

# Self-Advocacy Kit

## Book 3



## How to Self-Advocate

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# 1. Introduction

In our first two books we explored what self-advocacy is and why a person might start self-advocating.

In **Self Advocacy Book 1**, we learnt that we self-advocate when:

- we speak up about a problem that needs to be fixed;
- we speak about our skills and abilities when we are being interviewed for a job;
- we speak up about our human rights or things that we really value.



We particularly saw, in the first book, that self-advocacy has a strong relationship to our having human rights. Learning about our human rights is a good step we can take to help ourselves.



In **Self Advocacy Book 2**, we explored the changes that can happen in a person that might lead them to start self-advocating. We looked at the way self-awareness, particularly the ways that our body can give us the message that something is happening that is not OK, can be an important starting point for self-advocacy. There are many ways that we can notice a situation is not OK – sometimes it is through feelings of upset, overwhelm, or anger. What we think and feel matters and we all have the right to a life where we are safe and respected.



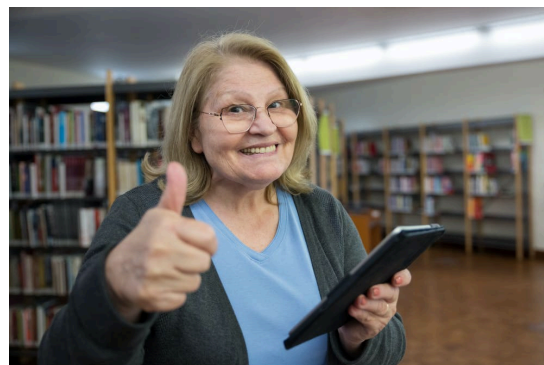
In **Self Advocacy Book 3** we are going to explore **how** a person self-advocates. We will look at the skills that play an important role in self-advocacy. The skills will include looking at communication as a way of connecting with others and as a way of solving problems.

We will look at confidence and assertiveness and how they help us find the strength to speak up about what is not OK and how we want situations changed for the better.

We will look at the skills that are helpful in managing our emotions so we can advocate in a way that most likely leads to the outcome we want.

## 2. Skills for Self Advocacy

We can all learn skills that help us with our self-advocacy. Our learning never really ends, and it is important that we are patient with ourselves. It takes time to build our strength and confidence.



Sometimes we might not always handle situations as well as we could.

For example -

- we might feel so much anger that we blow-up instead of talking about our problem calmly, or
- we might feel so overwhelmed that we can't think of the right words to say.

There are always things we can learn from our efforts, even when they don't quite go according to plan. A lot of the time, when we are self-advocating, we are experiencing a lot of emotions because we want to sort out a problem or issue that really matters to us.

As we learnt in **Book 2**, our emotions tell a story about who we are, what we have been through in our lives, and what matters to us.

Self-advocacy is about doing our best, one step at a time, to communicate about who we are, what matters to us, what problems we have and what changes we want so that our lives become better.

All our efforts, even the ones that didn't seem to go so well, help us gain knowledge and experience.

## What skills do I need?

In this book, we'll focus on some of the broad skills we might need to work on to advocate better for ourselves. These skills include:

- communication skills, including social and relationship skills
- assertiveness
- anger management
- relaxation & stress management
- decision-making, goal-setting skills.

In the final chapter, we have links to some specific self-advocacy skills including:

- making a phone call
- sending an email
- writing a letter
- making a complaint
- preparing for a meeting



## Over to you

### Reflecting on your skills

Use the spaces to write your thoughts.

**Think:** What skills and information do I have? What things am I good at?

Examples:

- I am good at sending emails
- I know about my Human Rights



**Think:** What skills do I need to become a better advocate for myself?

Examples:

- I need to be more confident in myself
- I need to be better at making phone calls



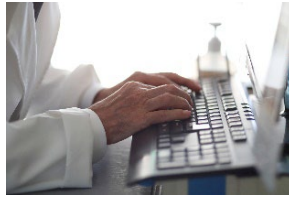
## **What about support from others?**

You can ask people around you to help develop these skills by:

- providing opportunities for you to learn and practice;
- sharing information about these skills with you;
- supporting your self-advocacy and providing feedback.



