

**Why You  
Talk So**

**White?**

**Eliminate the Behaviors  
That Sabotage Your  
Success**



**Sylvia Henderson**

## **Why You Talk So White?**

*Eliminate the Behaviors That Sabotage Your Success*

Sylvia Henderson

Copyright © 2005 Sylvia Henderson

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system without written permission from the publisher, except for the inclusion of quotations in a review.

Published by:  
V-Twin Press  
P.O. Box 588  
Olney, MD 20830-0588

Printed in the United States of America

Edited by Norma Collins

Cover design and typesetting by Ad Graphics, Inc.  
[www.TheBookProducer.com](http://www.TheBookProducer.com)

ISBN: 1-932197-00-1



## Lust for Language: Talkin' White

The ability to communicate clearly is the single most important key to success. This skill enables success in all personal and professional relationships. When two people do not communicate clearly with each other, then what is in their brains and in their hearts might as well stay inside. Another person cannot know fully what you think and feel if you do not communicate clearly.

Communicating clearly means that you convey your message in such a way that another person can interpret it correctly. In other words, they understand what you mean. You are responsible for making sure that they can accurately interpret what you are telling them.

“How is that?” you ask. “After all, how are you supposed to be responsible for how others interpret your messages? You can’t get inside their heads.” The answer is, because you are responsible.

The way to make sure that others interpret your messages the way you intend—especially in the professional world, or in the world in which you hope to succeed—is to speak up, speak clearly, be tactful, use correct English (in the United States of America), and good diction.



## Negative Messages

“**B**ecause he or she is x, they can’t do y.”

Remove negative messages from your speech and from your thoughts. Negative messages are words that not only beat you down but also those to whom you communicate. Negative messages reinforce what you cannot or will not do.

Negative messages surround us. Some messages are overt and obvious. Many others are covert and subtle. When a teacher consistently chooses one student over another, that teacher sends a message to the chosen student that he or she is special, thought of as good, smart, and likable. When that same teacher gives another student easier work than the others, or groups some students into a lower-achieving math group than others, they get the message that they are expected to remain at their low levels without being able to succeed at higher performance levels. Over time, the low achievers come to believe that they are inferior to other students or that they have no hope of reaching a higher level. Because they are not expected to achieve higher standards, they think they cannot do so, and eventually they stop trying to achieve.

Negative messages come to us early in life and are perpetuated throughout our lives. It seems easier to communicate negative messages than to create positive ones. How many more “don’t”

# THREE



## Names Can Often Hurt You

Geek. Nerd. Brainy. Wimp.  
Sissy. Fag. Scaredy-cat. Loser.  
Oreo. Uncle Tom. Turncoat.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me.”

How many of us grew up hearing our parents, teachers, or other adults quote this verse when we came home or ran into school crying after being called a name that was not nice? How many times, as children, did we place our hands on our hips and defiantly scream that verse in response to bullies or cliques who taunted us? How much

### **Columbine Massacre**

On April 20, 1999, in the small, suburban town of Littleton, Colorado, two high-school seniors enacted an armed assault on Columbine High School during the school day. The boys planned to kill hundreds of their peers. With guns, knives, and bombs, the two teens walked the hallways and killed. By the end of their rampage, twelve students, one teacher, and the two teenage killers were dead.

See: About.com Web site:  
History 1900s.

.....  
<http://history1900s.about.com/library/weekly/aa041303a.htm>



## Not Like “Us”

If there is anything that gets under my skin (no pun intended) it is hearing that someone is “not like us.” What, in this day and age of being aware of individuals over groups, encouraging creativity, and multicultural demographics, does being “like us” mean?

The demographics of “us” may include:

- Black , White, Yellow, Tan
- Tall, Short
- Dark, Light
- Young, Middle-aged, Old
- Heavyweight, Lightweight
- Full-bodied, Thin
- Straight hair, Curly hair
- Male, Female, Transgender
- Heterosexual, Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual, Asexual
- Highly educated, Minimally educated
- Joiner, Loner
- Rich, Middle-class, Poor
- White-collar, Pink-collar, Blue-collar, No collar
- Domestic Engineer (home maker), CEO



## The Family Thang

You can choose your friends but you cannot choose your family. I have heard this saying time and again from friends, colleagues, and strangers. As an only child, I enjoyed a primarily positive relationship with both my parents. Fortunately, I have had little cause to identify with the saying.

I appreciate what I had and have. Many of you are not so fortunate. While you cannot choose your blood-related family, you can choose how you interact and respond to your family and the individuals who comprise your family. You can choose to allow your family members to keep you from achieving your success or to help you achieve it.

Early in my life, I received a piece of advice that has served me well: “Never a borrower or lender be.” “Never” is a conditional term. While it is difficult to “never” anything, the intent of the advice is to forewarn against borrowing or lending. Borrowing money, books, living space, transportation vehicles, and tools typically seems to have the most potential for causing volatile situations. Make it a point to avoid lending any of these items, and do all you can to avoid asking to borrow them.

