

“What Should I Do?”: Three-Part Role Plays

LEVEL: Lower Intermediate and above

TIME REQUIRED: About 30 minutes

GOALS: To practice describing a problem and asking for advice; to use level-appropriate language (imperatives, modal verbs, semi-modal verbs, etc.) to give advice in a specified context; to give and receive feedback from peers

MATERIALS: Chalkboard and chalk or whiteboard and markers; pencils or pens and paper; a clock or other time-keeping device; a bell, whistle, or other signaling device

OVERVIEW: Role plays can be used to practice conversational skills at all levels. They are also excellent opportunities for learners to rehearse the interpersonal communication skills required in English for Specific Purposes settings, as mentioned in the article “Case Studies in ESP Course Development” on page 2.

This activity is a fresh take on the classic role play. In groups of three, students take turns completing three tasks: asking for advice, giving advice, and giving feedback to peers. The activity offers a variety of language-practice opportunities and is well suited for larger classes where the teacher cannot give feedback to each student. Teachers can adapt the role-play activity for almost any level or content area by writing advice-seeking prompts that include recently taught course material. The example role-play situations shared in this article are for a Medical English setting. Prompts for other levels and content areas are included in the Additional Prompts section.

PREPARATION:

1. Prepare four course-relevant prompts about situations that require someone to ask for advice. Each prompt should be relatively short (so you can write it on the board quickly) but interesting (so students will be able to discuss it for a few minutes). The first prompt will serve as an example during the activity explanation; students will use the other three prompts—Prompts A, B, and C—as they complete the activity. See the Additional Prompts section on page 51 for a selection of adaptable prompts.

- If desired, you can write these prompts on the board before class and cover them with paper so you can reveal them quickly as the activity progresses.
- As an alternative, you can photocopy the prompts, cutting up or sorting the copies so that the activity prompts (A, B, and C) are on separate slips of paper. During the activity, distribute the prompts so that everyone in each three-person group has a different prompt (A, B, or C). If you use this approach, student positions in relation to the board are not important, but the students should not show each other their prompts during the role plays.

If necessary, plan to present or review new or less-familiar vocabulary used in the prompts before beginning the activity.

2. Consider your students' proficiency with using advice-related language. As needed, prepare to review the use of modals, semi-modals, and imperatives in advice situations before beginning the activity. You can find information to support and prepare your students in the Scaffolding Suggestions: Language Focus section.
3. Consider your students' comfort with giving each other feedback. If your students don't have much experience providing peer-to-peer feedback, review the Scaffolding Suggestions: Task Focus section and think about how you will prepare your students to give helpful, positive peer feedback.

PROCEDURE:

1. Tell students they are going to participate in role plays about giving advice. If you want, you can warm up for the role plays by leading a few simple advice-giving examples with the full class. For instance:
 - a. Ask students, "If a friend says, 'I'm always tired,' what advice would you give her?" Elicit possible responses from different students.
 - b. Ask students, "If a friend told you he is always getting in trouble for being late to class, what advice would you give him?" Elicit a few possible responses.
2. Invite three volunteers to the front of the class to model the role-play activity as you explain the instructions.
 - a. Direct the first student, the **Advice Giver**, to sit or stand facing away from the board (tell the Advice Giver not to look at the board at any time). Ask the second student, the **Advice Requester**, to sit or stand facing toward the board. Tell the third student, the **Feedback Giver**, to sit or stand to the side with pencil and

paper so he or she can easily observe the other two.

