



**Lifespan** EDUCATION

# *Thoughtful Chat*

A Learning Guide for Navigating  
Challenging Online Text Conversations

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# 1. Who This Guide Is For

This guide is for learners who want to develop genuine skill over time in managing challenging text conversations. Whether you're a student navigating group project tensions over Discord, managing workplace conflicts in Slack, dealing with difficult WhatsApp exchanges, or handling any challenging conversation through written messages, this resource is designed to build your long-term capabilities.

When we say "**chat conversations**", we mean all forms of written back-and-forth communication: messaging apps (WhatsApp, Discord, iMessage), email exchanges, social media DMs, SMS, workplace chat platforms (Slack, Teams), and any other text-based conversation. The principles in this guide apply across all these formats.

## This guide IS: ✓

- 🔗 A learning framework to develop your judgment
- 🔗 A diagnostic tool to improve your thinking process
- 🔗 A foundation for building text communication skills that grow with you

## This guide is NOT: ✗

- 🔗 A quick-fix solution for immediate crises
- 🔗 A collection of copy-paste templates
- 🔗 A script bank for specific situations

This guide is specifically for **challenging** conversations, ie. those moments when something important is at stake, emotions are involved, or relationships could be affected. You don't need to **overthink** every friendly check-ins or chat over weekend plans. Those are not "challenging". Save this guide for situations where the stakes are high: conflicts, difficult feedback, boundary-setting, or any conversation where you find yourself hesitating before hitting send.



## 1.1 Why Text Conversations Need Different Skills

Most of us learned difficult conversations face-to-face, where we can read facial expressions, hear tone of voice, and get immediate feedback. But increasingly, our challenging conversations happen through text - chat messages, emails, direct messages (DMs). These conversations carry unique challenges:

- **Tone from words:** What feels neutral to you might read as harsh to others
- **Timing changes the meaning:** Delayed responses can be misinterpreted
- **There's a permanent record:** Messages can be screenshotted and shared
- **Context is missing:** Others can't see your facial expression or current situation; there are more strangers who don't know your background crossing your path
- **Misunderstandings compound:** Small miscommunications can spiral quickly after a handful of messages.

Most communication training focuses on face-to-face skills, leaving you to figure out the chat adaptation on your own. This guide teaches you to think systematically about text-based challenging conversations from the start.

## 1.2 How This Guide Works as a Learning Tool

This guide is designed to be a long-term learning guide. Although it does have some scripts to follow, it primarily builds your internal decision-making capacity. Instead of memorising what to say in specific situations, you'll learn to diagnose what's really happening in any challenging conversation and choose your response thoughtfully. The framework teaches you to pause, assess multiple factors (relationship dynamics, emotional states, timing, desired outcomes), and then craft messages that serve your real goals. With practice, this diagnostic thinking becomes automatic, giving you confidence to handle new and complex situations that no template could cover. The goal is to develop judgment and communication intuition that grows stronger over time, making you more effective across all the different chat platforms and relationships in your life.

**DO NOT TRY TO DIGEST ALL OF THE MATERIAL IN ONE SITTING!**



If material you encounter is new to you, take time to understand, implement, review and adapt what you learn. The good thing is that even if you learn something small from one section, it may bring immediate benefits to your relationships and conversations.

## 2. The Core Philosophy: Assess Before You Write

The quality of your message in a difficult situation depends entirely on the quality of your thinking beforehand. Before crafting any challenging chat message, run through these three assessment phases:

### 2.1 Situation

What's  
really  
happening  
here?

Look beyond the surface trigger. A friend's harsh response might actually be about their stress from exams, not your suggestion. A teammate's silence might be confusion, not disagreement. Try to see the full picture, including pressures and contexts you might not be aware of.

What don't  
I know that  
I'm  
assuming?

We fill gaps in information with assumptions, often negative ones. Are you assuming they ignored your message on purpose? That they understand the urgency? That they remember previous conversations? List what you're taking for granted and consider alternative explanations.

What are  
the facts  
versus my  
interpreta-  
- tions?

