The Secret Language of Work

Ask for a raise
Discuss a promotion
Give tough feedback
Ace any job interview
Handle sticky situations
Land your dream job
Set boundaries at work
Confidently lead a team
Set realistic expectations
Articulate your skills
Quit your job
Disagree with your boss
Be direct but not rude
Negotiate your salary
Navigate your job search
Avoid corporate jargon

Hyper-helpful scripts for every situation

Talk to clients with ease
Ask for what you want
Network with anyone
Advocate for yourself
Own your mistakes
Present with confidence
Deal with a bad boss
Write the perfect email
Reject a job offer

Erin McGoff

Creator of @AdviceWithErin

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HYPER-HELPFUL SCRIPTS FOR EVERY SITUATION

Erin McGoff

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Penguin Random House UK,
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk

Penguin Random House UK

First published in the United States of America by Portfolio, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC 2026
First published in Great Britain by Penguin Michael Joseph 2026
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Illustrations by Janis Ozolins
Book design by Nicole Laroche
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK ISBN: 978–0–241–80254–0
TRADE PAPERBACK ISBN: 978–0–241–80255–7

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To Michael, my husband.

And to Chris and Claire, my parents.

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INTRODUCTION

Most play checkers, few play chess.

Let me tell you a story about Samantha and Jessie. Samantha and Jessie have a lot in common. They're both nineteen. They have the same major at the same university. They're both applying for the same internship at the same consulting firm. And today is the first time either of them will be sitting down in a formal, corporate interview setting.

Samantha grew up in an upper-class family in a wealthy suburban neighbourhood. You know, the kind of neighbourhood with a Homeowners Association, Christmas carolling and a members-only golf course. Her dad's a CEO and her mum's an attorney. Samantha grew up attending private school, taking French lessons and 'summering' in Martha's Vineyard. You get the picture.

Jessie, on the other hand, grew up in a more rural blue-collar town. Her father is a truck driver and her mum works at a petrol station, and every month it's a challenge for them to make ends meet. Jessie's parents taught her how to work hard, be honest and have integrity. They always wanted her to have more

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opportunities than they did, but as a kid she didn't have access to much living in their small town. She spent her summers babysitting her little siblings, reading books from the library, and cooking with her grandma. She's the first person in her family to go to college.

Flip back to the present day where Samantha is sitting in the lobby of Health Inc., a corporate consulting firm. She gets called in, walks into a conference room and sits down with proper posture – her hands gently folded in her lap, both feet firm on the floor and a friendly smile on her face as she leans slightly forward. When the recruiter walks in, Samantha stands up, smiles, and gives a firm handshake partnered with a 'Hi Kelly, I'm Samantha, nice to meet you.' In her mind, she can hear her mum saying, 'You want to show them, not tell them – speak with your body.'

The recruiter asks Samantha, 'So, why should we hire you?' Samantha recalls her father's advice, reminding her to 'make it about the company, not yourself. Speak to your skills, and speak slowly.'

'I believe I am a great fit for this role for a few reasons,' Samantha answers. 'First, I'm a dedicated student with a three point nine GPA. I show up on time, am enthusiastic, and am a team player. Second, I'm particularly interested in public health consulting and genuinely fascinated by the vaccine research Health Inc. is conducting. I'd be honoured to contribute to future publications in any capacity. And finally, my experience volunteering with local organizations and my research-related coursework means I'd be bringing more to this role than a typi-

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cal intern. If hired, I'd bring research skills, genuine curiosity, and an eagerness to learn and contribute.'

Next up, there's Jessie. She walks into the corporate lobby thirty minutes too early feeling nervous and a bit out of place in her brand-new suit. It's her first time wearing a suit. Is she supposed to button the jacket? What about her backpack? Can she leave it with the receptionist? Jessie awkwardly stands in the corner of the lobby avoiding eye contact and glued to her phone. When she gets called in for the interview, she shoves her phone into her backpack and spits out a string of apologies. After scurrying into the office, she plops down into her chair, bounces her leg and gives a timid and quick handshake to the recruiter after they initiate.

When the recruiter asks, 'So, why should we hire you?' Jessie fumbles a bit. She isn't sure why the recruiter is asking such a blanket question – it seems obvious. She thinks, *Don't you need an intern . . . ?*

'Uh, well, you should hire me because – wait – this is just an internship, though, right? So you're not really *hiring* me, it's just for the summer,' she says. 'But anyway, you should pick me because, well, I'm in school for business, and we had this guest speaker come in, and well, I'm interested in learning more about it all. To be honest, I'm not sure how the world of consulting works, but I'm definitely interested in gaining experience for my résumé. Oh, I'm also a hard worker and always show up on time! So . . . yeah. That's it I guess.' Jessie smiles and checks the recruiter's face for feedback. They move on to the next question.

