

Section 4: Communicating

If you get a "Not Yet" in an evaluation in the Communicating Section, you likely suffer from a combination of problems that centre around poor listening skills and negative attention-seeking behaviours. Here are some suggested activities that will help you move towards better communication skills in a group setting.

OBJECTIVE: You work to understand.

One of the most important skills you need to develop in order to comprehend and follow your peers is taking clear notes. By keeping a clear record of points discussed in group meetings, you will be able to review what was said on your own later. You will also be able to assist your peers in recalling areas that have been covered. To improve your note-taking ability, try one of these methods:

Format One: The Standard Outline

- I Major concept, major idea, major topic, or main topic
 - A. Minor detail or explanatory detail
 - i) smallest detail or further support (Often it is an example.)

Format Two

- II Major topic
 - A. Major concept of idea or major topic
 - a) supporting detail
 - B. Major topic

Format Three: A Non-Indented Number System of Outlining

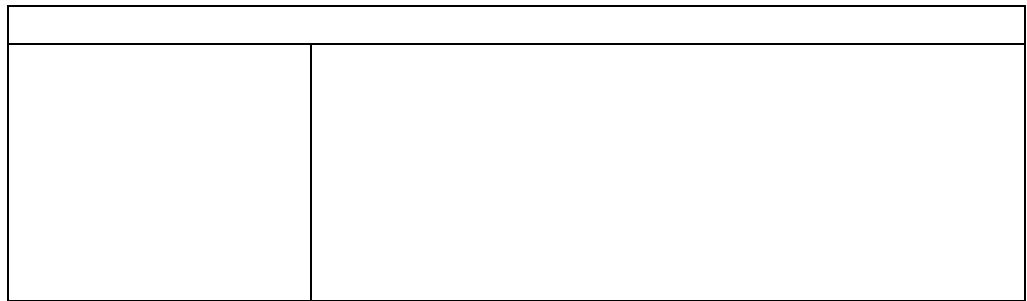
- 1.0 Major topic
- 1.1 Subtopic
 - 1.1.1 Supporting detail
 - 1.1.1.1 Explanatory detail
 - 1.1.1.1.1 Further support (Often an example)
- 2.0 Major topic

Format Four: An Indented Number System of Outlining

- 1.0 Major topic
 - 1.1 Subtopic
 - 1.1.1 Supporting detail
 - 1.1.1.1 Explanatory detail
 - 1.1.1.1.1 Further support (Often an example)
- 2.0 Major topic

The Cornell Method

On top of a page of loose-leaf paper, write the following information: the name of the course, the title of the chapter or class topic, the date, and page number. See the diagram below.



The left side is designed for general headings and major ideas; the right side is used to list specific points of detail.

The Brown Method

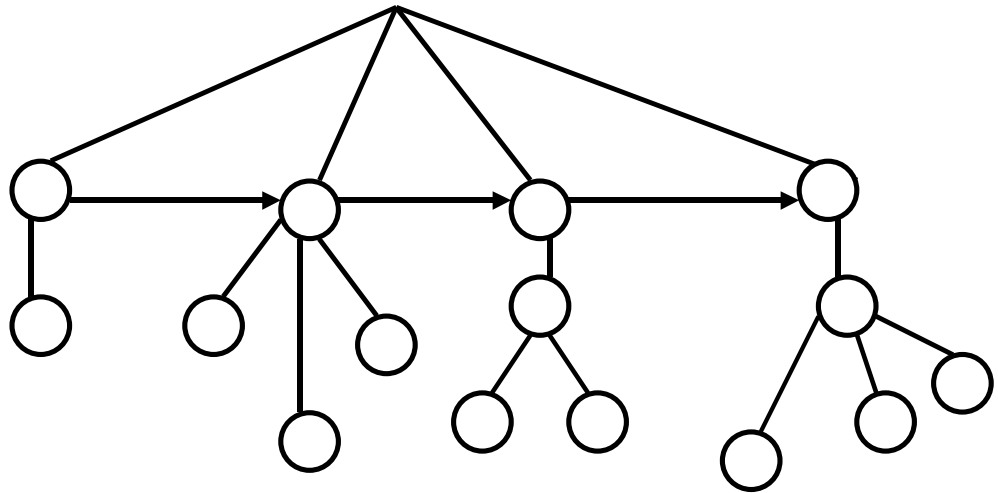
This tactic looks very much like a formal outline. On the top of a page of loose-leaf paper, write the following information: the name of the course, the title of the chapter or class topic, the date, and page number.