**Facts:** "They haven't responded in 3 days."

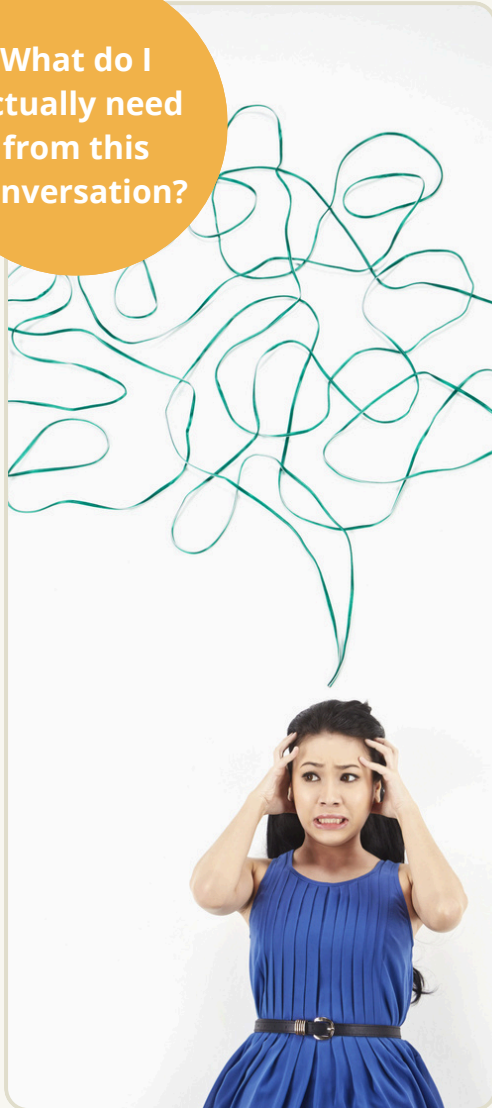
**Interpretation:** "They're avoiding me."

**Facts:** "They used short responses."

**Interpretation:** "They're angry."

Separate observable behaviours from the stories you're telling yourself about those behaviours.

What do I actually need from this conversation?



## 2.2 Outcomes

Get specific about your real goal. Do you need an apology, a behaviour change, information, a decision, or just to be heard? Many conversations fail because people aren't clear about what outcome they are after. "I want them to understand" is vague; "I want them to respond within 24 hours in our conversations" is actionable.

In many situations, we find people are unable to say what they need or want from a conversation, but they repeatedly engage in conversation. This suggests they have a more basic human need for connecting or exploring, which is a valid need itself. Being able to recognise these basic needs helps in working out what is useful to say.

What's my minimum viable outcome?



If you can't get everything you want, what would still make this worthwhile? This prevents all-or-nothing thinking. Maybe you can't get a full apology, but acknowledgment of impact would help. Maybe you can't change their communication style completely, but agreement on urgent-message protocols would work.

What am I NOT trying to achieve?



Be honest about unhelpful motivations. Are you trying to make them feel bad? Win an argument? Get them to admit you were right all along? Prove you're smarter?

Naming these hidden agendas and goals that cannot be fulfilled helps you set them aside and focus on productive goals.

## 2.2 Context

What's my relationship with this person?

A message to your best friend can be more direct than one to an acquaintance. Your boss requires different framing than a peer. Someone you're in conflict with needs more careful tone management than someone you trust. Consider the relationship's history, power dynamics, and current health.



What state are we both in right now?

Are you stressed, tired, or triggered? Are they likely dealing with deadlines, personal issues, or other pressures? High-stress states make people more defensive and less generous in their interpretations. Sometimes the kindest thing is to wait until both parties are in a better headspace.



Is text the right medium for this?

Some conversations are too complex, emotional, or nuanced for text. If you find yourself typing paragraphs to explain something simple, or if emotions are running high, consider a phone call or face-to-face meeting. Text works well for logistics and simple clarifications but can make complex emotional conversations worse.



Only after this diagnostic work do you craft your message. This prevents most text conversation disasters before they happen.



### 3. Factors that Influence Conversations

Here's a checklist of common factors that influences challenging conversations, organised into key areas. You don't need to consider every factor for every message, but scan through to catch what are important and what needs to be included in your thinking.



## 3.1 Checklist of Factors

### 3.1.1 Purpose & Outcomes

Primary outcome

What do I actually need by the end?

Minimum viable outcome

What's the smallest acceptable result?

Non-goals

What am I not trying to do (vent, win, assess)?