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After the interviews conclude, the recruiter emails her manager: 'I think we should go with Samantha. She seemed more interested. Let's invite her back for another interview.'

Samantha goes on to get the internship while Jessie gets the classic do-not-reply auto-rejection email. After graduation, Samantha goes on to accept a full-time position at the company and negotiates her salary, boosting her entry level pay by $4,000. Jessie accepts a job that underpays her, and she doesn't say anything because, well, negotiating would be rude and ungrateful, right?

The problem here isn't with Jessie or Samantha's ability, intelligence, motivation or drive. It's that one of them knows the secret language of work, a way of communicating that is used by successful, high-performing people to get what they want, while the other does not. And here is where we begin.

The Hidden Curriculum

Remember how in school you were taught that Tokyo is the capital of Japan and the mitochondrion is the powerhouse of the cell (but they somehow skipped over how taxes and mortgages work)? Those were part of the school curriculum, the visible curriculum. But remember how you also learned that you can't just sit wherever you want in the lunchroom? Like, the sixth graders sit near the bathrooms, the seventh graders sit near the teachers, and the eighth graders get the best spot – next to the windows? These are things you aren't explicitly taught but instead learn through observation. They are part of what's called

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the hidden curriculum: unspoken social rules of how to interact in a society.*

The secret language of work is part of the hidden curriculum. It's a set of unwritten rules and etiquette that communicates to others that you are professional, competent, experienced, dependable and trustworthy. These secret rules aren't written down anywhere, but rather embedded in our psychology and passed down in hushed tones through the networks of high achievers. Some folks will spend decades of trial and error simply attempting to pick up on tiny bits of this secret language, while most never learn of its existence. But you're in luck. In this book, I've compiled the unwritten rules of the secret language of work all in one place for you, so that you can reach your goals faster and with more confidence.



*Philip W. Jackson coined this phrase in his 1968 book *Life in Classrooms*, which explores implicit lessons, values and social norms that are learned in school but are not part of formal education.

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My Story

So, why should you listen to me? Why should you spend hours of your precious time invested in yet another professional development book promising to change the way you approach your career (and life)? Allow me to introduce myself.

Hi, I'm Erin, also known as AdviceWithErin. Let's rewind a little. In 2020, when the pandemic hit, I was living in my four-hundred-square-foot Brooklyn apartment, confined by stay-at-home quarantine policies and living off my emergency fund. Before COVID-19, my career was going great. I had my dream job in the film industry, making good money, and gearing up to direct my second feature film. I had moved to New York at twenty-three, fresh on the heels of my Pulitzer Center reporting fellowship and the premiere of my debut feature documentary film, *This Little Land of Mines*.

I always knew my dream was to work in the film industry, but I wasn't born with access to the Hollywood industrial machine. I didn't know a soul in LA or New York, so I had to wiggle in on my own. I scraped and clawed my way into the industry, trying my best to network, be a sponge and learn the lingo as quickly as possible. And now I had accomplished my goals and had exciting things lined up. I felt like I had made it – it was all happening! You know, until the world imploded.

As the work dried up and shoots were delayed, bored and sad pandemic Erin had a burgeoning curiosity that led her to download an exploding social media app all the cool kids were using. I was instantly fascinated by TikTok's powerful algorithm. You

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could have zero followers and post a video that would magically reach the right audience. I decided to post some career advice, specifically about the very gatekept film industry, in the hopes of helping other 'outsiders' like me break in. I expanded to posting about networking, interviewing, cold emailing and even personal finance tips as the videos started to reach audiences from all industries.

One day, I propped my phone up on my window A/C unit and decided to post a tutorial on 'How to answer the worst job interview question ever: Tell me about yourself.' I edited it, clicked post and went to bed. I woke up the next morning and checked my phone. That video had gone viral overnight and garnered over twenty million views. Over the next few weeks, I gained hundreds of thousands of followers, and my DMs were flooded with people wanting more. I realized there was a massive need for practical, candid and realistic career advice.

This is the part of the story where I tell you I hit my big break, right? I jumped into content creation with two feet, got an agent, started coaching, penned a book deal, did a TED Talk, was interviewed on *Good Morning America*, and started selling massively successful online courses. The only thing? Well . . . that didn't *quite* happen.

