

Our friendly helpline team is waiting  
to answer your call or email.

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Telephone 0808 808 0123  
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[www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk)

**ACTION ON**  
**HEARING**  
**LOSS**

## **Text communications**

**THE**  
**FACTS**

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# Text communications

This factsheet is part of our **Equipment** range. It is written for people with hearing loss who cannot, or prefer not to, use telephones. If you are hearing and need to call someone who uses a textphone, you may also find this factsheet useful. When we say 'people with hearing loss', we mean people with all levels of hearing loss, including people who are profoundly deaf.

Read this factsheet to find out:

- What text services can I use to communicate with people?
- What is the difference between conversational and message-based systems?
- What is a textphone?
- How do I use a textphone?
- How does Text Relay work?
- What if I need more help with my calls?
- I am thinking of buying a textphone. What should I look for?
- How do I connect my textphone to the telephone network?
- Where can I get a textphone?
- Can I use my computer to make textphone calls?
- Can I get textphone software for my mobile phone?
- What is instant messaging?
- What is the difference between instant messaging, textphones and TalkByText?
- Can I get help with paying for equipment?
- Where can I buy products that may help?
- Where can I get further information?

If you would like this factsheet on audio tape, in Braille or in large print, please contact our helpline – see front page for contact details.

## What text services can I use to communicate with people?

There are now many text-based services available on a range of devices. A lot of us use text to communicate – people who are hearing as well as people with hearing loss. Some text services are conversational, others are message systems. A conversational system is one where you have a direct conversation with someone. The most important text communications are:

- Textphones and real-time text software.
- Email and short message service (SMS) – also known as text messages.
- Instant messaging on the internet.

## What is the difference between conversational and message-based systems?

As the word implies, conversational messages are designed for holding instant conversations. The person with whom you are communicating is connected to you while you type and sees your text almost immediately. In contrast, a message-based system delivers a message to a device where it will wait for it to be read. It can take a while before the other person sees your message. Examples of message-based systems are email and the short message service (SMS) available on mobile phones (and sometimes on fixed-line telephones).

Some conversational and message services are available on the telephone network (such as, for example, textphones), whereas other services are internet based (such as instant messaging).

Textphones and real-time text software allow you to call (in text) a person who is hearing on his or her voice telephone through a text relay service.

### Main text communication systems

	<b>Textphone</b>	<b>Real-time text software</b>	<b>Instant messaging</b>	<b>Email</b>	<b>SMS</b>
<b>Type of service</b>	Conversational	Conversational	Conversational	Message service	Message service
<b>Used by</b>	Specialised - Mostly used by people with hearing loss	Specialised - Mostly used by people with hearing loss	Mainstream – used by some people, irrespective of hearing loss	Mainstream – used by many people irrespective of hearing loss	Mainstream – used by many people irrespective of hearing loss
<b>Available on?</b>	Fixed telephone network	Internet and some mobile phones	Internet and some mobile phones	Internet and many mobile phones	Mobile and fixed telephone network
<b>Can be used to call a voice phone?</b>	Yes, via a text relay	Yes, via a text relay	No	No	No, but some networks allow SMS messages to be delivered as a voice message

As you can see from the table, the choice of service depends on who you want to communicate with and what type of conversation you want. Message systems (such as email or SMS) are not well-suited to holding conversations. For instance, if you want to agree where to meet someone, at what time, how you will travel and what you will do, you might need to exchange half a dozen messages over the period of half an hour. For such communications, a conversational service such as a textphone or real-time text software is a better choice.

## What is a textphone?

A textphone is a telephone device that has a keyboard and a display screen. It is used to communicate using text in real-time (conversational). You type what you want to say rather than speaking into a mouthpiece. You can use a textphone instead of a voice telephone if you have hearing loss or if you have problems with speech. Textphones connect to the telephone network.

In the UK, companies often use the word 'Minicom' rather than textphone. In fact, Minicom is a widely used brand of textphone.

## How do I use a textphone?

Using a textphone to make a text call is easy:

- Dial the number of the person you want to call with or without the Text Relay prefix (see page 5).
- Once the other person has answered, anything they type will appear on your screen and anything you type will appear on theirs.
- It is important to take turns, otherwise the text will get jumbled up and be unreadable. Use GA (go ahead) to tell the other person it is their turn.
- When the call has finished, hang up.

