

Lesson 12: Phrasal Verbs for Communication

Read and listen to the dialog.

Vanessa: I did the stupidest thing the other day. I'm embarrassed to even talk about it.

Louis: Haha, come on, **fess up!** What'd you do?

Vanessa: Remember I told you about how my boss always **talks down to** me and treats me like I'm incompetent?

Louis: Yeah, and I said you should **speak up** – it's not right to treat an employee like that.

Vanessa: Well, I didn't want to cause any problems, so I usually just try to **tune him out**. But yesterday I finally got fed up and **called him out** on it – respectfully, of course. I just **pointed out** that I've been with the company for two years and he doesn't need to **spell out** every single task as if I were a child.

Louis: Oooh, good for you! How'd he react?

Vanessa: He didn't even let me finish! He **cut me off** and said I was challenging his authority. Then he **rattled off** all his own accomplishments and started **harping on** the importance of new employees needing to respect the company hierarchy.

Louis: Ugh – so did you keep quiet or **tell him off**?

Vanessa: Before I could say anything, another colleague of mine **butted in** – I thought she was going to **stand up for** me, but she **backed him up** instead! That really stung, because I had **opened up to** her about my frustrations and she had promised to help me out.

Louis: So... I don't get it. What was the stupid part?

Vanessa: I was at a restaurant with my best friend and I had been **ranting about** my boss for a solid ten minutes when suddenly my friend **blurted out**, "Look behind you!"

Louis: Let me guess – your boss was right there.

Vanessa: Bingo.

Louis: How much did he overhear?

Vanessa: Enough to make him furious, although he was trying not to **let on** because he was having dinner with his wife and kids. But I could tell by the look on his face that he’s definitely going to **bring up** my “attitude problem” at the next performance review.

Louis: Ouch. Well, lesson learned – always check your surroundings before you start to vent!

Explanation

Vanessa is hesitant to talk about the stupid thing she did, and Louis tells her to **fess up**. The phrasal verb **fess up** is an informal way to say “confess” – admit that you did something bad or wrong.

Earlier, Vanessa had told Louis that her boss **talks down to** her. To **talk down to (someone)** means to talk to them as if they were inferior, stupid, or incompetent. Louis had encouraged Vanessa to **speak up** – that means to say your opinion about something you believe is wrong, without fear or hesitation.

There’s another related phrasal verb, **speak out on/against (an issue)**, which is often used for speaking publicly about controversial issues. **Speak up** is used more for personal conversations or discussions in a small group, and **speak out** is used more for public statements.

Vanessa usually tries to **tune her boss out** – that means to ignore him and pretend she doesn’t hear him. But yesterday she got sick and tired of being treated badly, so she finally **called him out** – to **call (someone) out** means to challenge or confront the person, especially about something they are doing wrong.

She **pointed out** that she already has two years’ experience in the company. To **point out** means to call attention to a particular fact. She doesn’t need her boss to

spell everything out for her – to **spell (information) out** means to describe or explain it very carefully in a detailed and meticulous way.

Unfortunately, her boss didn't listen – he **cut her off**. In the context of a conversation, to **cut (someone) off** means to interrupt the person in the middle of a sentence. He then **rattled off** his accomplishments – to **rattle off** information means to say a list of things very quickly.

Then he started **harping on** the importance of respect for the company hierarchy. To **harp on** a topic means to emphasize it or say it repeatedly in an annoying way.

Louis asks, “Did you keep quiet or **tell him off?**” To **tell (someone) off** means to say *exactly* what you think about that person (when you have a negative opinion of them).

But Vanessa didn't have a chance to respond because another colleague **butted in**. To **butt in** means to suddenly enter and interrupt a conversation (often when you are not particularly welcome in that conversation). A rude way of telling someone to stay out of the conversation or situation is to say, “**Butt out!**”

Vanessa had hoped this colleague would **stand up for** her. **Stand up for** or **stick up for** means to defend or support someone or something in the face of opposition. However, the colleague took the boss' side – she **backed him up** – to **back someone up** means to support that person.

