

The Travel Adapter

23 simple lessons to help English speakers communicate successfully in global English



Matt Halsdorff & Christian Saunders

About the authors



Matt Halsdorff was born in California but now lives in Italy. He has worked as a business trainer for multinationals since 2004. He is interested in the intersection of language and culture.



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If you would like to learn more or book a workshop with us please contact: info@canguroenglish.com

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All proceeds from this project go towards building schools. You can make a donation starting from \$1 here:

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Introduction

When you travel to another country you pack a bag. It's a symbol of preparation. What you put in the bag reflects what you expect to find in the country you are going to visit.

If you travel to Barbados in August you expect sun, so you take sunscreen and a bikini. When you go to Norway in December you expect snow, so you take a thick coat and gloves.

But unfortunately when we travel to other countries either in person or virtually, we are often ill-prepared for something fundamental: language. Most of us only have one strategy to use when someone doesn't understand you: speak louder!

And this is almost never done in malice, or ignorance, or unkindness. It's because most of us have never been taught how to prepare for language travel. The sad fact is that research has proven that monolingual English speakers are the worst communicators in a global environment, and that's because we often take too much advantage of our privilege as native speakers.

Communication is not a one-way street, it is a dance between two or more people, and it can only work if both sides participate equally. Unfortunately, that is not often the case.

We both spend a majority of our time working directly with students teaching English as a foreign language, and we focus on preparing them for communication in the real world. But as you will discover in the following pages, no matter how well we teach our students, and how dedicated they are, we can only help with half of the problem.

Language can be used to bring people closer together. But it can also be used to separate and exclude people. It can be used as a weapon. As native speakers using English in a global setting we have a huge arsenal of weapons that we can use. And the people that we are communicating with sometimes have no way to defend themselves. And that creates a huge imbalance in power.

We hope this PDF will help you to share that power, and create a little bit more equality in the world.

Matt & Christian
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What is The Travel Adapter?

There are two main concepts that we will be using in this PDF and they are **tools** and **adapters**.

Your language skills are your tools: your vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and the culture that is embedded in them. And to use those tools successfully when you travel you will need an adapter.

The key thing about *The Travel Adapter* is that it doesn't require you to acquire any new language tools or to throw away the language tools you already have. It only requires you to use an adapter so that they work successfully.

vocabulary
grammar
pronunciation
culture



Your language tools

Adapting is natural

You already adapt your language every day depending on who you are speaking with. Think about the different ways you speak when you:

- give a presentation
- chat with close friends
- flirt with someone
- speak to children
- use global English - this is where you will need your travel adapter

The Travel Adapter is not about policing your language. We are not here to tell you what you are allowed or not allowed to say.

There is no right and wrong in language, only successful and unsuccessful communication.