### 3. Communication



#### **Finding words to communicate our message**

In **Book 2**, we focussed on the importance of self-awareness. Being self-aware puts a spotlight on our situation and the parts of our life where change needs to happen to make our life better.

The next step is about communication.

It is about

- working out how to communicate what we need or feel, what is not OK, or what matters to us;
- working out who the best person is to communicate this to;
- working out the way we would like the situation to be made OK or improved.

#### **What is communication?**

Communication is the act of giving, receiving and processing information. It is the way we get our message across to other people.

## How do we communicate?

We communicate in many ways, for example

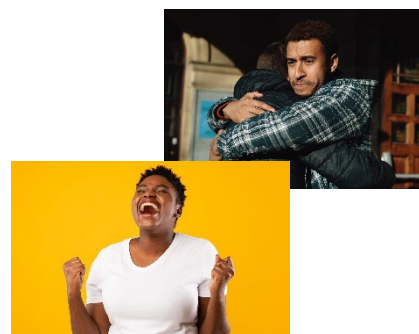
- speaking and listening
- reading and writing
- using our body language and gestures
- through our facial expressions
- using technology
- using communication aids.



## Why do we communicate?

We communicate to express our

- needs and wants
- likes and dislikes
- emotions
- creativity (singing, telling stories etc).



We also communicate to

- socialise or talk with family and friends
- get and share information
- learn
- keep ourselves safe
- protect our rights.



Communication might not always come easily to us. It involves skills that we can work on and that we can strengthen through practice.

It can be helpful to practice with someone we trust.



## Know your stuff

Watch this video on communication and reconnecting with others:



[Self Advocacy 4 Communication and Reconnecting - YouTube](#)



Watch this video to learn more about communication and problem-solving:



[Self Advocacy 5 Communication and Problem Solving - YouTube](#)



## Over to you

**Think:** In what ways do I prefer communicating with others?

Examples:

- I like talking to people face-to-face.
- I prefer text messages to phone calls.



**Think:** What types of communication do I feel less comfortable with?

Examples:

- I don't like formal meetings.
- I don't feel confident writing emails.

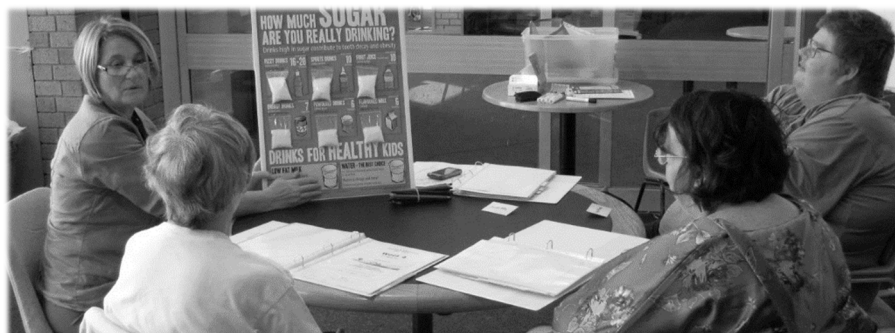


## How can we communicate more effectively?

It takes time and practice to improve our communication skills. Like with any skill, the more we practise, the better we get, and the easier it becomes.

When it comes to self-advocacy, there are some simple things we can do to make communication easier:-

- ✓ Tell or show people our preferred ways of communicating.
- ✓ Be prepared – think about or plan out what we want to share. Perhaps even have it on paper.
- ✓ Take our time. Make sure others give us time!
- ✓ Remember to focus on the most important points.
- ✓ Make sure we have our say.
- ✓ Let others have their say and listen to them.
- ✓ Have an advocate or support person with us.
- ✓ Consider using communication aids, including technology, to help get our message across.





## Know your stuff



Here are some useful links to other communication skill resources:



### **ReachOut Australia**

Support service for young people who experience mental health challenges.

