

How Do I Ask for What I Want?

Read the article first. This worksheet accompanies [Why Don't People Listen to Me?](#) at ThoughtsFromATherapist.com, which explains how describing only what we do not want, and asking in words whose meaning is private, leaves the other person guessing. Search “why don't people listen” on the site to find it.

Being heard is relational, and the speaker carries half of it. This sheet takes one complaint as we actually said it, or would say it when upset, and revises it into a request another person can act on. Choose a complaint that comes up more than once, about a three or a four out of ten. A few words per space is enough.

STEP ONE The complaint as said	Word for word, in the heat of it. No editing yet. The complaint carries emotional truth and names something important.
STEP TWO Universals to behavior	We circle the universals: always, never, you are, everything, and character words like messy or selfish. A statement about character works as shame, and a self cannot change on request, so the listener defends it. A behavior invites guilt, and guilt is functional, because a behavior can change.
STEP THREE Name the destination	A list of everything we do not want is a boundary without a destination. Ordering a sandwich by listing what we dislike never produces a sandwich. We say what we want instead.
STEP FOUR Translate private words	More, closer, enough, support, good, respect. These words feel specific because they mean something to us. The listener fills them with their own meaning. We write what the word would look like this week.
STEP FIVE The door, the time, the “but”	We say which conversation we are starting, and pick a workable time. Then we check for a “but,” which turns a desire and a need into a conflict. “And” asks for both. <i>Something happened to me: presence</i> <i>Something you did affected me: accountability</i> <i>We have a problem to decide: problem-solving</i>

A WORKED EXAMPLE: THE DISHES

AS SAID	“You are always messy. I feel like I do everything around here.”
UNIVERSALS	always, messy, everything
ONE BEHAVIOR	The dishes left in the sink.
DESTINATION	“I would like you to clean the dishes you leave in the sink.”
THE DOOR	Something you did affected me. After empathy, it needs ownership and change.
THE “BUT”	“I need to get to the bank before noon.” “But I need to get gas.” Becomes: “And I need to get gas.” Both were true.

Sometimes people are not refusing to listen. We have told them what must stop, or asked for something whose meaning exists only inside us, and left them to guess what should take its place.

From complaint to behavior

Write it the way it comes out, then revise. The first draft is supposed to be messy.

THE COMPLAINT AS SAID

Word for word, the way I said it or would say it when upset.

UNIVERSALS I FIND

Check each one that shows up, and circle it in the complaint above.

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Always or never | ☐ You are... |
| ☐ Everything, nothing, every time | ☐ A character word (messy, lazy, selfish, careless) |
| ☐ A motive I am reading as if I know it | ☐ Agreement as the price of feeling heard |

STEP TWO

One behavior

The specific act, at a specific time. Not who they are: what they did or did not do.

STEP THREE

The destination

What I want instead. Each preference is a useful constraint that gives the other person somewhere to go.

WHAT I DO NOT WANT

WHAT I WANT INSTEAD

IS IT MY OWN COMPLAINT, OR AN OLD ONE FINDING A DOOR?

Unspoken needs accumulate. Sometimes a complaint is an older need taking the first available opening. If so, what is the older need?

Making it legible

The listener remains responsible for engaging. The speaker is responsible for making the desired outcome clear.

STEP FOUR

Private words

Each word that holds a private standard (more, closer, enough, support, good, respect), and what it would look like this week between us.

THE WORD

WHAT IT WOULD LOOK LIKE THIS WEEK

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

STEP FIVE

The door

Which conversation am I starting? Empathy comes first in all three.

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Something happened to me: I need presence | ☐ Something you did affected me: accountability |
| ☐ We have a problem to decide: problem-solving | ☐ I am not sure yet, so I will ask which one I need |

STEP FIVE

The time

When could this work? Not ten minutes before a meeting. A pause can carry a specific return: "Can we come back to it at eight?"

STEP FIVE

The "but" check

Any "but" in my request? Rewrite it with "and," so both things can be met together.

THE REQUEST, REVISED

One behavior, a destination, words with a shared meaning, the door named, and no "but."

