

# How to Improve Your Communication Skills in English

Think of some phrases that show up repeatedly on job postings. Your list probably includes something like, “Candidate must have strong verbal and written skills,” or “Excellent communication skills a must!” With quickly changing technology and expanding globalization, it seems we are living in an increasingly communications-driven world. There are very few professions where employees can thrive without sharp English communication skills.

## What’s So Important About Communication Skills?

The advent of the internet caused some observers to mourn the imminent death of personal written correspondence, but the reality couldn’t be further from the prediction. Communication with others through texts, social media, and email is increasingly important. With that, more messages means more potential for misunderstandings. Just think of the amplifying effect of social media. Something you used to say to only a few people can now be declared to thousands or millions with a few clicks. Technology has knit together the world in ways we wouldn’t have imagined just a few decades ago, but this interconnectivity also requires proficient language skills.

In this article, we talk about why communication skills in English are so important; we’ll also give you tips for meeting today’s communication demands, whether English is your first language or whether you are learning it as an additional language skill.

You’ll also learn about how National University can help you improve your English skills in our ESOL (English speakers of other languages) programs or with our offerings for English and communication majors.

## What's So Important About English?

English is a *lingua franca*, meaning it is a “bridge” language: When two people who speak different non-English languages meet, very often the common language they use to connect is English. This is why English is taught in many schools around the globe and why many international corporations are officially mandating [English communication](#) for employees in all global locations.

English is the common language of navigation, such as for air traffic controllers and airline pilots, and it is the most common language used on the worldwide web. It is one of the six official languages of the 193-member United Nations. It is also the language of scientific research, with some 96 percent of science journals publishing in English. Some researchers report that learning English communication is as important to obtaining their PhD as their thesis.

English is spoken by about 2 billion people today. As a native language, English ranks third, but it is the number one language learned by speakers of other languages. In fact, more people use English communication as a second language than they do their own native language.

Regardless of whether you started learning English communication in infancy or much later, being able to use English language skills effectively is a big advantage, especially in the workplace.

### **Develop Your English Language Skills**

## The Four Skills to Master

For both native speakers and ESOL speakers, strong communication in English involves four modes: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Different people have naturally differing aptitudes for these skills. You probably know someone who has terrific English conversation skills, responding to your points with keen insights and offering up witty observations seemingly without effort. This person might also be someone who never cracks a book and who panics when faced with writing a simple cover letter. You probably also know that person's opposite: the introvert who seems tongue-tied in social settings or whose mind seems to wander when others are talking, but who reads a couple novels per week or repeatedly churns out well-crafted stories and articles.

The more well-rounded you are in all the modes of English communication, the better equipped you are to thrive personally, socially, and professionally. Whatever skill you struggle with, the best prescription for improving it is practice. Reading comprehension increases when you read often, especially if you read a variety of material. So if you shrink in fear at a school or work reading assignment, commit to reading a little every day. Pick up a magazine, read a novel a few pages at a time — no pressure to finish it quickly — or take a few minutes to actually read one of the articles a friend has linked on social media.

The same goes for writing. Do a little every day. It doesn't have to be anything anyone ever reads, though occasionally it's helpful to have someone read your writing and offer feedback. As a runner becomes strong and fast through regularly logging miles, a writer becomes concise and articulate by logging words.

Learning to focus your listening also takes practice. If you are the kind of person who is always planning what you'll have for dinner while someone else

is talking to you, it helps to simply catch your own mind in the act of wandering and gently bring it back to the present situation. Many experts recommend establishing a meditation practice, even if only a few minutes a day, to hone the skill of noticing when your thoughts stray and bringing them back to the point of focus.

If you have trouble speaking, whether in social groups or before audiences, try to assess exactly why; if you're too anxious to get your point across, sometimes acknowledging your anxiety can help dispel it. Try not to be too hard on yourself if, looking back, you cringe at something you've said in a public speaking situation. For one thing, we tend to be our own harshest judge, so it's likely no one else thought it was that bad. Also, ask yourself how *you* would treat someone else in the same position. You would likely feel sympathy and want to encourage that person — so do the same favor for yourself. If you can put aside some of your self-judgment, your mind is freed up to compile coherent thoughts on the fly, which is what public speaking is all about.

## Finding Your Voice in Writing

We all look back on conversations and regret things we didn't say or things we did say. There is no Control-Z in conversation. But there is in writing (at least if you're using Windows!), so whether you're a novelist, a blogger, or that person who writes only when desperate, use the power of rethinking. If time allows, walk away from your writing for a day or two and come back to it. You'll be amazed at how the words have rearranged themselves to better effect in your mind — and how quickly you spot errors you didn't see before. If you proofread immediately after finishing writing, you'll just read what you *meant* to say. But if you give yourself some distance, the mistakes reveal themselves. It's always a good idea, too, to read your writing aloud, even if you're only reading it to yourself or your cats. When you hear the words, you'll

catch mistakes and awkward phrases. If you have a helpful partner or friend to read your writing back at you, all the better. Another effective technique is to use the read-aloud feature in your word processing software. You might not see a subtle error like a doubled or missing “the,” but you’ll *hear* it if the robot says it.

