



Rent Smart

Module E

Communications



Extension

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Rent Smart 2017 focuses on the knowledge and skills essential for a successful renting experience. It challenges participants to know and understand their rights and responsibilities as a tenant as well as know and understand the rights and responsibilities of their landlord. Emphasis is on forming a strong partnership between the tenant and landlord. **Rent Smart** was originally based on information collected through focus groups held with property managers and tenant advocates. It was piloted under its original name, **Good Neighbor-Good Tenant**, for several years, then taught as **Rent Smart** in numerous Wisconsin counties for the past 15 years.

Rent Smart 2017 participant goals include:

- Learn new skills to build positive relationships with landlords and neighbors.
- Gain confidence in their ability to find and maintain affordable housing.
- Understand the application and screening processes used by landlords.
- Learn the responsibilities and rights of tenants and landlords.

The 2017 revised curriculum continues to emphasize an active learning approach designed to foster participant motivation and course effectiveness. Videos, case studies and internet links have been incorporated in the updated curriculum to provide additional interactive learning options. The 2017 revised curriculum consists of six modules, designed to be taught separately or in combination.

Rent Smart 2017 Modules:

- How Much Will It Cost? And Can I Afford It?
- Checking Out the Rental Property and the Landlord
- Application Process
- Who's Responsible for Maintenance, Repairs and Care?
- **Communications**
- Rental Agreements—Moving In, Moving On

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Overview

Communication can be at the core of many problems with landlords as well as with neighbors and roommates. The emphasis of this module is on developing effective communication skills to minimize such problems.

Typical studies suggest that seventy-five percent of our waking time is spent communicating with others through speech, writing, or gestures such as smiles or handshakes. In spite of all of this practice, we often have problems communicating with each other. Poor communication is the cause of many arguments, hurt feelings, and misunderstandings.

Some problems arise from different communication styles based on personality, gender, or cultural differences. For example, in some cultures it may be considered poor manners to look someone in the eyes when you talk with him or her. In another culture, not looking a person in the eye may be seen as a sign of dishonesty. Some people depend a great deal on facial expressions and gestures to communicate, while others may not use this type of communication.

Both tenant advocates and landlords agree that many problems between tenants and landlords result from poor communication. The purpose of this module is to provide participants with techniques for improving their communication skills with landlords, roommates, and neighbors. This includes providing tools which participants can use if conflicts arise so that such problems can be settled with minimum anger and frustration.



Objectives

Participants will:

1. Understand the difference between business and personal relationships.
2. Develop active listening skills.
3. Practice formulating clear I messages.

Activities

Activity 1: Business Relationship

Activity 2: Listening

Activity 3: Formulating and Using “I Statements”

Activity 4: When Repairs Are Needed

Activity 5: Living with a Roommate

Teaching Outline

Provide the *Overall Handout* before beginning the module.

Suggested Introduction

Poor communications can be the cause of misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and arguments. In this module we will explore ways to make certain that your communications with your landlord, roommates, and neighbors have the desired effect. We will also look at some ways to settle conflicts or misunderstandings when they arise. Strong emotions can get in the way of listening for meaning. Sometimes it may be appropriate to communicate via phone, email or text, but most of the time face-to-face communication will be the most effective when crucial conversations need to happen.



OPTIONAL: Show “Who’s on First?” videos to demonstrate what happens when communication isn’t clear.

- “Who’s on First?”: Abbot and Costello:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTcRRaXV-fg>
- “Who’s on First?”: The Sequel (Jimmy Fallon):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K0Jg7pvVzKk>

Activity I: Business Relationship

(Objective 1: Understand the difference between business and personal relationships.)

- No Handouts

Suggested Introduction: Think about people with whom you have a business relationship (phone company, school, bank, etc.). How do you talk with them? (Acknowledge answers) You probably talk more directly, courteously, and with specifics. You do this is by: 1) planning ahead, 2) determining the topic, 3) if necessary—making notes, 4) having direct conversation in a neutral location, and 5) being specific. Business relationships focus on the facts, not the strong emotions that are present in personal relationships.

Ask participants to briefly describe an issue that they have recently experienced with a landlord, neighbor or roommate. List these issues on a flipchart or board. When five or six issues have been listed, summarize them and point out how resolving each of the issues should involve communicating with facts and a business approach.

