

How to Leave and Take Telephone Messages



What to do and say when dictating and taking dictation on the telephone? with useful leaving and taking messages phrases and common mistakes when dealing with dictating on the phone.

This article is an introduction to dictating and taking dictation on the phone when someone isn't there, with what to and not to do and say. For intensive practice of these and many other useful phrases for telephoning see the e-book [Really Learn the Most Useful Telephoning Phrases](#).

Even people who rarely have to make or receive English phone calls themselves can sometimes have to take down messages for the people who the caller really wants to speak to. This is obviously a challenge for the receiver, but it can also be tricky for the person phoning, because they will have prepared for a completely different conversation with the person who they actually wanted to speak to. Luckily, leaving messages for someone who isn't there is usually a fairly predictable conversation, with a fixed format and a limited set of phrases that you can learn and prepare to use. This article goes through such dictating and taking dictation conversations from beginning to end, looking at the

language used by both the caller and receiver. There is also some advice on typical mistakes to avoid.

Beginning taking and leaving messages telephone calls

Even when you already know that someone isn't there, the best way into leaving a message is usually to start by asking for the person who you wanted to speak to, with phrases like:

- **Caller:** "Hello. Can/ Could I speak to..., please?"
- **Caller:** "Good morning. Can/ Could you put me through to..., please?"
- **Caller:** "Good afternoon. Can/ Could you connect me to..., please?"

There are also more informal versions like "Is... there?" but "I want to speak to..." and "Please connect me/ put me through to..." are too pushy and therefore rude even in casual situations.

There is no need to give your name at this point. This is because the receiver will want to write your name down later when you leave a message, and so saying it now will mean they will have to ask you to repeat it later. Perhaps the only time when you might want to give your name at this early stage is when you know the person who answered the phone well enough that some friendly language and/ or small talk is necessary before asking to speak to someone else. A typical exchange of this kind might be:

- **Receiver:** "Good morning. ABC Limited. Harold Harris speaking. How can I help you?"
- **Caller:** "Hi Harry. This is Alex."
- **Receiver:** "Hi Alex. How's it going?"
- **Caller:** "Pretty good, thanks. How about you? How was your big presentation?"
- **Receiver:** "Hmmm, could have been better to be honest. The clients were very nice about it, though. So/ Well/ Anyway/ Well then/ So then, what can I do for you today?"
- **Caller:** "I'm calling because I need to speak to someone about the meeting next week/ I'm phoning about the meeting next week. Is Geena around?"

If the receiver doesn't help move towards getting down to business in this way, the caller can do it with transitions phrases ("Anyway/ So/.....") then asking to speak to someone. If

actual small talk isn't necessary, this can be done straight after a friendly greeting and saying who you are, something like:

- **Receiver:** "Good morning. ABC Limited. Harold Harris speaking. How can I help you?"
- **Caller:** "Hi Harry. This is Alex. Is Geena there?"
- **Receiver:** "Oh, hi Alex."

Quite often the person answering the phone doesn't know if the person who the caller wants to speak to is there or not, so they will probably say something like:

- **Receiver:** "Of course. Just a moment please. I'll just check if he's available."
- **Receiver:** "Okay. Please hold (the line). I'll put you through to her now."

When it comes to telling the caller that someone isn't there, the receiver should explain as politely and in as much detail as possible why that person isn't available to speak, with phrases like:

- **Receiver:** "I'm afraid he's on another line/ his line is busy/ he's not answering his phone."
- **Receiver:** "I'm sorry but she's meeting a client/ in a meeting with.../ away from her desk/ out of the office/ out of the country/ flying to New York/ on a business trip/ not in today/ ..."
- **Receiver:** "Sorry, he doesn't work on Fridays."

General and vague explanations like "He is not available", "He's not here" and "She's out" are not considered polite in English.

Taking and leaving telephone messages

After giving the bad news about someone not being there, the receiver should then go straight on to offer to take a message with phrases like:

- **Receiver:** "...Can I take a message?"
- **Receiver:** "...Would you like to leave a message?"
- **Receiver:** "...If I can take your name and number, I'll ask him to call you back."