See the diagram below. There is no writing in the first section. Write the major topics in the second section, the subtopics in the third section, and the evidence, facts, quotations, details and examples in the fourth section.

1	2	3	4

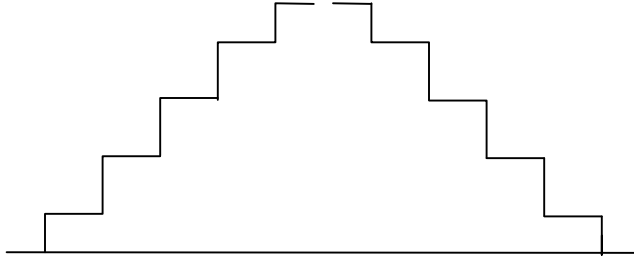
Graphic Organizers

A graphic organizer allows individuals to work within a formal hierarchical framework. They are hierarchical charts that display concepts, key ideas, and examples. Graphic organizers begin at the top of the page with the major concept or topic and progress down the page as the information becomes more detailed.



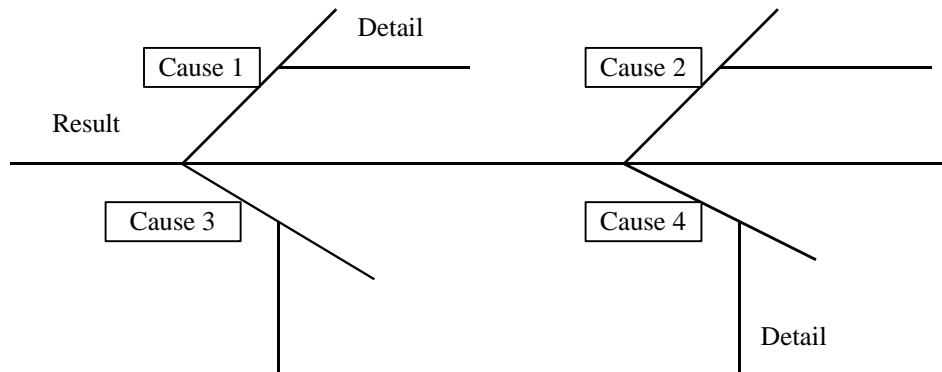
Step Pyramids

A step pyramid presents a hierarchy of data as well. It shows the series of steps required to reach the top or main goal. For example, becoming a chief of police requires a series of steps that includes joining the police force. The steps of a person going to jail begin with committing a crime.



A Fishbone Map

Use fishbone maps to show the causal interaction of a complex phenomenon or event.



There are several sites on the Internet that address organization and time management. If you like to surf, check out one of these to find a style of note taking and organization that suits you.

Your communication skills will also improve if you seek to understand by frequently rephrasing or clarifying the points your peers are making. This will help you to ensure that you are receiving the appropriate message. Also, you will be perceived more often as a contributor.

Another reason communication can break down and misunderstandings can occur could simply be boredom. Although it is not a good idea to give up too easily or too soon, an occasional stretch break will rejuvenate the group and actually increase productivity and harmony within the group. Sometimes merely changing roles--having the reader act as the recorder, for example--may serve the same purpose as a break.

OBJECTIVE:
You avoid side conversations.

Perhaps the most unproductive communication of all in a group setting is the off-topic side conversation. You must develop self-discipline to avoid engaging in this type of conversation. Focus your energy and conversation on the topic or problem your group has raised that day.

Strategies to Avoid Making Side Conversations

1. Restate the group's daily goal at the beginning of the meeting. This will help to get everyone focussed and limit you to specific topics of discussion.
2. Ask a group member to give you a signal every time you wander off task. You can help your group mates as well. This is called peer monitoring.

By avoiding side conversations, you will help your group's productivity as well as develop the skills you need to become a polite, effective listener. Here are a few thoughts on being an effective listener:

DID YOU KNOW . . . ?

Spoken language is our most frequently used form of communication, yet research has shown that we usually remember only 40 to 50% of what we hear.