[Communication skills | ReachOut Australia](#)

## 4. Assertiveness



Assertiveness means having confidence in ourselves and our abilities. This includes confidence in our ability to communicate what we think and how we feel about things.



### Know your stuff

Watch this video to learn more about growing your self-confidence:



[Self Advocacy 2 Confidence - YouTube](#)



### Why be assertive?

There are many reasons why assertiveness is a good skill for us to learn. Being assertive helps us to: -

- feel good about ourselves – develop good self-esteem
- have better relationships with others
- reach our goals and get things done
- stop others from taking advantage of us
- gain the respect of others
- protect our rights
- take control of our life
- let others know what we think, feel, need, and want.

## What stops us from being assertive?

How assertive we are (or not) is mostly learned behaviour. It is closely related to how we've been brought up and our experiences in life. For example, if we grow up in a place where we are punished for speaking our mind, then we might be less inclined to be assertive as adults. Similarly, if we are brought up to believe we should always put others' needs before our own, then we may feel that being assertive is not polite.

Factors that stop us from being assertive include:

- **Self-defeating beliefs** – these are negative beliefs about what will happen if we are assertive. For example,
  - "It is rude and selfish to say what I want."
  - "I will upset the other person if I say what I want."
  - "If I say what I think, it might be wrong and then I will look silly."



Self-defeating beliefs are often influenced by our culture and generation. For example, in some cultures and in older generations, it is very disrespectful to openly question the authority of elders.

Many of us would also be familiar with outdated social norms, such as

- it is weak for men to show their emotions ("boys don't cry."), or
- women look aggressive if they voice their needs or opinions ("That's not very ladylike.").
- young people should not interrupt ("Don't speak unless you are spoken to.")

All these factors influence the way we feel about being assertive. Of course, we can't change our upbringing, but it is important to understand its **connection** to our behaviour and beliefs about ourselves.

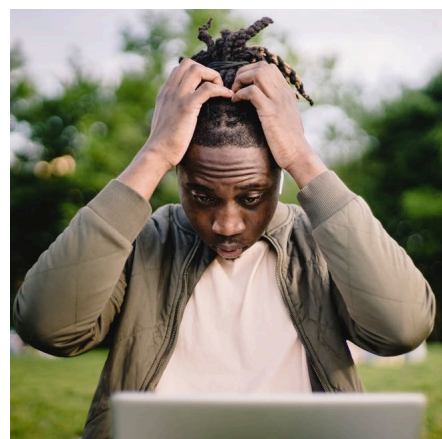


- **Anxiety and stress** – Anxiety and stress can play a huge role in our ability to think and act in the way we want. We may know what we want to say, but get so nervous or overwhelmed that we can't let the words come out. To become more assertive, we also need to learn how to manage these emotions.



Chapter 5 has links to some helpful resources on managing anxiety and stress.

- **Not having the skills we need** – In some cases, we might feel confident in ourselves, but don't have the verbal or non-verbal skills to be able to assert ourselves effectively. Maybe we find it hard to think of the right words to use, or we have difficulty controlling some emotions, like anger, so it's easier not to assert ourselves at all.



Our level of literacy – our reading and writing skills, as well as our IT skills – can also be a huge barrier to understanding information, or participating in formal processes, like writing a complaint email or filling in forms. This is especially an issue when we are dealing with legal problems or bureaucratic systems (like Centrelink, NDIS, bill payments etc).

One very important thing to remember here is this: – if we do not understand something, it is **NOT** our fault. We all have the right to be given information in a way we understand.

It is ok to say, 'I don't understand.'

It is ok to ask for help.

It is ok to ask for information to be given to us in a different way.

### Did you know?

**44%** of Australian adults have difficulty reading and writing. \*

### What assertiveness is not.

Being assertive means being able to express ourselves openly, but not in a way that violates the rights of others.

Assertive does not mean aggressive. For example, we may be angry about something, but that doesn't mean we should yell or hit. When we communicate assertively, we need to think about the words we use, the tone of our voice and the body language we use.