## Textphone abbreviations

People use abbreviations when making a textphone call so it is useful to learn them:

- |          |  |
|----------|--|
| GA       | 'Go ahead' – this is used after the end of each piece of conversation. It tells the other person that you have finished and that it is their turn to type a reply. |
| BIBI     | 'Bye bye' – this is usually followed by SK.  |
| SK       | 'Stop keying' – this tells the other person that it is the end of your conversation and you want to end the call.  |
| GA or SK | 'Go ahead or stop keying' – allows the other person to choose whether to end the call or carry on.   |

If you're using a textphone to call a voicephone user, you will not be able to connect to them directly, so you will need to use Text Relay.

## How does Text Relay work?

If you have a textphone and want to contact someone with a telephone, just dial the Text Relay prefix before dialling the full national, international or mobile number you are calling. Then a person called a Relay Assistant will join the call to relay text-to-voice and voice-to-text in the conversation. Use the following codes:

- Textphone users calling voicephones or textphones – dial **18001**
- Voicephone users calling textphones or voicephones – dial **18002**
- If you need emergency services – police, fire, ambulance, coastguard or mountain rescue – dial **18000** and you will be connected directly. 18000 is the textphone equivalent of the 999 emergency number.

### **EmergencySMS**

If you cannot make voice calls, you can contact the 999 emergency services by SMS text from your mobile phone using the EmergencySMS service which has been designed specifically for people with hearing loss or speech difficulties. For more information, go to [www.emergencysms.org.uk](http://www.emergencysms.org.uk) or contact our helpline.

The Text Relay prefix does more than just tell the telephone network you want to use Text Relay. There are different types of textphones available and they can be set up in many different ways. The Text Relay service bridges between these different types of textphones and different settings, so that you can communicate without having to worry about what textphone the other party is using or what settings it has. Text Relay will also show you the progress of your call (such as 'ringing' or 'busy') in text on your textphone screen. So it is always a good idea to use one of the Text Relay prefixes.

If you want to use Text Relay but do not want to use a Relay Assistant even if a voicephone answers, you can do this as well. Just dial **180015** before the phone number if you want a textphone to textphone call only.

You cannot use Text Relay prefixes to call a UK textphone from abroad. Instead, hearing callers dial the international number +44 151 494 2022 to reach a Text Relay operator who will ask which number you are trying to reach and then connect you.

### **Discounted calls with Text Relay**

If you are a BT customer you automatically get a discount for the **text part** of your Text Relay calls for most destination numbers, whether these calls use a Relay Assistant or go from textphone to textphone. This is because textphone calls take much longer than voice calls.

If you call a mobile number from a BT landline through Text Relay you also get a discount on those calls. Text Relay calls are itemised on your BT telephone bill.

You don't get a discount for the voice part of calls, international or premium rate calls, or on rental or equipment charges.

## **Text Relay and other telephone companies**

All standard analogue telephony companies have a legal requirement to provide access to a text relay service. However, this legal requirement doesn't apply to voice or text calls connected over the internet, provided by companies such as Skype, and often called voice-over-IP (or VoIP) services.

Call Text Relay's helpline for free advice about using the service (see page 10).

## **Can I access automated call options?**

Many companies have automated call options that give the caller a list of numbers to press to get to the right department. This service can be difficult for Text Relay users to access because the recorded messages don't give the Text Relay Assistant enough time to type what is being said. Also, the messages don't leave enough time for the textphone user to make their choice.

If you experience this problem, try Relay Assist or call the Text Relay Customer Service Team (see below). They can contact the company to tell them that their services aren't accessible to textphone users.

## **What if I have problems reading messages?**

If your textphone settings do not match the settings of the other textphone then you may get problems such as not seeing the other person's text, the other person not seeing your text or characters being displayed twice (so, 'hello' becomes 'hheellllloo').

If you have problems like these, then first make sure you use a Text Relay prefix when dialling and that people ringing you also use the Text Relay prefix when calling you. If you still have difficulties you can contact the Text Relay helpline.