Don’t lull yourself into thinking that solid English communication skills aren’t important in everyday writing. From tweets on up, your writing reflects your thinking and it reflects you. It can be tempting to ignore the details of grammar and syntax because, “They’ll know what I meant.” Yes, they may, but confused writing is perceived as confused thinking. Meticulous writing conveys a clear mind and ordered thoughts.

## Tips for Improving Your Skills

There are a number of online programs that not only help you with proofreading, but they can also help you learn to improve your English communication skills. Leading the proofing app offerings are [Grammarly](#) and [ProWriting Aid](#), which do much more than find typos and grammar mistakes. They’ll also assess overall readability and flow, and give you suggestions for improvement. Paying close attention to the issues these programs flag is like taking a mini-course in English communication.

If you’d like to go more deeply into improving English communication skills, consider enrolling in online or local college classes like the [English language programs](#) at National University.

## Learning English as a Foreign Language

Dr. Starley Dullien, Program Director of the English Language and Pathway Programs at National University, speaks English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, and is currently learning Chinese. She draws on her personal experience when she suggests day-to-day strategies for improving English communication skills.

Dr. Dullien recommends committing to at least an hour or two of English study every day. “You have to make the language a part of your life and a part of you,” she says. One tip Dr. Dullien suggests for English learners is to resist the temptation of setting your cell phone to your first language — set it to English instead.

Read and write in English as often as possible. Dr. Dullien suggests keeping a journal in English, or even just copying English articles or writing while someone dictates. This reinforces the written appearance of spoken words. Another way to engage visual learning with language learning is to make collages of magazine articles on similar subjects.

Dr. Dullien also points out that books that pair words and pictures are powerful language acquisition tools. Children’s books, comic books, and graphic novels enlist the brain’s visual abilities to cement English communication concepts.

Music is another effective way to engage different parts of the brain. “I was singing songs in Italian before I knew what they meant,” relates Dr. Dullien. She recommends listening to songs in English while following along with the lyrics, which are usually easy to find online.

You can improve your English conversation skills by simply having as many conversations in English as possible and by surrounding yourself with English media. Watch news programs in English. If the stories move too fast, try

getting your news from [BBC Learning English](#), which has news reports geared to different levels of English. Listen to podcasts or radio programs that feature stories on different subjects.

Don't panic when you want to say something that's on the tip of your tongue. If that sentence you've just read doesn't make total sense, don't worry about it — “tip of the tongue” is what we call an idiom. An idiom can be defined as a phrase that makes no sense in the context in which it's used — you don't actually have any words sitting on the tip of your tongue — it has meaning only after you've had time to become familiar with its usage. Idioms play with language in order to convey a special meaning; consider: English will give you a run for your money no matter how on the ball you are, but when some phrase doesn't ring a bell, there's no reason to have a cow, because even if you screw up, you'll get over it. Just chill and hit the books for a while before you hit the sack!

If you want to get a handle on—that is, *learn*—the strange idioms of English language more quickly, you can find an idiom generator and many other useful English exercises on the site run by the [American Association of Intensive English Programs \(AAIEP\)](#).

Here are a few more resources that can help you when learning English communication skills:

[BBC Learning English](#), in addition to its level-appropriate newscasts, offers lessons, tips, games, explanations of idioms and slang, and much more. It also offers lessons in many non-English languages for English learners who are just starting out.

[TalkEnglish](#) has lessons for speaking and listening at various levels as well as many instructional articles.

[EnglishClub](#) has a large array of lessons covering all four aspects of communication, as well as forums to connect with teachers and other learners.

## National University: Your Partner in Learning English as a Foreign Language

According to Program Director, Dr. Dullien, [National University's ESOL offerings](#) support all levels of English language acquisition for general, socio-cultural, academic, and workplace settings.

National University's ESOL programs are in-person programs of varying lengths. The programs employ blended language learning (BLL) strategies, meaning students receive personal instruction along with a variety of web-based tools, allowing them to simultaneously improve their modes of understanding.

For students applying to academic programs at National University, completion of EAP meets the language proficiency requirements and waives placement tests. Students who apply to degree programs outside National University will likely be required to pass placement tests such as TOEFL, but Dr. Dullien is more than confident that students who have completed EAP will pass. "There is a difference between a score and a skill," says Dr. Dullien, adding that a passing test score may not reflect the depth of English understanding that is actually required to thrive in the academic setting. As Dr. Dullien puts it, "By the time students are in the final classes of EAP, they will be able to write a formal research paper, make presentations, hold round-table discussions, and give speeches, so they are more than ready to pass exams."



Students who complete this program or otherwise demonstrate satisfactory proficiency may enroll in the [\*\*English for Specific Purposes \(ESP\)\*\*](#) program, which Dr. Dullien characterizes as a sequence designed to enhance employment opportunities. Often, she says, professionals from non-English speaking countries take time off work and enroll in the program to improve their career performance or seek other careers. The program helps learners refine the terminology of individual areas of study, such as engineering, economics, environmental science, and many other programs. The program is customized to meet the proficiency level and subject-area needs of each student.

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