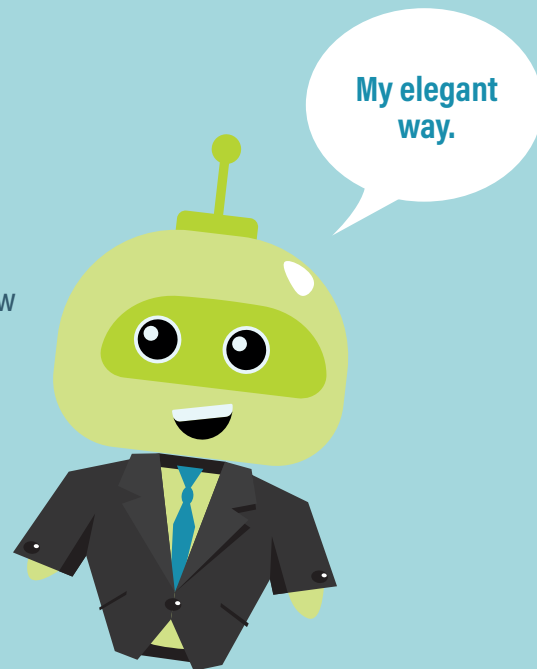




What to say when you don't understand ...

In situations when you didn't hear or understand what was said, you need a range of expressions to ask for clarification. The exercises below give you some elegant ways to do that, so as not to feel embarrassed.

by Garry Britton



A Be honest and ask for repetition

You could be really direct, admit you didn't understand, and ask for repetition.

Match sentence parts: Match the beginnings to the endings of these phrases, which achieve that objective:

1. I don't understand what

2. That was too fast for me. Could you

3. I'm afraid you've

4. I didn't understand at all –

5. I'm not sure what you

6. My English isn't good enough

7. You've lost me. Could you

8. Sorry, that went

a. said, exactly – could you explain?

b. to catch everything – what was that?

c. completely over my head.

d. you mean – can you repeat that?

e. could you say that again?

f. speak more slowly, please?

g. go over that again?

h. lost me there, what did you mean?

Exercise A: 1 d; 2 f or g; 3 h; 4 e; 5 a; 6 b; 7 f or g; 8 c

B Presenting partial understanding

To avoid feeling embarrassed, present your complete lack of understanding as only partial. A key word here is 'quite', as this implies that you almost – but not quite, not completely – understood:

Reorder the scrambled sentences

1. I catch that didn't quite.
2. didn't I get the first of that part.
3. you said I didn't catch all of what.
4. all I quite couldn't follow of that.
5. exactly what I said you didn't hear.
6. what you're lost I've the thread of saying sorry.

Exercise B: 1 I didn't quite catch that; 2 I didn't get the first part of that; 3 I didn't catch all of what you said; 4 I couldn't quite follow all of that; 5 I didn't hear exactly what you said; 6 Sorry I've lost the thread of what you're saying.

D Misunderstanding and confirmation

Sometimes we use idioms to talk about understanding and misunderstanding. When you really want to be sure you have understood, it's time to check. The expressions below might help.

Insert the correct idiom/expression into each gap, changing the grammar as required.

tie everything up/ drop me a line/ got our wires crossed/ missed the point/ on the same wavelength

1. I think we are talking about completely different things, we've _____!
2. I don't really follow you – I think I've _____.
3. We agree, we're _____ here, so just confirm the details for me.
4. Perhaps you could just email me, so we can _____ in writing.
5. _____ to remind me of what we said.

Exercise D: 1 got our wires crossed, 2 missed the point, 3 on the same wavelength, 4 the everything up, 5 Drop me a line

C Ask questions for further information

When you want to encourage the speaker to repeat with the same words, or perhaps to rephrase, ask questions to get more information. This way, you gain some time to think about what was said.

Select the correct word in each sentence

Select the word which makes most sense in each case.

One word is not a real verb at all!

1. Do you (a) mean (b) declare (c) imply that the seminar will finish early?
2. Are you (a) recording (b) suggesting (c) requesting that the speakers are unpaid?
3. If I (a) catch (b) understand (c) realise you correctly, you're saying that everything is free.
4. What (a) correctly (b) probably (c) exactly do you mean by 'early'?
5. So what's your (a) thought (b) thread (c) point, exactly?
6. Could you (a) clarify (b) rectify (c) spotify (d) amplify what you mean by that?

Exercise C: 1 a; 2 b; 3 b; 4 c; 5 c; 6 a; 'spotify' is not a real verb, but a brand name.

