



## Telephone Communication

**By Lauren Swieter**  
**BA (Hons), MA TESOL (Hons)**  
**Wall Street Institute**

Making and receiving telephone calls is one of the hardest tasks to do in English. We can't see the person we're speaking to, and we can't use facial expressions or gestures to supplement our spoken words. But with a little know-how and a good bit of practice, it's possible to speak confidently to anyone over the phone. Here are some tips to get you started:

### 1. **Speak slowly and clearly**

Listening to English over the telephone can be challenging because you cannot see the person you are trying to hear. However, it may be even more difficult for the person you are talking with to understand you. You may not realize that your pronunciation isn't clear because you are used to speaking to your colleagues, who know and understand you. Pay special attention to your weak areas (such as "r" and "l" or "b" and "v") when you are on the phone. If you are nervous about using the phone in English, you may unintentionally speak very quickly. Practise or write down what you are going to say and take a few deep breaths and relax before you make a phone call.

### 2. **Make sure you understand the other speaker**

Don't pretend to understand everything you hear over the telephone. Even native speakers ask each other to repeat and confirm information from time to time. This is especially important if you are taking a message for someone else. Learn the appropriate expressions to use when you don't hear something properly, such as "Sorry, could you repeat that please?" or "Could you just say that again please?" Don't be afraid to remind the person to slow down more than once if they are talking too fast.

### 3. **Practise with a co-worker**

Ask a friend to practise talking on the phone with you. Try to talk for at least 15 minutes. You can talk socially, or role play different scenarios in your work environment. The most important thing about practising telephone English is that you aren't able to see each other's mouths. It is amazing how much people lip-read without realizing it.



#### **4. Learn telephone etiquette**

The way that you speak to your best friend on the phone is very different to the way you should speak to someone at work. Many Hong Kong speakers make the mistake of being too direct on the telephone. It is possible that the person on the other line will think that you are being rude if you don't use formal language in certain situations. Sometimes just one word such as "could" or "may" is necessary in order to sound polite.

#### **5. Practise dates and numbers**

The most miscommunicated information on the telephone is dates and numbers. This is usually the most important information as well. Practise saying dates and numbers aloud. You and a friend can write out a list of dates and numbers and take turns reading them over the phone to each other. Record what you hear. Then swap papers and check your answers.

So the next time a caller on the telephone speaks to you in English, don't be afraid to handle the call. You can do it!