Most of us speak at a rate of 125 words per minute, but we listen and process words at 375 to 500 words a minute. We have to learn to fill the gap so that our minds do not wander. Making a greater effort to listen effectively just might be what it takes.

Review the listening models given below. Which type of listener are you?

Types of Listeners

The Combative Listener

If you are a combative listener, you are more interested in promoting your own point of view than in exploring someone else's view of the world. You listen for flaws in the other person's argument. As you pretend to pay attention you are secretly rehearsing some devastating comeback that will destroy the other's argument and leave you the victor.

The Attentive Listener

If you are an attentive listener, you are genuinely interested in hearing the other person's point of view. You are willing to accept that you may have something to learn from this interaction and you are willing to drop your defence of "my view of the world is the only correct one." In spite of this willingness, however, you inevitably will hear the person through the filters of your own beliefs. You will make assumptions and fill in the gaps of what the other person intended to communicate.

The Reflective Listener

If you are a reflective listener, you are involved in a much more active process that assumes that communication is a two-way street. You hear what the other says and build some kind of mental picture about what he or she means. You then feed the information back to the speaker to check that you got the message correctly. It is the feedback process that distinguishes reflective listening and makes it so much more effective. As you give the speaker feedback, you can help to progressively fine-tune both your own and the speaker's mental pictures until they are substantially the same. At this point, you can be sure that you really do understand what the other meant to say.

Using the reflective listening model will increase group productivity and maintain harmony.

To become a better listener you must be a positive, active listener. Sit down and do not read or talk while others are talking. Work on dedicating extra energy to listening during the last minutes when a summary is given or conclusions are drawn. If you cannot resist speaking, do not interrupt. Make a note and raise your point when the others have finished speaking. Try limiting yourself to asking questions only. Remember, you were born with *two ears* and *one mouth* . . . use them in their respective proportions.

OBJECTIVE:

**You avoid "killer statements."
You have positive body language.**

One reason you may be having difficulty communicating might be because you display a negative attitude during discussions. Although you may try to make changes that will ultimately help the group, your tone, posture and wording may be harshly critical. The first step is to recognize the difference between positive and negative statements. Compare the way the sentences are worded in the left column with the way they are worded in the right column.

What You Said . . .

1. As if we can really pull off *that* idea!
2. That's the dumbest idea I've ever heard!
3. You're *wrong!*
4. You've got to get that typed by Monday *or else!*
5. Shut up and get to work!
6. Wow, we're *doomed!*

What You *Should* Have Said . . .

1. That's a really creative idea, but I don't think we'll have enough time to do it justice.
2. You know, I'm not sure there is any evidence in the novel to support your point.
3. Do you have any proof to back that up?
4. Do you think you could get that done by Monday?
5. Pardon the interruption, but if you're finished, could you help me with my part?
6. I'm worried about getting finished on time. Maybe we should rethink our timeline.

You do not always have to agree with the other group members, but you must choose words that will help the group to accomplish its goal instead of words that attack someone personally. Avoid labels, a snobby posture, and intolerant laughing.

One way to avoid being perceived as excessively critical is to limit yourself to a maximum of **two constructive criticisms** per group meeting. Remember, choose your words carefully! Even better, try to take on the role of peacemaker during group discussions.

Strategies for Making Constructive Criticisms

Try using some of these openers. They show that you have empathy.

1. Summarizing or Reflecting With Empathy

When you have a fairly clear idea about what the other person is feeling or saying, these phrases will help you form an empathic response:

- "It sounds like (you feel, you think, you believe) . . ."
- "So you feel . . ."
- "From your point of view, then, . . ."
- "So, it seems to you . . ."
- "Then, in your experience . . ."
- "From where you stand, it seems . . ."
- "So, as you see it . . ."
- "Then, you think . . ."
- "It sounds like you're feeling (identify the feeling--angry, sad, happy) . . ."
- "You really seem to be saying . . ."
- "You figure, then, . . ."
- "So, what you mean is . . ."

