

Are you communicating the right way?

# THE FIRST MINUTE



**HOW TO START CONVERSATIONS  
THAT GET RESULTS**

**CHRIS FENNING**

**THE FIRST MINUTE**  
**HOW TO START CONVERSATIONS**  
**THAT GET RESULTS**  
CHRIS FENNING

Copyright © 2020 by Chris Fenning

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without written permission of the copyright owner except for the use of quotations in a book review.

For more information, address: [chris@chrisfenning.com](mailto:chris@chrisfenning.com)

The First Minute

How to Start Conversations That Get Results

By Chris Fenning

Book cover by Marko Polic

Published by: Alignment Group

20-22 Wenlock Road

London

N1 7GU

First paperback edition November 2020

ISBN 978-1-8382440-0-2 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-8382440-1-9 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-8382440-2-6 (ebook)

ISBN 978-1-8382440-3-3 (audiobook)

[www.chrisfenning.com](http://www.chrisfenning.com)

# **CONTENTS**

[CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS THE FIRST MINUTE?](#)

[CHAPTER 2: FRAMING](#)

[CHAPTER 3: STRUCTURED SUMMARIES](#)

[CHAPTER 4: TIME CHECK & VALIDATION CHECKPOINT](#)

[CHAPTER 5: APPLYING THE TECHNIQUES IN  
DIFFERENT SITUATIONS](#)

[CONCLUSION](#)

[RESOURCES & REFERENCES](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

# INTRODUCTION

This book is a step-by-step guide for starting clear, concise communication in everyday work situations. This includes the conversations and emails with your teams, peers, and managers that account for over 80 percent of your communication at work.

The techniques described in this book are based on the following core principles.

- You must prepare your audience to receive your message before you deliver it.
- People are busy, so you need to get to the point quickly.
- The most effective work conversations focus on actions and solutions, not on problems.

There is some crossover into social communication, but the focus of this book is communication at work.

\*\*\*

We communicate with dozens and sometimes hundreds of people every day at work. Every conversation relates to a different task or topic, and they all have different goals and outcomes. Each time we start a conversation, we know what we are going to talk about and why it's important. Unfortunately, the people we speak to don't know either of these things.

When we start communicating, our audience's brains must work to understand the context of the words. They try to work out why we are talking to them and what they need to do with the information. If these things aren't clear in the first few sentences, their minds create their own version of the facts. This leads to many problems, from wasted time to incorrect assumptions and high-cost mistakes.

A study by Siemens Enterprise Communications found that a business with one hundred employees spends an average of seventeen hours a week clarifying communications.<sup>1</sup> That is 884 hours a year that could be spent delivering value to customers instead of repeating information to make sure it's understood. To avoid this repetition, every conversation should start

clearly and concisely. This is true whether you are communicating about printer paper or the launch of a million-dollar advertising campaign.

Each conversation can be set up for success if the context, intent, and message are clear. Even the most complex topics can be started simply and clearly if they are summarized using the right structure. It is also possible to achieve all this in less than a minute by applying the techniques in this book.

By focusing on the first minute, you can position every work conversation for success. Do this, and you will be recognized as a great professional communicator.

The techniques in this book show how to give the information your audience actually needs. The first minute is not about trying to condense all the information into sixty seconds. It is about having clear intent, talking about one topic at a time, and focusing on solutions instead of dwelling on problems.

Creating the most effective first minute of any work conversation is a two-step process.

- **Step 1:** Frame the conversation in fifteen seconds or less. Framing provides context, makes your intentions clear, and gives a clear headline.
- **Step 2:** Create a structured summary of the entire message you need to deliver. State the goal and define the problem that stands between you and achieving that goal. Then focus the conversation on the solution.

By following these steps, you can start any work conversation feeling confident that you are communicating clearly. This is all possible in less than a minute, no matter how complex the topic.

Throughout this book you'll discover how to:

- Have shorter, better work conversations and meetings
- Get to the point faster without rambling or going off on tangents
- Reduce the risk of mistakes caused by people incorrectly assuming they understand your message
- Lead your audience toward the solution you need
- Apply one technique to almost every conversation with great results

It doesn't matter what your job title is or what level you occupy in the organization; the principles in this book will help you become a clearer, more concise, and effective communicator, and you'll be able to do it fast.

I am going to start by addressing the most common causes of miscommunication at work.

