

SPEAK & WRITE

BETTER
BUSINESS
ENGLISH

(SAMPLE OF THE FIRST SIX
CHAPTERS FOR STUDENTS)

ANDREW MILES

SPEAK & WRITE BETTER BUSINESS ENGLISH

(SAMPLE OF THE FIRST SIX CHAPTERS FOR STUDENTS)

By Andrew D. Miles

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This six-chapter sample of *Speak & Write Better Business English* is for people who want to have a look at what the full book might be like.

The full *Speak & Write Better Business English*, which is 16 chapters long, is for people who use English at work. Who want to write more clearly and understand better. It's about learning English faster and about speaking more fluently. In summary, a book for anyone who needs English for their professional life.

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Other books by the author

Apart from *Speak & Write Better Business English*, Andrew has written

- [*The English / Spanish Business English Dictionary*](#)
- [*400 Ways to Write It in Business English*](#);
- [*400 Ways to Say It in Business English*](#)
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Index

Chapter 1	8
Use can, could, may or might to make requests.....	9
Simplify your conditionals	11
Improve your vocabulary by building words.....	13
Chapter 2.....	14
Find the best academy.....	15
Use question tags to convince, confirm information and keep conversation going	16
Memorise key words to improve your fluency.....	18
Chapter 3.....	20
Learn what to do when you can't understand anything people say.....	21
Use these expressions when you don't understand someone	23
Use visual aids to improve communication	24
Learn about gestures and culture to improve you listening comprehension.....	26
Chapter 4.....	28
Introduce yourself properly	29
Use one sentence to one idea if you want people to understand you easily.....	31
Improve your listening by identifying important information	32
Chapter 5.....	33

Improve your pronunciation working on difficult sounds and recording yourself.....	34
Learn how to pronounce names.....	36
Make your writing concise, clear, complete and correct	37
 Chapter 6.....	 39
Learn how to differentiate similar sounds.....	40
Attack your weaknesses and learn better	42
 Chapter 7.....	.....
Learn about words that are written differently but sound the same.....	.....
Draw a learning map and study more effectively.....	.....
Help people understand you better .....	.....
Ask these questions to help people understand you better.....	.....
 Chapter 8.....	.....
Put manner, place and time in the right order .....	.....
Explain what should be explained .....	.....
Check whether your teacher is teaching properly .....	.....
I remember what I hear .....	.....
I remember what I understand.....	.....
I remember what I do .....	.....
I remember what I repeat.....	.....
I remember what I learn with other people.....	.....
I remember what I see .....	.....
I remember what I write .....	.....
 Chapter 10.....	.....
Write better emails with these rules.....	.....

Study three hours a week
Use link words to improve your communication
Provide examples so people remember
Give English time
Avoid large classes and don't give up if you can't see instant results.....
Remember that not everyone speaks with good grammar

Chapter 12.....
Learn words properly
Do not mix levels
Anticipate to improve your listening
Learn habitual situations.....
Learn how to interrupt.....

Chapter 13.....
Record yourself to improve your pronunciation and fluency
Help people understand your writing.....
Give effective orders

Chapter 14.....
Learn by taking notes
Use time effectively when you study English
Improve your listening by learning where words finish and start...
Remember things by revising—though not immediately.....
Choose the right words and write better

Chapter 15.....
Keep up to date with neologisms
Memorise phone expressions

Keep sentences short and simple

Chapter 16.....

Kill those mistakes

Use the same type of language you hear.....

Conversation practice should reflect your needs

Explain ideas with analogies so people understand them better....

Tell people when you change subject.....

Use quotes to generate trust

Avoid these words when speaking.....

Chapter 1

United Kingdom: Edinburgh to London

I was travelling from Edinburgh to London in the Caledonian Sleeper train. It left at night. Too poor to pay a sleeping cabin I had booked the cheapest seat, a place in a group of four. Not the best location but if my companions were quiet I would be able to rest and arrive in proper conditions for a job interview in London.

No luck. A man and a woman sat across me. Around my age, in their early twenties. They were laughing and eating potato chips.

They chatted in French until the man, changing to English, spoke to me.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

USE CAN, COULD, MAY OR MIGHT TO MAKE REQUESTS

“We are students. When we make a request in English, should we use *can*, *could*, *may* or *might*?”

The teacher in me woke up.

“It is possible to use them all, though *might* is the most polite.”

“And *can*?”

“**Can** is informal and direct. For example, when you want to borrow a pen from a classmate you say “Can you lend me your pen?”

“Thanks.”

“**Could** is a bit more formal. Let’s say you’re telling a professor that you won’t finish a project on time: “Could I hand in the project on Wednesday instead of today please?” Still direct, still common but more polite.”

“What about *may* and *might*?”

“Imagine your boss comes to your house for dinner and the telephone rings. It’s your mother so you say “May I be excused for a minute? It’s my mother on the phone.” **May** is polite but not too common. Use it in formal circumstances.”

“Interesting.”

“**Might**. Your company’s general manager is at a meeting but you have to interrupt her. You knock on the door and say: “Might I interrupt you for a minute? Something urgent has come up.” **Might** is uncommon and extremely respectful. Only for few situations.”

“I see. *Can* with friends, *could* with people I don’t know too well, *may* when I want to be polite and *might* only in formal situations. Is that right?”

“We could say so.”