Activity 2: Listening

(Objective 2: Develop active listening skills.)

- Handout 1: *Listening Activity*

OPTIONAL:

- There are several options for communication exercises. Suggestions might be to “Draw what you hear” or “Make a Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwich” (based on the directions that a partner writes down), or “Paper Folding” with simple directions. The options are endless, so look for activities that reflect what your audience would appreciate! More can be found at sites like: <http://blog.trainerswarehouse.com/communication-and-listening-exercises/>.

Suggested Introduction: In high stress situations, we are often so busy being angry or worried that we don’t listen to what is being said to us. In many cases we assume we know what the person is going to say and are busy thinking about our response, rather than what is actually being said. Being a good listener is a key component to being a good communicator and requires you to have an active role.

Provide Handout 1: *Listening Activity* and tell participants to listen and follow the instructions. (Don’t reveal answers until the end.)

1. Put a dot on the i
2. BB = Baby Bull, MB = Mama Bull, PB = Papa Bull. Baby bull gets hurt; who does he go to for help?
3. Write the word candy in the spaces
4. Your mother calls and asks you to bring home meat, cereal, cheese, milk, bread, apples, carrots, toilet paper, flour, and orange juice. You arrive home with meat, bread, milk, and flour. What did you forget?
5. You are the driver of a school bus. At the first stop, 13 kids get on, at the second stop 5 get on and 2 get off, at the third stop 2 get on and 1 gets off, at the fourth stop 1 kid gets on, and at the fifth stop 3 get on and 2 get off. How old is the bus driver?

When everyone is finished, briefly discuss the responses listed on the activity sheet. This activity can help participants to experience how hard it can be to really listen.

1. I didn’t say exactly how to “put a dot on the i”. While some people may have interpreted this to mean, dotting the “i,” others may take it literally and place the dot right “on” the “i” (demonstrate on board). There are opportunities for misunderstanding even in very basic communication.

Training our brains to respond, not react, is essential when it comes to communication.

Communicating with “I messages” helps train our brain to make smarter choices which helps to deflate barriers to communication.

2. A bull is an intact male. So the answer is probably “Papa Bull,” since there's no such thing as a Mama Bull.
3. Some people might take this literally and put the letters in the spaces, like this: C _ A _ N _ D _ Y (not on the lines). (Write on board.) We tend to filter everything we hear through our own personal biases. Is one more correct than the other?
4. Missing: cereal, cheese, apples, carrots, toilet paper, orange juice. Did anybody get this? Sometimes when we give too much information at once, critical pieces of information get lost.
5. Who is the bus driver? Since “you're the bus driver,” the answer is your own age. What got in the way of you hearing this? When we speak off-topic (who got on and off wasn't important), critical pieces of information get lost.

Ask participants for examples of how this miscommunication could happen with landlords, roommates or neighbors. Ask participants what would have helped with the communication process in the above statements. Offer Handout 4: *Active Listening* and *Positive Messages* as a tip sheet to help with communicating more effectively.

Activity 3: Formulating and Using “I Statements”

(Objective 3: Practice formulating clear I messages.)

- Handout 2: “I Messages”
- Handout 3: *Feelings Chart*
- Handout 4: *Active Listening & Positive Messages*
- Handout 5: “I Messages” *Scenarios*

Communicating with “I messages” helps train our brain to make smarter choices which helps to deflate barriers to communication. Positive messages go a long way toward solving communication problems. For both options of activity 3 it is important to note that this is the formula to help train our brains to *respond*, not *react*. Anger and stress are natural responses to fear and pain, and make it harder to communicate.

Suggested Introduction: Just as our emotions can get in the way of listening, they can also get in the way of clearly expressing ourselves. This activity provides some ideas how participants can more successfully communicate their needs and concerns when it is important to be heard. This technique is sometimes referred to as the “I Message” technique because it stresses speaking for yourself—saying what you feel and what you need.

Have you ever tried to confront someone and planned to be very clear with your communication? Maybe you started the conversation like “You said you would fix the lock on the door.” When we have strong feelings in

conflict, especially anger, we often use “You” statements. These are statements that start with “you” and they tend to accuse, blame, or belittle someone. When this happens, typically the conversation turns into a heated argument and people get defensive. “You” messages generally irritate people and can derail the conversation very quickly. People focus on their emotions and feelings and not at all on what you intended to say. As Maya Angelou once said, “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

It IS possible to express strong feelings without increasing the conflict by using “I messages.” They help keep the conversation moving in the right direction. We can express our feelings (frustration, disappointment, anger, etc.) and needs without sounding accusatory.