- Lack of context
- Unclear purpose
- Not getting to the point
- Mixing up multiple topics in the same conversation
- Lengthy, unclear summaries

You'll learn how to avoid these pitfalls and how to summarize your entire message in less than a minute. The result will be a summary that makes it clear what you are trying to achieve and what you would like your audience to do. You'll see how this technique works in different situations, industries, and job types.

You will also learn about the three components of framing—context, intent, and key message—and how these provide the foundation for a successful conversation.

Finally, you'll discover the three components required of a structured summary: 1) the goal you are trying to achieve, 2) the problem stopping you from reaching that goal, and 3) the solution to the problem. These three things will enable you to summarize any topic, no matter how complex.

The last section of this book shows how to apply these techniques in a wide variety of situations.

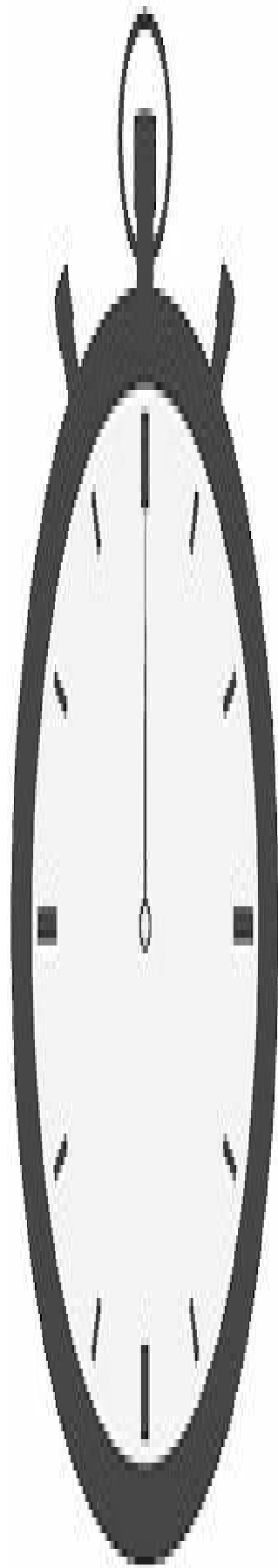
Along the way you'll meet managers, software developers, secretaries, and executives; witness the frustrations of missing out on dessert; ride the conversation rollercoaster; learn a valuable lesson in communication from a car mechanic; and even learn why it costs so much to put people into space.

This book is a result of more than 20,000 conversations in both business and technical jobs. I've trained individuals and teams around the world in these techniques. I've worked with organizations from start-ups to Fortune 50 and FTSE 100 companies. These methods work for them all.

Apply these techniques, and you will have shorter, clearer conversations that get results. It is easier than you might expect, and it all starts with the first minute.

# CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS THE FIRST MINUTE?





The first minute starts when you start talking about the work topic.

In the context of this book, the first minute is not always the start of the interaction with your audience. It does not include the greeting or the time spent on personal engagement. Throughout this book, the first minute refers to the start of the work conversation. The clock starts when you shift from personal to professional topics.

Many books describe how to start conversations that establish and build relationships. Others show you how to make a great first impression in an interview or on a date. Still more show you how to start challenging conversations the right way. What none of those books teach is how to start conversations about normal, everyday work topics.

It is possible to make a great first impression with a colleague, only to ruin that impression when the conversation shifts to work. It doesn't matter how much people like you; if you cannot deliver information in an organized way, you will have a hard time being respected professionally.

## **WHY IS THE FIRST MINUTE IMPORTANT?**

The way we communicate at work influences how people think about us. It can impact the opportunities we get or don't get, and the consequences can be significant. Poor communication skills are one of the top reasons why people don't get promoted.<sup>2</sup> This is especially true for people applying for leadership positions.

We spend over eight hours at work every weekday. Over 50 percent of that time is spent communicating either verbally or through writing.<sup>3</sup> That is a lot of time. All those interactions leave either a good or a bad impression about our ability to communicate.

### **How would you rate your communication skills? Do you leave a good impression, or is there room for improvement?**

If you are reading this and thinking it's too late for you—you've already made a bad first impression, and there's no point trying to fix it—don't despair! You may have had some less than ideal conversations at work, but you can turn it around and become a role model for clear communication.