## **What if I need more help with my calls?**

You can call Relay Assist. A Relay Assistant will answer and can help you to make your calls. There are two ways to get help:

- If you are deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind or have speech problems, and you use a textphone, dial **0870 240 9598**.
- If you are hearing and use a telephone, dial **0870 240 5152**.

Once a Relay Assistant answers your call:

- They will ask you who you would like to call and their telephone number. You can either type or speak to the operator. You can also give the operator additional information about the call.
- The operator will dial the number you want and will tell you if the number is engaged or unavailable.

- If your call is connected, the operator will confirm you are speaking to the person you have asked for and you can continue your conversation.
- At the end of the call, the operator will end the call.

Calls using Relay Assist are **charged at BT's national rate**. Relay Assist is available to customers of other telecommunications companies and should be charged at the BT national rate, but confirm this before using Relay Assist. You don't get a discount on calls made using Relay Assist.

## I am thinking of buying a textphone. What should I look for?

Check that you are happy with the screen and keyboard. These are the two parts you will use most so they need to be easy and comfortable to use. Make sure the screen size and text size are large enough for you. If you are likely to use the textphone in poor light conditions make sure it lights up (either an LED screen or backlit screen). Other features that may be available are listed below.

### **Answering facility**

Many textphones have a built-in answering facility that records text messages when you aren't there.

### **Automatic Text Relay prefix dial**

Some textphones can be set to dial 18001 automatically so you don't have to do it yourself.

### **Message storage**

Some textphones can store messages, so if you regularly send the same message, you don't have to type it in each time. If you have a long message to send during a call, you can also type this into the textphone before the call and use it later.

### **Number storage**

Some textphones let you store frequently-used names and telephone numbers.

### **Printing**

Some textphones have a socket to connect to a printer so you can print copies of your conversations. Some even have a built-in printer.

### **Voice announcer**

A voice announcer is a pre-recorded or computer-generated spoken message, which tells a hearing caller they need to use a textphone.

### **Voice carry over (VCO)**

VCO allows you to use your voice in a call but receive the answers in text (see below for details). There is a phone designed for VCO called ScreenPhone but some textphones support VCO as well. VCO allows you to speak in calls but uses Text Relay to convert the other person's speech into text.

## How do I connect my textphone to the telephone network?

There are two main types of textphone: acoustically coupled textphones and direct connection textphones.

### **Acoustically coupled textphones**

These have a 'cradle' in which you place a voice phone handset. They then convert the text into sounds which are sent through the voice phone. Sometimes the handset will not fit in the cradle well and they can be badly affected by background noise. Acoustically coupled textphones may work with digital phone systems but this is still not ideal.

### **Direct connection textphones**

These will plug directly into a wall phone socket like a voicephone. These textphones are not affected by background noise. These require an analogue phone line as found in most homes. If your workplace has a digital telephone system, you can ask for an analogue extension so that you can directly plug-in your textphone for the best results.

## Where can I get a textphone?

We sell a range of textphones and there are many other suppliers (see page 10). People who are deaf do not normally have to pay VAT when buying a textphone. However, this is not automatic. You will have to fill in a VAT exemption form first, which you should be able to get from the textphone supplier.

You may be able to get help with the cost of a textphone for work or home use (see page 10).

## Can I use my computer to make textphone calls?

Yes. We have developed real-time text software that allows you to use your computer as a textphone. It's called TalkByText. It's also available to use on mobile phones.

### **TalkByText Business Edition**

TalkByText Business Edition is a business software program that provides incoming and outgoing textphone access on Microsoft Windows computers. It is useful for organisations that want to be fully accessible to customers and staff with hearing loss.

TalkByText Business Edition can be installed on Windows 2000 and later (including XP and Vista). If you have a computer that does not run Windows, see TalkByText Web edition.

### **TalkByText Home Edition**

TalkByText Home Edition is Windows software designed for a home user. It is very easy to use and just requires a Windows computer and a broadband internet connection.

## TalkByText Web Edition

TalkByText Web Edition offers real-time text calls over the internet. It provides a simple way for you to have text conversations from a computer. You do not need to install extra programs to use TalkByText Web Edition; you just use it from your internet browser (for example, Internet Explorer or Firefox). Calls are routed through Text Relay, so you can hold a text conversation with a person who is deaf using a textphone or a person who is hearing using a telephone.