### 3.1.2 Relationship & Power

Trust level

How solid is our relationship right now?

Power dynamics

Who has authority here?

History

Any past conflicts or agreements?

Audience

Who else might see this message?

### 3.1.3 States & Context

My state

Am I calm and clear enough to write well?

Their likely state

What pressures might they be under?

Cultural context

Communication styles, language considerations

Timing

Is this urgent? What's their availability?

## 3.1.4 Facts & Evidence

**Knowns vs assumptions**

What can I verify versus what I'm guessing?

**Sources**

Can I cite specific examples, policies, or agreements?

**Ambiguity**

Where might we define terms differently?

## 3.1.5 Safety & Risk

**Privacy**

Does this belong in DMs rather than a group chat?

**Safety concerns**

Any harassment, threats, or escalation risks?

**Record-keeping**

Do I need documentation for compliance or protection?

**Reputation**

How would this look if forwarded or screenshotted?

## 3.1.6 Message Design

**Channel fit**

Is chat/text the best medium, or would a call be clearer?

**Temperature**

Do I need neutral, warm, or firm tone?

**Clarity**

Lead with the key point, keep it scannable

**Options**

Can I offer choices rather than demands?

## 4. Examples of assessing and writing messages



Here are three examples of common situations showing how different factors may change your message.

🔍 **Example 1:** Group Project Deadline Issue

**Situation:** Your teammate Sam hasn't submitted his part, and it is due tomorrow.

**Scenario A:**

High-trust relationship + calm states + urgent timing

**Assessment thinking:** Sam and I work well together usually, so this is probably just an oversight or he is struggling with something. I'm not stressed about it yet, just need to check in. The timing is urgent but there's still opportunity to problem-solve together.

**Message decisions:** Use casual, friendly tone ("Hey Sam!") to maintain the good relationship. Offer help because we trust each other. Include emoji to keep it light. Give them an out with "Plan B" because trust means assuming good intent. Ask for confirmation either way because I need to plan my evening.

**Message:** "Hey Sam! Just checking - are you able to get your section to me by 8pm tonight? If you're stuck on anything, I can help or we can figure out a Plan B. Just need to know either way so I can finalise everything 😊"

**Scenario B:**

Low-trust relationship + stressed states + urgent timing

**Assessment thinking:** Sam has been unreliable before, and I'm already stressed about this deadline. I can't assume good intent, and I need to protect myself from last-minute problems. This needs to be more formal and documented.

**Message decisions:** Use formal greeting ("Hi Sam") to maintain professional boundary. Be direct about the requirement instead of asking if they're "able to" - this is what needs to happen. Set an earlier check-in deadline (2pm) so I have time to react if there are problems. No emoji or casual language because this is business, not friendship. Use "Thanks" instead of friendly sign-off.

**Message:** "Hi Sam, I need your project section by 8pm today to meet tomorrow's deadline. If there are any problems, please let me know by 2pm so we can work out next steps. Thanks."

**Things to Note:**

The two scenarios have the same urgent situation, but relationship trust and your stress level completely change whether you approach this collaboratively and warmly or be protective and formal.

🔗 **Example 2: Addressing Inappropriate Comments**

**Situation:** Someone made a comment that bothered you in a group chat.

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**Scenario A: Public group chat + ongoing relationship + safety concerns**

**Assessment thinking:** This happened in front of others, so addressing it publicly might embarrass them and escalate things. I think they didn't mean harm, but I need to address it. Safety-wise, I don't feel threatened, just uncomfortable. I want to preserve the relationship while still being clear about the impact.

**Message decisions:** Move to private DM to avoid public embarrassment and allow for honest conversation. Use "was uncomfortable for me" instead of "was wrong" to focus on impact rather than judgment. Acknowledge good intent ("probably didn't mean it that way") to avoid defensiveness. Ask for conversation rather than demanding apology.

**Message (in DM):** "Hey, that comment about [topic] was uncomfortable for me. I know you probably didn't mean it that way - could we chat about it?"

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**Scenario B: Private chat + close friend + no safety issues**

**Assessment thinking:** This is just us, so I can be more direct. This friend usually isn't like this, so something else might be going on. I feel safe being vulnerable and asking what's happening. The comment was out of character, so I'm genuinely curious rather than just upset.

