

Telephone English

Ready to tackle phone calls in English? I've got you covered. This lesson will help you develop this must-have skill for confidence and fluency in English. We're touching on everything from friendly chats to professional calls, breaking down actual conversations to pick out useful language and etiquette. Whether it's booking a table or making work calls, you'll learn it here. Let's jump in!

● Making Plans

In our first conversation, Jesse receives a call from Drew, who proposes the idea of organising a reunion with their university friends. The conversation leads to plans for a get-together at their old hangout spot, setting the scene for a nostalgic Friday night reunion.

Jesse: Hello?

Drew: Hey, Jesse, how are you?

Jesse: I'm sorry, who is this?

Drew: What, you don't have my number saved? It's me, Drew!

Jesse: Oh, of course! Sorry about that, Drew! Yeah, I just got a new phone.
How's it going?

Drew: Great, thanks! I was calling coz I was thinking, why don't we organise a reunion with our uni friends? It's been ages!

Jesse: I'd love that! Let me call that old pub we used to go to and see if I can book a table. How about Friday night?

Drew: Brilliant! Friday night is perfect. Let me know how it goes. Call me at my office. The number is 0344 431 7963.

Jesse: Okay, sounds like a plan. Chat soon. Bye!

Drew: Bye!



Let's start at the beginning. Jesse used the most common of phrases to answer the phone: **Hello?**

- Adding that slightly raised 'oh' at the end makes this greeting more of a question, signifying that Jesse doesn't recognise the number and wasn't expecting the call.
 - It's almost like saying, "**Erm, who are you, and why are you calling me?**"

If Jesse had been more animated in her tone, like '**Hello!**' or '**Hey there!**' we would assume that she knew who was on the other end of the line.

Of course, you can answer the phone in numerous ways. Here are a few more common ways to answer the phone:

- **[Your Name] speaking.**
- **Hey! How's it going?**
- **Hey, how's tricks?**
- **This is [Your Name].**
- **Hello, [Your Name] here.**

After Jesse answers the phone, Drew attempts to start a conversation, but Jesse isn't sure who she is speaking to. She said, '**I'm sorry, who is this?**'

- This is a great question to try to **get information from an unknown caller** without being rude and saying, '**Who are you?**'

Consider using some of these other polite questions when you want to politely ask about the identity of a caller -

- **Who exactly am I talking to?**
- **Sorry, I didn't catch your name. Who is this?**
- **Can/May I ask who is calling, please?**



Okay, let's talk about '**Let me...**'.

This is a common expression in English, often **used to offer assistance, request permission or indicate a future action by the speaker**. It's a polite way to suggest that the speaker is about to take some initiative or perform a task, either immediately or in the near future.

The structure is usually: **Let me + verb**

- **Let me** check.
- **Let me** get back to you.
- **Let me** explain!

Right, moving on, we also heard Drew give his phone number there when he told Jesse to call him at his office.

In the UK, it's common to **replace zero with 'oh /əʊ/ '** when giving a phone number, or any string of numbers, over the phone.

There is also another unique aspect of giving numbers over the phone. If we have **two of the same number in a row, we often say double 'the number'**:

- 33 → **double-three**
- 99 → **double-nine**
- 007 → **double-oh seven** 

And let's look at one more important aspect of a phone conversation: **the closing**.

How you end your phone call can vary greatly depending on who you are talking to. In Drew and Jesse's conversation, it was quite informal: **Chat soon. Bye!**

- This a colloquial way to say, '**Let's talk again soon.**'



You don't need to be that casual unless you are talking to close friends. Here are a few more common phrases:

Casual

- **Talk to you later, bye!**
- **It was great catching up. Bye for now!**
- **Alright, gotta go now. Bye!**

Formal

- **Thank you for your time, bye.**
- **It was a pleasure speaking to you. Goodbye.**
- **I appreciate your assistance. Have a great day.**

And here are some important tips to keep in mind when ending a phone call:

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|----|--|
| 1. | Ensure that the closing phrase clearly indicates the conversation is ending. |
| 2. | Match your tone to the context of the conversation (professional or casual). |
| 3. | In formal calls, a quick recap of key points or action items can be helpful. |
| 4. | Always end on a polite note to leave a positive impression. |

Okay, I think it's time to move on and listen to Jesse's conversation with her uni pub.

