

# Talking to Technology

*"This is the start of a new species."*

—Alistair Croll, author and entrepreneur

## Pre-Reading

### A. Warm-Up Questions

1. Do you use a virtual assistant on your mobile device?
2. Are you comfortable talking to virtual assistants in front of other people?
3. What tasks do people use virtual assistants for?



### B. Vocabulary Preview

Match up as many words and meanings as you can.

Check this exercise again after seeing the words in context on page 2.

- |                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| ___ 1. delegate ( <i>verb</i> ) | a) offensive words, swear words                                 |
| ___ 2. sophisticated            | b) a computer program that can have a conversation with a human |
| ___ 3. keep someone company     | c) to assign tasks to others                                    |
| ___ 4. integral                 | d) coded in advance (for automation)                            |
| ___ 5. chat bot                 | e) unsure   |
| ___ 6. destination              | f) advanced   |
| ___ 7. hesitant                 | g) a place that you are trying to get to                        |
| ___ 8. bleep out                | h) to prevent someone from feeling alone                        |
| ___ 9. profanities              | i) to cover up (censor) an offensive spoken word with a sound   |
| ___ 10. preprogrammed           | j) necessary, a key aspect                                      |

## Reading

### TALKING TO TECHNOLOGY

*What can I do for you?*

1. As our lives get busier, many of us are learning the importance of **delegating**. Parents, managers, students, and all sorts of busy people rely on personal virtual assistants to get things done. Artificially intelligent assistants are becoming more **sophisticated** every day. They can make a grocery list, remind us it's garbage day, tell us the weather, and play our favorite songs. They can even **keep us company** when we're bored.
2. The most common place to use an AI assistant is in the car. Virtual assistants allow us to keep our hands free while we're driving. They can help us find a new **destination** or avoid a traffic jam. They can also make or answer calls from our clients, colleagues, and loved ones. While many of us are comfortable using digital assistants in our own cars or homes, we're **hesitant** to use voice technology in public or at work.
3. In a growing number of families, virtual assistants play an **integral** role in day-to-day living. In fact, some developers are now marketing their **chat bots** as members of the family. Advertisements show family members greeting, thanking, and saying goodbye to their bots by name just as they might with their pets. Some bots are even programmed to demand respect if a user is being impolite.
4. Many children and young people use voice assistants for pure entertainment. For example, if you ask Siri (*Apple*) what  $0 \div 0$  is, you will hear a funny explanation involving Cookie Monster. If you play Simon Says with Alexa (*Amazon*), she will **bleep out** swear words and other **profanities**. You can even ask Cortana (*Microsoft*) to tell you a joke. Finding these **preprogrammed** responses is half of the fun for people who are killing time. Have we become more comfortable interacting with technology than with real humans?

## Comprehension

Discuss these questions in pairs, and write the answers in your notebook.

1. What is the article mainly about?
2. According to the article, what are some tasks that AI assistants do for busy people?
3. What does the article say about comfort levels when using virtual assistants?
4. Why does the article mention pets?
5. What do many young people use virtual assistants for? Give a specific example.
6. How does the reading end, and what is the author's intention?

# Vocabulary Review

## A. Recognizing Vocabulary

Which word from page 1 is described in the sentence?  
More than one option may be possible.

#	Sentence	Word
1	I couldn't live without the calendar on my phone. I wouldn't remember any dates without it.	
2	On the news, they censor profanities and show stars in place of some letters on the transcripts.	
3	Today's bots are so technologically advanced that they recognize a user's voice.	
4	When Angie is lonely, she takes out her phone and asks Siri questions.	
5	Cortana does not like it when you ask her to repeat swear words.	
6	I'm not sure if I should rely on Siri's directions or not.	
7	The chat bot gives the same answer to that question every time.	
8	Where are you going now?	

## B. Complete the Sentences

Complete the sentences using vocabulary from page 1.  
You may need to change the word forms.