“Thanks a lot. I’m Guy and this is Jeannette,” he introduced. I replied with my name and said I was a teacher.

“We’ll call you Teacher—if you don’t mind.”

Another train passed. My answer was lost in the noise.

“I’ll remember it like this,” Jeannette said, “*Can* is for a beer with my sisters; *could* at a restaurant with workmates; *may* with my boss and *might* when I need a favour from a very important person.”

“That’s an effective way to remember,” Guy said.

SIMPLIFY YOUR CONDITIONALS

“Can I ask you another question? Do you know of any rule to make conditional sentences easier? They are very hard in English!”

“Sorry?”

“Conditional sentences. As in “If I win the lottery I had a lot of money.”

“I will have,” I corrected.

“If I win the lottery I will have a lot of money,” Guy repeated.

I was about to reply that they were more complicated in French but the man spoke again.

“Tomorrow we are sitting for a business English test and we’re afraid we’ll make mistakes.”

“There’s an answer to that. English has many conditional combinations but you could limit them to four.”

“Only four?”

“Imagine you are architects talking about a project. You can use conditionals to explain what’s always true, what’s sure, what’s possible and what’s impossible.”

“Always true, sure, possible and impossible.”

“First, use **present + present** when something is always true, as with scientific facts: “If you add two plus two you get four”, “If it’s frozen it is cold” or “If the window is a triangle it has three sides.”

“Right. All triangles have three sides!”

“Use **present + will** when a consequence is sure. The architects could say “If we extend the bedroom we will spend more money.”

“That’s clear. If they make a bigger room it will be more expensive. There’s no other alternative!”

“Thirdly, use **past + would** when something is possible but not one hundred percent certain: “If we changed the design the building would look better.”

“Can I give you an example? “If we made smaller windows the client wouldn’t be pleased,” Guy said.

“Correct. You started with the past tense in “If we made” and finished with would in “wouldn’t be pleased.” Excellent!”

“And the other conditional? What about the impossible?”

“Use **past perfect + would** when something is impossible. For instance: “If we had started a month earlier the house would be ready now.”

“It’s certainly impossible. We cannot go back in time!”

“If we had studied more we wouldn’t be afraid of the exam,” Jeannette laughed.

“You’re right, Jeannette. Your example is excellent. You began with the past perfect tense in “If we had studied more” and finished with would in “we wouldn’t be afraid of the exam.”

We reached the city of York. Guy took a small notepad from his shirt pocket. He looked at his watch, wrote a few words and put it back.

IMPROVE YOUR VOCABULARY BY BUILDING WORDS

“Could I ask you something else? Is there an easy way for me to expand my vocabulary?”

“You can try **word building**.”

“What’s that?”

“If you know one word, for example *time*, you can build *timer*. If you know *react* you can build *reaction*. And if you know *know* you can make *knowledge*! You have doubled your vocabulary with little effort!”

“Interesting. I can transform *electric* into *electricity* or *electrician*!”

“When you learn a new word ask yourself “**Is there a verb for sale?**” or “**What’s the adjective for deliver?**” Your vocabulary will grow fast.”

“Thanks Teacher.”

“Teach, teacher, teachable!” Jeanette said.

“Very good, Jeannette.”

“It’s like transformer toys. You can turn a truck into a robot but in the end it’s the same toy!”

“Yes, *teach*, *teacher* and *teachable* have different shapes but in the end they share the same meaning.”

We reached Euston Station in London. I hadn’t slept the whole night.

“Where’s your interview,” Guy asked.

“A school at Russell Square.”

“I’m sure you’ll get the job. If I pass the test I’ll invite you to a drink.”

They went into the underground. I walked to Russell Square.

Chapter 2

United Kingdom: London to Gatwick Airport

I got the job and Guy passed his test. He invited me not only to a drink but also to a return trip on the Gatwick Express, which links London's Victoria Station with Gatwick Airport. We arrived early and took window seats. I mentioned I had always liked trains. He answered he had studied railway engineering.

FIND THE BEST ACADEMY

“I want to keep on learning English when I go back to France but there are many academies in my city and I don’t know which one to choose.”

“The right school can mean the difference between learning and wasting your money.”

“Where should I start?”

“Visit the place. Classrooms should be **comfortable and clean.**”

“That’s easy to see.”

“Then ask if **teachers have certificates.** Some schools hire native speakers who are not qualified.”

“I know that. Speaking the language is not the same as teaching the language...”

“Try to **pay monthly** so you can leave if you are not satisfied.”

“Very sensible. What about group size?”

“**Small classes** are always better. There is no exact rule as to when a class is too large but the bigger the group the less time to speak.”

“You can’t learn a language without speaking it.”

“True.”

“Do you think I should ask for a **trial lesson?**”

“Of course. Attend a class before you enrol. Most academies will accept and you’ll be able to see whether you enjoy the lessons.”

“What about other aspects?”

“A school is sometimes not only about classes. Find out if they have a **social programme** such as conversation groups, excursions or theatre in English.”

“Theatre could be a good way to improve my pronunciation.
Thanks Teacher.”

“You’re welcome. The better the academy the faster you will learn, won’t you?”

USE QUESTION TAGS TO CONVINC LISTENERS, CONFIRM INFORMATION AND KEEP CONVERSATION GOING

“Sorry, what did you say?”