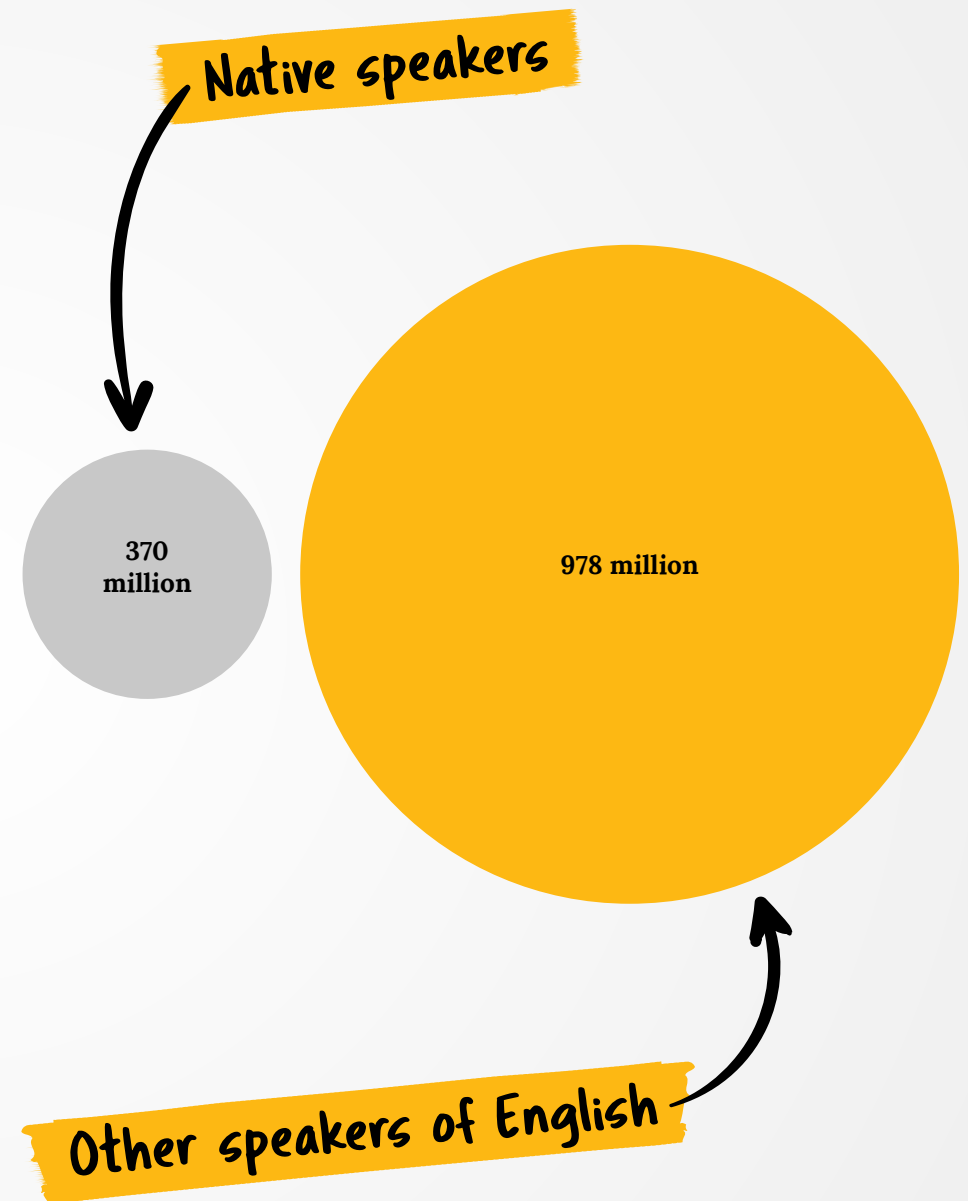
Why adapt?

We could give you lots of facts and figures about how adapting your language saves time, money and prevents costly errors, but the main reason you should adapt is a lot bigger than that.

English is now a true global language. Native speakers are completely outnumbered by non-native speakers and a majority of the world's communication in English includes non-native speakers.

If you don't adapt you are in danger of being left behind in this globalised world. Now, more than ever, it's necessary to let go of the idea that English belongs to native speakers.

Now that you understand more about the philosophy behind *The Travel Adapter*, let's get started!



The Travel Adapter

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“The single biggest problem in communication
is the illusion that it has taken place.”

- George Bernard Shaw

When most people think about 'good English' they often think about right and wrong, or correct and incorrect language. And as children we are taught at school that perfect language looks only one way.