- b. Explain that the Advice Giver is a doctor who must help the patient, the Advice Requester, who is seeking suggestions for the problem that will be shown on the board. Tell the class that the Feedback Giver will observe their interaction and make notes about the language they use and how the two people interact in this professional situation. You can ask the Feedback Giver to make notes about grammar and vocabulary use, pronunciation, the Advice Giver's professional demeanor and nonverbal communication, and any other communication aspects that are relevant to your course goals. Advanced students can give feedback on several aspects of communication and language use; however, for lower levels, consider limiting feedback to one or two focus areas.
- c. Write or uncover your example role-play prompt on the board: *You have had an itchy, runny nose for the past week. You have also been sneezing a lot, but otherwise you feel healthy.*



Figure 1. Student Positions and Role Responsibilities

Image created by Heather Benucci and Tabitha Kidwell

- d. Ask the Advice Requester (the patient, in this example) and the class to silently read the prompt on the board and think about how to explain the problem to the Advice Giver (the doctor, in this example).
 - e. Explain these steps and allow the modeling students to demonstrate; offer the students supportive reminders, questions, and hints from classmates, as needed:
 - i. To begin, the Advice Giver will greet the Advice Requester and ask about the problem. (Example: “Hello. How are you? What brings you to the clinic today?”)
 - ii. Next, the Advice Requester will briefly explain the problem. (Example: “I’ve had a runny nose for the past few days . . . ”)
 - iii. The Advice Giver should listen and ask follow-up questions to gather information about the problem. (Example: “Have you been coughing, too?”)
 - iv. The Advice Requester can be creative and make up additional information to answer questions about the situation. (Example: “Yes, I’ve been coughing at night.”)
 - v. When the Advice Giver has sufficient information, he or she should offer advice about how to address the situation. (Example: “You should drink a lot of fluids.”)
 - vi. The Advice Receiver can ask the Advice Giver clarifying questions about the advice. (Example: “What kind of fluids are best?”)
 - f. After the interaction, ask the Feedback Giver to share his or her notes about the encounter. Provide feedback on these comments and solicit additional feedback from the class.
 - g. Explain that the groups will perform similar role plays for three situations. Tell students that they will rotate roles each time so that everyone has a chance to be the Advice Requester, Advice Giver, and Feedback Giver.
3. Put students in groups of three; you can assign groups or allow students to choose their own groups. Tell the groups to select their roles for the first role play and to position themselves to begin the activity. If the prompt is written on the board, remind students that the Advice Giver must sit or stand facing away from the board.
 4. Write or uncover Prompt A on the board: *Your wrist is swollen, and it is difficult to move your hand. You think you may have been bitten or stung by something while you were hiking yesterday afternoon.*
 - a. Signal students to begin.
 - b. The three group members perform their roles as modeled in Step 2. As the class works, move around the room, answering questions and helping students stay on task. You can also note common errors or issues to discuss later in a whole-class feedback session (Step 8).
 - c. The Advice Requester and the Advice Giver continue the role play until you signal them to stop (after approximately 3 or 4 minutes).
 - d. The Feedback Giver gives feedback to the other two students about their interaction, highlighting the feedback items you specified (approximately 1 or 2 minutes).
 5. Gain students’ attention and tell them to rotate positions and roles in their groups for the next role-play situation.

- a. When students are in their new positions, write or uncover Prompt B on the board: *You hurt your knee in a motorcycle accident several days ago, but you continued to walk on it. Now it is swollen and painful.*
 - b. Repeat Steps 4a to 4d.
- 6.** Gain students' attention and tell them to rotate positions and roles for the final role play.
- a. When students are in their new positions, write or uncover Prompt C on the board: *You have been vomiting for the past 24 hours, have a low fever, and cannot keep food down. You often suffer from indigestion, but you rarely vomit.*
 - b. Repeat Steps 4a to 4d.
- 7.** Tell students to return to their seats.
- 8.** Ask students to share strengths and weaknesses they noticed about the role-play interactions while acting as the Feedback Giver. Offer feedback regarding common strengths or mistakes across the class.

VARIATION

Student-written role-play prompts

Rather than supplying students with the role-play prompts, have each student prepare a classroom-appropriate request for advice that is relevant to your course content. Before Step 3, give students time to think about a problem that would require them to ask for advice; students may make notes about the problem if needed. When it is their turn to play the role of Advice Requester, they should be prepared to describe their problem to their Advice Giver partner.