Personally, I wasn't super interested in being an 'influencer', or 'internet person', as I lovingly call it. I had a 'real job' at National Geographic and was developing my next documentary project with a studio. In the mornings and evenings, I made TikToks, and my following kept growing. I'd take a topic, research it, and design a video that both educated and entertained. It was something I did for fun, as a silly creative outlet.

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But the feedback I was receiving from followers was anything but silly. I received hundreds of messages, sometimes thousands per week, from folks telling me about how my advice impacted their lives. They were able to bump up their salaries, advocate for themselves in meetings, professionally articulate their feelings, negotiate promotions, boost their confidence, and on and on.

One day, I posted a video about how to write that you worked at McDonald's on your résumé. To viewers, it seemed funny and random, but I did it very intentionally. McDonald's is one of the largest employers in the United States, yet it is a job that many struggle to be proud of. So I thought if I could teach people how to articulate the fact that they didn't just 'take orders', but rather 'managed customer payments via a POS system fulfilling more than 1,500 orders per shift', I could help empower them. The video exploded. Again, I received messages from people all over the world telling me never to stop doing what I was doing, and how much these videos had changed their lives.

So, no, as of writing this book, I'm not a self-proclaimed guru, I don't have a PhD in organizational psychology (yet), a lucrative life coaching business and forty-plus years of HR experience.

That's not me. Instead, I'm more like your friend's successful cousin who corners you at her birthday party and tells you to quit your job because you're too amazing to be underpaid while putting up with your lame boss. And then I follow up the next day to give you the exact words and timeline to quit professionally, proceeding to hop on FaceTime to help you revise your résumé and land your dream job.

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I've helped literally millions of people from all different backgrounds gain the ability to get what they want – whether that's a million-dollar net worth or simply a new job that doesn't make them cry in a toilet cubicle. My advice is backed by psychological research and real-life case studies and is relevant for the modern-day worker. I have a zeal for creating meaningful change, with a dangerous level of curiosity and a tragically open mind. I believe there is no one right way to do anything – anyone who tells you they have all the answers and everyone else is wrong is selling you something. I believe in shutting up and listening to many, many wise folks who have gone before me and distilling their advice down to what is repeated over and over because it works. By reading this book, you are gaining access to some of the best advice I have gathered from the world's greatest minds.

Of course, I also have personal experience both hiring and getting hired as a business owner and freelancer who has worked with more than twenty-five companies across all industries. I have seen various company cultures, hierarchical structures, good and bad leadership, innovative and archaic policies, and have used all the different types of cloud-based collaboration tools. (Shout-out to Slack, I love you.) I understand what it's like to have an awful boss, but I also understand what it's like to have an awful employee or coworker. I've been on all sides and give advice that acknowledges all parties involved.

If you want to rise up in the world and be successful in what you set out to do, this book is for you. Maybe you graduated during or shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic and most of your professional experience has been through a screen. Maybe you're an introvert who can't stomach the thought of attending

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a networking event. Maybe you are early on in your career and simply lack confidence. Or maybe your career is going great, and you're just looking to take your communication skills to the next level.

Everyone has a unique story, and no one was born with any knowledge of the hidden curriculum. No one was born knowing how to ask for a recommendation or negotiate their salary or professionally quit their job. Everything anyone knows they learned from someone else, through either direct teaching or observation. So let's talk about what we're going to learn.

First, we're going to focus on the basics: small tweaks you can apply to any conversation to supercharge your professional (and let's be honest, personal) communication. We'll also learn how to build true inner confidence and get your mindset right. I want you to be operating with a confident, calm, genuine and clear mind. This will allow your words to be understood exactly the way you intend them to be.

Next, we'll discuss how to communicate professionally and effectively in some of the most common workplace scenarios. We'll discuss how to network without being awkward, negotiate without being rude, and instantly impress any recruiter without coming off as a try-hard.

Finally, we will dive right into all those sticky situations that no one prepares you for (and that you don't learn about in school). Situations like how to deal with an annoying coworker, give and receive feedback, quit a job you hate, ask for a raise (that your manager keeps saying is coming), and more.

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But before we go any further, I'd like to point out something important – something that I didn't hear enough when I was

rising up in my career. While I always recommend against spending any energy victimizing yourself, it is certainly worth acknowledging the fact that different people are viewed, well, differently in society. Therefore, what you say at work is going to be taken in a certain way based on how you show up in the world. No, this is not fair. And I'm not saying that you should mould yourself into someone you're not simply to change the way you're perceived.