“I messages” usually begin with the words “I feel” so you don’t come across as being critical of the other person. They tell the other person your own feelings, what happened for you to feel this way and what can be done to help change the situation. “I messages” help you take responsibility for your own ideas and feelings instead of blaming the other person. We always have a choice in how we *respond* or *react*. And it does take a LOT of practice to use “I messages.” Handout 4: *Active Listening Tips and Positive Messages* suggests other things to keep in mind when formulating “I messages.”

Failing to talk things over with landlords, roommates and neighbors can result in misunderstanding, hurt feelings, and arguments. Learning to communicate clearly and honestly can keep things from getting out of control. Follow this template as you learn how to communicate in a positive way, asking for your needs to be met.



Provide handout 2, 3, and 4. Write on board:

When _____

I Feel _____

Because _____

Would you please _____

Provide Handout 5: *“I Messages” Scenarios*. Practice writing “I Messages” in a large group, small group, or individually. Fill in the blanks on Handout 2: creating the *“I Messages.”* Remind participants to not use any “hidden you” messages! Focus on not using “you” at all while learning how to communicate with “I messages.” Instead, focus on the importance of identifying your feelings (Handout 3) and the facts.

Potential responses to these scenarios:

Scenario 1: When I have water dripping through my bathroom ceiling I feel annoyed because it's creating a mess and I'm worried about falling on the slippery floor! I'm also concerned for the safety of my family. Would you please fix it today? The leak needs to be stopped.

Scenario 2: When I'm trying to sleep and there is so much noise in the hallway, I feel tired and annoyed because I work the night shift and am trying to sleep during the day. Could you please have your children play somewhere else or stop screaming?

Scenario 3: When I can't pay my bill on time, I feel ashamed. Because my hours have been cut at work I've not been able to keep up with my bills. Would you please allow me to pay \$50 a month until I can figure out a way to make some more money? What type of payment plan can I get on?

Scenario 4: When I moved in, I was promised new screens for my windows, especially since it's a housing code violation. I feel annoyed because I've not been able to open my windows all summer long while I've waited for them to be installed. Would you please replace them or update me on the status of them by Friday?

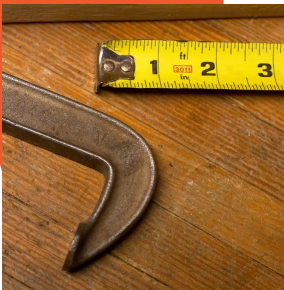
Scenario 5: When we moved in together, we were friends. I feel concerned and frustrated because the tension is so high between us. Would you please help me figure out what we can do to get through the next five months of our lease without hurting each other?

Activity 4: When Repairs Are Needed

(Objective 1: Understand the difference between business and personal relationships, Objective 2: Develop active listening skills, and Objective 3: Practice formulating clear I messages.)

- Handout 5: *"I Messages" Scenarios*
- Handout 6: *When Repairs Are Needed* Fact Sheet
- Handout 7: *Sample Letter Requesting a Repair* This sample letter requests that a landlord make a repair and can be helpful when thinking how to document your request in this "business relationship."

Use Scenarios 1 and 4 from Activity 3 on Handout 5: *"I Messages" Scenarios* to have participants think about how to handle the situation if the *"I Message"* doesn't work. Share Handout 6: *When Repairs Are Needed* and Handout 7: *Sample Letter Requesting a Repair* and discuss with participants.



Activity 5: Living with a Roommate

(Objective 1: Understand the difference between business and personal relationships.)

- Handout 8: *Life Skills*
- Handout 9: *Roommate Agreement*

OPTIONAL:

- Roommate Agreement from *Big Bang Theory*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVtlx1JCSg8>

If your participants plan to live with a roommate discuss Handout 8: *Life Skills* and provide Handout 9: *Roommate Agreement*.



Learning Assessment

Have participants learned the key concepts of this Rent Smart module? The following questions or activities are recommended to assess participant understanding of the information covered in this module:

- Identify the difference between an “I statement” and a “You statement”
- Share the formula for creating an “I statement”
- Identify ways to actively listen