

How to Ask for Clarification in English

Never say “what?” again

EPISODE 12 • LEVEL B1-B2

Episode summary

- Clarification is a skill, not a weakness. Natives ask constantly — it is a human thing, not a learner thing.
- The core phrases: “Could you repeat that, please?” “Sorry, I didn’t catch that.” “Could you speak a little more slowly, please?”
- Check meaning by rephrasing back: “Do you mean...?” “So you are saying...?” A two minute question prevents a big misunderstanding.
- Confirm details, especially names and numbers: “Could you spell that for me, please?” Then read it back: “S as in sugar?”
- On a bad phone line, blame the line, not yourself: “Sorry, the line is breaking up. Could you say that again?”
- The emergency exit is respectable: after three tries, “Could you write it down for me?” Clarify before you act, not after.

What’s inside this PDF

20 key words • 7 clarification tools • Say It Better upgrades • 3 practice exercises

Key Vocabulary

20 words from this episode — learn them, then use them this week

1. clarify

to make something clearer.

> Could you clarify what you mean by “soon”?

2. confirm

to check that something is correct.

> Just to confirm, we meet at three?

3. rephrase

to say the same thing in different words.

> Could you rephrase that?

4. misunderstanding

when people understand differently.

> A two minute question prevents a big misunderstanding.

5. gist

the general meaning, not every detail.

> I got the gist, but I missed the details.

6. spell out

to say the letters, or to explain very clearly.

> Could you spell that out for me?

7. repetition

saying something again.

> A polite repetition request saves the conversation.

8. detail

one small piece of information.

> Confirm the details before you act.

9. thorough

careful and complete.

> Being thorough in meetings is a strength.

10. vague

not clear or specific.

> Do not act on a vague instruction — clarify first.

11. paraphrase

to repeat an idea in your own words.

> Paraphrase it back: “So you are saying...?”

12. confirm back

to repeat details to check them.

> Always confirm names and numbers back.

13. dignity

calm self-respect in a hard moment.

> The emergency exit keeps your dignity intact.

14. face-saving

protecting someone from embarrassment.

> Blame the bad line — face-saving is a skill.

15. alphabet code

using words for letters: “S as in sugar.”

> The alphabet code prevents spelling disasters.

16. nod along

to nod without really understanding.

> Do not nod along on a bad phone line.

17. silence

saying nothing when you are lost.

> Silence in a meeting helps no one — ask.

18. emergency exit

the last-resort polite option.

> “Could you write it down for me?” is the emergency exit.

19. catch

to hear and understand speech.

> “Sorry, I didn’t catch that.”

20. specific

exact and clear, not general.

> Be specific: “Could we go back to the second point?”

The Clarification Kit

seven tools for any confusion

Ask for repetition

“Sorry, could you repeat that?” — honest confusion beats fake agreement.

Slow it down

“Could you speak a little more slowly, please?”

Go back a step

“Sorry, could we go back to the second point? I want to make sure I am following.”

Spell and confirm

“Could you spell that for me, please?” — then confirm it back.

The emergency exit

“Could you write it down for me?” — completely respectable.

Say It Better — 10 upgrades

☐ Smiling and saying “yes” when you understand nothing.

☐ “Sorry, could you repeat that?”

☐ “What?” said sharply.

☐ “Could you speak a little more slowly, please?”

☐ Staying silent in meetings when you are lost.

☐ “Sorry, could we go back to the second point? I want to make sure I am following.”

☐ Guessing the spelling of a name.

☐ “Could you spell that for me, please?” Then confirm it back.

☐ Nodding along on a bad phone line.

☐ “Sorry, the line is breaking up. Could you say that again?”

☐ Acting on a vague email.

☐ “Just to clarify, do you mean...?”

☐ Giving up after three tries.

☐ “Could you write it down for me?”

☐ Pretending you understood a fast announcement.

☐ “Sorry, I missed that. Could you say it once more?”

☐ “Huh?” with a blank stare.

☐ “Sorry, I did not quite get that.”

☐ Acting on a vague instruction and hoping.

☐ “Just to confirm, the meeting is at three, right?” — hope is not a strategy.

Practice Time

3 exercises — do them today, not “someday”

Exercise 1 — Fill in the blank

Word bank: clarify • confirm • rephrase • gist • misunderstanding

1. “Could you _____ what you mean by ‘soon’?” — asking is a power move.
2. “Just to _____, we meet at three?” — check it on the phone, every few minutes.
3. “Could you _____ that?” — same idea, different words, new chance.
4. When you are lost, ask for the _____ first, then fill the gaps.
5. Most conflicts start as small _____s — catch them early.

Exercise 2 — Clarify it

Fix each confusing moment (answers below):

1. You understand nothing but smile and say “yes.” > Say it better:
2. You say “What?” sharply to your manager. > Say it better:
3. You are lost in a meeting and stay silent. > Say it better:

Exercise 3 — The three-ask week

This week, ask for clarification three times on purpose: once on the phone, once about a name spelling, once in a meeting or class. Write down what you asked and what you learned. The best clarifiers are the best communicators.

- A name you need spelled.
- An instruction you want confirmed.
- A point in a meeting you missed.

Answer key

Ex 1: 1 clarify • 2 confirm • 3 rephrase • 4 gist • 5 misunderstandings

Ex 2: 1 “Sorry, could you repeat that?” 2 “Could you speak a little more slowly, please?” 3 “Sorry, could we go back to the second point? I want to make sure I am following.”