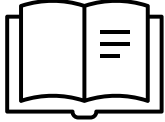
Assertive does not mean we show our anger in other ways either, like using sarcastic language, sulking or refusing to communicate at all. We call this type of behaviour 'passive-aggressive' and it is just another form of aggression.



\*Source: ABS. Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, Australia, 2011 – 12



## Know your stuff



Passive-Assertive-Aggressive

- Learn more about these communication styles here.

<https://www.advocacyforinclusion.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Passive-Aggressive-Assertive-updated-Dec-2021.pdf>



**[Coming Soon]**

Can you recognise the different communication styles? Look at them in action here.

## Over to you

### How assertive am I?

It can be hard to know how assertive you are. You may feel very confident in some situations and shy or nervous in others.

This exercise will give you a better idea of how assertive you are in different situations.

Click on the box that best describes you in these situations. The more you answer 'yes', the more assertive you are.

I can say 'No' to ...	Yes	No	Not Sure
• my friends			
• members of my family, including parents and siblings			
• my intimate partner or spouse			
• my work colleagues or classmates			
• authority figures, like officials, managers, doctors, teachers			
• strangers			
<b>Total</b>			

I can express my opinions in front of...	Yes	No	Not Sure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>my friends</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>members of my family, including parents and siblings</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>my intimate partner or spouse</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>my work colleagues or classmates</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>authority figures, like officials, managers, doctors, teachers</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>strangers</li> </ul>			
<b>Total</b>			

I can ask for help from ...	Yes	No	Not Sure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>my friends</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>members of my family, including parents and siblings</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>my intimate partner or spouse</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>my work colleagues or classmates</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>authority figures, like officials, managers, doctors, teachers</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>strangers</li> </ul>			
<b>Total</b>			

I can start and keep a conversation going with ...	Yes	No	Not Sure
• my friends			
• members of my family, including parents and siblings			
• my intimate partner or spouse			
• my work colleagues or classmates			
• authority figures, like officials, managers, doctors, teachers			
• strangers			
<b>Total</b>			

### Totals

**Reflect:** Looking at the number of times I answered 'yes', how assertive do I think I am? In what situations am I more assertive than others?



**Think:** How can I improve my self-confidence?



## More on Assertive Communication

### 1) Finding the Right Words

Let's look at two examples of communicating:

#### Example 1

"You are making me feel bad because you told me I had to come to this room and not the one I like for our meeting and now I'm really upset."

#### Example 2

"I don't feel comfortable in this meeting room. I don't feel OK in small spaces. I would find it helpful if we could have this meeting in a larger room where I feel comfortable."

If we look at these two examples, we can see that they are both about the same thing. The speaker does not feel OK about the room where the meeting is happening.

Self-advocacy is about speaking up about what is not OK in a way that helps solve the problem.





## Over to you

**Think:**

**Which example above is most likely to help solve the problem?**

**Why?**



We can see, in example 1, that the speaker is very upset. The words that are used not only tell us that the person is upset. They also tell us that the speaker **blames** the other person.

One of the important skills in self-advocacy communication is letting people know **how** they can help. If we let someone who can make a difference know what the problem is and how we would like it fixed, then we are working with that person to solve the problem.

We can see, in example 2, that the speaker is giving the other person some useful information. The speaker is not only communicating that they do not feel OK with the meeting room. She is also giving information about what the problem is.

The small space is the problem.

The other person has been given helpful information that they can work with. This speaker not only gives that information, but also points out a solution – having the meeting in a larger room.

## 2) Using "I statements."

Using an "I statement" we can tell someone how we feel, without accusing the other person.

When we want to use an "I Statement", we say these things:

1. **"I feel ....."** (What emotion do I feel?)
2. **"when ....."** (What is causing the feeling? What are the triggers?)
3. **"because ....."** (How does the person's actions affect me? How does my feeling connect to what is OK or not OK for me?)
4. **"Can you please....."** (What outcome do I want?).

Example:

Instead of saying: -



"Will you stop that noise; you are driving me insane!"

