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SMART STRATEGIES

when you don't understand something in English



THE THIRD EDITION

About this guide

Make sure you do the **free** lesson that accompanies this guide:

[3 things NOT to do when you don't understand an English speaker](#)

← Click link

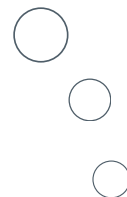
This guide has been designed to give you **practical strategies** to help you manage situations when you don't understand speakers of English.

You'll learn HOW TO

- keep the anxiety of not understanding to a minimum
- ask for clarification
- ask the speaker to modify their language
- ask for specific meaning
- reformulate
- use informal / slang expressions

BONUS: 4 idioms to use when you don't understand

Huh?!



Mindset



1. Remember that communication is **everyone's responsibility**, not just yours
2. *It is **ALWAYS** okay to ask for **clarification**.*
Native speakers do it all the time!
3. *Stay **calm** and **admit** when you don't understand*

Here's how!



Ask for clarification

When you don't really **hear** what is being said or you want some **clarification**:

1. Sorry, could you repeat that?
2. I'm sorry, I didn't catch that.
3. Sorry, I didn't understand, Could you say that again?
4. I'm sorry? *

N.B. Use these phrases sparingly as they can be ineffective. See this free lesson for more information

When you can't understand because the person is **speaking too fast**: you need the person to **slow down** or **modify** their language:

1. Would you mind repeating that more slowly?
2. I'm not following, could you go over that again more slowly please?
3. I'm having trouble following. Would you mind speaking more slowly please?
4. I'm confused. Can you explain that again?
5. Can I ask for clarification on ... ? (formal)
6. What did you mean by that? *
7. Could you speak up a bit please? The connection isn't great.

*Pronunciation Note!

When you use the phrase "I'm sorry?" to indicate that you didn't understand, make sure your intonation **goes up** at the end to show that you are asking a question

*Grammar Note!

"What do you mean?" is quite a **direct question** so it will be more **informal**.

If you want to sound **polite**, you should use the **past simple** instead of present simple: "What did you mean by ...?"



For more about how to use polite English, see our free lesson



Click link

Ask for specific meaning

When you understand most of the conversation but there is **one word** or **expression** that you don't know or understand:

1. Simply repeat the word using the correct intonation. For example, if the word you didn't understand was 'peanut', just say: "**Peanut?**", with your **intonation going up** at the end to make it clear it is a query.
2. I'm sorry, I don't think I understand what you mean by 'X'.
3. Sorry, I don't know this word/expression. Can you explain it please?
4. What does X mean in this context?
5. Sorry, I don't understand this expression. Can you say it in a different way?
6. I can't make out the word you are using.
Can you spell it please?



Reformulate

When you want to **check** that you are understanding **everything**, **repeat back** to the speaker what they've just said: say what you think you've understood using your **own words**.

1. So, you're saying...
2. Do you mean ...
3. So you mean that ..
4. So if I understood you correctly,
5. So if I've understood correctly, Is that correct?
6. What I understand is...
7. Just so that I'm clear ...
8. Could you be more specific about ...
9. If I can just recap the main points:

What's great about reformulation?

You'll come off as a good listener and at the same, boost your conversation skills by sharing ideas & increasing the chance of a successful & effective exchange.

Informal / Slang

These phrases are for close friends or colleagues in an informal setting

1. What did you say? (Pronounced: Whatcha say?)
2. Hmm? (We use this when we are distracted. It shows that the person wasn't focusing on what you were saying, so needs you to repeat)
3. Huh? Eh? (Slang when we don't hear or don't understand)
4. What? (be careful using 'What?' as it can appear aggressive. Native speakers tend to use 'What?' when they are offended by something)
5. Come again?
6. You what? (UK)
7. I don't get it. (Not a question but a statement, meaning simply 'I don't understand')

BONUS: Idioms & Expressions

These idioms all mean this: cannot understand someone or something at all; cannot make any sense of someone or something.

1. I can't make head nor tail of what you're saying.

I've been working with Ted for years, but I still can't make head nor tail of what he says!

2. It's all Greek to me.

I came out of the meeting very confused. It was all Greek to me!

3. As clear as mud to me.

Everything she explained about the new project was as clear as mud to me.

4. For the life of me, I can't work out what you mean.

I tried to follow the call but for the life of me I couldn't work out what she was talking about.

Summary

3 things NOT to do are

- Don't pretend to understand when you don't.
- Don't freeze and become mute.
- Try using other strategies instead of *Can you repeat that please?*

- Never be afraid to ask for clarification
- Never be afraid to ask someone to modify their language
- Ask for the specific meaning of words or expressions. This enables you to ask for clarification and avoid having the whole thing repeated to you.
- When possible, reformulate, check and confirm your understanding. By doing this you show that you take accuracy seriously and you demonstrate that you want to make sure you've got all the information you need before moving forward.