EXTENSIONS

Comparing and evaluating advice

After the activity concludes, put students into three groups based on their Advice

Requester prompts. (For the examples above, one group would be students who said they have a swollen wrist, another would be students who hurt their knee in the motorcycle accident, and the last group would be those who are vomiting.) Ask students in each group to share and discuss the advice they received and to decide which advice was the best. In addition to comparing and evaluating the advice they received, students can practice reporting what another person has said: for Prompt A, a student might say, "The doctor told me to put ice on my wrist and take allergy medication."

Advice reactions

After the activity concludes, ask students to write a paragraph summarizing the problem they shared while playing the Advice Requester role and the advice they received. Students can then explain whether they agree with that advice or whether they would have recommended something different in the situation. This extension gives students the chance to practice an additional grammar point: the second conditional (e.g., *If this situation happened to me, I would . . .*).

SCAFFOLDING SUGGESTIONS

Language Focus: Asking for and Giving Advice

There are several advice-related grammatical forms in English. Figure 2 gives examples of how modal verbs, semi-modal verbs, and imperatives can be used to give and request advice. If needed, you can display this chart or create a handout for students to refer to as they complete the role plays, or you can review the chart with them before the activity, encouraging students to give additional examples for each form.

Task Focus: Giving Feedback to Peers

The feedback-giving aspect of this activity will work best if your students are accustomed to providing peer-to-peer feedback. Prepare students to give each other feedback by highlighting these three elements of effective feedback:

Effective feedback is ...

- **Framed positively:** It can be upsetting to receive feedback that focuses only on mistakes and errors. Encourage students to start their feedback with a positive comment, then comment on errors, and close with a suggestion for improvement.

- **Specific:** Saying only “Great job” or “You made a lot of mistakes” isn’t very helpful. Students should

listen carefully for their peers’ strengths and possible areas of improvement so that they can give detailed and specific advice.

- **Brief:** Students can’t comment on everything their peers said and did. It’s better to select a few important areas to focus on.

For example, a student might say, “Your pronunciation was clear, and you nodded to show you were listening to the patient. Your

Giving and Asking for Advice		
Grammatical Form	Use	Examples
Modal Verbs		
<i>should</i>	Giving advice and making recommendations in either the present or past tense	<i>You should eat lots of vegetables.</i> <i>You should have brought an umbrella.</i>
	Requesting advice	<i>What should I do?</i>
<i>must</i>	Giving a strong recommendation with a sense of necessity, duty, or obligation	<i>You must stop eating sugar.</i>
<i>would</i>	Giving advice using the second conditional	<i>If I were you, I would bike to work.</i>
	Requesting advice using the second conditional	<i>What would you do?</i>
Semi-Modal Verbs		
<i>ought to</i>	Giving advice with a sense of moral obligation	<i>You ought to be nicer to your sister.</i>
<i>had better</i>	Giving advice with the sense that there will be a negative consequence if it is not followed	<i>You had better not park your car illegally.</i>
<i>have to</i>	Giving a recommendation with a strong sense of necessity, duty, or obligation	<i>You have to finish your assignment by 5 p.m.</i>
Imperatives		
[the base form of a verb]	Giving instructions or commands	<i>Take the bus.</i>
<i>don't</i> + [the base form of a verb]	Explaining behaviors to avoid	<i>Don't sit on the grass.</i>

Figure 2. Giving and Asking for Advice

advice was appropriate, but I noticed you started all your advice with ‘You should to’ You don’t need to use ‘to’ after ‘should.’ In the future, you could try using more than one modal verb, maybe ‘ought to’ or ‘have to.’” This feedback is positive; it focuses on specific strengths, errors, and areas of improvement; and it is succinct.

Be sure to remind students about effective feedback practices prior to beginning this activity. If your students aren’t used to giving each other feedback, you can prepare them to give helpful feedback by doing the following:

- Explain the features of good feedback mentioned above and lead a short discussion about what kind of feedback students find most helpful.
- Give examples of ineffective feedback and ask students how to improve it by following the three feedback guidelines.
- Provide a short feedback form or graphic organizer that students can use to develop comments for their peers. See Figure 3 for an example

feedback form that could be used in a Medical English context. This form can be adapted for use in any context by changing the feedback areas in the first column. For lower-level students, you can reduce the number of items in the first column, asking them to focus on only one or two feedback areas.