“The better the academy the more you will learn, won’t you?”

“The “won’t you?” What’s that?”

“A question tag. Short phrases we add at the end of sentences to transform them into questions, as in “this is a train, isn’t it?”

“Are they common?”

“Very. We mainly use them to **confirm information**, to **keep conversation going** or to **get listeners to agree** with our proposals.”

“Oh. This makes question tags useful. Can you give me some examples?”

“They help us confirm information when we are almost sure about something but still need to verify it. Examples could be “Tina works in production, doesn’t she?” or “Peter can’t speak French, can he?”

“Interesting. You are a teacher, aren’t you?”

“Well done! You got it right.”

“Thanks.”

“They’re also useful to keep conversation alive, as in “It won’t rain, will it?” or “This beer tastes good, doesn’t it?”

“I remember a Canadian saying “It’s a bit cold outside, isn’t it?” It was snowing!”

“He was using question tags to keep conversation alive.”

“Now I understand. We were at a party and he didn’t know anyone except me.”

“We also use question tags when we want listeners to agree, as in “Hailey’s the right person for the job, isn’t she?” or “Other suppliers can’t give you such good prices, can they?”

“This would be useful for meetings.”

“Questions tags are helpful when you want to **convince listeners** and work much better than direct questions.”

“For example?”

“Our engine is the best in the market, isn’t it?”

“You’re right. It sounds more convincing than “Is our engine the best in the market?”

“You’re asking the same but with question tags you mention your opinion and invite listeners to say yes, especially because no effort is needed on their part. They don’t need to think about other engines. You’ve just told them yours is the best!”

“Can you explain how to build question tags?”

“**Add negative endings to affirmative sentences**, as in “She will arrive late, won’t she?”

“That’s easy.”

“Or **positive endings to negative sentences**. “They can’t manage the problem, can they?”

“That’s easy too.”

London houses and factories turned into open fields as our train marched south. Guy took out his notebook. He wrote short phrases at unpredictable intervals. I looked out the window.

MEMORISE KEY WORDS TO IMPROVE YOUR FLUENCY

“Something else. I’ll start work soon and will need English for my job. The problem is that sometimes I can’t find the words I want.”

“Words are essential. We can’t speak without words!”

“I know.”

“The solution is for you to memorise all common **expressions connected with your profession**. You’re a railway engineer, aren’t you?”

“Question tag! Yes I am.”

“If you were an accountant you would need to talk about numbers. If you were a baker you’d have to talk about bread.”

“I’ll work at a train factory. I can chat with you but couldn’t describe a train. I’m afraid I’ll project the wrong image if I can’t find the right words. For example, what do you call the engine that pulls the train? It’s *locomotive* in French.”

“You’re lucky. It’s the same in English—locomotive!”

We sat silently for a few minutes until a lady wearing sunglasses looked our way. She reminded me of a student I had taught last summer.

“Let me tell you about Marta, an Italian architect. She could speak English well but at a meeting in New York she did not remember the technical words to describe a building. She felt badly because her prospective clients thought she didn’t know enough about her job.”

“Did she?”

“Yes! What she didn’t know were the *words* to describe her job.”

“I can certainly understand her.”

“She was one of my students in Edinburgh. Had excellent grammar and good general vocabulary.”

“But that wasn’t enough...”

“She told me her English had failed her. Her studio lost the contract but Marta learnt a lesson—she memorised the more common words in architecture and can now reply to almost any question.”

“So, what’s your advice for me, Teacher?”

“Learn the three hundred **more common words** in railway engineering. Your fluency and your image will benefit. Try two words a day. You’ll know everything you need in half a year.”

We reached the airport. Walked up the stairs, turned right into the hall but bought no beer. They were too expensive. We caught the next express back to London.

Chapter 3

Spain: Zaragoza to Canfranc

Friendships develop in different ways. We kept contact through Christmas cards for six years until I received a letter with a job offer. Guy was now working at a locomotive builder and had been transferred to Montcada i Reixac, near Barcelona in Spain. Would I be interested in becoming an in-house English teacher at his factory? I would not teach him directly but yes other employees at the company.

We celebrated my incorporation with a train ride into the Pyrenees. Drove to the city of Zaragoza where—after buying sandwiches and coffee—we boarded *El Canfranero*. It would take us to an abandoned station at the border with France.

“Now that we’re on a train once again I must say I followed your advice, Teacher.”

“Which one?”

“Learn words connected with my job. I can tell you seven. Carriage, car, coach or wagon—the part of the train where passengers travel.”

“You’re right. We’re sitting in a carriage now. And the rest?”

“Gauge. The distance between rails. It is 1,435 millimetres in most of Europe and 1,668 in Spain. Words six and seven are tram or streetcar, which describe short trains that run on streets.”

“Useful for a railway engineer...”

“But not for an accountant or a baker,” he laughed.

LEARN WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU CAN'T UNDERSTAND ANYTHING PEOPLE SAY

“By the way, the other night I had dinner with an Australian customer. She sat across me at the table but I understood nothing she said. I had to ask my neighbour to translate, which was embarrassing. Do you know what could have happened?”

“I think you suffered what I call listeners block. Most often it is because the speaker’s accent and speed make listening very hard.”

“She did speak fast. Also, I am used to British English so I find other accents difficult.”