**Message decisions:** Use casual language ("Wow") to show I'm surprised rather than angry. Be direct about the impact ("felt pretty harsh") because close friends can handle directness. Ask about their state ("What's going on?") because I care about them. Reference that this behaviour is unusual ("That's not like you") to separate the comment from their character.

**Message:** "Wow, that comment felt pretty harsh. What's going on? That's not like you."

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### Scenario C: Public group chat + repeated behavior + safety concerns

**Assessment thinking:** This person has done this before, and direct conversation hasn't worked. Other people might be uncomfortable too but afraid to speak up. I need to think about the safety of the whole group, not just my comfort. This might need someone with authority to handle it.

**Message decisions:** Don't engage directly in the moment - that could escalate publicly. Document the behaviour (screenshot). Consider involving a moderator or group leader who has authority to set boundaries. If I do respond publicly, keep it brief and focused on group norms rather than personal conflict.

**Approach:** Inform the moderator. If responding publicly: "Let's keep comments respectful of everyone in the group."

#### Things to Note:

Public vs private setting, relationship closeness, and safety concerns determine whether you address directly, privately, briefly, or through others.

### Example 3: Asking Your Boss for Time Off

#### Scenario A:

Good relationship + non-urgent request + plenty of notice

**Assessment thinking:** My boss and I have a solid working relationship, so they trust my judgment. I'm asking with plenty of advance notice, which shows I respect their planning needs. This is for something important but not an emergency, so I can be flexible about how we handle it. I want to make their job easier by thinking through the logistics.

**Message decisions:** Be upfront about the challenge (busy period) to show I understand the context. Offer solutions proactively (deliver ahead of schedule, arranging coverage of duties) because good relationships are collaborative. Use "would that work?" instead of just stating what I need - this invites problem-solving together. Keep tone professional but warm.

**Message:** "Hi [Boss], I'd like to take Dec 15-18 off for a family event. I know it's during the project busy period, so I'm happy to get my deliverables done early or arrange coverage for my duties. Would that work?"

**Scenario B:**

Strained relationship + urgent personal need + short notice

Assessment thinking: Things have been tense with my boss lately, so I need to be more formal and thorough. This is an emergency, not a choice, so I need to communicate necessity while still being professional. Short notice means I need to show I'm handling the impact responsibly. I can't negotiate much on the timing, but I can control how I handle the work.

**Message decisions:** Lead with "family emergency" to establish this isn't optional. Be specific about coverage arrangements to show responsibility. Offer to stay connected remotely to demonstrate commitment despite the difficult relationship. Ask for a follow-up meeting to show transparency and planning.

**Message:** "Hi [Boss], I have a family emergency and need to take Dec 15-16 off. I've arranged for [colleague] to cover urgent items and will catch up on email remotely if needed. I can brief you on handover details this afternoon."

**Things to Note:**

Relationship quality, urgency level, and timing constraints change everything from your tone to how much you explain to whether you ask permission or inform about decisions.



## 5. Getting Better at Assessing a Situation

The assessment framework above is only as good as your ability to read what is actually happening. Here are strategies to improve your situational awareness:





## 5.1 Learn from Your Communication History

**Look for patterns in past conversations with the same person:** How do they usually respond when stressed? Do they prefer direct or gentle approaches? What tone works best with them? Your chat history is data - use it. If someone always responds better to your messages when you're warm and casual, that tells you something about what works.

**Review your own patterns:** Notice when your messages are received well versus when they create problems. Are you consistently too formal with friends? Too casual with authority figures? Do you assume the worst when people are slow to respond? Your recurring communication challenges point to areas where you need to adjust your skills.

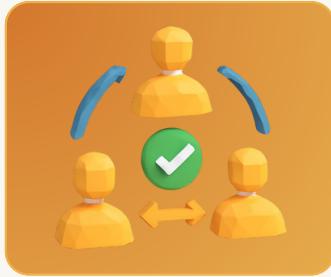


## 5.2 Use Check-ins

**When in doubt, ask directly:** "Is now a good time to talk about this?" or "How are you feeling about the project situation?" A simple check-in can prevent you from crafting a message based on wrong assumptions about their mood or availability.