Research shows that poor first impressions can be reversed by a consistent strong performance. It takes eight good impressions to overturn a bad one.<sup>4</sup> That may sound like a lot, but we have so many interactions at work that it doesn't take long to have eight conversations with someone. For example, if you have one conversation every day with a colleague, you can go from being

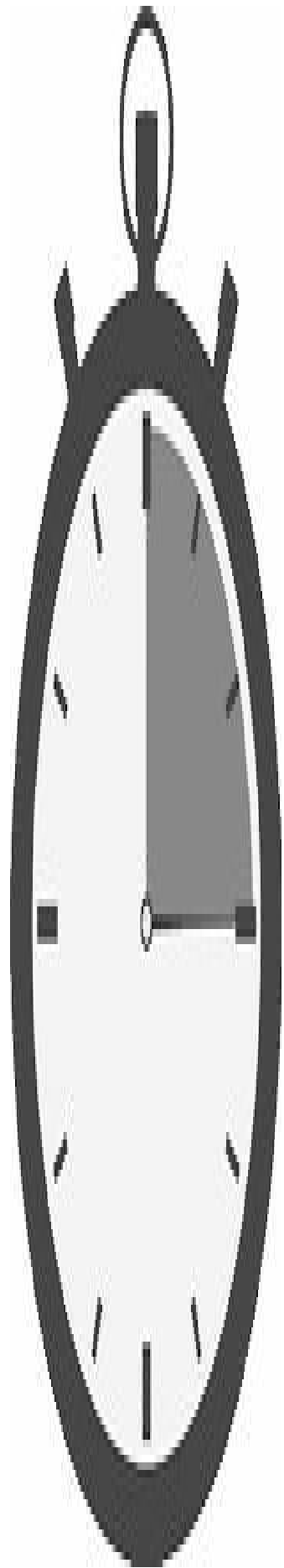
regarded as a poor communicator to being seen as a great one in less than two weeks. When you factor in emails and meetings, the number of times you communicate with someone each day goes up, and the turnaround time is even shorter.

What would you give to go from being seen as a poor or average communicator to being seen as a great communicator in just eight conversations?

Plus, while you may have some work to do to change the impressions of the people you work with, there are many more chances to give first impressions when you meet and work with new people in other teams and in new companies as your career progresses.

In the coming chapters, you'll learn how to create a great first minute no matter what you want to talk about at work. When you apply this to all your work conversations, it will become a natural part of how you convey information, make requests, and engage in all other types of daily work communication.

# CHAPTER 2: FRAMING



Framing happens in the first  
fifteen seconds of a conversation.

*“Framing helps individuals interpret data.” – Erving Goffman*

The problem with starting conversations about work topics is that we are never taught how to do it. Most professionals have fourteen to eighteen years of schooling and yet don't get a single lesson on how to start conversations about work topics. No wonder we have so many ineffective conversations at work.

Just over a decade ago, I was a software project manager for a telecom company overseeing the delivery of software on new mobile phones to be sold across Europe. We had at least eight complex projects running at any one time, most of them involving hundreds of people in many countries.

Like many large projects, we had our share of communication issues, but it wasn't the occasional breakdown in communication that caused us problems. Our teams seemed to struggle with day-to-day communications. Everyone on the projects said the problem was language barriers and cultural differences that come with working across a continent. But the more I observed the teams, the more I realized something else was causing the frustration.

The issue became real for me one day when I was walking to lunch. Steve, a member of my testing team, stopped me just outside the cafeteria. He started talking about an issue with a test case on one of his projects. After a few minutes, I interrupted him. “I'm sorry,” I said. “What project is this for?”

“Oh, this is for the LT-10 program.” Then he carried on talking about the issue.

Having found out the project name, some of the information he gave made more sense. The LT-10 project was a high-profile product launch due in the next few weeks. He had my attention now, and I refocused on his explanation.

A few more minutes passed, and it still wasn't clear what the issue was or why I needed to know about it.

A large group of people walked past us and joined the lunch line, which now extended into the corridor. With a growling stomach and an image of an empty dessert counter, I waited for Steve to finish his current thought. “I heard a lot of interesting things there,” I said. “Is there something specific I can help with?”

Steve looked confused. “Oh,” he said, “I thought you might want to know we'll miss the testing deadline. I need your approval to move the go-live date

out a month.”

This revelation changed the nature of the interaction significantly. This was a big deal. The manufacturer had millions of dollars of TV advertising spend locked in for the end of the month. There was no way we could miss the deadline.

The images of dessert fled, and I asked Steve to start again from the beginning. This time the details he shared made more sense. I was able to ask clarifying questions to help me decide the best course of action.

The situation highlighted a key issue in the way our teams communicated. If it took almost ten minutes to say we had a major issue on a flagship program, we had a communication problem. And it was a bigger problem than “cultural differences” could cause.