2. Clarifying or Exploring With Empathy

When you are having some difficulty recognizing what the other person is feeling or saying, you may wish to be tentative with your empathic response. Some useful phrases are:

- "Could it be that . . ."
- "I wonder if . . ."
- "I'm not sure if I'm with you, but . . ."
- "Correct me if I'm wrong, but . . ."
- "Is it possible that . . ."
- "Does it sound reasonable that you . . ."
- "Could this be what's going on, you . . ."
- "From where I stand, you seem to be . . ."
- "You appear to be feeling . . ."
- "It appears to you the . . ."
- "Perhaps you're feeling . . ."
- "Is there any chance that you . . ."
- "Maybe you're feeling . . ."
- "Is it conceivable that . . ."
- "Maybe I'm out-to-lunch, but . . ."
- "I'm not sure if I'm with you; do you mean . . ."
- "I'm not certain I understand; are you feeling . . ."
- "It seems that you . . ."
- "As I hear it, is that the way it is?"
(or . . . is that what you mean?)
(or . . . is that the way you feel?)
- "Let me see if I understand; you . . ."
- "Let me see if I'm with you; you . . ."

Sometimes you do not even have to say anything to communicate negative feelings—your body language does it for you. With just one look at your facial expression, people will get the message, "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard!"

DID YOU KNOW . . . ?

Nonverbal communication (NVC) is that part of the communication process that focusses on the non-language or non-spoken components.

It may come as no surprise to you that our bodies say a lot about us in all sorts of ways as we communicate with those around us.

Body language has been studied for many years and some very interesting and useful discoveries have been made. Consider the following:

- We all use body language.
- It is a natural part of our lives.
- Up to 70-80% of communication can be by NVC.
- It is often culturally derived and can vary in meaning and interpretation from culture to culture.
- It often says the opposite to what the verbal message says.
- It is almost impossible NOT to use NVC.
- It is part of the total communication we make.

If you are the victim of a killer statement or rude posture, control your anger and resist the temptation to strike back.

Coping With Killer Statements or Negative Body Language through Healthy Self-Talk

Anger arousal is strongly influenced by what we say to ourselves. It is helpful to develop a script of thoughts to help you respond more effectively when your anger is triggered. These scripts are very personal. The thoughts and sequence of thoughts are individual and unique. The following are some categories of coping thoughts and behaviours to help you prepare for a confrontation.

Preparing for a Confrontation

1. Thinking reassuring thoughts.

- This is a problem. I can handle it.
- I can work this out.
- I can cope.
- I know what I am doing.

2. Combating "I should haves" and blaming thoughts.

- Other people don't have to meet my expectations.
- Other people have the right to say no.
- I am responsible for me.
- People change only when *they* want to, not when I want them to.
- Don't guess.
- Don't mind-read.
- Don't judge.
- Shift your judgment to curiosity.

3. Coping with your body.

- Breathe.
- Relax.
- Relax your muscles.
- Stretch.
- Be calm.

4. Sticking to the problem.

- Decide what you need or want.
- Try to understand the other's needs.
- Acknowledge the other's point of view.
- Speak for yourself only.
- Stick to the facts.

It might be worthwhile to keep a journal of your group experiences. If you feel frustrated or unappreciated, make a note of what caused these feelings after each group session. Reread your journal before your next group project in order to identify situations that previously "set you off." Work to avoid these moments at all cost!

If you are on-line with your teacher, you may wish to have a dialogue with him or her in a journal form. Sometimes some objective feedback and encouragement is all that you need to function harmoniously in a group.

OBJECTIVE:

You avoid repetition, showing off and storytelling.

Perhaps you think that you are making excellent contributions to the group because you are always the one talking. This is not always helpful. You must evaluate your contributions and check to see if they are helpful or distracting and self-centred.

Strategies to Get People to Listen to You

What can you do when you are the speaker and you want your contributions to be valued by your group? Here are a few tips.

Make Eye Contact

If you are speaking to a group, try directing your attention to the different people in the group one at a time. Make eye contact and speak directly to that person for a minute or longer.

Avoid Speaking in a Monotone

Speak clearly. Vary your voice to keep people interested. An inaudible or droning voice can quickly put your listeners to sleep--figuratively *and literally*. By varying the inflections in your voice and speaking enthusiastically, you can command greater attention.

Ask Questions

Whether they are rhetorical or demand some kind of response, questions keep the listener involved. When it comes to communicating, a two-way conversation is usually more effective than a lecture.

Be Brief

Don't get gabby; get to the point. Avoid wandering off on tangents. Instead, stick to the subject at hand. Even though you think that you are really helping to drive a point home by telling a blockbuster personal anecdote about the time your dog died or the time you were fired from your job, you probably are impeding the progress of the group.