Try saying: -

**"I feel** annoyed **when** loud music is on all the time **because** I can't concentrate. **Can you please** use headphones when I'm trying to work."



## Over to you

Think about a situation when you want to tell someone how you feel about something.

Think about what you want to tell the other person.

Write down what you want to say as an 'I' statement here:

I feel ... (emotion)

when ... (situation)

because ... (affect)

Can you please ... (outcome)



### 3) The Importance of Listening

We can put a lot of focus on our own communication when we are self-advocating. We want to make sure the other person knows what is not OK, why it is not OK for us, and how we want the situation sorted out.

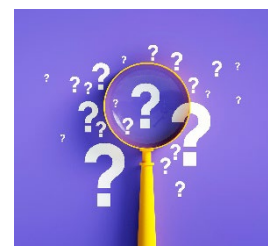
When we have this strong focus on what we want to say, it can be easy to forget that problems are usually solved through conversations. We will say what we need to say, and then the other person will respond.



It is important for us to listen to what the other person is saying.

When we talk to someone about a situation that is not OK, the other person might respond in a number of ways.

- **They might ask questions** to find out more information about what is not OK, and how it impacts us.



It is helpful to stop and focus on what the person is asking. Those questions quite often give you a chance to give some more information to make it even clearer that the situation is not OK, and that it really needs to be sorted out.

Self-advocacy is quite often about working with the person we meet to make the problem very clear and put together a solution.

- **They might give an explanation** about why the situation is the way it is, and they might even go on to talk about why it is difficult to change it.



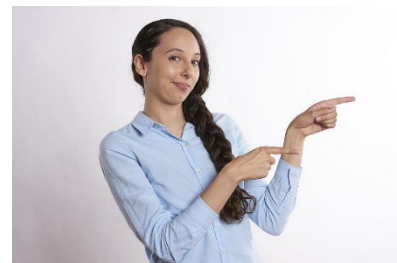
This can be a more challenging thing to listen to because it is not clear whether the person we are meeting wants to help us or not.

If you are able to take notes in the meeting, it can be helpful to take down the points the person is making, so you have a record of it. If you have a friend, advocate, or support person with you then they might help by taking notes.

One of the challenging aspects of self-advocacy is that not everyone we meet is going to want to help us. In those situations, it is particularly important to know your rights and to know where you can get help.

- **They might refer you to someone else.**

Sometimes the first person we speak to about something that is not OK is not the best person to help us solve the problem.



At other times there might be a process – some steps we need to take – to solve the problem.

It is important to listen, and even take a note, when the person we meet gives us information about who can help or the steps we can take to move towards solving the problem.

If we have an email address, then we can also ask that the information is emailed to us if possible.

#### 4) Recognising ableism and other roadblocks

People react in different ways when they see someone with disability, or even when they hear the word disability. Sometimes the way people react shows they still have a lot to learn about disability. Sometimes the way they react shows they have prejudices.

Let's think of some examples of challenging reactions.

- Some people get cranky when they see a driver parking in a disability parking space. They get cranky because the driver does not have a visible disability. The cranky people seem to believe that if you can't see signs of disability (e.g. a wheelchair or a guide dog) then there is no disability.
- Some people see disability as something they should feel pity about. They show what they believe when they say things like "oh, you poor dear", and when they start acting as though they have to "look after" the person with disability. Their attitude of pity stops them from really seeing and knowing the independence, strength, talent, and experience of the person with disability.
- Some people feel uncomfortable about disability. They might avoid people with disability, or focus their attention away from people with disability in situations like meetings. Sometimes they avoid talking to people with disability because they are afraid they might say the wrong thing.
- Some people have a lot of presumptions about what disability means. If they are on a job panel, for example, they might underestimate the abilities of a candidate with disability. They see disability and, in their minds, put the person with disability in a "too-hard basket."



When people view and treat people with disability with these kinds of limiting presumptions, we call it **ableism**.

### Over to you

In our first example we looked at people who get cranky about who parks in a disability parking space. Let's say we ask the cranky person "How do you know if a person has disability?"