**Question:** Have you ever been on the receiving end of a conversation like the one I had with Steve?

If you answered no, you probably work with people who know how to get the first minute right when they communicate. If you answered yes, consider the following questions:

- Does it happen often?
- Did the eventual revelation of what was needed change the way you reacted to the information?
- Was it an efficient use of time for you and the other person or people involved?

Here’s a harder question for you: Have you ever started conversations like the one in the example?

In my live training sessions, this is the point when the audience falls silent. Eventually, I see some reluctant nods as people realize they often start their conversations this way.

Confession time: I have started conversations like the one in the example. In fact, I used to start most of my conversations this way. I was so focused on the topic I wanted to talk about, I forgot that other people didn’t have the same information as me. This meant I started many conversations in an unstructured and unclear way.

A few weeks after the lunchtime corridor conversation, the incident was still in my head. I wanted to know what we could do to be clearer and get to the point faster when sharing information at work. I started studying the

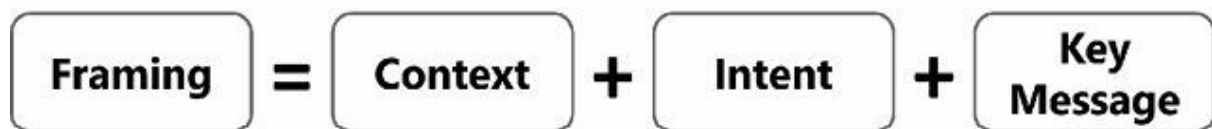
conversations in my teams and began to notice common themes. It became clear that many work conversations started with the following issues.

1. Failing to provide context for the message. This happens when the audience doesn't know what the topic is about.
2. Not having a clear purpose for the message. This happens when the audience doesn't know why they are receiving the information.
3. Not getting to the point fast enough. The speaker shares a lot of information and takes too long to get to the critical part of his or her message.
4. Mixing up two or more topics in the same conversation. The speaker has two or more topics to discuss, but it isn't clear what they are.

Each of these mistakes can be avoided by starting the conversation with three short statements. These statements are required for every work conversation to start with clarity.

- **Context:** This is the topic you want to talk about. Of all the topics in the world, this is the one you will talk about now.
- **Intent:** What you want the audience to do with the information you are about to share.
- **Key message:** The most important part of the overall message you are about to deliver (the headline).

These elements remain the same no matter what the topic is, who is talking, and who is listening. When used together in the right order, these three elements frame your message.



Framing is the simplest way to prepare an audience to receive your message before you go into detail. It lets the audience know what is expected of them right from the start. Clear framing ensures they understand the core of the message within a few sentences.

Framing should take no more than three sentences and be delivered in less



than fifteen seconds.

In the example above, if Steve had started his conversation with me with framing, we would not have needed to repeat the first ten minutes.

There are lots of ways to frame a topic. Here are a couple of examples.

“Hi, we’re working on the testing for the LT-10 project. I need your help because we have a testing issue and are going to miss the deadline.”

“We’re testing the LT-10; you should know we’re going to be late.”

Both of these examples provide context by naming the project. The first example clarifies the intent by stating the need for help. The second example has the intent of delivering news. Both deliver the key message about a missed deadline, though the second example is more efficient.

These may seem abrupt, but the point isn’t to convey your entire message in fifteen seconds. The point is to let your audience know what you are going to talk about, so they aren’t guessing for the first few minutes of the conversation. If the first lines of your message provide context, intent, and a key message, you will have clearer conversations every time.

## >> ACTIVITY <<

How well do you start your work communication? Grab the last important email you sent. The longer the email is, the better it will work for this activity. While much of this book describes how to start conversations, the principles are the same for written forms of communication as well. Our memories are not as reliable as we think, and using an email for this activity will help you see exactly what you wrote.

Did you provide context, show clear intent, and deliver a key message up front?

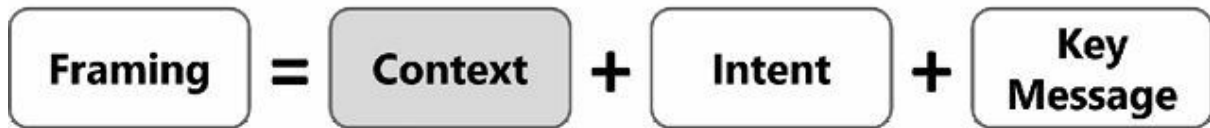
If you didn’t tick all the boxes, don’t worry. In the next sections, you will learn about the three core components of framing and how to apply them correctly. In the process, you’ll see how easy it is to make a simple yet powerful change to the way you start your conversations.