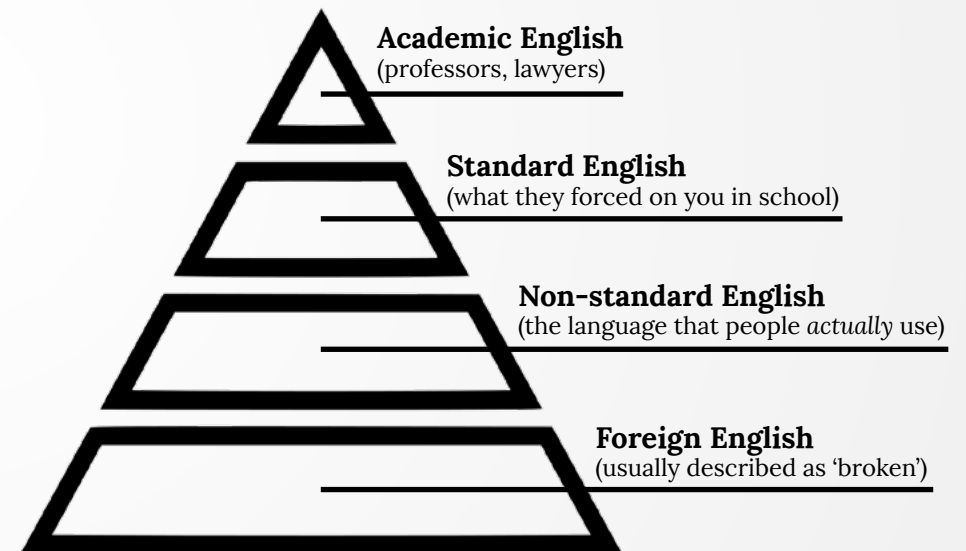
But language doesn't have a hierarchy.

We are taught to put a very specific way of speaking at the top of a social pyramid, and that way of speaking comes from wealthy, educated, white people.

This is not a controversial or surprising fact in the world of linguistics. Language is a social construct and so it's natural that the power structures from society are reflected in language.

But we want you to adopt a different perspective of 'perfection' in communication, one that is rooted in equality, but also one that will help you to use your English all over the world.

This is what most people think language is like



The background of the image consists of numerous vertical stripes of varying widths, creating a rainbow gradient from left to right. The colors transition from dark blue on the far left, through purple, magenta, red, orange, yellow, and finally to bright green on the far right.

This is what
language *really*
looks like

No type of language is better than another, only more successful at communicating.

We probably wouldn't be very successful at communicating with our grandmother by telling her that she is a 'lucky cow' when she wins \$25 in the lottery, but we might be really successful saying that to a friend. We might be really successful talking about 'agile methodology' in the office, but not so successful talking about it on a first date.

We already adapt our language every single day, every time we open our mouths, or write an email, or a WhatsApp message.

These are not separate identities, or separate Englishes that we carry around inside us, they are just part of the natural variety that occurs in all language.

Successful
communication
is
perfection

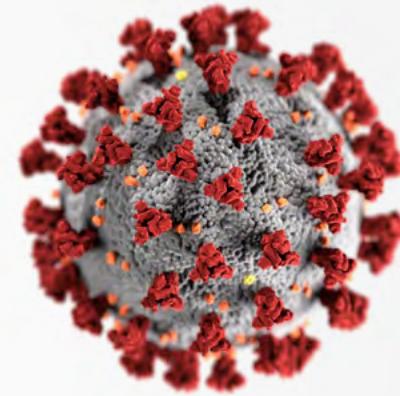
Our language is full of idiomatic expressions. ~~In a nutshell~~ **In summary**, an idiomatic expression uses figurative language. These enrich a language and should be ~~treasured~~ **valued**. As a native speaker, we use them ~~without a second thought~~ **without thinking about them**.

For us, they are ~~a piece of cake~~ **very easy to understand**. But it is difficult for the second language speaker to ~~figure out~~ **understand** these expressions.

Here are two tools you can use to help:

- 1) **Avoid idiomatic expressions**
- 2) **If you use an idiomatic expression, check that your listener understands.**

- Do you know the English expression _____?
- We have an expression in English that says _____
It means _____



**Avoid idioms
like the plague**



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Do you understand the expression on the right? If you are unfamiliar with the game of cricket, you likely have no idea what being on a sticky wicket means (it means being in a difficult position).

Referencing ideas from sport is risky business.

It's challenging to understand sports metaphors in another language. On a deeper level, the sport you are referencing may not even exist in your listener's culture. How can they possibly understand it?

Our language is full of these references. Avoid them or double check for understanding.

- fumble the ball (**American football**)
- take a rain check (**baseball**)
- hit below the belt (**boxing**)
- move the goalposts (**soccer**)
- bark up the wrong tree (**hunting**)
- let someone off the hook (**fishing**)



Our language reflects our culture and this creates confusion when speaking globally.

