Telephone Talk

Using the phone successfully in the US requires specific language and cultural skills. Phone calls can be challenging due to the lack of nonverbal communication (seeing mouths, facial expressions, etc.) and the immediate demand for language production. This handout includes tips for effective calls and voicemails as well as suggestions for when miscommunications occur.

Making phone calls:
1. Before calling, prepare a note for yourself with points that you want to talk about.

2. Identify yourself:
   - "Hello, my name is... Andrew Carnegie."
   - "Hello, this is... Richard Mellon."
   - Refer to the ICC handout, “Saying your name clearly”, that offers tips to help second language speakers learn to communicate their name effectively.
     http://www.cmu.edu/icc/handouts/SayingYourName.pdf

3. State the purpose of your call with phrases like these:
   - "I'm calling to... learn about the application process."
   - "I'm calling about... available study space at the library."
   - "The reason for my call is to... request an appointment."

4. Mirror back key spoken phrases to show you are actively listening. Use various spoken feedback signals to indicate listening (silence may indicate that you are no longer on the line):
   - ok, yes, sure, good, right, hmmm, I see, I understand, etc.

5. Finish with a definite “Goodbye / bye” to leave no doubt about the end of the call.

Leaving voicemails:
Voicemails are used as a brief message to indicate the original purpose of your call. These messages often contain only essential information and are rarely more than 30 seconds. It is important that your voicemail include the following information:

1. Self-identification: “Hello, this is Mary Smith.”

2. Purpose: “I'm calling to schedule an appointment with your office.”

3. Request with number: “Would you please return my call at 412-123-4567.” (slowly)

4. Repeat name and number for clarity: “Again, that's 412-123-4567.”

5. Closing: “Thanks for your time / Talk to you soon / Thanks!”
Avoiding miscommunications:
- When you cannot understand a speaker (too quiet, too fast, etc.), ask precise questions so the speaker becomes aware of the issue.
- Since phone calls lack many communicative cues, direct questions or statements may sound abrupt or even impolite. Consider the following alternatives for specific issues:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abrupt</th>
<th>Alternative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I can’t hear you.</td>
<td><em>I’m having difficulty/trouble hearing you.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Could you please speak up?</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Could you please say that louder?</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>What did you say?</td>
<td><em>Sorry, could you please repeat that more slowly?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t understand.</td>
<td><em>Hmm, I’m not sure what you mean.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>What exactly is the question/problem?</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Could you please restate that?</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Do you mean [restate question/problem]?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you understand?</td>
<td><em>Was I clear?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Should I repeat that?</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Common phone errors:
- *The speaker spoke so fast! I didn’t catch her name!*
  ✓ Say your first and last name slowly, as this information is important for most requests or inquiries. Be sure to pause between your first and last name so both names are heard as two distinct words.

- *The speaker left a voicemail but didn’t say his name. Who is he?*
  ✓ State your first and last name at the beginning of the voicemail. Use a structure like, “Hello, my name is (first name) (last name).”

- *The speaker asked me in a voicemail to call her back, but she didn’t leave her number!*
  ✓ Do not assume that listeners can see your phone number on their phone screens (especially for office phones). Include your phone number with area code at the end of your message. Say the number twice so the listener has time to write it.

Talking tips:
- Be aware that speaking too quietly or too quickly can hide your information. Speak directly into the phone and consciously slow down to help the listener better hear you.
- Make phone calls in a quiet area with little background noise or interruptions. Do not carry on side conversations while speaking as this can seem rude.
- Dialed the wrong number? Say, “Sorry, wrong number!” and hang up the phone.
- Relax! Phone calls are unpredictable and rarely perfect. Frequently practice making calls and leaving voicemails to improve your fluency and comfort.