Avoid Self-Centredness

Carefully monitor how many times you use the word "I" in your group sessions. Everything does *not* have to be about you . . . Again, you should listen more than you speak.

Furthermore, your group might try using the **token system** for group discussions. It works as described below.

1. Each group member is issued three tokens at the beginning of the discussion.
2. Every time a group member makes a thoughtful contribution, he/she must "spend" a token.
3. Once he/she has used all three tokens, he/she must wait for the others to finish spending theirs. If you spend your tokens talking about your girlfriend, the weekend or Hockey Night in Canada—that's it! You will not be permitted to speak again until everyone has used up their tokens. You will be labelled as a useless, self-centred non-contributor. *So spend your tokens wisely.*
4. This system will help balance the contributions made by the group members. Be careful . . . don't spend all your tokens in one place!

If you continue to be too chatty and unfocussed during group discussions, use peer monitoring again. Ask a friend to give you a signal when you stray from the topic at hand or monopolize the conversation with personal, self-centred, irrelevant stories. (Your friend could try winking, using a flag, a frozen mackerel to the head . . . whatever works!)

To make focussed, useful contributions to the discussion, you must develop sensitivity, timing and self-control. Perhaps a personal anecdote might lighten the mood or illustrate a point, but most of the time these kinds of comments tend to waste the group's valuable time. Shifting the focus away from you and onto the assignments by rephrasing or paraphrasing others' ideas is a much more useful mode of communication.

CAUTION! Merely repeating others' good ideas is not useful or productive. Check this out:

The WRONG Way:

Speaker A: I think it would be worthwhile to change our timeline because we're really falling behind.

You: Well I think we should change our timeline then!

The RIGHT Way:

Speaker A: I think it would be worthwhile to change our timeline because we're really falling behind schedule!

You: Good point! Do you think the whole plan should be changed or should we rework our weekend schedule?

OBJECTIVE:

You acting as a recorder when appropriate.

One way to keep yourself organized and to ensure you are making focussed contributions to the group is to volunteer to take on the role of recorder. This will minimize your chatty behaviour, but allow you to contribute effectively to the project. It is easy to use poor handwriting or inexperience as an excuse, but remember practice makes perfect. See the segment on the different styles of note taking that appears earlier in this section to assist you in becoming a good recorder.

OBJECTIVE:

You use humour when appropriate.

Once you get the hang of it, working in groups can certainly be fun! You will learn to be more confident and appreciate the personalities and quirks of your fellow group members. When there is a job to be done, however, it is important not to have *too* much fun. If you spend all of your time trying to entertain your group, you will be unproductive and perceived as a disruptive influence. Use peer monitoring again to help you limit your "hilarious" comments. Discipline yourself to crack a maximum of two jokes per session. Remember the old show biz adage: "Leave them wanting more!"

You may also get a "Not Yet" in the Communicating Section of your evaluation if you have the opposite problem, that is, if you are perceived as humourless because of your innate shyness. If so, planning and consciously using one or two small quips might be a way to break into a group discussion. Write them down and rehearse, if necessary. If you have trouble contributing anything to your group, consider these points on shyness.

Strategies to Deal with Shyness

One message that is difficult to conceal is the fact that you are shy. Shyness can be a genuine, biological trait that makes opening up to others very difficult, or it can be an excuse for not trying to contribute. Naturally, excuses are *not* a valid reason for not communicating, but biology just might be. Use these tips to help you work to overcome your natural tendency to clam up.

1. Overcoming the Anxiety

To tame your racing heart and churning stomach, learn how to relax. Use simple breathing exercises that involve inhaling and exhaling deeply and slowly. You can ride out the acute discomfort by staying around after a group meeting. Try to engage in casual conversation with one group member so you will become more comfortable with him/her. Feeling like someone might be on your side will help you speak up or even crack a joke during a formal group meeting.

2. Face to Face

Tackle the art of very, very small talk face to face. Start a casual, quick exchange with the person next to you, or the cashier in the supermarket checkout line. Most people in such situations would be very responsive to passing the time in light conversation. Since half the battle is having something to say, prepare. Scan the newspaper for conversation topics and practice what you are going to say a few times.