- I am \_\_\_\_\_ to use Siri at work, because I don't want people to think I'm talking to myself.
- Virtual assistants are \_\_\_\_\_ to the lives of many who are living with disabilities.
- They will \_\_\_\_\_ those words if the video airs on prime-time TV.
- She is not good at \_\_\_\_\_. She tries to do everything herself.
- I don't even watch TV when I turn it on. I just use the sound to \_\_\_\_\_.

# Grammar Review

## REPORTED SPEECH

Voice assistants provide voice or text responses (*direct speech*). Sometimes you have to tell others what your assistant's response was. You will use *reported speech* to describe the response you received. Practice these dialogues with a partner.

**\*Note:**

The relative pronoun *that* after the reporting verb *said* is optional in all of these examples.

### Dialogue 1

#### Weather

Man: Hey, Siri. How's the weather today?  
Siri: It doesn't look so nice today.  
Woman: What did Siri say about the weather?  
Man: She said (that)\* the weather doesn't look so nice today.

### Dialogue 2

#### Sports

Woman: Cortana, who won the Blue Jays game?  
Cortana: The Blue Jays won 5-1 against the Yankees.  
Man: What did Cortana say?  
Woman: She said (that) the Blue Jays won 5-1.

### Dialogue 3

#### For Fun

Mom: Alexa, can you give me some money? *[laughs]*  
Alexa: I am not a bank.  
Dad: What did Alexa say?  
Mom: She said (that) she is not a bank.

### Dialogue 4

#### Fact-Checking

Woman: Tom Cruise was born in 1960.  
Man: No way. He is not that old.  
Woman: Let's ask Siri. Hey, Siri. What year was Tom Cruise born?  
Siri: Tom Cruise was born on July 3, 1962.  
Man: What did Siri say?  
Woman: She said (that) he was born in 1962.

### Dialogue 5

#### Travel

Child: How long will it take to get there?  
Dad: Hey, Siri. How long will it take to get to the airport?  
Siri: You should arrive in 25 minutes.  
Child: What did she say?  
Dad: She said (that) we should arrive in 25 minutes.

## Discussion

1. Do you think our memories are becoming weaker because of our virtual assistants?
2. Is it okay to place blame on a bot?  
Will we become more accepting of this excuse in the future?
3. What happens when voice assistants don't hear users correctly?  
Will misunderstandings always be funny or can they also be dangerous, hurtful, etc.?

## Critical Thinking

### IN PAIRS OR SMALL GROUPS

Are today's virtual assistants eliminating too many human jobs?  
If they are the beginning of a new species, could they eventually lead to the destruction of the human race?

## Listening

Fill in the blanks as you listen to the recording.

### TALKING TO TECHNOLOGY

*What can I do for you?*

1. As our lives get busier, many of us are learning the importance of \_\_\_\_\_. Parents, managers, students, and all sorts of busy people rely on personal virtual assistants to get things done. Artificially intelligent assistants are becoming more \_\_\_\_\_ every day. They can make a grocery list, remind us it's garbage day, tell us the weather, and play our favorite songs. They can even \_\_\_\_\_ when we're bored.
2. The most common place to use an AI assistant is in the car. Virtual assistants allow us to keep our hands free while we're driving. They can help us find a new \_\_\_\_\_ or avoid a traffic jam. They can also make or answer calls from our clients, colleagues, and loved ones. While many of us are comfortable using digital assistants in our own cars or homes, we're \_\_\_\_\_ to use voice technology in public or at work.
3. In a growing number of families, virtual assistants play an \_\_\_\_\_ role in day-to-day living. In fact, some developers are now marketing their \_\_\_\_\_ as members of the family. Advertisements show family members greeting, thanking, and saying goodbye to their bots by name just as they might with their pets. Some bots are even programmed to demand respect if a user is being impolite.
4. Many children and young people use voice assistants for pure entertainment. For example, if you ask Siri (*Apple*) what  $0 \div 0$  is, you will hear a funny explanation involving Cookie Monster. If you play Simon Says with Alexa (*Amazon*), she will \_\_\_\_\_ swear words and other \_\_\_\_\_. You can even ask Cortana (*Microsoft*) to tell you a joke. Finding these \_\_\_\_\_ responses is half of the fun for people who are killing time. Have we become more comfortable interacting with technology than with real humans?