“You can learn how to handle listener’s block if you pay special attention to a few things.”

“What are they?”

“Let’s start with accent. Find out where speakers come from and **watch videos or listen to audios** by people from those regions.”

“She’s from Canberra.”

“Well, you can always visit Australia for a holiday!”

“I wish! I could start by watching documentaries.”

“The next point is vocabulary. Think about the **expressions** people are likely to use and learn their pronunciation. For instance, you could have listened to something about railways in Australia before your meeting.”

“You’re right there. I should have prepared myself better.”

“The third aspect is place. Noisy locations make listening harder. Choose a **quiet spot** where you can be close to the speaker.”

“Good idea. The restaurant was crowded and it was difficult to hear with all the noise. We’ll go somewhere quieter next time.”

“That should help. Also, **role play** situations to anticipate what people will say. This was a dinner meeting so you could have invited a foreign friend to a restaurant and practised.”

“I should have practised with you, Teacher. But you’re not Australian, are you?”

“I see you still remember question tags!”

“I do. By the way, you’ve given me ideas to prepare my meetings-but my problem now is what to do when I’m already in front of the person.”

“Try to **sit near** them so you hear better; tell them that your English is not good so they speak more slowly or ask them to repeat things-but mainly lower your expectations.”

“Sorry?”

“Lower your expectations. Concentrate on only part of the message. A good strategy is to **focus on easy words** and forget the rest.”

“But I want to understand everything!”

“That’s not possible. You are a student and students don’t know everything. One day you will reach the advanced level and listener’s block will be forgotten. Think of that day!”

“It’s a long way off!”

“Think of it as a game of tennis. If your opponents have the same level you often enjoy the game but if they’re much better you run from here to there without ever catching the ball.”

“The problem is that I can’t choose my opponents, Teacher.”

“But you can learn how to play better.”

The train stopped by a lonely road. Yellow fields, olive trees. Far away, a military-looking building with antennas on its roof. We heard a noise under the wheels and our carriage moved side to side, as if someone was shaking it. Guy took paper and pen from his pocket. He looked at his watch. Wrote numbers and words. The shaking stopped; we gained speed and reached Huesca, a provincial capital. Seven passengers got off. Two climbed in. A castle on top of a hill. A large black and white sign with numbers near a town called Ayerbe. Bridges. Rivers. Tiny people escalating a mountain wall. Short tunnels. An artificial lake.

USE THESE EXPRESSIONS WHEN YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND SOMEONE

“You said I should ask people to repeat things. Can you suggest how to do that?”

“You can use: “What do you mean?”, “Can you explain?”, “I don’t get the idea”, “Could you repeat?” or “I don’t understand.”

“Thanks.”

“By the way, one more point connected with listening. Don’t be afraid to **interrupt when you have a doubt**. People generally think that everything they say is understood perfectly so they never explain unless you ask them to.”

Olives gave way to pine trees. It wasn’t a fast train but we lost speed when we reached the city of Jaca. A group of Girl Scouts came in. They waved at us. We followed another river and climbed steadily.

USE VISUAL AIDS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION

“Can you see the valleys below us? They’re beautiful. I wish I had a camera,” Guy said.

“Pictures are worth a thousand words.”

“That’s true.”

“Which reminds me of the importance of visual aids when speaking a foreign language. Some people **absorb visual information better** than spoken words.”

“Visual aids?”

“Pictures, drawings, graphs, charts, samples or videos.”

“Just like the photo I could have shown Jeannette.”

“It’s a good idea to bring **visual aids** to meetings and presentations. If listeners cannot understand your words, at least they will remember your examples.”

“I generally use graphs. They provide credibility.”

“And help to convince by showing instead of saying.”

“Any advice on how to prepare visual aids?”

“Yes. Graphs and charts should be **clear**: make fonts large and avoid pastel colours so words are easy to read; eliminate unnecessary pictures; avoid more than three columns; if it’s a small meeting provide printed sheets. Of course, you do not have to show everything you carry but it should be ready in case you need it.”

“So I should bring more than I’m planning to show?”

“Yes. If you have time to prepare it, carry **as much information as possible**. When someone asks a question it’s fantastic to be able to say “I’m pleased that you’ve asked. Here I have a chart with last year’s sales figures.”

“Anything else?”

“Make sure visual aids are **well produced**: the sound on videos must be excellent; product samples should be finished; charts printed on new and not on scrap paper; backgrounds should be plain; fonts consistent.”

“My graphs are always well produced. However, I sometimes doubt on how many to use. I don’t want my listeners to be bored!”

“Restrict visual aids to **key moments** in your presentation because an overuse will make your speech boring. People can only absorb some information and too much is worse than none! “

“Jeannette would pay attention to the first few pictures but if I showed her too many she would lose interest... “

“For instance, during the introduction to a speech use slides to show your main points. Later, a chart could support technical information. As you conclude, present a short video for your final argument.”

“Teachers have experience speaking in public, don’t you?”

“We do it every day.”

“Would you have any other advice for me?”

“**Stand-up** presentations work well with large groups; printed sheets are fine if **people have to write** something but don’t distribute them early because everyone will read them and not listen to you. Samples are excellent if you are going to show a **new product** but will take up time and slow you down. Also, audiences can get immersed in examining things, which means their attention will concentrate on the object and move away from you.”