**Get feedback on your drafts:** For high-stakes conversations, show your message to a trusted third person before sending. Ask: "How does this sound to you? What tone am I coming across with?" Fresh eyes catch things you miss, especially when you're emotionally involved.

**Follow up after difficult conversations:** "How did that message sound to you?" or "Did that conversation help us make progress?" This helps you learn what actually works versus what you think works, improving your judgment for next time.



## 5.3 Get Third Party Perspectives

**Ask mutual friends for context:** "How has Sam seemed lately?" or "Have you noticed anything going on with them?" Sometimes others have information you don't - they might be dealing with family stress, health issues, or work pressure that explains their communication style.

**Check if it's just you:** Are they responding differently to everyone, or is this behaviour specific to your interactions? If mutual friends report normal communication, the issue might be relational rather than circumstantial.

**Consider the group dynamic:** In workplace or group project situations, ask others if they've noticed communication patterns or tensions that might be affecting the situation.



## 5.4 Use the "Wait and See" Strategy

**Sleep on it:** Your assessment of a situation often changes overnight. What feels urgent or offensive at 10pm might seem manageable at 10am the next morning. Give yourself time to process before making assumptions about intent or tone.

**Wait for more information:** Sometimes the best response to a confusing or concerning message is to wait and see what happens next. People clarify themselves, situations resolve, or additional context emerges that changes everything.

**Let time reveal patterns:** One short response might be someone being busy. A week of short responses might be a pattern worth addressing. Don't diagnose based on single data points.

*The goal is to get better at seeing situations clearly rather than through the lens of your own stress, assumptions, or communication habits.*

## 6. Learning Cards

The following learning cards are designed as quick reference tools you can return to again and again. Think of them as your practical toolkit for building better chat habits:

### **The 10-Second Check Before Sending**

Before hitting send on any challenging message, quickly ask:

1. What's my one clear thing I am asking?
2. Is this protecting the relationship I want tomorrow?
3. Am I calm enough?
4. Did I separate facts from assumptions?
5. Would I stand by this if it is shared with others?

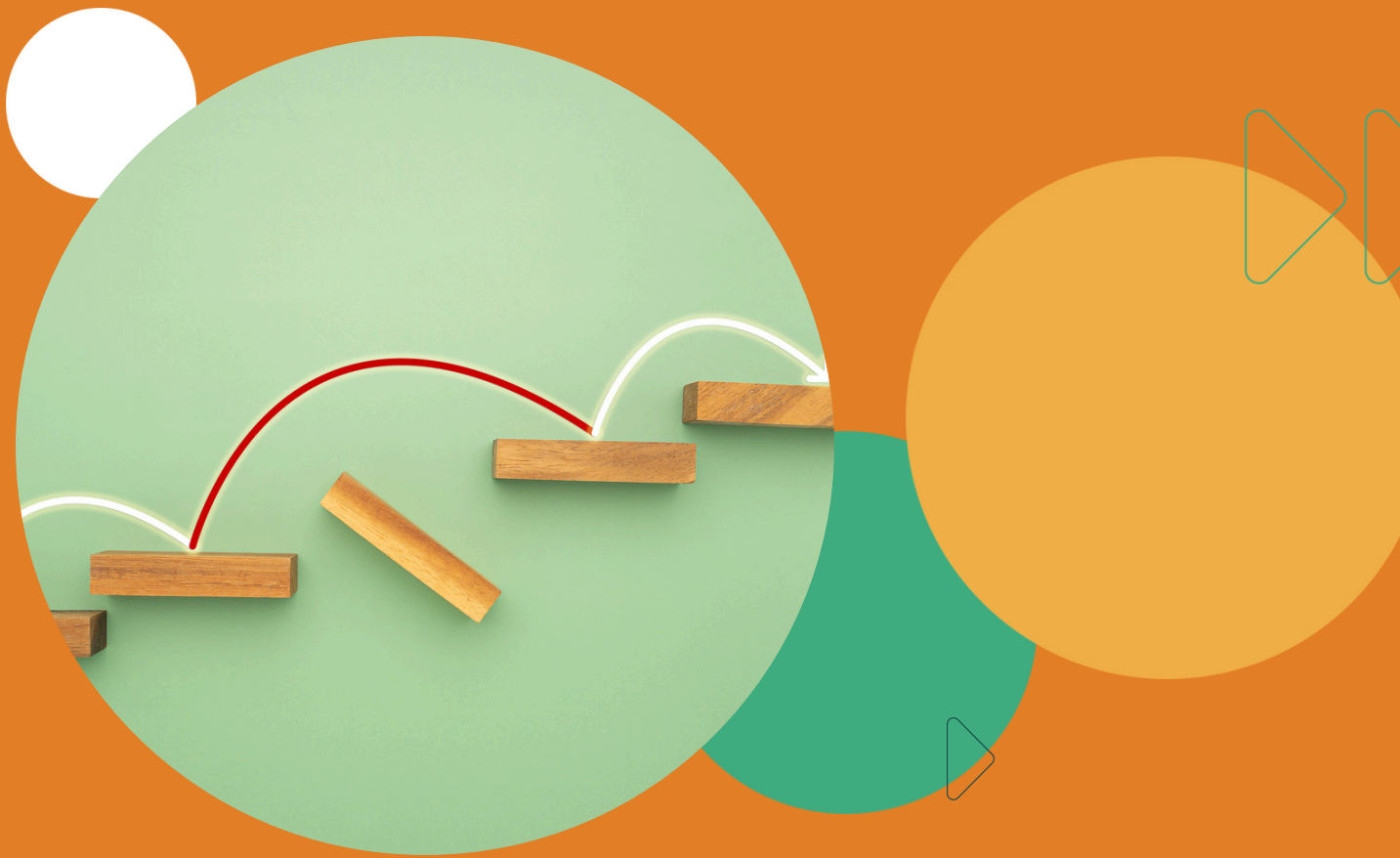
**Use the 10-Second Pre-Send Check** as your immediate safety net. When you're about to send a challenging message, run through these five questions quickly. This becomes your automatic pause button that prevents most chat disasters. Keep this card handy on your phone or computer - many people screenshot it for easy access.