We are often unaware of how these hidden connections influence our vocabulary. If we look at English through the lens of a culture far from our own, we begin to see where confusions are likely to take place.

Let's imagine we come from a culture that lives in the desert. It's doubtful we would have many metaphors or references to oceans or fishing.

If we hear, "She's trying to make waves in the company" or that, "The coast is clear", or "I've got bigger fish to fry", we may not have the cultural or geographical background to understand.

People may have learned these expressions while studying English, but there are tens of thousands of expressions to memorize.



Be aware that our language is full of hidden culture.

When speaking internationally, do your best to be aware of this type of vocabulary and use your travel adapter when necessary.

When in doubt, simply check with your listener. If they don't know the expression, this is also a nice opportunity to share something about your culture and learn about your listener's culture. Examples of cultural influence in language:

- **History:** bury the hatchet
- **Holidays:** stocking stuffer
- **Cultural:** doggie bag, buy time (US Americans often speak of time as if it were a commodity/money)
- **Religion:** It's hotter than hell!
- **Environment:** make a mountain out of a molehill (what if I don't know what a mole is?)
- **Pop culture:** Winter is coming! He's such a boomer!

**So many words have
fascinating cultural origins**



clue (klü) *noun* **1.** something that helps you to solve a problem or answer a question.

The word clue was originally a variant spelling of clew, meaning "ball of thread or yarn." Our modern sense of clue, "guide to the solution of a mystery," grows out of a motif in myth and folklore, the ball of thread that helps in finding one's way out of a maze. Of these stories the best known is the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. In the myth, Theseus unravels a ball of thread as he searches for the monstrous Minotaur in the Labyrinth. After killing the Minotaur, he retraces his steps out of the maze by rewinding the thread.

In English, we sometimes combine words together to create meaning. Think of each word like a small LEGO brick. For example:

watch + out + for = avoid

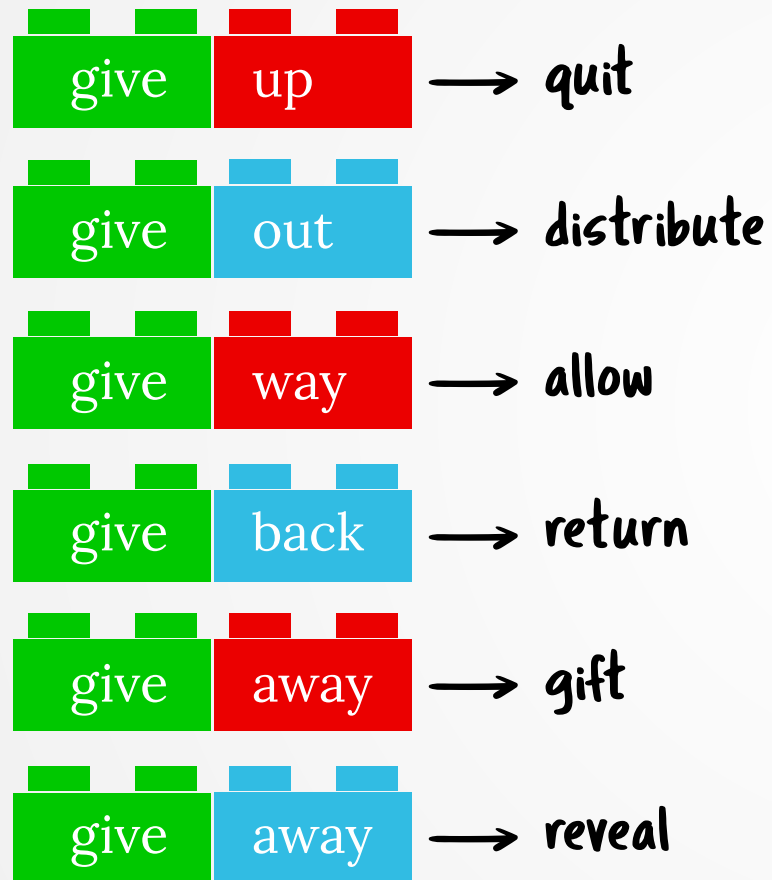
When we combine these words together, we get a new verb with a specific meaning. This is called a *phrasal verb* and is a normal part of English.