“So I shouldn’t bring toy trains to my meetings?”

“Certainly not. Unless you’re selling trains, of course.”

“I am!”

“Two last things. Visual aids are also useful when **writing**; just keep them to about one per page. Finally, aids ought to be **relevant**-we do not really want to see your lovely Pyrenees pictures. They’re OK for your wife or friends but not for business meetings!”

“It’s a pity I forgot my camera.”

We opened our bags and ate the sandwiches we had brought from Zaragoza. There was no bar on the train. The girls looked at us and laughed. We were so near the trees that sometimes branches hit our window. A farmer and his tractor, birds circling above, an old water tank.

LEARN ABOUT GESTURES AND CULTURE TO IMPROVE YOUR LISTENING COMPREHENSION

“Another thing about listening, Teacher. I sometimes understand people’s words but don’t understand what they say. Is this possible?”

“Yes. You might be getting their gestures wrong or maybe there’s something connected to the speaker’s culture that you don’t know.”

“Gestures? Aren’t they international?”

“Most gestures are. Others, however, belong to more restricted circles and could cause confusion.”

“What can I do?”

“Ask your teacher for a lesson on **common gestures in English** speaking countries and practise them in class.”

“You also mentioned culture.”

“Sometimes it’s not the words you don’t understand but the **cultural references**. I remember going to Chicago and people mentioning buildings by name instead of address. It was impossible for me to find them!”

“I wouldn’t know how to work on that. Culture is a very wide concept.”

“It is. Anyhow, **read guides or watch documentaries** on places you are about to visit. Also, **check the local news**. Many people talk about what’s happening in their town and that could help.”

“Good idea. In fact something like this happened just before we met in Edinburgh. What I had read before helped me understand things better.”

“Really? I remember Jeannette and you coming into the train...”

“We had gone to the Edinburgh Jazz Festival. We made a point of checking the programme before we arrived and could recognise theatre and band names when people said them. It was helpful. Our English was bad but at least we understood everything we needed!”

“Not so bad. You passed your exams.”

“Yes. Thanks to simplified conditionals!”

We saw an abandoned cottage with a dog that barked at us. Our carriage was travelling so slowly the dog could have jumped in if doors had opened. It began to snow. The vegetation cleared. An empty platform. Canfranc. We parked near an enormous station in ruins. Guy had booked a hotel by a canal but immediately left to see if he was able to find a cheap camera so he could get pictures for Jeannette. I stayed and watched TV. It still snowed.

Chapter 4

USA: Market & Powell St. to Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco

Nine months into my new job the division manager called me into his office. They had been contacted from the San Francisco city council to present a project for their cable cars. As by now I understood most of the technicalities involved in trains and carriages, could I accompany him and a team of engineers to California and help them with their presentations?

We landed in the afternoon. Everyone was tired. However, Guy and I walked to Market and Powell Street for a ride on the cable cars as he wanted first-hand experience before a meeting tomorrow. We were accompanied by an Austrian technician who had travelled beside Guy on the plane.

The Austrian turned towards me. We were on the tram already, climbing up a hill.

“These cars are pulled by a cable that runs under the streets. By the way, Teacher, can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

INTRODUCE YOURSELF PROPERLY

“How should I introduce myself when talking to Americans? I know the words but I’m never sure of what to say.”

“Try with “Pleased to meet you.”

“Yes, I know that, but what else should I bear in mind?”

“The first rule in an introduction to foreigners is to **pronounce your name** slowly and clearly. If possible, repeat it so people understand it well. Austrian names can be difficult for English speakers.”

“Yes. I’m called Juergen and that’s hard. I always try to pause before and after I say it so listeners can ask if they don’t understand.”

“Right. If you have time it’s also a good idea to **mention your position** and where you come from so people can easily place you.”

“Oh.”

“They might forget your name but could remember you as the technician from Vienna.”

“I’m actually from Salzburg. Can you give me some examples?”

“Of course. A company manager might say “I’m Henry Thompson. Henry. I run our Bristol factory” or “I’m Henry Thompson, head of the Bristol factory. Please call me Henry.”

“Would this be all right? “I’m Juergen, a technician from the Salzburg office. Juergen.”

“Perfect.”

“Another question. Should I shake hands?”

“In the English speaking world both men and women usually **shake hands** when they meet and when they leave—if the group is small.”

“And for bigger groups?”

“If groups are large we often look at the people who are introducing themselves and bow slightly on hearing their name. As we leave, we wave a general goodbye to everyone.”

“Sorry, what’s to bow?”

“To move your head down, as in a reverence.”

Guy spoke now.

“What if we have to introduce someone else, Teacher?”

“Imagine you’re introducing a university professor. You might say: “I’d like you to meet Professor Grant. She’s teaches math at Harvard” or “This is Professor Alice Grant, a mathematician from Harvard.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes. Always **ask people** how they would like to be introduced. We don’t want to offend anyone by forgetting to mention they’re a doctor or mispronouncing their name.”

Juergen pointed towards Guy.

“This is Engineer Guy Durand, our suspension system specialist. He’s French but lives in Barcelona.”

“Well done!” Guy replied.

We saw a steep hill.

“Lombard Street. Some movies were filmed here.”

We reached Ghirardelli Square, where Guy spent time talking to the cable car conductor while Juergen and I walked to the seaside. Afterwards, Juergen invited us to hot chocolate at a converted factory.

