

Words that start fires

How one sentence can spark a fight — and how to say it differently

didn't

You ~~never~~ call
me back.

One word. A completely different conversation.

“Why didn’t you call me?”

One ordinary question.

And maybe the start of a completely unnecessary fight.

What if changing a single word was enough?

Words That Start Fires

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One sentence, two very different reactions

Before we get to individual words, let's look at one ordinary situation. You know it. Everyone knows it.

Imagine you arrive late. Not dramatically, just fifteen minutes. You missed the bus, a meeting ran over, your phone died in your pocket. You open the door and two people ask you the same thing.

Everyday Two people, one piece of information

First “Why are you late again?”

Second “What happened? You’re running late.”

Both want to know exactly the same thing: why you didn’t arrive on time. The information they’re after is identical. And yet each sentence sets off something completely different inside you.

With the first sentence, a small warning light switches on in your head. The word “again” brings back every previous offence. The word “why” sounds like a demand for a defence. Before you even open your mouth, your mind is already building a case: *It wasn’t my fault. I was on time last week. And you’ve never been late, have you?*

With the second sentence, the warning light stays off. You simply want to explain what happened. You might even apologise, because nobody is pushing you into a corner you’d have to fight your way out of.

**Often the problem isn’t WHAT we want to say.
The problem is WHAT REACTION our sentence
automatically triggers.**

Why the first sentence matters so much

A conversation is a bit like a journey you set out on with another person. The first sentence sets the direction. If you start with an accusation, the other person starts defending themselves. When they defend themselves, you push harder. And five minutes later you’re arguing about something that barely has anything to do with the original problem.

American psychologist John Gottman, who spent decades studying couples in his lab, made a remarkable discovery: the way a conversation begins in its first few minutes predicts, with high accuracy, how it will end. A sharp, accusatory opening, which he calls a *harsh start-up*, almost always leads to an equally sharp ending. It's true in relationships, but you'll see the same mechanism in a meeting, at a family lunch or in the comments under a social media post.

Why it works this way

When something sounds like an attack, the brain reads it much like a threat. Attention narrows, tension rises and we switch into “defend or attack” mode. In that state it's hard to listen, hard to think, and very easy to say something we later regret. So a good phrasing isn't cosmetic. It's a way of keeping the other person in a state where they're able to actually talk to you.

What this book is not

It's not a collection of manipulative tricks for getting people to do what you want. Those formulas usually work once and then backfire, because people spot fakeness sooner than we think.

Nor is it about talking like a therapy handbook. Nobody wants to hear “I perceive that your behaviour evokes frustration in me” at home. The goal is to speak naturally, just a little more precisely.

The goal is to say the same thing more precisely, more calmly, and in a way that lets the conversation continue.

You're still allowed to be angry. You can still disagree, complain, want change. It's just about making sure your message reaches the other person in a form they're able to hear. Because even the most justified complaint is useless if it bounces off them like a wall.

How to use this e-book

Each chapter focuses on one principle, one word or one type of sentence that reliably inflames conversations. In each one you'll find:

- **Situations** from everyday life, relationships and work that show how quickly a conversation can fall apart.
- **The “Say it differently” section**, where the original and the rephrased sentence stand side by side. For both, you’ll see **what the other person actually hears** and **how they’ll likely react**.
- **Quick examples** for inspiration that you can try straight away.
- **A short exercise** at the end of each chapter to get the new phrasing into your head and, more importantly, into your mouth.

At the end, there’s a practical section with thirty sentences on cards, a mini quiz and, finally, a one-page A4 cheat sheet you can print or save to your phone.

A small note on the examples

Every example is tagged with where it most often happens: in relationships, at work, in the family, among friends, online or just on an ordinary day. But don’t take the tags too literally. The sentence that starts a fight in the kitchen will start one in the office too.

When words aren’t enough

Better phrasing can change a lot. But it can’t fix everything. If a relationship or workplace involves humiliation, intimidation, control or violence, the problem isn’t your sentences, and you don’t have to solve it by searching for the perfect phrasing. In that situation, your safety and outside support come first: someone close to you, a professional or a specialised helpline.

Now let’s get started. We’ll begin with a question that isn’t really a question.

06

Chapter 6

Stop reading minds

We can guess what others think, what they feel and why they did something. We're just wrong quite often.

~~"You just don't want to go."~~

"Do you want to go? Just tell me how you feel about it."

Key idea

An assumption ends the question before you've even asked it.