English learners need to know which words can be combined and then memorize a new meaning for each combination. That isn't easy... there are thousands of combinations!

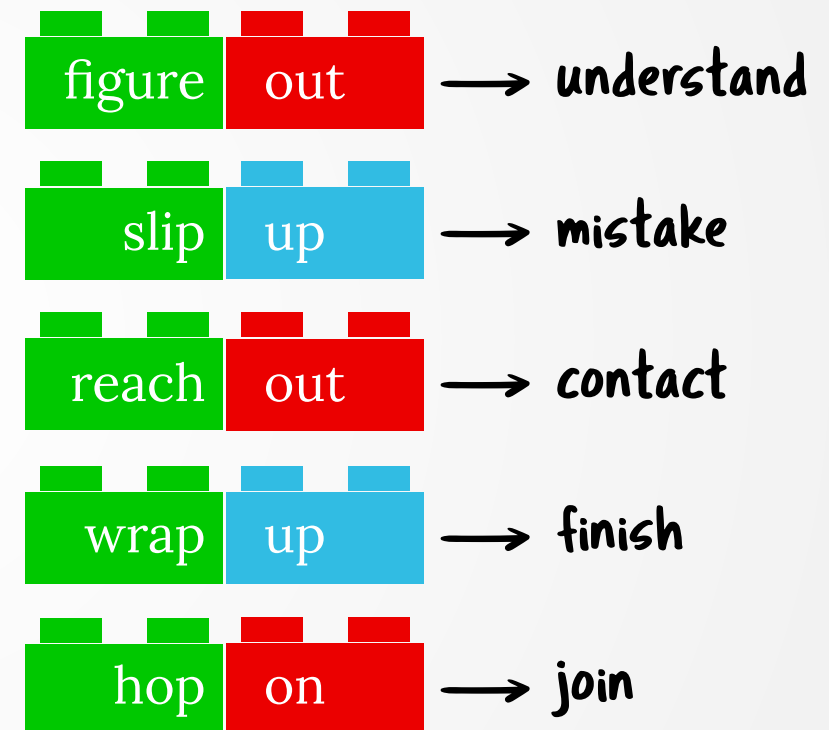
You can help by avoiding phrasal verbs.



Examples with give



More examples




Adapt how quickly you speak and show you are open to adapting by asking if you need to speak slower.

In 1997 researchers found that 73% of foreign English learners understood more when they could control the speech rate. And the average speed that the people chose for maximum intelligibility was 155 words per minute (w.p.m.).

The table shows how 155 w.p.m. compares to some other common speech rates. So you can adapt by imagining that you are giving a radio monologue.

Notice that academic lectures, where lots of complex information is transmitted, have a really slow speech rate of only 140 w.p.m. Speaking slowly doesn't mean that you're talking like a baby.

**73% of people will
understand you better
if you speak this fast**



Category	w.p.m.
Radio	160
Conversation	210
Interview	190
Lecture	140


In 2002 a researcher published the first empirical evidence of what specific sounds cause intelligibility problems in international English conversations.

**And she discovered one very simple principle:
pay attention to your consonants.**

Vowels don't matter as long as they're consistent, but consonants are really important, especially when there are two or more consonants together. Sometimes when we are speaking in English we change or even completely eliminate consonants.

Paying special attention to enunciating your consonants can really help.

Say these words out loud
and watch what happens
with your consonants!



factsheet → faksheet
in bed → imbed
next please → nexplease
old man → ohman

When we speak in English, we tend to change the way we pronounce some words. This happens frequently in spoken language. (One study calculated we do this 94% of the time!) When we do this, we create something called reductions, like the examples on the right.

People learning English are almost never taught these reductions. They create confusion. Avoid using reductions when you are using your travel adapter.