### **Red Flag Awareness**

Stop and reconsider if you notice:

1. Writing when angry, tired, or stressed
2. Messages getting longer and more complex
3. Rehashing old grievances
4. Making assumptions about intent
5. Feeling like you need to "win"

**Use Red Flag Awareness as your warning system.** If you notice any of these five signs, it's time to step back before sending. Save your draft and come back later, or switch to a phone call instead. This card helps you recognize when you're not in the right headspace for a challenging conversation.



## 7. Categories of Challenging Conversations

The following are categories of typical conversations where the approach in this guide may help in.



# 7.1 Challenging Conversations

## 7.1.1 Boundaries & Limits

- Saying no without burning bridges
- Setting availability and response expectations
- Protecting privacy and personal space

## 7.1.2 Feedback & Change Requests

- Giving constructive feedback kindly but clearly
- Requesting behaviour changes
- Receiving criticism without defensiveness

## 7.1.3 Conflict & Repair

- De-escalating heated exchanges
- Apologizing and making amends
- Clarifying misunderstandings

## 7.1.4 Logistics & Coordination

- Negotiating expectations and timelines
- Following up without nagging
- Managing group dynamics

## 7.1.5 Safety & Boundaries

- Addressing harassment or inappropriate behavior
- Enforcing community standards
- Protecting vulnerable members

## 7.2 Learning to categorise conversations to identify approaches

Understanding these conversation categories accelerates your learning in key ways:

### Pattern Recognition

Different conversation types may require different approaches: boundaries require firmness; feedback needs specifics; conflict repair requires vulnerability. Recognising the category helps you adjust your tone and strategy quickly.

### Faster Assessment

Instead of assessing from scratch, the category gives you a head start. Safety conversations prioritise documentation over relationship warmth. Logistics conversations focus on clarity over emotional nuance.

### Targeted Practice

Focus your learning on conversation types you encounter most.

**Many conversations blend multiple types. These categories aren't rigid rules. They give you a strategic starting point for applying the assessments and responses effectively.**

## 8. When Chat Isn't the Right Choice

Sometimes the best chat strategy is not to use chat. Consider alternatives when:

- Emotions are running very high
- The issue is complex and nuanced
- Trust is already damaged
- You've tried text and it's not working
- Safety concerns exist

Here are common alternative channels besides text chat:

Voice call



Video chat



Face-to-face meeting



## 9. Complementary Resources

This guide applies diagnostic thinking to challenging text conversations. Comprehensive resources on this intersection of topics are surprisingly limited. Most existing materials either focus on face-to-face difficult conversations or provide text etiquette rules rather than frameworks for learning and building judgment.

