

The new phone call etiquette: Text first and never leave a voice mail

When is it okay to leave voice mails, call multiple times in a row or take a call in public?



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Phone calls have been around for 147 years, the iPhone 16 years and FaceTime [video voice mails](#) about a week.

Not surprisingly, how we make calls has changed drastically alongside advances in technology. Now people can have conversations in public on their [smartwatches](#), see voice mails transcribed in real time and dial internationally midday without stressing about the cost.

The phone norms also change quickly, causing some people to feel left behind or confused. The unwritten rules of chatting on the phone differ wildly between generations, leading to misunderstandings and frustration on all sides.

We spoke to an etiquette expert and people of all ages about their own phone pet peeves to come up with the following guidance to help everyone navigate phone calls in 2023.

These will vary depending on your relationship, your age and the context of the call. The closer you are to someone, the less the rules apply. Go ahead, FaceTime your mom with no warning while brushing your teeth.

Don't leave a voice mail

Voice mails are an artifact of the days before text messages. If you have information that needs to be communicated in an accurate, timely manner, you're far better off putting it into writing as a text or email. Most phones transcribe voice mails now, so chances are people aren't even listening to what you said but reading a (possibly incorrect) text version instead.

The exceptions for the no-voice-mail rule are calling people who would love to hear your voice no matter what you're saying, or sharing some kind of audio experience. Think besties and immediate family members singing happy birthday, a dispatch from friends at a Taylor Swift concert or a simple "I love you."

If you have a long juicy story you want to tell, consider sending it in a voice memo instead. It's the best medium for a monologue.

Text before calling

Calling someone without warning can feel stressful to the recipient. Instead, text them ahead of time to ask if they're free to talk now, if they can you call when they're free, or if they can pick a time they'd like to chat. If it's someone you call regularly, find out what their ideal times are, like after work or only on Sunday afternoons.

Wording and context are key for these pre-call texts. A simple "call me" text can feel urgent and make someone think there's an emergency. Clarify if it's urgent or just to catch-up. If it's about a specific topic, mention it in the text what it is you'd like to talk about so they can be prepared.

These steps are especially necessary for video calls. Catching someone on video at an unexpected time can be embarrassing for all involved. You should almost never start a FaceTime or other video call without warning.

Worried about texting etiquette? [We've got you covered there too.](#)

You don't need to answer the phone

The responsibility isn't only on the person dialing. Just because someone is calling you out of the blue does not mean you have to pick up. If you're in a restaurant, using the bathroom or in a meeting, mute the call and get back to them at a convenient time.

"We all have control of our phones and can decide if it's the right time to answer it," said Lizzie Post, etiquette expert and co-president at the Emily Post Institute. "If someone interrupts you and you're ticked off about it, guess whose fault that is? You're the one who answered the call when you shouldn't."

To be even more polite, send them a text. Smartphones will let you send an automated text response when you can't answer, which is handy if you want to tell them you can text but not talk or will get back to them soon. Consider adding a custom reply in settings or typing something fresh each time. The default texts can sometimes feel a little brusque.

Emotions are for voice, facts are for text

Many things don't need to be a phone call at all. When you're trying to decide on the best method of communication, consider what it is you want to say.

Anything requiring nuance like opinions or emotional matters are best done over the phone, including arguments, catching up or connecting on a personal level. Factual updates, coordinating plans or anything that is more cut and dried often work best in writing. If something is complicated and will drag on too long as a text chain, go ahead and ask if they can talk.

"Nobody has a good fight via text message," says Post. "I get that sometimes it feels better to fight via text because you're not actually confronting the person, but you get through it a lot faster on the phone."

Unless it's an emergency, please hold

If someone doesn't answer your call, do not hang up and immediately call them again. If they have not responded to your text about the call they missed, do not send them an email about it. If it *is* an emergency, clearly state that right away in a text message.

Use video voice mails judiciously

Voice mails are dead. Long live the video voice mail. Apple recently introduced a new feature in its iOS 17 update that lets you leave a video message when someone doesn't answer your FaceTime call. It's silly and fun and should be used that way, but keep in mind not everyone will find them delightful. Our own Shira Ovide is prepared to unfriend anyone who leaves her a FaceTime voice mail (FaceMail?).

Stay still for video calls

Video calls on FaceTime, Google Meet, Zoom or Skype should get your full attention. Prop your phone up someplace so that your full face fills the screen, not just your forehead and nose, and stay put until the call is over. When people, especially kids, move around during a video call, it can be disorienting for the person on the other end. If you want to wander around and do chores while talking, switch to a voice call.

Don't use speakerphone in public

While many people (myself included) love eavesdropping on strangers' gossip, it's generally considered bad form to use speakerphone in public. Whether it's a regular call, video call or smartwatch call, use headphones or save it for later. Headphones only solve half of the problem, however, as people still have to hear your side of the conversation. If you're in a crowded area, like an office or store, be aware of other people's personal space and your own volume.

Video calls in public are also a sensitive issue. There are strangers around you who did not consent to being on camera, and they might also see something they're not supposed to on your screen. Frame your shots accordingly.

Start screening calls again

Apple also added a new call screening feature in iOS 17 that will transcribe a voice mail in real time, meaning you can decide while they're talking to answer the phone. For anyone old enough to have owned an answering machine, this is a delightful throwback. Use this feature to avoid scam calls from unknown numbers instead of answering them all out of curiosity.

The feature is still new so we'll have to see how people feel about being ignored unless they have something worthwhile to say.

Don't stop talking on the phone

Phone calls aren't dead! While hopping on the phone may be less common or involve more planning than it used to, it's still a wonderful way to communicate. Talking to a person in real time can strengthen relationships, improve mental health and lessen loneliness.