

THE WRITING SKILLS POCKETBOOK

By Stella Collins & Beth Curl

Drawings by Phil Hailstone

"Delightfully clear! Writing a book about writing is brave – and this one follows its own advice to the letter."

Dr. Peter Honey, Occupational Psychologist and Management Trainer

"It's obvious from reading this book that Stella Collins & Beth Curl know exactly what they are talking about. It's a marvelously clear, concise, and compelling treatment."

Robert B. Cialdini, Author of Influence: Science and Practice

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GETTING THE TONE RIGHT

BE CLEAR & ASSERTIVE



You can build your writing with three types of assertive sentences, mixing and matching them as required: basic statements, open questions, and conveying empathy. These are covered in the next few pages.

1. Basic Statements

- To give information
- State our views
- State our needs or beliefs

Use 'I' statements rather than 'it', 'you', and 'one'. 'I' statements are direct, powerful and assertive. It is clear that you are giving your own opinion.

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------------------|
| ● I can, I think | ● I prefer |
| ● I believe, I feel | ● I will |
| ● I like | ● I won't be able to |
| ● I'd like you to | |

GETTING THE TONE RIGHT

BE CLEAR & ASSERTIVE



2. Open questions

Open questions are one of your most valuable communication tools to find out information or ask about someone else's views, opinions or needs or position. They usually start with *Who*, *Why*, *Where*, *What*, *When* and *How* and require more than a 'yes' or 'no' answer. They are very useful when you want to reach a win-win solution.

Examples of open questions:

What do you think?

When could you do this?

Who would be the best person for this?

How do you feel about this?

Why would that be a concern?

Where would you like to meet?

GETTING THE TONE RIGHT

BE CLEAR & ASSERTIVE

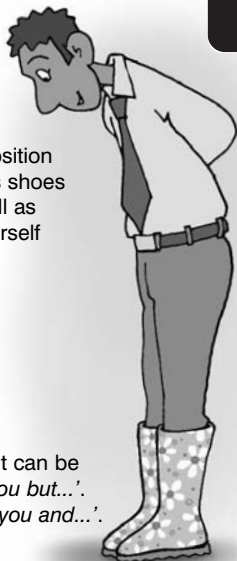
3. Conveying empathy

Displaying empathy is acknowledging another person's position or feelings; it's when you put yourself in the other person's shoes and show you can see things from their perspective as well as your own. You use empathy to build a bridge between yourself and other people.

Examples:

- I recognise....
- I understand....
- I appreciate....
- I realise.....and....

Be careful using the word 'but' when conveying empathy. It can be seen to diminish everything that has gone before: *'I hear you but...'*. You can build on what you've said by using 'and' – *'I hear you and...'*. ('However' and 'yet' are like a polite 'but'.)



GETTING THE TONE RIGHT

BE CLEAR & ASSERTIVE



Occasionally you may need to be stronger in your written dealings with other people. This can seem more difficult, particularly if it is something you feel will upset them such as:

- Pointing out when someone has not done what they agreed to do
- Conveying your own negative feelings about a situation in a controlled and constructive way
- Issuing an ultimatum and giving someone a last chance to take action

Here are some techniques to deal with these types of situations.



GETTING THE TONE RIGHT

POINTING OUT A DISCREPANCY



If you want to remind someone of something they have agreed to, but not yet done, try using a sentence like this.

EXAMPLE

'On August 26th we agreed that you would provide the information for my project. I haven't received the data yet, and this means that we will be really pushed to meet the deadline. So please will you update me on where you have got to by tomorrow morning.'

The structure here is:

- State what was agreed
- State that it hasn't happened yet
- Get information in order to plan the way forward

Acknowledgements to Ken and Kate Back for their classification of assertive language.

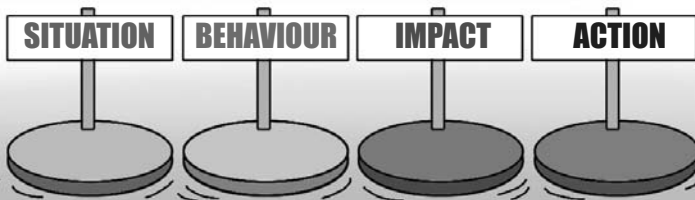
GETTING THE TONE RIGHT

EXPRESSING YOUR FEELINGS



When you feel worked up, it is easy to let your emotion spill onto the page. Sometimes you want people to know how you feel about a situation or their behaviour so you need a format to express your feelings in a controlled, clear and constructive way.