"Can I take your message?" and "What is your message?" are not correct things to say, because there might not be a message and you don't want to pressure them into giving you one if they don't want to! "Shall I tell him you called?" is possible but can suggest that you aren't really volunteering to take and pass on any more complex messages!

If the receiver doesn't offer, you can ask to leave a message with phrases like:

- **Caller:** “Can/ Could I leave a message?”
- **Caller:** “Can/ Could you take a message?”
- **Caller:** “Can/ Could you ask him to call me back?”
- **Caller:** “Can/ Could you tell her I called?”

“Please + verb” (“Please + take/ ask/ tell...”) is again not polite, because it would be a command rather than a request. “Would you + take/ ask/ tell...?” is more polite, but is still a command and so is rarely suitable. There is a similar problem with “Can you tell him to call me back?”, which would mean “He has to call me back”.

It is rarely possible to refuse a request to leave a message, so the receiver will almost certainly reply with a positive answer like:

- **Receiver:** “Of course. What would you like me to tell him?”
- **Receiver:** “Of course. If you can tell me your name and number, I’ll make sure he calls you back as soon as possible.”
- **Receiver:** “Of course. Please go ahead.”
- **Receiver:** “Of course. Just a moment please while I find a pen and some paper. Okay, got it now. Please go ahead.”
- **Receiver:** “Of course. (No problem.) Does she have your number?”

More casual options are “Sure” instead of “Of course” and “Please hold on” instead of “Just a moment”.

Although it’s not recommended, the caller might sometimes get straight into a phrase for giving messages like “Can you tell her that I need...?” without a more general “Can I leave a message?” phrase first. In such a case, the receiver might have to ask them to wait with a phrase like:

- **Receiver:** “I’m sorry. Just a moment. I’ll write that down for her.”
- **Receiver:** “Okay. Just a second. I’ll get a pen and some paper and note that down for her.”
- **Receiver:** “Sorry. Just a minute. Let me make a note of that so I can pass your message onto her.”

Phrases for actually leaving the message include:

- **Caller:** "Can you tell her that...?"
- **Caller:** "Can you ask her to...?"
- **Caller:** "My name/ (home/ office/ mobile/ cellphone) number/ email address/ postal address/ ... is... (and... is...)"
- **Caller:** "The zip code/ postal code/ international dialing code/ invoice number/ order number/ product number/... is..."
- **Caller:** "I think she already has my number, but just in case it's..."

Again, "Can you tell her to...?" is not suitable for anything apart from the most aggressive messages, so "Can you ask him to...?" is the only possibility for passing on requests like "... send me...?" and "... email me about...?"

Checking/ Clarifying/ Dealing with communication problems when taking and leaving messages on the phone

If there is anything about what is being dictated which is likely to be difficult to understand or write down, the caller can help by giving more details with phrases like:

- **Caller:** "It's spelt..."
- **Caller:** "That's written with a colon/ a capital letter/ a capital.../ brackets around..."
- **Caller:** "You need a hyphen/ dash/ (forward) slash/ apostrophe/ underscore/ dot/ point/ full stop/ period/ space/ comma/ colon/ new line/... between... and..."
- **Caller:** "That's B as in banana"/ "That's... as in..."
- **Caller:** "It's all one word (with no punctuation)."

The receiver can also ask many similar questions for checking/ clarifying/ confirming, such as:

- **Receiver:** "Sorry, could you say that again (a little more slowly)?"/ "Sorry, could you say that one more time (a bit more slowly)?"
- **Receiver:** "Sorry, can you repeat the first word/ the last part/...?"
- **Receiver:** "So, it's... Is that right?"/ "So, that's..., right?"
- **Receiver:** "Sorry, could you spell your family name/... (for me), please?"/ "Sorry, how do you spell your surname/...?"

- **Receiver:** "Sorry, is that B for Bobby (or V for virgin)/ one five (or five oh)/ two words (or all one word)/ ... (or...)?"
- **Receiver:** "I'm afraid I couldn't catch the first/ middle/ last word/ part."
- **Receiver:** "Sorry, did you say... (or...)?" / "Sorry, was that... (or...)?"
- **Receiver:** "Sorry, is that spelt with a... (or a...)?"
- **Receiver:** "Is that... as in...?"
- **Receiver:** "Is that small C or capital C/ small... or capital...?"
- **Receiver:** "Sorry, do I need any punctuation (in that email address)?"
- **Receiver:** "Sorry, do you mean... or...?"
- **Receiver:** "Just to (double) check..." / "Sorry, can I (double) check...?"