As you type, the other person sees each character on their screen almost immediately (just like an ordinary textphone), so there are no long delays and it is easy to interrupt if you want.

You can use TalkByText Web Edition almost anywhere with internet access. So you could make real-time text conversations when away from your own computer; for instance, in an internet café.

## Can I get textphone software for my mobile phone?

You may already use your mobile phone to send and receive SMS messages and/ or emails. But if you want to have a text conversation (rather than send messages), TalkByText Web Edition allows you to do this from your mobile. Your mobile phone needs to have an internet browser that runs Javascript – you may need to check the phone's handbook.

## What is instant messaging?

Instant messaging (IM) software allows you to use your computer or mobile to hold text conversations with other people over the internet. Most such systems allow you to have conversations with more than one person at a time. Some let you chat by voice or webcam as well as by text. If so, you can readily switch between voice, text and video pictures - a feature which many people with hearing loss find particularly useful. Instant messaging is used by many people who are hearing too. However, you cannot use instant messaging to call a voice telephone using Text Relay.

## What is the difference between instant messaging, textphones and TalkByText?

When holding a text conversation, a person usually types one or two phrases or sentences at a time. In most IM systems, those words will not actually be sent until the 'return' or 'enter' key is pressed. Then they will all appear at once on the other person's screen. However, when using a textphone or TalkByText, each letter is sent as you type it. The other person sees your typing letter by letter and they can be confident that you are still there. This is rather similar to the way traditional textphones work on the telephone network. In fact, TalkByText can also be used to communicate with traditional textphones and services such as Text Relay. With TalkByText, you can make text calls to voice telephones using Text Relay. That is not possible with instant messaging.

## Can I get help with paying for equipment?

You may be able to get help to pay for equipment. Contact our helpline for more information about the following:

- The Access to Work scheme may help to pay for equipment you need at work or for interviews.
- The Equality Act 2010 may require service providers, such as hospitals and GP surgeries, to provide equipment. See our factsheet **The Equality Act 2010 – a guide for service users**.
- Social services may help to pay for or provide equipment. For more information, contact your social worker or your local social services department. Read our factsheet **Social services for adults who are deaf**.

## Where can I buy products that may help?

We sell a range of equipment for people with hearing loss and tinnitus. Visit our online shop or you can request a copy of the *Solutions* catalogue by contacting us directly.

1 Haddonbrook Business Centre, Orton Southgate, Peterborough PE2 6YX

Telephone 01733 361199

Textphone 01733 238020

Fax 01733 361161

[solutions@hearingloss.org.uk](mailto:solutions@hearingloss.org.uk)

[www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/shop](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/shop)

### Ricability

Charity providing independent information to disabled and older consumers.

Unit G03, The Wenlock Business Centre, 50-52 Wharf Road, London N1 7EU

Telephone 020 7427 2460

Textphone: 020 7427 2469

Fax: 020 7427 2468

[mail@ricability.org.uk](mailto:mail@ricability.org.uk)

[www.ricability.org.uk](http://www.ricability.org.uk)

### Direct link to textphone suppliers:

[www.ricability.org.uk/consumer\\_reports/at\\_home/buying\\_a\\_textphone/suppliers/](http://www.ricability.org.uk/consumer_reports/at_home/buying_a_textphone/suppliers/)

## Where can I get further information?

### Text Relay Customer Service Team

PO Box 284, Liverpool L69 3UZ

Helpline 0800 7311 888

Textphone 0800 500 888

[helpline@textrelay.org](mailto:helpline@textrelay.org)

[www.textrelay.org](http://www.textrelay.org)

### Further information from Action on Hearing Loss

If you want to find out more about some of the subjects covered in this factsheet, you may find our factsheets **Telephones** and **voice communications** and **Mobile phones** useful. You may also want to look at our leaflet **Products to make life easier**. Contact our helpline for a wide range of information on many aspects of hearing loss – see the cover page for details.

## Action on Hearing Loss Information, July 2009

The Royal National Institute for Deaf People. Registered Office: 19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL.

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