A useful structure for this type of situation is:

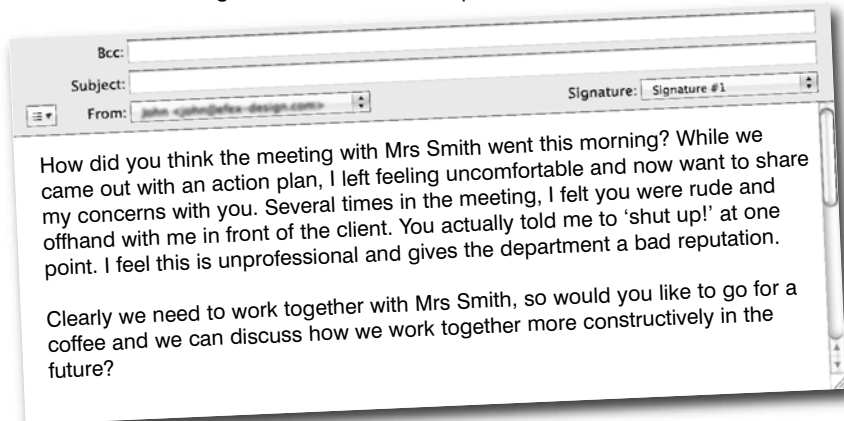


GETTING THE TONE RIGHT

EXPRESSING YOUR FEELINGS



An email written using Situation, Behaviour, Impact, Action.



GETTING THE TONE RIGHT

GIVING AN ULTIMATUM – A LAST CHANCE TO ACT



When you have tried every other option, you may need to issue an ultimatum or a sanction. Think carefully about it as you lose power if you do not carry it out.

I remember saying to my daughter when she was young, *'If you don't behave you will not be able to go to the party.'* I was taken aback when she said, *'Good, I didn't want to go anyway!'* I regretted my words as I saw my peaceful afternoon disappearing and I will leave you to guess what happened next!

With a sanction or ultimatum, you need to firmly explain the consequences.

EXAMPLE

'I need your timesheet by 9am on the 20th of each month. If you do not supply it, unfortunately you will not be paid that month. Please make sure you get it in promptly.'

GETTING THE TONE RIGHT

WORDS TO BE WARY OF



Uncertainties

- Perhaps/ maybe
- Hopefully
- Try

Using rules against yourself

- I ought
- I should

Over apologising

- I'm terribly sorry

Asking others

- Do you think I ought to

Put downs

- It's just a ...

Hopelessness

- We can't do anything
- It's hopeless

Imposing rules on others

- You must
- You should

Generalisations

- Everyone always
- It's never...

Expressing opinion as facts

- It's like this

Making decisions for others

- If I were you

Blaming others

- If you hadn't done that
- Why on earth did you do that?

Giving orders

- Get me that data now

About the Authors

Stella Collins, BSc, MSc, FITOL

Stella is a passionate advocate for enhanced communication skills. With 16 years experience in the IT industry and 12 years in L&D, her company, Stellar Learning, transforms training particularly if it's tough, technical or tortuous. She founded The Brain Friendly Learning Group, speaks regularly at conferences, has co-published six e-books and is a regular writer for training publications as well as having her own blog. She consults internationally on communication skills for SME and blue chip clients. She loves helping people with writing to make life easier for both writers and readers.



Beth Curl, BSc, MCIPD

Beth believes in 'giving the best to and getting the best from people'. From research chemist to founder of Hyproformance Ltd, she views effective writing as a cornerstone to business success. Through 25 years as a management development consultant to organisations in the private and public sectors, Beth has distilled out key principles for communicating clearly in writing. Her goal is always to get the desired response from the reader, whilst making the task of writing easier and faster. She shares these concepts through workshops, coaching and her blog.