It is also possible to use more general checking/ clarifying phrases, perhaps before the more specific (and therefore more useful) phrases above, for example:

- **Receiver:** "I understood up to..."
- **Receiver:** "I'm afraid I'm not familiar with..."
- **Receiver:** "I'm afraid I didn't get all of that."

Even more general phrases like "Pardon?" are correct, but are not very useful unless you say them just after the word you didn't understand.

When you've finally understood and written the message down, the standard phrase to show that everything is fine is "(Okay). Got it (now) (, thanks)". "I understand" and "I see" can have the very different meanings of unhappily accepting some information, so should be avoided in this kind of situation.

"Got it" can also be used just to show that you are listening and that they should continue.

Other useful "active listening" phrases include:

- **Receiver:** "Mmmm hmmm."
- **Receiver:** "Okay."
- **Receiver:** "Right."

Perhaps the most useful checking/ clarifying/ confirming phrase of all is "Can I check that back?" / "Can I read that back?" This means that the receiver has written the information down and wants to read it back to the caller so that they can confirm that it is all correct. The standard response to "Can I read/ check that back?" is "Of course/ Sure. Please go

ahead". If the information is all correct, the caller can simply say that with phrases like "Yes, that's perfect, thanks". Any correction should be with "Actually, (it should be) ..." because the "No" in "No, (it should be) ..." is not polite.

Especially if you have problems communicating, nowadays there are also technological solutions to communication problems, such as:

- "I'll write it out for you" (if you are speaking on a platform which allows texting as well as speaking, such as Skype).
- "If you Google..., you will find..."
- "You/ He/ She can find it on the intranet by searching for..."
- "It's (all) on the main page of our website."
- "I can send a link to that information online, if that's okay."

All of the phrases above can also sometimes be used the other way round with the receiver dictating and the caller taking dictation, for example after phrases like:

- **Caller:** "Actually, it's quite urgent. Could you give me his mobile number?"
- **Receiver:** "... but he/ she's (probably) contactable on his/ her mobile. Do you have the number? / Shall I give you the number?"

Ending taking and leaving messages

Once the person taking the message is sure they have got everything written down correctly, they can smoothly end the process with phrases like:

- **Receiver:** "Okay, I'll make sure (that) he gets your message. (I'm sure he will get back to you soon.)"
- **Receiver:** "Okay, I'll tell him that you called/ I'll pass your message onto him (as soon as I can/ as soon as he gets back). / I'll stick a Post-it on his monitor."

and then maybe a sentence offering more help such as:

- **Receiver:** "Is/ Was there anything else (that I can help you with) (today)?"

The correct answer to an "anything else" question is usually "No, that's all (for now), thanks". You can also say "Actually, (there is just one more thing)" in the much rarer case that the one message isn't enough.

If the receiver doesn't use one of the phrases above to help move towards the end of the call, the caller can use similar phrases such as:

- **Caller:** “So, I think that’s everything (he needs to know/ I wanted to tell him), thanks.”

You should then be ready for the final couple of lines, such as mentioning future contact with phrases like “I’m sure he will get back to you soon” (if you haven’t said that already) or “Please phone me again if he doesn’t get back to you soon”. It’s then time for final thanks, such as:

- **Caller:** “Thanks for (all) your help.”
- **Receiver:** “Thanks for calling/ Thanks for your call.”

“Thanks for your calling” is not grammatically correct and “Thanks for your cooperation” has a totally different function.

You are then probably ready for “(Good)bye”, but there are also friendly things you can say right at the end, particularly if you chatted at the beginning of the call, such as “Have a good evening/ day/ weekend/ trip/...”

Reference:

Case, A. (2023). *How to leave and take telephone messages*. *UsingEnglish.com*. Retrieved from: <https://www.usingenglish.com/teachers/articles/how-to-leave-take-telephone-messages.html>