USE ONE SENTENCE TO ONE IDEA IF YOU WANT PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND YOU EASILY

“I will have to explain complicated processes to our clients here in San Francisco. I have no problems with German but when I speak English listeners sometimes get lost.”

“Try to use short sentences with **one concept to every phrase**. People prefer simple phrases because they are easier to understand.”

“Yes, but simple sentences can only express simple ideas.”

“Of course. If you need to transmit complicated concepts divide the ideas into steps and **link them with connectors** or markers.”

“What are connectors and markers?”

“Words like but, because, first, so, before, after, then and others that link sentences.”

“Can you provide an example?”

“I’ll tell you a story. Once I asked a teacher to explain how to plan a lesson and she said “To plan a class properly you must know what you want, or your objective, to be able to decide what you need to teach to calculate the time before you write it down.”

“That’s not very clear.”

“It’s not. I said so and she gave me a version I could understand easily: “First set your objective. Then decide what you’ll need and how long it will take. Finally, write the plan.”

“One idea per sentence.”

“And sentences linked with connectors.”

It got dark so we took the cable car back to our hotel. This time Guy spoke.

“I followed your advice and studied more words related to my profession. Last week I learned *bogies*, which is the structure that holds the wheels of a carriage. I’ll use it tomorrow at a presentation. However, I’m worried about something else.”

“What is it?”

IMPROVE YOUR LISTENING BY IDENTIFYING IMPORTANT INFORMATION

“I still have problems understanding everything speakers say. I did what you suggested when we travelled to Canfranc and studied common American gestures—but what if I miss a sentence that’s really important because I’m paying attention to what’s not important?”

“Here’s something you’ll find useful. Most speakers will pronounce important things differently, so if you pay attention to **phrases that are said louder, spoken more slowly, are mentioned after a pause or are accompanied by gestures** you should at least be able to comprehend the main part of what people say.”

“And if I want to understand everything?”

“We’ve talked about this before. You shouldn’t even try. You’ll get frustrated. Paying attention to everything will only give you a headache.”

“I do sometimes get headaches.”

“Imagine that you’re at a buffet breakfast. Do you eat all the food? Listening is the same. Get what you need and leave the rest on the table!”

“So I should concentrate on words that are spoken louder, come after a pause and are pronounced slowly...”

“Or accompanied by gestures such as head movement, raised hands, walking or pointing. Later we’ll talk more about listening comprehension. Now we’re back at Market Street so we’ll have to get off.”

We stayed in San Francisco for a week. Guy understood most of what the clients said, Juergen was able to explain his ideas and our team won the contract. I was paid a bonus. The first time in my life.

Chapter 5

United Kingdom: Chester to London

Our next trip happened in England. I was in Wales visiting a cousin and Guy had gone to Liverpool for work. We met in Chester, whose station reminded Guy of Milan. I couldn't tell because I'd never been to Italy. The London train was punctual. Clean, seats a bit too hard, heating a bit too high, men reading newspapers, children looking out their window. A steward offered us good tea and not so good apple pie, which we ordered and ate. We rolled across green countryside. It was spring. We discussed pronunciation.

IMPROVE YOUR PRONUNCIATION BY WORKING ON DIFFICULT SOUNDS AND BY RECORDING YOURSELF

“People sometimes don’t understand my pronunciation. What can I do?”

“Practise until you’ve improved all your sounds.”

“How? English sounds are difficult!”

“Be patient. Don’t worry if you can’t say some words at the beginning. You’re training your mouth to move in a new way. It’s like exercising at the gym. You can’t expect success the first day. Practice will eventually let your muscles adapt and what seemed impossible a few days ago will be easy now.”

“How should I start?”

“List all the **sounds that don't exist in your language** and repeat them until you get them right.”

“I’ll need a teacher for that, won’t I?”

“Yes. But there is something you can do without a teacher. You can **record yourself**. If you listen to yourself you will realise where you need to improve.”

“OK. Anything else I could try?”

“I always advise my students not to hide their accent when they speak and not to trust their instinct when it comes to pronunciation.”

“What do you mean not hide my accent?”

“Don’t try to sound more English than the English! It’s OK to have a foreign accent. **Don’t talk with your mouth closed or too fast**. Instead, vocalise slowly; breathe normally; look at listeners and open your lips wide.”

“That’s easy.”

“Lastly, don’t trust your instinct when you learn new words. Ask a native speaker for the correct pronunciation or look it up in the internet. Do not try to guess, because pronunciation is sometimes unpredictable.”

“You’re wrong on one thing, Teacher.”

“What?”

“English pronunciation is *always* unpredictable!”

LEARN HOW TO PRONOUNCE NAMES

The train reached Crew and we got ready for one hour non-stop to the city of Milton Keynes. The steward came back. He parked his trolley by our seat and counted the money in his purse. After a pause he addressed me.

“I overheard you talking about pronunciation. My wife is Polish and I’m studying their language but have problems when speaking to her family. I often make mistakes.”

“Mispronunciation sometimes lead to misunderstanding.”

“I always have trouble with names.”

“Well, **pronouncing names correctly is part of courtesy.** It helps create a connection with your listeners and shows that you are making an effort.”

“I do make an effort. But some sounds are really hard.”