**Think:** What might the cranky person say when answering that question?



When people feel pity, they often think they are being helpful by doing everything for the person they pity.

**Think:** How would it feel to have someone else do everything for me all the time, even make all decisions for me?



**Think: How do I react when people do things for me that I can and want to do for myself?**



It's unfair and frustrating when we are in a meeting and people are talking about us instead of talking to us.

**Think: If I were in a meeting, and people were talking about me instead of to me, how could I remind them that they need to talk to me?**



Let's think about our example of the job panel.

**Think: How can I tell if another person is underestimating what I can do?**





**Think:** Are there any helpful ways I can encourage the person to see the fuller picture of my skills and abilities?

✓

## 5. Managing Emotions



We have already seen in Book 2 that self-awareness helps us notice when something is not OK for us. We notice the **"not OK"** messages that our body sends us through our feeling tense, or annoyed, or threatened.

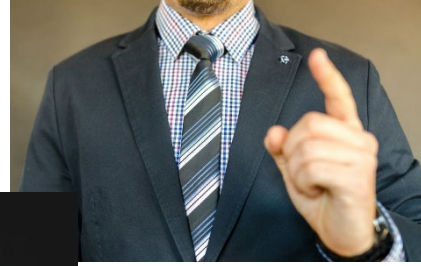
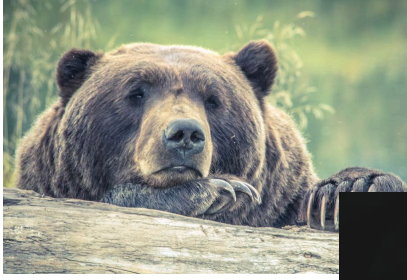
Self-awareness also plays an important role when it comes to decisions about **when** and **how** we might communicate our message.

When we come across problems or conflicts in our lives, our automatic response is often one of 'fight or flight'. 'Fight or flight' mode is when our body physically prepares itself for a threat or danger. Our body sends signals to our brain that things are 'not OK' and gets us ready to react.

What does the 'fight or flight' reaction do to our body?

- Our brain releases hormones, such as adrenaline
- Our heart rate goes up
- we breathe faster
- our muscles tighten
- the blood flows from our organs to our major muscles
- we may sweat or go red
- we feel uncomfortable.

This can be a good thing if we are being chased by a bear, but not so helpful when we are trying to communicate with others. A by-product of our 'fight or flight' response is that we often lose the ability to think calmly, rationally and clearly.



## How to deal with strong emotions

When we find ourselves feeling overwhelmed, emotional, angry or panicked, there are ways to control these emotions, so they don't get in the way of what we are trying to achieve.

Some strategies: -

- Breathe

Focussing on your breathing can help you stay calm. Try this:

Count to five as you breath in slowly – then count to five as you breathe out slowly.

- Move

Moving around releases hormones that relax the body and improve mood. Simple movements, like walking around, stretching your arms or moving from an inside environment to outside can help reduce panic attacks and anxiety.

- Take a break

If we know that our problem is most likely going to be solved by our communicating with someone calmly, then it is helpful to ask ourselves some self-awareness questions:

- Do I feel like I can communicate with someone calmly right now?
- What can I do that will help me become calmer?

- What are the things I can keep in my mind that can bring me back to a calm state if I feel the communication is becoming difficult?
- Are my feelings so strong, right now, that it might be helpful to find another way of communicating what is not OK (e.g. an email)?

It is possible to work with our feelings, even those strongest feelings, in a way that will help us improve our life.

- Get support

If something has happened and we have a lot of strong emotions or feelings, then it can be helpful to talk it through with someone. The person who can help us with those strong feelings is **not always** the same person as the one we need to communicate with to solve our problem.

### Over to you

**Think:** What works for me when I want to get into a calm state?



**Think:** Have there ever been times when I needed to stay calm, but I had a lot of strong feelings going on inside me? How did that go for me? Did I learn anything from that time?