● Making Reservations

In this next part of the conversation, Jesse calls the Royal Tavern to reserve a table for their upcoming university friends' reunion. After a brief misunderstanding of Jesse's name, Billy confirms the booking for ten people on Friday night, solidifying the plans for their get-together.

Billy: Thanks for calling the Royal Tavern; this is Billy speaking. How can I help you?

Jesse: Good afternoon. I'd like to book a table for 7pm on Friday, the 21st.

Billy: Certainly, for how many people?

Jesse: There'll be a group of ten.

Billy: Excellent. Can I have your name, please?

Jesse: It's Jesse Potter.

Billy: Sorry, I didn't quite catch that. Did you say 'Jenny' Potter?

Jesse: No, it's Jesse - J as in Juliett, E as in Echo, S for Sierra, S for Sierra, E as in Echo.

Billy: Thank you for the clarification. You're all booked in for Friday at 7pm.

Jesse: That's great, thanks a lot! Bye!

Okay, we've got some great phrases here and important phone etiquette to talk about. Let's start by looking at this slightly more formal greeting from this gentleman at the pub: **Thanks for calling the Royal Tavern; how can I help you?**

The way we answer the phone in a business setting is different from how we would answer the phone normally. It's common to **state the company name** so that callers know they've reached who they are trying to call. You can also **give your own name**, like Billy did here, **to make your conversation more personable**.



But did you notice how Billy gave his name? He didn't say, **'I am Billy.'** He said, **'This is Billy.'**

- Saying **'This is [Name]'** on the phone is very common because making a clear and direct introduction is often necessary, and it answers the question we saw at the start: 'Who is this?'
- It establishes the speaker's identity in a concise manner that is suitable for professional and casual situations alike.
- We pretty much never say **'I am [Name]'** over the phone, except in specific situations.

Here are a few more greetings you could also use:

- **Good morning/afternoon, [Company Name]; how may I help you?**
- **Thank you for calling [Company Name]; this is [Your Name]. How may I assist you today?**
- **Hello! This is [Your Name] at [Company Name]. What can I do for you today?**

When calling to make reservations, book a hotel or request information, it's important that you **know the specifics of your request or inquiry and have all the necessary information close to hand.** This will help you feel more comfortable while you are on the phone and make the process faster.

You should **start with a polite greeting** and **clearly explain your purpose for calling.** Then, provide all of the relevant details as clearly as possible. Preparing ahead of time will certainly help with that.

Jesse would definitely get full marks. As we can see here, she gave a polite greeting and clearly explained what she needed:

"Good afternoon. I'd like to book a table for 7pm on Friday, the 21st."



Now, Billy used a wonderful phrase after Jesse gave her name, saying:
Sorry, I didn't quite catch that.

- You can use this phrase when you don't understand what someone has said or if they are speaking too quickly.

Here are some other phrases you can use:

- **Sorry, can you speak more slowly?**
- **Can you repeat that, please?**
- **Would you mind saying that again, please?**
- **I couldn't hear you, I'm afraid. What was that?**

If the connection isn't very strong, you can say:

- **I'm sorry you're breaking up.**
- **I'm sorry, but you keep cutting in and out.**
- **I think the reception is bad. Would you mind calling back?**

We also heard Jesse spell her name in a unique way:

Jesse - J as in Juliett, E as in Echo, S for Sierra, S for Sierra, E as in Echo.

This brings us to an important topic: **the NATO phonetic alphabet.**

The **NATO phonetic alphabet assigns specific words to letters** to enhance clarity in verbal communication, especially over the phone. While you don't HAVE TO use it, you could choose your own words, like **E for Elephant**, the NATO phonetic alphabet is standardised to ensure precise communication across different languages and accents.