The human brain hates gaps. When we don't know why someone behaved a certain way, we instantly fill in an explanation. And in a tense situation, that explanation tends to be the worst possible one.

A colleague doesn't reply to an email: *I must be annoying him*. A partner is quiet at dinner: *he's got something against me again*. A friend cancels: *she probably doesn't want to see me*. In a few seconds we have a finished story. And then we start acting as if the story were true.

Psychology calls this **mind reading**, and it's one of the most common thinking traps. The problem isn't that we make assumptions. Everyone does. The problem arises when we **say our assumption out loud as if it were fact**.

Relationships**The party invitation**

Kate is reading a message from a friend: she's celebrating her birthday on Saturday. Her partner Oliver sighs as she reads.

Kate "You just don't want to go."

Oliver "I didn't say that."

Kate "You didn't have to. I can see it. You never want to see my friends."

Oliver "I sighed because my back hurts. But if that's how you see it, I'm definitely not going."

Oliver sighed because his back hurt. Kate interpreted it her own way and said it as fact. Oliver objected, Kate pushed harder (and added a "never"). And in the end, her fear came true: Oliver really isn't going.

That's the treacherous thing about mind reading. When you tell someone what they think, you give them only two options. Either they agree with your interpretation, or they have to defend themselves. Either way, they can no longer say how things **really** are for them.

Say it differently

Relationships

**“You just don’t want to go.”****What they hear**

She already knows what I think. There’s no point explaining.

How they will likely react

Defence or resignation: “If you already know, why ask?”

**“Do you want to go? Just tell me how you feel about it. We’ll figure something out.”****What they hear**

She’s interested in my opinion. I can tell the truth and it won’t be a problem.

How they will likely react

Honesty: “My back hurts, but I’d go for a little while.”

Say it differently

At work

**“You’re obviously not interested in this project.”****What they hear**

The boss has formed a bad impression of me and doesn’t want to hear an explanation.

How they will likely react

Withdrawal, a sense of injustice. Next time he’ll be even quieter.

**“You were very quiet in the meeting today. How do you see the project?”****What they hear**

He’s interested in my view. I can say what I think.

How they will likely react

Opening up: “Honestly, I have doubts about the deadline. I didn’t want to say it in front of everyone.”

Fact, story and question

The most useful skill in this chapter is learning to separate three things that tend to blend together in our heads:

- **A fact** is what a camera would see. “You didn’t say anything in the meeting.” “You sighed.” “You didn’t reply to my message.”
- **A story** is what you add to it. “You’re not interested.” “You don’t want to go.” “You’re angry with me.”
- **A question** is how you find out whether your story is true.

When you want to talk about something that worries you, try this trio: “I noticed that [fact]. It made me think [my story]. Is that right?” You’re not hiding your interpretation, you’re just owning it as yours, not presenting it as the truth about the other person.

Assumption → question

✗ You just don't want to go.	✓ Do you want to go?
✗ You're obviously not interested.	✓ I get the feeling this didn't really grab you. Is that right?
✗ You did it on purpose.	✓ What made you do it that way?
✗ You're angry with me, aren't you?	✓ You seem a bit quiet today. Is something up?
✗ You don't believe me.	✓ I get the sense you have doubts. What doesn't sit right with you?
✗ My boss hates me.	✓ Could we look at what she'd like to see differently in my work?

Why it works this way

The brain makes assumptions quickly and automatically because it once increased our chances of survival. Whoever “saw” a predator in rustling grass survived more often than whoever waited for evidence. That's why our inner narrator tends towards worst-case scenarios. Don't see it as a flaw. See it as a reminder that your first interpretation is only one possibility, and often the darkest one.

Beware of “on purpose”

“You did it on purpose” is one of the heaviest accusations you can make. It attributes bad intent. And even if the other person really did behave badly, an intention to hurt is rarely behind it. Usually it's inattention, haste, tiredness or a different view of things. Yet an accusation of bad intent reliably kills any willingness to put things right.

Try it

Next time something upsets you, take a sheet of paper and divide it into two columns: **What happened** and **What I think about it**. Write only facts on the left, everything else on the right. Then look at the right column and ask: *How much of this do I know for sure?*

In a nutshell

- We all make assumptions. The problem is saying them out loud as fact.
- Separate fact, story and question: “I noticed... It made me think... Is that right?”
- Accusing someone of bad intent reliably kills any willingness to put things right.