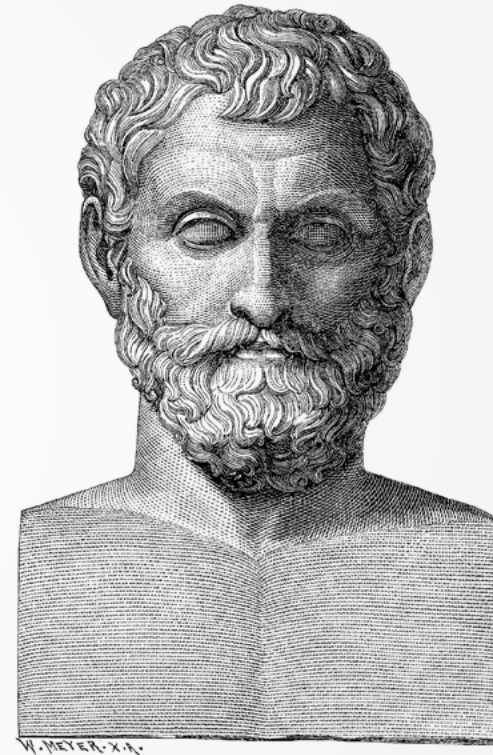
Your international audience is ~~gonna~~ **going to** thank you ~~cuz~~ **because** they won't ~~hafta~~ **have to** work so hard to understand ~~yah~~ **you**.

cuz → because
dunno → don't know
gimme → give me
gonna → going to
hafta → have to
sorta → sort of
wanna → want to

When asked about organizing a speech, the Greek philosopher Aristotle is said to have advised:

- 1) Tell them what you're going to tell them**
- 2) Tell them**
- 3) Tell them what you told them**

Follow this advice when speaking globally.



Aristotle's classic piece of advice for giving a speech leads us to a very effective language tool - always let your audience know where they are in a presentation, speech, or story.

Give them a map of what you are going to talk about. Continuously remind them of where you are on that map.

We do this by using signposting language.

- Today we will look at...
- Firstly... Secondly... Finally...
- Let's move on to our second point...
- Let me tell you a short story about...
- I will finish this section by saying that...
- Now we will look at some details about...
- To summarize...