3. Smile and Make Eye Contact

When you smile, you project a benign social force around you: people will be more likely to notice you and smile back. If you frown or look at your feet, you don't exist for people, or worse, you project a negative presence. Once you have smiled and made eye contact, you have opened up a window for the casual, "This project is so hard" type of comment. Always maintain eye contact during a conversation. This signals that you are listening and interested.

4. Compliment

The shortest route to social success is via a compliment. It's a way to make other people feel good about themselves and about talking to you. Compliment someone every day.

5. Know How to Receive Compliments

Thank the person right away; then return the compliment. "That's great coming from you. I've always admired the way you handle group conflicts." Use this as a jumping-off point for a real conversation.

6. Stop Assuming the Worst

In expecting the worst of every situation, shy people undermine themselves--they get nervous, start to stutter, and forget what they wanted to say. The chances are that once you actually throw yourself into that dreaded interaction, it will be much easier than you thought. Only then will you realize how ridiculous your doomsday predictions were. Ask a group member if he or she likes his/her assigned part. Just do it!

7. Stop Whipping Yourself

Thoughts about how stupid you sound or how nobody really likes you run through your head in every conversation. No one would judge your performance as harshly as you do. Search for evidence to refute your beliefs about yourself. Don't get upset that you didn't ask a brilliant question at the right time. Be happy that you were able to support others' comments with evidence.

8. Lose the Perfectionism

You might think that every one of your jokes has to be hilarious and every one of your contributions must be insightful and ironic. The truth is you set standards for yourself that are so impossible they spawn performance anxiety and doom you to failure. Set more realistic standards for yourself.

9. Learn to Take Rejection

Rejection is one of the risks everyone takes when they engage in social interactions. Try not to take it personally; it may have nothing to do with you.

In short, there is an art to using humour effectively in a group work setting. Whether you are a blabber mouth or as quiet as a mouse, learning to be relaxed and lighthearted when appropriate will improve your overall group communication.

Practice all of these skills over a period of time, and you will evolve into a more effective communicator. Follow the alphabet of good communication techniques.

The Alphabet of Good Communication Techniques

- A Acknowledge responsibility for your own behaviour and communicate "I messages"--what YOU think and feel.
- B Be true to yourself, communicating honestly and conveying the truth as you see it.
- C Convey respect for others' ideas; don't monopolize a conversation or discussion.
- D Disagree without being disagreeable.
- E Empathize with others.
- F Feed back verbal and nonverbal messages to encourage other speakers to share their views.
- G Give praise when it's due, but don't overdo it with gushing insincerity.
- H Hone your writing skills by keeping a daily journal or diary or by writing letters to friends and relatives.
- I Increase your ability to interpret contradictory spoken messages by looking for body language or listening for paralanguage cues (voice quality, loudness, tempo) that do not support the spoken words.

- J Join a drama club, debate team, or similar group to help develop your communication skills.
- K Keep your distance if you observe that a person with whom you are speaking has a large "bubble area." (A "bubble area" is the space that a person likes to keep between him or herself and others. Some people, for example, are comfortable speaking to others when they are standing or sitting a couple of feet away from them.)
- L Learn how people from cultures that are different from your own communicate so that you can avoid misunderstandings.
- M Monitor your own verbal and nonverbal messages at times to determine ways you can improve your communication skills.
- N Note and apply communication skills that others use successfully.
- O Organize and outline the main points you want to convey in a speech, essay or report.
- P Paraphrase another speaker's words and ideas to make sure you understand the content and meaning of a message you heard.
- Q Question the messages of those who use doublespeak. (Doublespeak is language used to blur or hide the truth.) Distinguish between fact and inference.
- R Respect others' private disclosures. Don't pass on others' secrets as gossip.
- S State your views and ideas in a concise manner; stick to the point.
- T Talk to other people the way you would want them to talk to you.
- U Use the active voice whenever possible in written reports and essays.
- V Vary your communication patterns--particularly in conversations--balancing active listening with speaking.
- W Write thank-you notes to those who provide helpful services or act in other ways on your behalf.

- X X-out offensive, racist and sexist language, and avoid stereotyping and labelling others.
- Y Yell only in appropriate situations such as shouting for emergency help or expressing excitement during an athletic event. Turn down your voice volume in one-to-one or group discussions.
- Z Zero in on mixed messages. Try to identify them in others and control mixed signals in your own messages so that you convey exactly what you mean.