The following resources complement different aspects of this guide:

### 9.1 Core Frameworks for Difficult Conversations

#### **Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High**

Joseph Grenny, Kerry Patterson, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler and Emily Gregory

<https://cruciallearning.com/books/crucial-conversations-book/>

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/1260474216>

A bestseller and business classic book on high-stakes dialogue that shares this guide's diagnostic approach to communication. While originally focused on face-to-face interactions, recent editions address digital communication challenges. Like this guide, it builds judgment and communication skills rather than providing scripts, teaching readers to assess situations and respond thoughtfully when emotions run high and relationships are at stake.

#### **Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most**

Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen (Harvard Negotiation Project)

<https://www.stoneandheen.com/difficult-conversations>

A best seller book on a research-based framework from the Harvard Negotiation Project that breaks down the three conversations underlying every difficult exchange: the "what happened" conversation, the feelings conversation, and the identity conversation. Complements this guide's assessment framework with deeper exploration of the emotional and psychological dynamics that make conversations challenging.



## 9.2 Specific Communication Methods

### **How to Write a BIFF Response**

By Bill Eddy, High Conflict Institute

<https://highconflictinstitute.com/high-conflict-strategies/how-to-write-a-biff-response/>

Practical technique specifically designed for email and text responses in high-conflict contexts. Particularly useful for dealing with chronically difficult people or situations requiring documented, professional communication.

### **Nonviolent Communication (NVC)**

The Center for Nonviolent Communication

<https://www.cnvc.org/learn/what-is-nvc>

<https://www.youtube.com/@cnvc>

Framework for expressing needs without blame, developed by Marshall Rosenberg. While broader than text communication, NVC's emphasis on separating observation from judgment and identifying underlying needs aligns well with this guide's assessment approach.

## 9.3 Community and Safety

### **Discord Moderator Academy**

Discord's official training program for community management

<https://discord.com/moderation>

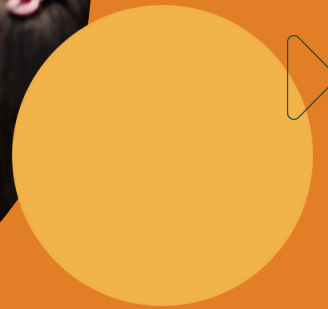
For those managing group chat dynamics and digital spaces. Addresses moderation, safety protocols, and community standards - a different but related aspect of challenging online interactions.

### **eSafety Commissioner (Australia)**

Australian government agency for online safety and digital literacy

<https://esafety.gov.au>

Essential resource for understanding safety issues, harassment response, and legal aspects of digital communication in Australian contexts.



## 10. Conclusion

**Remember: the goal isn't perfect messages, but thoughtful ones. Every challenging text conversation is an opportunity to practice clarity, empathy, and wisdom.**

*This guide grows through use. Share your insights, difficult cases, and improvements with the Lifespan Education team so we can all learn together.*



# About Lifespan Education

This guide was developed by **Lifespan Education**, an Australian social enterprise dedicated to helping young people live and learn with joy, integrity, and agency in a digital world. We foster communities, build partnerships, and cultivate ecosystems that make safety, trust, and human connection the heart of modern education. Our work includes podcasts, social media engagement projects, global student forums and community building, and educational frameworks that empower young people to navigate digital life thoughtfully.

We believe learning is a shared adventure in being human - one that transcends likes, links, and clicks.

## **Invitation to collaborate**

We are committed to developing resources with and for young people. If you are interested in collaborating on projects related to digital communication, online communities, or navigating challenging conversations, we would love to hear from you.

**Learn more and get in touch:** <https://lifespan.education>

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# Lifespan

## EDUCATION

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### **Use of AI Tools**

This guide is based on original ideas, communication frameworks and examples developed by the author. Large language models (ChatGPT v5 and Claude Sonnet 4.5) were used to support brainstorming, drafting, and editing. All AI-generated suggestions were reviewed, refined, or rewritten by the author before being included in the final text.