Vanessa was disappointed because she had **opened up to** this colleague about her frustrations with the boss. To **open up to (someone)** means to tell them your feelings, especially things that you had previously hidden.

Later, Vanessa was **ranting about** her boss to her best friend. To **rant about** something means to complain loudly and angrily. Suddenly, her friend **blurted out**, “Look behind you!” The phrasal verb **blurt out** means to say something quickly and spontaneously, often without thinking.

The boss was furious, but he was trying **not to let on** because he was with his family. **Not let on** means not allowing other people to know about something. It is almost always used in the negative, when someone is trying to hide their emotions or keep some fact secret.

But Vanessa knows the boss will probably **bring up** her attitude at her next performance review. To **bring up (a topic)** means to introduce it into a conversation or discussion.

You now know **20** new phrasal verbs for talking about communication. Go ahead and do the quiz and the writing exercises to practice using them.

Phrasal Verb	Definition
fess up (<i>informal</i>)	confess; admit you did something bad/wrong
talk down to (someone)	talk to the person as if they were inferior, stupid, or incompetent
speak up	say your opinion about something you believe is wrong, without fear or hesitation
speak out on/against (an issue)	speaking publicly about controversial issues
tune (someone / something) out	ignore; pretend not to hear
call (someone) out	challenge or confront the person, especially about something they are doing wrong
point out	call attention to a particular fact
spell (information) out	describe or explain it very carefully in a detailed and meticulous way
cut (someone) off	interrupt the person in the middle of a sentence
rattle off (information)	say a list of things very quickly
harp on (a topic)	emphasize it or say it repeatedly in an annoying way
tell (someone) off	say <i>exactly</i> what you think about that person (when you have a negative opinion of them)
butt in	suddenly enter and interrupt a conversation (often when you are not particularly welcome in that conversation)
stand up for / stick up for (someone)	defend or support someone or something
back (someone) up	support the person
open up to (someone)	tell them your feelings, especially things that you had previously hidden
rant about	complain loudly and angrily
blurt out	say something quickly and spontaneously, often without thinking
not let on	not allowing other people to know about something
bring up (a topic)	introduce it into a conversation or discussion

Quiz – Lesson 12

Question 1: I knew my boss was lying to the client, but I didn't _____ because I was afraid of losing my job.

- A speak up
- B stand up for him
- C tune out

Question 2: It's annoying when people _____ because they don't think I understand English.

- A cut me off
- B harp on me
- C talk down to me

Question 3: The gym teacher _____ the rules of the game so that all the kids would know how to play it.

- A blurted out
- B spelled out
- C pointed out

Question 4: Steve is really into astronomy - if you can ask him, he can _____ the names of all the constellations.

- A bring up
- B rant about
- C rattle off

Question 5: When my doctor told me my cholesterol levels were high, I _____ and admitted I hadn't stuck to my diet.

- A butted in
- B fessed up
- C spoke out

Question 6: I can't stand people who are always _____ problems, but never offer any solutions.

- A harping on
- B opening up to
- C tuning out

Question 7: We work for an organization that _____ the rights of indigenous people to stay on their ancestral land.

- A brings up
- B calls out
- C stands up for

Question 8: Here comes Sophia - don't _____ that you know about her pregnancy; I don't think it's public knowledge yet.

- A call out
- B let on
- C speak up

Question 9: When I was debating whether or not to buy the product, the salesperson _____ that it would actually save me money in the long run.

- A backed me up
- B pointed out
- C talked down to me

Question 10: I can't concentrate on my work with the noise of the construction outside - it's impossible to _____.

- A cut it off
- B rant about it
- C tune it out

Writing Exercises

1. Describe a time when you had to **fess up** about something you did.
2. Have you ever **stood up for** someone (or had someone stand up for you)?
3. What was the last thing you **ranted about**?
4. Have you ever **blurted out** something that you later wish you hadn't said?
5. Describe a time when you saw something wrong and **spoke up**.
6. Do you know anyone who tends to **harp on** a particular topic?

Want to get corrections? [E-mail me](#) your answers.

Answers – Quiz 12

1. A
2. C
3. B
4. C
5. B
6. A
7. C
8. B
9. B
10. C

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