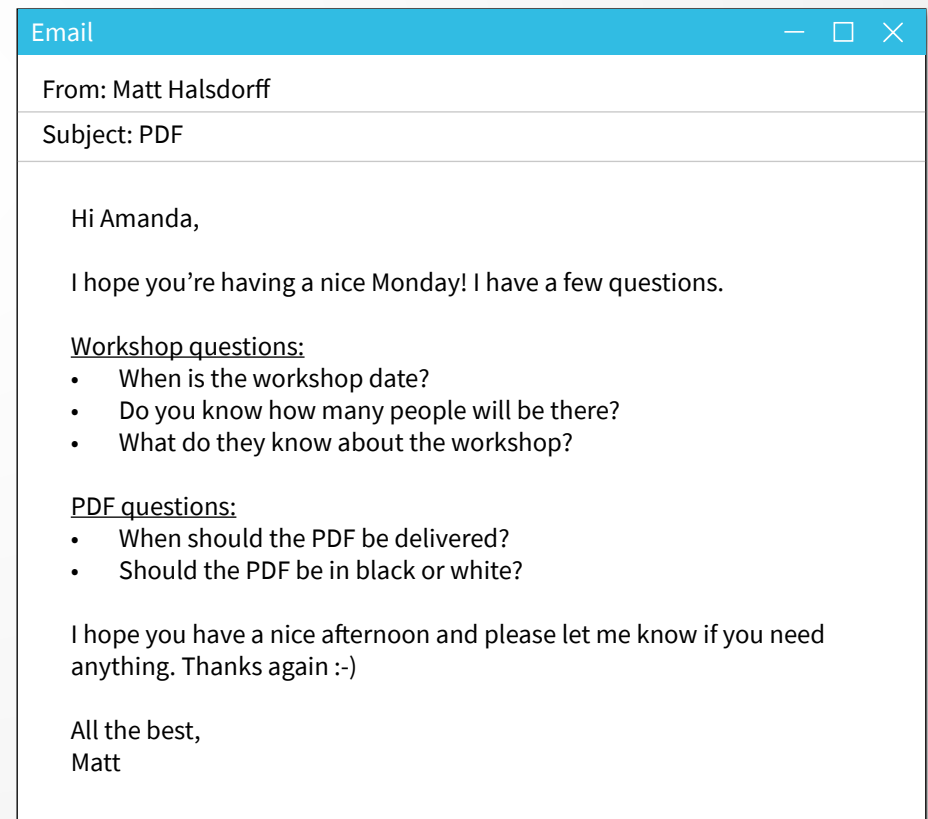
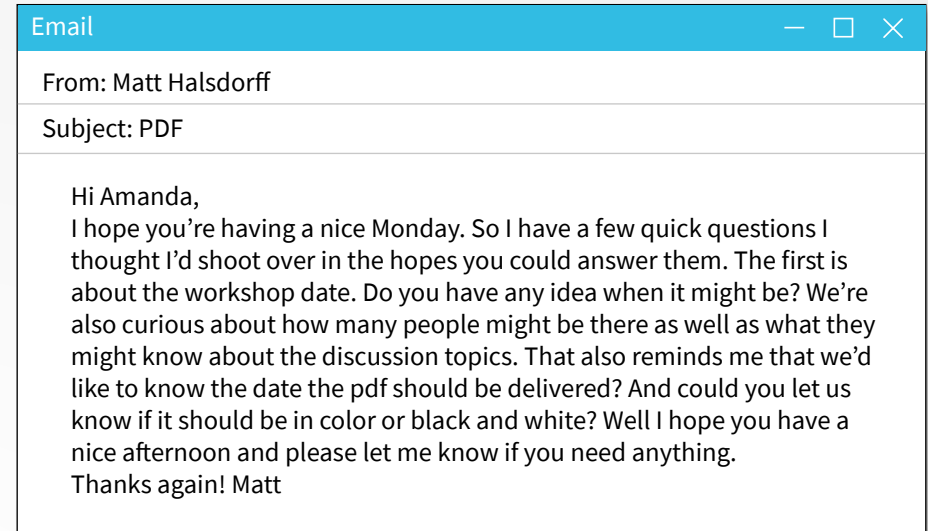
Each signpost lets a listener find their place after getting lost due to language difficulties or distractions.



Look at the emails on the right and answer these questions:

- Which email would you prefer to find in your mailbox?
- Which email do you think is easier to understand?
- Do you think we should add multiple questions to one long sentence?

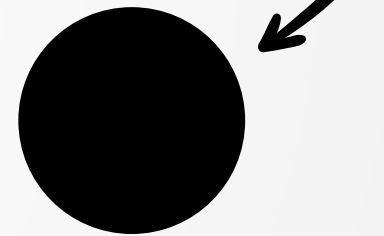
Organizing your email well ensures your communication partner will feel more comfortable when receiving messages from you, and they will probably answer you faster.



**Bullet points are so helpful in international emails.
Here's why:**

- Readers don't need to dig through the email searching for content
- It saves time and reduces difficulties related to language
- It's easier to copy & paste single sentence into translating tools
- It's easier to answer single questions when writing in a second language - complex grammar is avoided

**This little dot will save you
both time and money!**



FYI: avoid using acronyms

There is a good chance your international partner is unaware of English acronym meanings. They are also difficult to find in a translating tool.

Even if they are acronyms used in your profession or company, don't assume everyone knows them in a second language.