# Answer Key

**LESSON DESCRIPTION:**

In this lesson, students read about personal voice assistants, such as Siri, Cortana, and Alexa. They learn about how AI agents are becoming part of society. Student review related vocabulary and discuss the impacts of this technology.

**TEACHING TIPS:**

*See Discussion Starters Teaching Guide (<https://esllibrary.com/courses/72/lessons/>) for a variety of ways to use the reading.*

**LEVEL:** Int – High Int

**TIME:** 1.5–2 hours

**TAGS:** technology, talking to technology, personal assistant, robots, Siri, Cortana, Alexa, voice assistant

## Pre-Reading

**A. WARM-UP QUESTIONS**

Have students work in small groups or as a class. Discuss the quote.

**B. VOCABULARY PREVIEW**

- |      |      |      |      |       |
|------|------|------|------|-------|
| 1. c | 3. h | 5. b | 7. e | 9. a  |
| 2. f | 4. j | 6. g | 8. i | 10. d |

## Reading (and/or Listening)

Read individually, in small groups, or as a class. You can also play the listening as your students read along. A gap-fill version of the reading is available on page 6. Help your students with vocabulary and expressions that they are unfamiliar with.

## Comprehension

1. The article is mainly about the various uses of virtual personal assistants and how our lives are changing because of them.
2. The article mentions the following tasks: making a list, giving us a reminder, telling us the weather, playing DJ, keeping us company, getting us to a destination, calling hands-free in the car, making us laugh.
3. The article says that many people are comfortable using voice technology in the privacy of their home or car, but may be uncomfortable talking to technology in public or at work.
4. The article mentions pets because some virtual assistants are used so often that they become like a member of the family. Companies are trying to market them this way.
5. Young people often use chat bots for entertainment or to pass the time.
6. Answers will vary. The author leaves the reader with a question to ponder. The author is trying to get the reader to consider what the future will be like. Will we continue to become less social as technology becomes more advanced? You could survey your students to find out if they are comfortable actually talking (not texting) on the phone.

*(continued on the next page...)*

# Answer Key cont.

## Vocabulary Review

### A. RECOGNIZING VOCABULARY

Answers will vary.

- |                         |                  |
|-------------------------|------------------|
| 1. integral             | 5. profanities   |
| 2. bleep out            | 6. hesitant      |
| 3. sophisticated        | 7. preprogrammed |
| 4. keep someone company | 8. destination   |

### B. COMPLETE THE SENTENCES

- |              |                    |
|--------------|--------------------|
| 1. hesitant  | 4. delegating      |
| 2. integral  | 5. keep me company |
| 3. bleep out |                    |

## Grammar Review

Have your students practice the dialogues to review reported speech. You could also have your students use their mobile devices to ask their own questions and create their own similar dialogues.

If your students need to review direct vs. reported speech, try our ready-made Grammar Practice Worksheets lesson:

<https://esllibrary.com/courses/88/lessons/1618>

We also have a Resource with a handy chart and tips:

<https://esllibrary.com/resources/2367>

Note that the lesson and resource focus on the tense changes that occur when the speech is reported much later on. When speech is reported immediately, like in the dialogues in this lesson, the tense doesn't usually change. This exception is explained in Note #1 on page 5 of the Grammar Practice Worksheets lesson and on page 2 of the Resource.

## Discussion

Answers will vary.

Can be done individually or in small groups or pairs.

## Critical Thinking

Answers will vary.

Can be done individually or in small groups or pairs.

## Listening

1. delegating, sophisticated, keep us company
2. destination, hesitant
3. integral, chat bots
4. bleep out, profanities, preprogrammed

### SPELLING NOTE:

This lesson shows the American spelling of the words *Favorite* and *Practice*. Most other English-speaking countries spell these words this way: *Favourite* and *Practise* (when used as a verb; *Practice* when used as a noun). Make it a challenge for your students to find these words in the lesson and see if they know the alternate spellings.