My goal instead is to help you strike a balance between communicating professionally while still sounding like *you*. Feel free to take my advice and fit it into your personality. If you read one of my scripts and think, 'Oh my gosh, I would never say that,' then don't say it! Please do not say it. It will come off as disingenuous if you try to force it. You can still use the overall framework and change the exact words to fit your style.

As millions of people have asked me for advice over the years, I've noticed one thing over and over and over again. When people ask me for advice, they're really asking for two things: reassurance and validation. Their gut and heart already know what they want to do and what they want to say.

What holds people back from speaking up is fear. They don't want to ask for a promotion because they fear *rejection*. They don't want to negotiate their salary because they fear *failure*. They don't want to ask for a raise because they fear being *offensive*. They don't want to communicate burnout to their boss because they fear *embarrassment*. And they don't want to communicate their true thoughts to their team because they're afraid of making others *uncomfortable*.

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Well, I have some good news: I'm here to teach you how to

communicate with confidence in a way that makes you and everyone around you feel good. That doesn't mean being a people pleaser; you can't always be the 'good guy'. Sometimes you need to give tough feedback, be straightforward, set a boundary, and break bad news. It's not your job to manage other people's emotions. It's your job to do your job.

However, there is a way to be a strong, effective and successful professional without being an unlikeable, selfish jerk. In fact, there is a way to assert yourself, take charge and speak confidently in a way that makes people like you more. This is the secret language of work, my friends. And get excited, because you're about to become fluent in it.

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The Secret Language of Work

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CHAPTER 1

Change Your Words, Change Your Life

> Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind.
>
> —BRENÉ BROWN

When I was a freshman in college, I landed an internship at a small commercial film production company. In my interview, I was eager to please. I said I could do anything! I'd stay late, work hard and do whatever needed to be done – even 'sweep the floors' if I had to. (Yes, I actually said that.) I pictured myself drafting call sheets, organizing the gear room, shaking hands with celebrities on set, reviewing scripts and learning from directors. I was so excited!

But the truth is, I had no idea what I was doing. I was merely a guppy out in the big blue sea, faking it until I made it. This was my first time working in a corporate environment, and I didn't know what to expect or what would be expected of me. What should I wear? Should I get to work early? How could I impress everyone around me?

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To my dismay, I showed up on my first day (overdressed and

too early) and was introduced to my first task by an unenthusiastic post-production manager. 'You need to organize these files. It's pretty self-explanatory,' he said and left me alone in a dark, windowless room. It was just me, Excel, a hard drive and a broken dream.

I looked at the screen and saw files – lots and lots of files. I had to cross-reference them with a spreadsheet. It was menial, tedious, boring and unglamorous. (I mean, there were no celebrities!)

I quickly grew bitter. This was an unpaid internship. I was giving up three half days a week – days I could have spent working at a paid job – to do some random tasks alone in a room while learning nothing about filmmaking. I wondered if this was even legal.

But . . . I had told them I'd do anything, right? I couldn't blame them . . . right? In my interview, I had basically promised to do just this. I decided that as a rookie intern, I just had to bite my tongue.

Another producer who worked at the production company checked in on me every now and then (probably for proof of life). She was so nice, and I was hoping that one day she'd come to my rescue. But when she asked me how everything was going, I responded, 'Great!' I didn't know how to say in a professional way, 'I'm so bored I want to rip out my hair. Is there literally anything else I could do?'

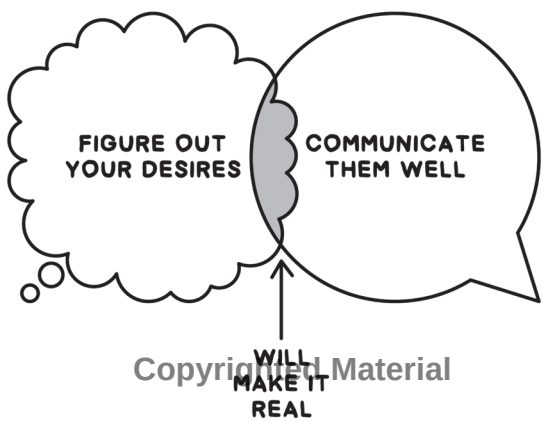
Meanwhile, the aforementioned unenthusiastic post-production manager was often nowhere to be found. (I guess he was my boss? It was never clear.) When he did show his face, I'd remind him of my existence and ask him to check my work. I

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waited eagerly, daydreaming of him snapping out of it and saying, 'You're still doing this? I have a commercial that needs editing. How about you take over as our lead editor?' But alas, he never did.