## CONTEXT

*“Without context, a piece of information is just a dot.*

*It floats in your brain with a lot of other dots and doesn’t mean a thing.”*

*– Michael Ventura*



When you start talking or writing an email, you already know the context of the topic. It's in your head, and you've probably been thinking about it for a while. Unfortunately, your audience doesn't have the benefit of that knowledge. They might have no idea what project you are talking about or what problem you want to discuss. They almost certainly have other things on their minds, such as other work, budget issues, what to have for lunch, a problem at home, and so on. Whatever they are thinking about, it is unlikely to be the thing you want to talk about.

Before you start talking about the details of your message, you need to provide some context. You need to orient your audience, so you are starting at the same point.

This is easy to do if you start your message with a simple context-based statement.

- Name the project or the issue.
- Name the process, system, or tool you will talk about.
- Give the name of the customer with whom you are working.
- Name the task or objective you want to talk about.

The options are endless. The key is to give the context quickly, so your audience knows the topic or area you are going to talk about.

Without context, the audience is not on the same page as you. They will be distracted trying to work out what the topic of the discussion is. Starting a conversation with clear context focuses your audience on the topic you want to talk about and helps filter out the other things that are in their heads.

### **Are there situations where context isn't needed at the start of a work conversation?**

No. Context is always needed when starting a new conversation at work.

There are a few scenarios where it appears that context isn't needed, but appearances are deceptive. For example, if you are talking to a team member about a project on which you have collaborated closely for weeks, it may

seem like you don't need to provide the project name as context for the conversation. Even in this case, at the moment you want to talk to your colleague about the project, he or she could have any number of other things in his or her head. Even if your colleague is thinking about the project, the chance he or she is thinking about the specific topic you want to talk about is tiny. In the unlikely event your colleague is thinking about the same topic as you, you won't lose anything by providing context.

Never assume the other person knows what you are talking about. It only takes a few seconds to provide context, and that will avoid a lot of confusion. In fact, you will gain positive engagement by confirming you both want to talk about the same thing.

Here are some examples of contexts that you may need to provide in everyday work situations.

- I'm working on project ABC . . .
- I was reviewing the new information security policy . . .
- We're closing the sale on the Jefferson account . . .
- I'm about to submit a request for time off . . .
- I read the marketing report you sent me . . .
- The office supplies have arrived . . .
- The new budget came out . . .
- I want to reward my team . . .
- I'm planning the office party . . .
- We're reviewing the policy for XYZ . . .
- My car broke down . . .
- The kitchen sink is leaking . . .

These lines are short, clear, and each one takes less than five seconds to say.

The options for what to provide as context are as varied as the number of jobs and situations that exist in the world. Despite this variety, only one thing is required when providing context: make it clear what you want to talk about.

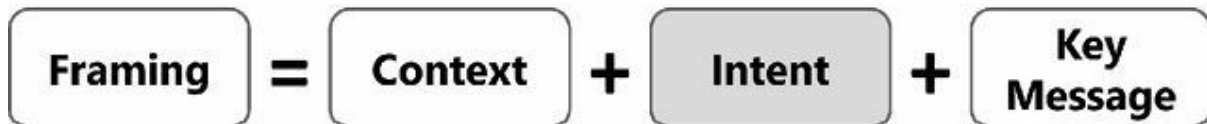
**>> ACTIVITY <<**

Look again at the email you chose in the previous chapter. Does it provide clear context? What would you change to make the context clearer?

## INTENT

*“Tell me what you want, what you really, really want.”*

*– The Spice Girls*



Now that you’ve provided context and gotten the audience on the same page as you, it’s time to let them know what you need them to do with the information you are about to share.

### **Make it clear why you are communicating**

Whenever we receive information, it takes our brains a few moments to work out what to do with it.<sup>5</sup> We try to work out if we have to answer a question, if the speaker is looking for a response, whether we need to take action or make a decision, and so on. Our brains do this all day, every day. We process information and try to work out the appropriate response. This means that when you communicate, your audience’s brains are trying to work out what to do with your message. They are doing this even before you get to the point.

The longer it takes to state the purpose of your message, the greater the chance your audience will form their opinion of your intent. The impacts of this range from minor to severe. The audience could make an incorrect assumption. They could decide the message isn’t important or take unnecessary action. The consequences of these responses vary depending on the situation.

When you reveal your real intentions, the conversation may need to restart, and your audience will need to reprocess the information with the correct filter.

### **Example:**

Emma closed her laptop and started to pack up her desk. She needed to be