“Try this. Sit with your wife and review common names. Write the pronunciation on a piece of paper and read the names until you get them right. Wait for a few days and repeat the process, this time without reading. Continue until they come automatically to your mind.”

“Maybe I should start with her cousins. I’ve always been afraid to talk to them!”

A passenger came by and asked the steward to move his cart. He disappeared down the aisle and we never saw him again.

MAKE YOUR WRITING CONCISE, CLEAR, COMPLETE AND CORRECT

“Something different now, Teacher. How can I make my business writing better?”

“Start by following the rule of the four Cs: concise, clear, complete & correct.”

“I understand **concise**. It means I should keep my paragraphs as short as possible.”

“Yes. It also means you should make your sentences as short as possible. Say “Charlie arrived late” instead of “Charlie did not arrive early enough.”

“So “I finished the project” would be better than “The project was finished by me?”

“Certainly.”

“It also sounds nicer.”

“Try to use short words too. *Need* in place of *necessitate* and *buy* rather than *acquire*.”

“So *car* is better than *automobile* and *speed* better than *velocity*?”

“If they fit the context yes.”

“That’s interesting. Concise paragraphs, concise sentences and concise words.”

“Yes.”

“I also understand **clear**. I should never confuse my readers with complicated grammar or complicated expressions.”

“Also avoid anything that distracts people without adding useful information.”

“Such as?”

“Irrelevant pictures or irrelevant data.”

“But you also said business writing should be **complete!**”

“Yes I did. You should not add unnecessary information but everything needed should be there. When you write a business document you have to make sure there’s no information missing. Double check everything before you send it.”

“And *correct*? I would love all my writing to be correct!”

“This one is harder. However, there are two strategies to help us find errors without asking a teacher. First, **read it aloud**. This will help you realise if there are strange-sounding constructions, missing words or changes in rhythm you did not see while writing.”

“But how do I know if they are correct. I’m not a teacher!”

“If they sound strange or you don’t like the rhythm they are probably wrong. If it is a sentence, you should be able to fix it by dividing it into smaller pieces and linking them with connectors—as I told you when we were in San Francisco. If it’s a word look it up in a dictionary.”

“What’s the second strategy?”

“Write once and **check twice**. If possible, reread your text hours or days later. Our brain is lazy and will not see errors that it has just made. It also helps if you read the document in another format. If you wrote it on a computer change the font or print it so it looks different.”

“OK.”

“In addition, when we are tired, upset or too busy we can write things we don’t actually want anyone to read. Rereading after some time will allow you to discover mistakes, be more objective and say exactly what you want to say. If it’s an important message, try to write it one day and revise it the next.”

“Or send it to my teacher and ask him to check it!”

“Yes. But you’ll never learn how to self-correct that way.”

“Maybe I won’t. By the way, I learnt a new word the other day. *Berth*, the name of beds on a ship or a train.”

We reached Euston Station and remembered our trip from Edinburgh, which had also ended here. Guy took the metro to Heathrow and I walked to my old school on Russell Square. I wanted to say hi to Sara, a girl from Barcelona who was studying there.

Chapter 6

Spain: Palma de Mallorca to Sóller

Summer. Guy and Jeannette had rented a house in the island of Mallorca and invited me for a few days. We had lunch in the city of Palma and in the afternoon took a train to Port de Sóller, where they were staying. The railway had been built in the early 20th century and the carriages hadn't changed much since. They looked as if transplanted from a cowboy film. It was hot with no air conditioning. Mostly tourists, some of them smoking. Jeannette sat by me. We headed north and gained speed across a plain.

LEARN HOW TO DIFFERENTIATE SIMILAR SOUNDS

“When we were in San Francisco you told me there are several ways to improve my listening. I sometimes find it hard to differentiate similar sounds,” Guy said.

“I am not surprised. English has twenty-four consonant and twenty vowel sounds—more than French. Consequently, it’s difficult for students to identify phonemes that don’t appear in their mother language.”

“What’s a phoneme?”

“A very short sound. For example, the *a* in *cat*.”

“That’s my problem, Teacher. The *a* in *cat* and the *a* in *bar* are supposedly pronounced differently but they seem the same to me.”

“They are different. *Cat* is with the /æ/ sound and *bar* is with the /ɑ:/ sound.”

“Still the same to my ears. What can I do?”

“You can improve your ability to recognise sounds with a plan that includes these four elements: learning phonetics, listening to English every day, recording yourself and singing.”

“Phonetics?”

“When we were travelling from Chester to London I asked you to revise difficult phonemes in order to improve your pronunciation. Did you?”

“Yes, I made a list of all the sounds that don’t exist in French.”

“Read it again but now pay attention to **phonemes that seem similar**, as in *fit* and *feet*. Pronounce them aloud, because it will later help you recognise them in conversation.”

“So that’s phonetics.”

“Yes, the study of speech sounds.”

“Interesting. What about recording myself?”

“**Recording and listening** to yourself is an excellent activity. It will improve your pronunciation and will let you consciously

understand that your mother tongue and English don't share all phonemes.”

“I now that already! Anyway, how should I do it? Repeat words as you told me before?”

“This time look for a video with subtitles. First listen to the video and read the script; then turn the volume down and record yourself. Play it back. Compare the speaker's accent to yours and pay attention to differences, because those are probably the sounds you'll find hard to understand.”