B2B	SMH	TTP	FYI	TGIF
B2C	BRB	QAP	RSVP	RIP
BR	IMO	YGTI	ETA	P.S.
CMS	CYA	AMA	AKA	ES
CPC	DIKY	DAE	FAQ	DIY
CTA	IDK	ELIS	ATM	ID
CTR	ILY	TIL	TBA	IQ
CR	HBU	FTFY	MIA	GMO
DM	LMAO	BAE	POW	PC
SEO	LMK	HIFW	AD	PR
SM	NVM	MFW	BC	SOS
SWOT	OFC	ICYMI	CE	AWOL
CX	PNL	JSYK	BCE	SOL
FB	ROFL	Lulz	DOB	OG
POS	SNMP	IRL	OCD	SOL
RTD	STFU	MIRL	MD	BYOB
SEM	TBH	PAW	HR	ASAP

Include emojis when using messengers like WhatsApp or Telegram. Look at the following:

It was a long flight but I'm finally here 😊
 It was a long flight but I'm finally here 😡

Just one simple emoji can communicate our tone, our emotion and our body language. They are a great language tool.

Use them when appropriate.

great! do you have any more tips?



Use your language adapter



Check for understanding



Short chunks are better than long sentences



Don't underestimate how much GIFs and stickers can communicate



Voice messages are nice, but use your adapter

thanks! 👍

In 2005 a researcher from Princeton wanted to know if using complex language helps you to communicate better. He performed 5 different experiments including replacing all of the nouns, verbs and adjectives in a text with its longest entry in the thesaurus.

And he discovered that when you use complex language, people rate you lower in intelligence, likeability, and trustworthiness.

He summarised: “Needless complexity leads to negative evaluations.”

And the reason is simple: if people can't understand you, they can't understand your message, so instead of being a tool to communicate, language becomes a barrier to communication.

“Needless
complexity
leads to
negative
evaluations.”

Which one of these sentences is easier to understand?

“As you can see, the invoice sent last Friday, which was mentioned by me in our meeting, needs to be updated.”

“We need to update the invoice we sent last Friday, as mentioned in our meeting.”

When creating a sentence, follow the 1-comma rule.

Reducing the number of commas in your writing helps you create less complex sentences that are easier to process and understand.



Only use one of these!

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When you're trying to understand another language you need as much extra information, and as little interference as possible.

When communicating in global English, take a moment to find a quiet, well-lit place, with no background noise, free from interruptions or distractions. Use a headset if you can.

If you can delay that meeting for 20 minutes until you get into the office, instead of doing it while you're walking to the office in city traffic, it will make a big difference to the people on the other end.



We don't just use our mouths to express ourselves, we use our whole body. A big part of everyday communication is non-verbal, and it becomes even more useful in global contexts.

Using gestures is an important way to give additional information about what you're saying.

In face-to-face communication and video chats, take full advantage of all that extra visual information. Don't be afraid to emphasize your message with body language and actions such as pointing and imitating.

It's not only Italians who
speak with their hands



As adults we are used to being in total control of our communication. But working in a second language can reduce our communicative abilities dramatically, and make us feel stupid.

So as adults, especially in professional situations, it's very embarrassing to admit that you don't understand, and people will pretend they understand in order to save face.

Checking understanding is a really great way to make sure that you're having successful communication.

Create moments to summarise key points together and ask open-ended questions like:

- Which points were clear?
- Can we talk together about what that means?
- How can I explain that in better way?

For a lot of people their main emotion when using English is shame




Every time you enter into a conversation, either face-to-face or via email, you enter into a social contract and you must take 50% of the responsibility for the success of that conversation.

You can do this by making the effort to create the conditions for successful communication, and by acknowledging that problems are far more likely to be caused by native speakers not adapting their language.

Make it clear that you are open to talking about language, and that misunderstandings are not related to language ability, are totally natural, and nothing to be ashamed of.

When you do that, not only will you have successful communication more often, but you are more likely to hear important new perspectives.

50%



**This is how much
responsibility you need to
take when communicating**

A travel adapter needs power to work. An engineer can learn the technical aspects of how to build one, but without electricity, it is nothing more than an expensive piece of plastic.

Your travel adapter is not powered by electricity: it runs on empathy. It is the key to successful international communication. It is at the heart of human relationships.

If you forget to power your adapter with empathy, all of the tips in this PDF will not work. Never forget - empathy is your power source.

