

THE SPEAK CLEARLY METHOD

FREE PHRASE GUIDE

What to Say When You Didn't Understand

The exact words for meetings, video calls and the moment you missed something — without apologising for your English.

in a meeting

on a call

one-to-one

in writing

You don't have to lose your accent.

You have to be understood.

Everybody asks

There is a moment that second-language professionals dread more than presentations, more than interviews, more than difficult clients.

Somebody says something. You don't catch it. And you have about one second to decide whether to ask.

The thing nobody tells you

Native speakers ask for repetition constantly. In noisy rooms, on bad connections, when someone mumbles, when a number goes past too fast. It happens in every meeting, in every language, between people who share a first language. Asking is not a language failure. It is what careful people do.

What makes it feel different for you is not the asking. It is the fear that the asking says something about your English.

So this guide does two things. It gives you the exact words — ready to use, no assembling under pressure. And it removes the one sentence that causes the actual damage.

How to use it

Pick two phrases. Not ten — two. Learn them as fixed units, the way you learned “nice to meet you.” Use them this week. Add more when those feel automatic.

What exactly did you miss?

There are four different problems here, and they need four different questions. Asking the wrong one is why repetition sometimes doesn't help — they say the same sentence again, and you still don't understand it.

1 You missed one word

Ask for the word, not the sentence.

"Sorry — what was the word after 'budget'?"

2 You missed the whole sentence

Ask for repetition.

"Sorry, I didn't catch that."

3 You heard every word and it still made no sense

It's probably an idiom. Ask them to say it differently.

"Could you rephrase that?"

4 You think you understood, but it matters

Check it back.

"So just to be clear — you'd like me to...?"

The one that surprises people

Number 3 is the most common of the four and the least recognised. If you heard every word and the sentence still meant nothing, you did not mishear — you met an idiom.

"Let's park that and circle back" contains no difficult words at all.

SITUATION 1

In a meeting

WHEN YOU DIDN'T CATCH IT

"Sorry, I didn't catch that."

"Excuse me — could you say that last part again?"

"Pardon me, I missed that."

"Could you rephrase that?"

WHEN YOU NEED A MOMENT TO THINK

"That's a good question — let me think for a second."

"So, if I've understood correctly, you're asking..."

"There are two things there."

"Can I come back to you on that?"

WHEN YOU WANT TO CHECK YOU'VE GOT IT

"So just to be clear — you'd like me to...?"

"Have I got that right?"

"Let me play that back — we're moving the date, not the scope?"

"Sorry," "excuse me," or "pardon me"?

All three are correct. They differ in register, not politeness — use whichever feels most like you.

"Sorry?" — most common, especially in British English. Despite the word, it is not heard as an apology. Used once, it is completely neutral.

"Excuse me?" — slightly more formal, entirely neutral, understood everywhere. A good default if you would rather not use "sorry" at all.

"Pardon me?" — polite and a little more formal. Common in American English.

What matters is not which word you choose. It is how many times you say it. One is invisible. Three turns a small request into an apology.

SITUATION 2

On a video call

Video calls give you something no other situation does: a socially perfect explanation that everybody accepts, because it is true dozens of times a day.

THE CONNECTION IS YOUR FRIEND

“Sorry, you cut out there — could you say that again?”

“You’re breaking up a bit.”

“Sorry, the audio dropped for a second.”

FOR NUMBERS, NAMES, DATES AND LINKS

“Could you put that in the chat?”

“Sorry — was that fifteen or fifty?”

“Could you spell that for me?”

The most underused sentence on this page

“Could you put that in the chat?” — spoken numbers and unfamiliar names are the hardest things to catch on compressed audio, for anyone. Asking for them in writing is not a confession. It is what organised people do.

And when two of you start at once

“Sorry — go ahead.” Then take your turn back: “Sorry, what was I going to say — yes, about the timeline...” The floor is still yours. You only lent it.

One-to-one, and in writing

ONE-TO-ONE — YOU CAN BE MORE DIRECT

“Sorry, say that again?”

“I’m not sure I follow — can you take me through it?”

“What do you mean by ...?”

“Can you give me an example?”

ON THE PHONE

“Sorry, it’s a bad line — could you repeat that?”

“Could you speak up a little?”

“Let me read that back to you...”

IN WRITING — WHERE YOU HAVE ALL THE TIME YOU NEED

“Just to make sure I’ve understood — you’d like...?”

“Could you clarify what you mean by ‘...’?”

“To confirm: the deadline is Friday the 14th?”

“Can you give me an example?”

The strongest question on this page. It isn’t defensive, it makes the answer more useful, and it signals that you intend to act on it.

The one sentence to delete

☐ “Sorry, sorry — my English isn’t very good, could you maybe repeat, sorry...”

Every word of that is an apology, and it moves the conversation from what was said onto your English — which was not the subject and was never the problem.

Worse: it tells the listener to start listening for difficulty. And once someone is listening for difficulty, they find it.

Compare

☐ “Sorry, I didn’t catch that last bit.”

☐ “Excuse me — could you say that again?”

One word. Specific. Done. Nobody thinks anything of it — and you have asked the same question, in fewer words, without putting yourself on trial.

The rule

Ask once — “sorry,” “excuse me” or “pardon me,” whichever you prefer.

Never explain why you didn’t understand. Never mention your English.

This is the single most valuable habit in this guide. It costs nothing, it takes one week to build, and it changes how every conversation you have at work begins.

PRACTISE

Your first week

These phrases only work if they arrive without thinking. That takes about a week of real use — not practice, use.

DAY
1

Choose two

Pick one repetition phrase and one checking phrase. Write them somewhere you'll see them.

DAY
2

Use one

Ask someone to repeat something. One 'sorry'. Notice that nothing happens.

DAY
3

Check back

Use "So just to be clear — you'd like me to...?" once.

DAY
4

Buy time

"That's a good question — let me think for a second."

DAY
5

On a call

"Sorry, you cut out there." Or ask for something in the chat.

DAY
6

Rephrase

When something makes no sense, ask them to say it differently — it's an idiom.

DAY
7

Notice

Count how many times other people asked someone to repeat this week.

Day 7 is the one that matters

You will be surprised how often native speakers ask each other to repeat things. You simply never counted before, because you were only noticing when you did it.

WHERE TO GO NEXT

More of the words you need

This guide covers one moment. The books cover the rest.

Speak Clearly at Work

COMING SOON

The English That Actually Comes Up at Work

150 phrasal verbs by situation, the phrases for meetings, video calls and email — and how not to over-promise a deadline.

Join the list below and we'll tell you the day it's out.

Speak Clearly

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You don't have to apologise for your English. Not before, not after, not at all.

THE SPEAK CLEARLY METHOD

**Ask the question.
Everybody does.**

Speak as yourself — at work, too.

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