“It's a bit complicated, isn't it?”

“You can always ask your teacher for help.”

“OK. What else can I do?”

“Listen to English as often as you can. Thirty minutes of **daily listening** to native speakers will help you differentiate similar sounds in the same way that constant practice allowed you to ride a bicycle or drive a car.”

“I could even drive this train!”

“I'm sure you could,” Jeannette said.

“You also mentioned singing,” Guy went on.

“**Singing** can also help. You won't become famous, but singing will help both your listening comprehension and your pronunciation. Look for songs you like, download the lyrics and sing along. It will help your brain become used to different accents and intonations.”

“I'm a bad singer!”

“Sing in the shower then! Lastly, remember there is a link between pronunciation and comprehension so whatever you do to improve your speaking will also help you understand better.”

The plain ended and the train slowed. Jeannette turned towards me.

ATTACK YOUR WEAKNESSES AND LEARN BETTER

“I also have problems with English but I don’t know where to start. Can you help me?”

“I’ll try, but first I must tell you that not all problems are visible.”

“What do you mean?”

“For example, people sometimes believe they’ll improve their speaking with more conversation practice—but it might be grammar or vocabulary that’s holding them back.”

“I don’t really like grammar.”

“I’m not surprised! Students often try to study what that they enjoy!”

“And teachers try to teach what they enjoy too!”

“You are right, Jeannette. And it’s not the right approach. Teachers should concentrate on the areas where students are not doing well.”

“How can I know what my problems are?” Jeannette insisted.

“Start by asking your teacher for a **deep analysis** of what is wrong with your English. You cannot discover your weaknesses alone.”

“Is that all?”

“Then find out **why something is wrong**. It might be that no one taught you the right structures in the past; that you never paid attention to vocabulary; that you learned English by translating; that you did not get enough listening practice or any other reason.”

“Can you give me an example?”

“I’ll tell you the case of a student I had last year. His company was in the fruit business and the man could name every single fruit in English but had problems when dealing with suppliers because they couldn’t understand him. He thought he was mispronouncing words and that with a few lessons he would solve his problem. It turned out he was pronouncing everything correctly but couldn’t

use verb tenses properly. His suppliers didn't know whether he was speaking in present, past or future!"

"Could you solve his problem?"

"Yes. It took longer than the few lessons he had anticipated but now people understand him."

"In my case it's writing. I think I need more practice."

"Maybe or maybe not. You want more practice but vocabulary could be the problem; or the fact that you want to transmit complex ideas with basic structures."

"Are you sure?"

"Not without investigating a little. If you want I can help you. Write a composition and I'll give you my opinion."

"Not now, Teacher. We are on holiday! Anyway, what should I do once I know what my problems are?"

"**Write a list of objectives and work towards it.** Your English will improve quickly because you'll be using time more effectively."

"Can you be more specific?"

"Of course. Make a list of the areas you need to improve and ask your teacher to dedicate part of every class to those objectives. It could be problems with prepositions, vocabulary, spelling, word order, conditional sentences or many others."

"Not conditionals. You gave us a very useful rule when we first met."

"Yes, keep them simple."

"I still remember that."

"Lastly, **don't attack all your problems at once.** Choose one objective and move onto the next only when you have completely solved it. Rome wasn't built in a day!"

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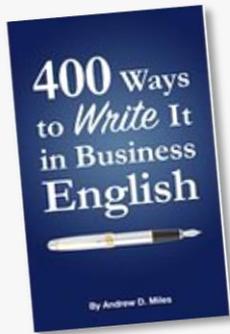


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Help people understand you better
Draw a learning map and study more effectively
Put manner, place and time in the right order
Explain what should be explained
Learn about words that are written differently
but sound the same
Check whether your teacher is teaching properly
Remember what you hear
Remember what you understand
Remember what you do
Remember what you repeat
Remember what you learn with other people
Remember what you see
Remember what you write
Study three hours a week

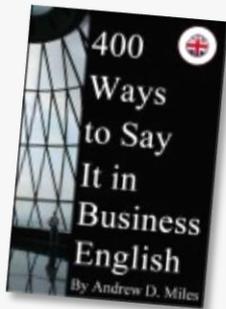
Use link words to improve your communication
Learn about words that are written the same but
sound differently
Provide examples so people remember
Write better emails
Give English time
Avoid large classes
Don't give up if you can't see instant results
Remember that not everyone speaks with good grammar
Learn words properly
Do not mix levels
Anticipate to improve your listening
Learn habitual situations
Learn how to interrupt
Record yourself to improve your
pronunciation and fluency
Help people understand your writing
Give effective orders
Learn by taking notes
Use time effectively when you study English
Improve your listening by learning where words
finish and start
Remember things by revising—though not immediately
Avoid some words when speaking
Keep up to date with neologisms
Memorise phone expressions
Keep sentences short and simple
Kill those mistakes
Use the same type of language you hear
Have conversation practice reflect your needs
Explain ideas with analogies so people
understand them better
Tell people when you change subject
Use quotes to generate trust
Choose the right words and write better

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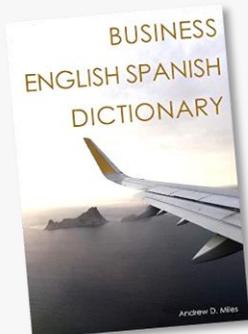
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