I will provide the full NATO Phonetic Alphabet on the next page if you're curious, but it's not essential that you memorise it.



The NATO Phonetic Alphabet

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|----------|---------|----------|----------|
| A | Alfa | N | November |
| B | Bravo | O | Oscar |
| C | Charlie | P | Papa |
| D | Delta | Q | Quebec |
| E | Echo | R | Romeo |
| F | Foxtrot | S | Sierra |
| G | Golf | T | Tango |
| H | Hotel | U | Uniform |
| I | India | V | Victor |
| J | Juliett | W | Whiskey |
| K | Kilo | X | Xray |
| L | Lima | Y | Yankee |
| M | Mike | Z | Zulu |



Okay, let's have a look at the closing of our conversation. Billy did a great job of wrapping up this conversation by giving a quick recap of key points discussed during the conversation. He said: **You're all set for Friday at 7pm.**

Jesse made it clear that the information Billy had was correct by saying: **That's great. Thanks a lot! Bye!**

Shall we move to the final phone conversation?

● Professional Calls

In this conversation, Jesse contacts Urban Enterprises to speak with Drew, navigating a professional exchange with the receptionist. The conversation showcases formal phone etiquette, including the identification and handling of call requests.

Receptionist: Good afternoon! Thank you for calling Urban Enterprises; who can I put you through to?

Jesse: Hello, may I speak to Drew Lancaster, please? I believe he works in advertising.

Receptionist: May I ask who's calling?

Jesse: This is Jesse Potter.

Receptionist: Could you hold for one moment, please? I'll see if Mr Lancaster is available.

...

Receptionist: I'm sorry, but Mr Lancaster is in a meeting right now. Would you like to call back later, or can I take a message?

Jesse: Yes, if you can, just let him know that we're all set for Friday.

Receptionist: Of course, I'll pass on the message. Have a lovely day!

Jesse: Thank you very much. Bye!



Here, the language is quite formal. The **receptionist** - the person responsible for handling a business' incoming phone calls - answered the phone with a classic business greeting.

Jesse does a great job at matching the receptionist's level of formality. We heard many uses of hedging language like the modal verbs **might, can, could** and **may**.

- This type of language helps to soften your speech so that you sound more polite as it is less direct.

The receptionist also asked an important question: **who can I put you through to?**

- **To put somebody through (to somebody)** means to connect somebody to another person by phone.

After Jesse requests to speak to Drew, the receptionist asks, '**Could you hold for one moment, please?**'

- **To put sb. on hold** means to temporarily pause a telephone conversation, typically to retrieve information or transfer the call to someone else.

There are also other phrases you can use depending on the formality of the situation, for example -

- **Hello, you've reached [Company Name]. How can I assist you?**
- **[Your Name] speaking. How may I help you today?**
- **Let me check and see if [Requested Person] is available.**
- **Let me transfer you to [Name's] extension.**

We also heard the receptionist give two options: **Would you like to call back later, or can I take a message?**



I'm sure you don't need me to explain 'to call back later', though I should mention that phrasal verbs are often considered informal but this one is so common it's used in relatively formal exchanges too.

We also heard '**Can I take a message?**'.

- **To take a message** means to write down or otherwise record information from a caller to pass on to someone else.

Finally, the receptionist gave Jesse a very polite farewell to end the call after he ensured he would pass on the message.

Of course, there are also loads of other phrases and important vocabulary you can use in this type of business situation, like -

Answering the Phone

- Could you please tell me your name and the purpose of your call?
- Hello, [Company Name]. How can I direct your call?
- Thank you for calling [Company Name]. May I have your name, please?

Requesting Information

- Could you please provide the details of your request?
- Would you mind specifying the purpose of your call?
- May I ask for your contact details in case we get disconnected?

Ending the Phone Call

- Is there anything else I can help you with today?
- We're here whenever you need us. Thank you for calling.
- It was a pleasure assisting you. Take care.