It continued on like this for an entire semester. I eventually realized that I could get my work done pretty efficiently and spend the rest of the time watching Vimeo Staff Picks, eating Chinese takeout and doing homework. But overall, the internship was a bust. I learned very little and met almost no one.

It took me years to realize that to a great extent this was my fault. See, I never vocalized . . . well . . . anything. I wanted to be happy-go-lucky and help out wherever I could. I didn't want to offend anyone by complaining about the work I was being assigned. And I assumed that if I did a good job at my tasks, the people around me would notice and eventually give me more interesting things to work on. That, my friends, was my first crucial mistake: assuming anything about anyone, anytime, anywhere.



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As my career progressed, I was able to observe and absorb the secret language of work – the language that highly successful people know how to speak to get what they want. I witnessed businesswomen smiling and even laughing as they negotiated deals. I saw colleagues smartly challenge each other on ideas and give blunt feedback that somehow wasn't offensive. I saw folks articulate their thoughts, share opinions, lead conversations and make tough decisions, all without any emotional baggage attached.

These people knew how to communicate professionally and perfectly curate their words to get across what they meant. They would never sit in a windowless room eating Chinese food for an entire semester. They would have looked at that room on day one and said, 'Yeah, this isn't going to work for me.' But, you know, in a professional way.

In fact, these folks probably wouldn't have been in that room in the first place because they would have asserted themselves in the interview. Maybe they would even have managed to negotiate for a stipend so that the internship wasn't completely unpaid. They knew how to professionally, effortlessly and joyfully advocate for themselves. I had so much to learn.

After that internship, I became obsessed with mastering the art of professional communication. How could I take my honest thoughts and turn them into effective, strategic communication? How could I be direct without being rude, confident without being cocky, assertive without being arrogant, and successful while still being liked? How could I learn this secret language that magically made everyone listen to and like me, all while still getting my way?

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It took me a while, but through a *lot* of trial and error, I learned all this, and I went on to craft my dream career by using the secret language of work. After a few years of studying this hidden curriculum, I no longer had to blindly send résumés to apply for jobs or vent to my friends about annoying coworkers. I networked effectively and communicated proactively with decision-makers, and people were saying my name in rooms full of possibilities. As a result, the types of opportunities I dreamed of started finding me.

Maybe you're thinking, 'Good for you, Erin, but I'm an introvert and shy and just not outgoing and confident like you!' Well, I've got some news for you: I'm an introverted recovering people pleaser whose ideal Friday night is sitting on the couch under a heavy throw blanket watching a movie with my dog and husband.

In fact, many (dare I assume most?) successful people I know are actually quite introverted. Being an introvert, quiet or shy doesn't automatically mean you can't also be a powerful leader and have a wildly successful career. That's a narrative you have concocted for yourself, and I hate to say it, but it's not doing you any favours. Don't tell yourself a story that takes away your power. The only thing standing between you and what you want is you – no one else can give you what you want. It's up to you, my introverted little superstar. (Also, if you're an extrovert reading this, you're a superstar too.)

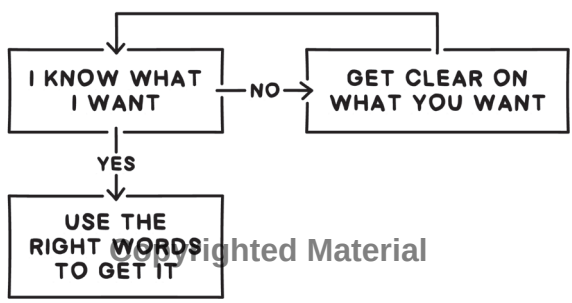
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The Desired Outcome

Take a moment to picture yourself in the future, living your dream life. Not your parents', siblings' or friends' dream lives. Not my dream life. (I live on a ranch with a few dozen rescue dogs and own a bookshop café . . . okay, snapping out of it.) Your dream life, whatever that looks like. I encourage you to dream, and to keep that dream close to your heart.

Remembering what you want is half the recipe for good communication. In Stephen Covey's book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People,* the second habit is: 'Start with the end in mind.' To plan the route to where you're going, you have to first *know where you are going*. What do you really want at the end of the day?

Moving forward, I will refer to this end result as your 'desired outcome', which is essential to keep in mind. Your desired outcome can be macro, like landing your dream job, or micro, like getting your boss to approve your holiday request. The important thing to know, though, is that once you are clear on your desired outcome, strategic communication is the key to getting it.



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