

A young boy with light brown hair and a man with dark hair are smiling and looking at a document together. The boy is wearing a striped shirt and a white scarf. The man is wearing a tan shirt. The background is a soft, out-of-focus indoor setting.

# CAMP CONVERSATIONS CHECKLIST

7 TIPS TO WRITING BETTER COMMUNICATIONS  
FOR CAMPER FAMILIES

**CAMP CONVERSATIONS CHECKLIST**

“ The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place. ”

George Bernard Shaw

## Writing: 2 Sources of Confusion

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Writing is a part of every camp director's job. Between emails, memos, instructions, forms, blogs, reports, texts, tweets, websites and marketing materials, camp directors and their staff are on the sending end of a lot of messages. Often these are dashed off in a hurry, perhaps on a phone or tablet. Sometimes a flurry of back and forth messages is required for clarity. Frequently, neither party realizes a misunderstanding has occurred until much later, when something doesn't get done correctly.

Sound familiar? Communication has always been a tricky business. No message sender means to be unclear, and no message receiver tries to be deliberately obtuse. Yet with poor communication costing businesses more than \$40 billion annually, clearly, we don't communicate as well as we think we do! In the information age, the need for effective communication is more pressing than ever.

Both you and your campers' parents are busy and distracted. That's the source of most miscommunication, and also why writing needs to be clear. As a camp director with a message, the responsibility is on you to slow down and make sure your words will hit their target. Like it or not, to some people, poorly written messaging raises a flag about the overall professionalism of your camp—especially on your website.

## CAMP CONVERSATIONS CHECKLIST

“If you don’t have time to do it right, when will you have time to do it over?”

John Wooden, Basketball Hall of Fame

### Navigating the 3 Legs of the Writing Journey

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We live in a world of increasing complexity. Everyone, from students to experts, struggles to master their daily tasks. It has been shown that neither more training nor more advanced technologies prevent significant errors. In his book *The Checklist Manifesto*, acclaimed writer and surgeon Atul Gawande describes a simple and humble remedy: the checklist.

When a pilot ticks off the items on a take-off checklist, it adds a few minutes to take-off, but the global installation of the checklist to the flight industry has significantly reduced the number of simple, but deadly, errors that can occur. Gawande was instrumental in establishing the checklist in operating rooms around the world, with impressive error reduction.

It’s possible this simple checklist can help improve your daily task of writing. These tips require no training time or new skills, and can be implemented instantly. Like a pilot’s checklist, it will take a little extra time to implement, but that time will “pay for itself” by eliminating errors and confusion, and increasing comprehension, compliance, and customer satisfaction.

These tips generally apply to all forms of writing.

#### BEFORE

Once you start writing, it’s like plunging into a jungle. You can be easily diverted from your intended path. Here’s how to stay on course:

##### **Mark Your Route**

Before you start writing, organize your thoughts. It doesn’t have to be complicated. Just jot down a quick outline of your main objectives (i.e. the 3 things you want to ask in your email, the 4 forms parents need to fill out, the details of a camp experience in the order you want to tell it).

##### **Check Your Compass**

Along the way, you’ll think of other ideas that seem good to include. Jot them down quickly on a separate page but stick to your original outline. Those extra ideas can easily distract your reader from the intent of your message but it’s not a bad idea to capture them for future use.

**CAMP CONVERSATIONS CHECKLIST****DURING**

Even when you lay out a logical path for your camp parents to follow when reading your communication, their own filters, interest level, and distractions can detour them from your intended message. It's important to avoid putting up roadblocks to comprehension, and to plant signposts along the way to keep readers tracking with your thoughts. Here's how you do that:

 **Write Responsibly**

- Write conversationally, but not too casually (i.e. Don't use text shorthand—"u" for "you"—anywhere but in your personal texts, and maybe not even then!)
- Avoid all caps and exclamation points (one exclamation point per document might be too many)
- Use Spellcheck
- Cover 3 of the 5 C's of Writing in this phase:
  - **Clear:** Avoid jargon and acronyms and follow logical thought processes
  - **Concise:** Get to the point in as few words as possible
  - **Compelling:** Enhance your message through stories, illustrations, humor, or data. A story is simply a fact, wrapped in an emotion, that compels someone to take action, that transforms them in some way.