ADDITIONAL PROMPTS

All of the examples in the Procedure section relate to Medical English. Below are prompts you can use or adapt if you teach in a different context. You can also write your own prompts to connect to whatever content students have studied recently. Students can also write their own prompts, as mentioned in the Variation section.

English for Business

- Example Prompt: *Your boss has asked you to lead a new project, but you don’t have experience or expertise in the project’s area of focus. You think you might not be the best person for the position.*
- Prompt A: *You have just received a job offer. You like the job, but you think the salary is too low. You would like to negotiate for a higher salary but aren’t sure how to do so.*

- Use the chart below to keep track of your peers’ performance during the role play.
- Select the two to four most important areas to discuss with your peers.
- Start your feedback with a positive comment and end with a positive comment or suggestion for improvement.

Feedback Area	Strengths	Things to Improve
Grammar and vocabulary		
Pronunciation		
Nonverbal communication and professional behavior		
Professional knowledge		

Figure 3. Example feedback form

- Prompt B: *You have a great idea for a new business, but you need investors. You aren't sure how to convince people to invest in your business.*
- Prompt C: *One of your coworkers often takes credit for the work you did. You don't think this is fair, but you don't want to cause conflict in your office.*
- Prompt A: *You have made plans to visit your sick grandmother this weekend, but a friend just invited you to a concert by your favorite singer.*
- Prompt B: *A friend is always asking you to borrow money, and she never pays you back. She just asked for money to buy lunch, and she seems very hungry.*

English for Law Enforcement

- Example Prompt: *The mother of a high school student just called to report that her son did not come home after school and is not answering his phone.*
- Prompt A: *You just saw a car drive through a red light at an intersection and speed away. This is on a street where many pedestrians are walking.*
- Prompt B: *You are patrolling a busy part of the city when you see a man knock down an older woman, grab her bag, and run away.*
- Prompt C: *You receive a call from a local secondary school saying that a fight between two groups of students has broken out in the schoolyard.*
- Prompt C: *You stayed up late finishing your assignment for English class. Your friend says he didn't get a chance to finish and asks if he could copy your answers for the last half.*

General Advanced English

English for Academic Purposes

- Example Prompt: *You are working on a group project, but you are doing more work than your partners. You don't think this is fair.*
- Prompt A: *You have been assigned a paper that is due in a few weeks. You are expected to include at least ten academic sources, but you don't know how to find relevant books or articles.*
- Prompt B: *Your professor gave an assignment during the last class session, but you don't understand what you are supposed to do. You have asked two friends about the assignment and got very different answers from each of them.*
- Prompt C: *You are feeling ill, but you have a midterm exam tomorrow. You aren't sure if you will feel well enough to do well on the exam, and it is worth 30 percent of your overall grade.*
- Example Prompt: *You are visiting a nearby city with friends for the weekend. One of your aunts lives there, and your mother told her you would be coming to town. Your aunt invited you to her house for dinner, but you and your friends have other plans for the weekend.*
- Prompt A: *Your brother brought his new girlfriend home, and she was rude to you and your family. Afterwards, your brother said he plans to ask her to marry him, and he asked your opinion.*
- Prompt B: *Your cousin borrowed your car and got in a bad accident. He is okay, but the car is damaged beyond repair. You need to buy a new car, but you don't have the money. Also, your cousin's family is upset that you let him use your car.*
- Prompt C: *Your grandmother is ill and needs a family member to take care of her. She always supported your dream of studying and working in the city, and she is proud of you, but you are considering moving back to the small town where she lives to help her.*

General Intermediate English

- Example Prompt: *You asked a friend to return a library book for you, but the library says the book has not been returned. The library has charged you a fine.*

This activity was written by **Tabitha Kidwell**, who teaches academic writing at American University in Washington, D.C. She has taught languages and trained teachers on five continents. Her research interests focus on language-teacher education, particularly how language teachers are prepared to teach about culture.