**Think:** Have I found it helpful to talk about strong feelings with someone? Do I have a go-to person when I want to let off steam, have a cry, or unpack confusion?



## 6. Links to resources on specific skills

### 1) Making a phone call



Communication over the phone is a quick and easy way to get answers to the questions or problems you may have.

Interestingly, even though many of us use our phones all the time, many of us tend to avoid calling people, unless we really have to. Instead, we prefer to text, email or message others.

There are many reasons why people don't like making phone calls. For example:

- we can't see the person we're talking to, so we can't read their facial expressions (non-verbal cues);
- we have to think on our feet. We don't have time to think about how we're going to respond to what the other person says;
- we fear how we will sound on the phone. What if we are nervous and stammer, or lose our train of thought, or say the wrong thing?

However, even if we try to steer clear of making calls, there are times when we can't avoid it. So what can we do about it?

Here are some links to resources that can help you when you need to make that call.



[Making a Phone Call - Communicating Confidently and Professionally Over the Phone \(mindtools.com\)](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/newbytelc/phonecall.htm)

## 2) Finding Services

### How to find contact numbers

#### Internet

You can use a search engine (such as Google, Bing) to find a phone number. Just type in the name of the organisation or person you are looking for.

Example: Google [www.google.com.au](http://www.google.com.au).

#### Phone Books Online

**White pages online** <http://www.whitepages.com.au/>

If you are searching for a **business or government department**:

- Click on the blue tab and type the business name and suburb
- Press search

If you are looking for someone's **home number (residential number)**:

- Click on the purple tab and put their surname and suburb in.
- Hit search

**Yellow pages online** <https://www.yellowpages.com.au/>

There are books available in hard copy (on paper) that you can look through. You can find them in Post offices if you do not have one at home. They are delivered yearly to homes, but not everyone keeps them as people often use the internet.

## Phone book

Surnames and company names are listed A to Z in the **white pages**.

In the **yellow pages**, you will need to search by TYPE of company.

## Using the Yellow Pages

For example, if you are looking for a podiatrist, you would:

1. Search the index at the front and find a listing for a podiatrist
2. Then you would turn to the listed page find all the podiatrists listed A to Z under the heading podiatrists

## Supported Communications Options

If you have a hearing and/or speech impairment, you can contact the [National Relay Service \(NRS\)](#) by calling **1800 555 677** then ask for the number for the relevant service

If you need an interpreter, you can call the [Translating and Interpreting Service \(TIS National\)](#) by calling **13 14 50**. TIS National will put you through to the relevant service



## Know Your Stuff

The ACT Community Directory helps you find services, community organisations and support groups in the Canberra region

## Volunteering and Contact Canberra

Phone: 6248 7988

Online: <https://vc-act.mycommunitydirectory.com.au/>



### 3) Sending an email

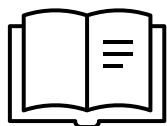
Email can be a great way to communicate with other people, especially service providers and professionals. An email is usually less formal than a letter.

#### Benefits of writing an email:

- You can write it any time.
- You can take your time writing it, even over days or weeks.
- A written record can be handy.
- Email is fast and cheap.
- Each email can be sent to one person or many.

**Remember:** Once you have pressed "send", you cannot get it back!

Here is some tips and tricks to writing and sending an effective email:

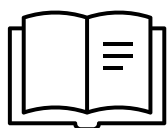


**[Coming Soon]**

### 4) Making a complaint

Sometimes you might not be happy with a service or product you have received. Giving feedback is always helpful to help others to improve what they are doing. Sometimes things might be so bad you might want to put in a formal complaint.

Here are some resources on how to make a complaint:



**[Coming Soon]**

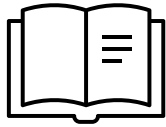
Making a Complaint



[ADCET News - Information for students: making a complaint of disability discrimination - ADCET](#)

## **5) Preparing for Meetings**

It can be confronting to attend and take part in meetings, but they can be very productive. Here are some tips and tricks to help you take part effectively.



**[Coming Soon]**