 **Use Road Signs**

Today, parents are more likely to skim than to actually read every word. They'll catch more of your message if you format the main goals you identified in your outline into:

- Bold headings
- Short phrases in bulleted or numbered lists (or checklists)

**Tip:** No punctuation is necessary for these lists unless they contain complete sentences or questions. Use a consistent style of wording (i.e. all nouns, all past tense, verbs, etc.) with items in a list and with capitalization and punctuation.

- New paragraph for each topic or question

## CAMP CONVERSATIONS CHECKLIST

“ We have become a  
'first-draft' society. ”

Nancy Duarte

**AFTER**

Even experienced writers need another set of eyes reviewing their work. You are no exception. The following tips are not choices, but a series of steps that—together—will significantly reduce typos, unnecessary words, unclear instruction, rambling, and confusing thought sequences.

Editing and proofreading are the most important steps, and the ones most often neglected.

 **Systems Check**

- Check for the final 2Cs:
  - **Consistent:** Did you make sure fonts, headings, punctuation and other formats (i.e. phone numbers) match?
  - **Correct:** Did you run Spellcheck?
- **Read your piece out loud:** This will help you find more errors than just proofreading. Revisit anywhere you stumble.

 **Pit Stop**

The most important step is to **Step Away From the Piece**. Do something else, then come back for review. The longer you wait, the more you'll see.

Recommended minimums:

- Facebook posts and Tweets – minutes
- Emails –minutes to hours
- Blogs and instructions – hours to overnight
- Confrontational communications – overnight to days
- Marketing copy – days or weeks

 **Roadside Assistance**

For anything going public, let someone else read it, preferably out loud. Ask what their main takeaway for the piece is. Does it match the goals you had in your outline? You know where you used humor or put emphasis, but their reading of it may reveal a different view.

## Reaching Your Final Destination

Now that you're ready to send out your communication, make sure the delivery is as polished as the content. If you'll be emailing, use software tools that allow you to put your copy in sleek templates that reflect your brand. Also think of adding a "register" button to your email to take people directly to your online registration forms. And to make sure your message is as targeted as possible, consider splitting your contact list into various segments and personalizing your email message with a different headline, salutation or closing paragraph for each group. A good camp management software system will enable you to do this with ease and to pre-schedule email sends to make sure they're delivered at the right time for your audience.

### PRINT THIS!

If writing isn't your best gift, you're not alone! Putting your thoughts and ideas into clear communication is difficult for many people. Turn these 7 practices into habits to ensure that your camp communication reflects the quality of your camp! Print out the mini checklist below to put near your computer.

## NAVIGATING THE WRITING JOURNEY

### BEFORE

- Mark Your Route: Organize your thoughts
- Check Your Compass: Stick to your outline

### DURING

- Write Responsibly: Be clear, concise, compelling, correct and consistent
- Use Road Signs: Format for skimmers with headings and bullets

### AFTER

- Systems Check: Scan for consistency and flow
- Pit Stop: Take a break
- Roadside Assistance: Enlist another proofreader

## Next Steps

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Consider your takeaways from this paper. Which steps do you want to start implementing right now? Also, think about the technology you're currently using to support your parent and staff communications. Are your tools integrated with the rest of your camp management and online registration system? Are they easy to use? Do you want to find out what else is possible?

Contact us to discuss how ACTIVE camp management solutions can help.

### ABOUT ACTIVE NETWORK

As a pioneer in online camp registration and management, ACTIVE Network has been serving camps for over 12 years. ACTIVE's camp management solution was designed from the ground up to make life easier for camp organizers and families so that, ultimately, more kids can enjoy the incredible experience of camp.

Today, with 2,500 camp customers, ACTIVE is a leader in camp management & online registration technology. ACTIVE's software suite has grown to touch on multiple aspects of camp management, from advertising & marketing to registration, payment, donations, online camper accounts and community engagement.

Visit [ACTIVEcamps.com](http://ACTIVEcamps.com).

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Dickman, The Elements of Persuasion