Multi-decade friendships have been known to dissolve after \$25 was borrowed and not repaid. Professional relationships have been strained over the accidental destruction of a borrowed book. Many family disputes have occurred when a



## Sell-Out

A close cousin to being “like us” is the concept of selling out—abandoning the culture from which you originated. Traitors to countries sell out as spies who give their nation’s secrets to other nations. People don’t sell out just because they seek to improve themselves and break the bonds that hold them back from succeeding in life. Those who accuse people of selling out are typically the very ones who are most envious of someone making forward progress in their lives.

One plea typically made of people who leave their places of origin to make their marks on the world is to come back to the old neighborhood and not forget from where they came. This is an appropriate request, in that, once we get to a certain stage in our own quest for success, we should seek ways in which to give back to the world by helping people who need our help. This is called philanthropy. Seldom will you read or hear about great leaders or success principles, without mention of philanthropic pursuits. A great person gives of themselves to others in one way or another.

Coming back to the old neighborhood may not realistically be the most prudent path to achieving or maintaining success. You may be more effective using the term theoretically, or in the broader concept of giving back to the world community as “the neighborhood.”





## The Homeboy Hang-up: It Ain't Just a Black Thing

Every generation seems to have its rebellious norms. Young people express their independence and challenge adult direction through their clothing, vehicles, music, appearance, and the company they keep.

As our communication channels expand and more opportunities are presented to us for learning how other cultures live, both domestically and globally, more groups of people take on the norms and behaviors of other groups. We see an example of crossover social norms when we look at suburban teenagers in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

When I walk through the parking lot of my local shopping mall on my way into the mall area, I hear loud, hip-hop music (music?) blaring from a nearby automobile. As the automobile cruises by me, I look at the driver and passengers, expecting to see a specific ethnic identity. Instead, I am surprised that the driver and passengers are not who I expected to see. Admittedly my surprise is a reflection of my own preconceived notions. The actual situation is a reflection of a variety of cultures intermingling with each other and being exposed to and adopting each other's norms and interests.

## EIGHT



# **Bitch. Ho. Dawg. And ...Whatever!**

When you first hear or watch a commercial, do you remember the advertised product? Or do you remember the commercial itself (if it is, indeed, memorable in one way or another)? How many times does it take for you to actually remember the advertised product? How many more exposures to the commercial does it take before you *trust* that the product or service will, in fact, be what it is advertised to be?

When we see or hear a message repeated frequently enough we eventually remember and believe the message. Advertisers hope that we will eventually act on the message in their favor by using their service or purchasing their product.

Advertisers craft the language of commercials and written ads according to carefully studied theories of how the brain works and how we behave when we respond to stimuli. Advertising language and images target specific demographics, people the advertisers want to convince and persuade. If a target audience receives focused messages long enough, they begin to believe them, and they then take the advertiser's desired action.

Move now to the language you use and hear every day. What messages do you send and receive? Are they positive or negative? A great deal of what I hear is negative language. Not



## Dis-Respecting: The Dissin' Dilemma

**N**ews flash: you *earn* the respect you receive. The respect you give others is a reflection of the respect that you deserve. The timeless Golden Rule is especially relevant here: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Display a pleasant attitude towards other people. Your attitude is contagious, and most people will respond to you with a pleasant attitude.

Glare at someone making hostile eye contact and the reflection you see will be hostile.

Speak to someone rudely, and they will treat you rudely in return. Pay attention to your tone of voice and physical movements. While you may say words that are not rude, you may be saying them in a way that communicates you are exaggerating or putting someone down. For example, the question “Who are you looking at?”—grammatically incorrect, but usually the way the question is phrased—is a harmless question when taken at face value. The simple answer is a name or description of the person at whom the responder is looking. When asked, using a challenging tone of voice with emphasis on the words “who” and “you,” the question becomes a challenge. (“*Who* are *you*



## Judge Me by What I Wear

**N**o matter how much we want to believe otherwise, we are judged by what we wear. There is no getting around it. You can be a millionaire, yet if you wear baggy clothes and a baseball hat turned backwards on your head, you will, upon first observation, be viewed and treated differently than if you are barely breaking even financially, yet wearing a business suit.

Think about it. When you first see someone you have never seen before, and before they open their mouths, on what do you base your initial assessment of that person? You make your own assessments on how that person looks. And what that person is wearing is a large measure of how he or she looks.

Remember this cold, hard fact the next time you go out in public and get annoyed at how someone else reacts to you. Perception directly influences reaction. If you perceive a situation as threatening or dangerous, you naturally react defensively. If you perceive a person as “like you” or “different from you,” however you define the terms, you initially react in whatever way you are programmed to react to that perception. Other people are no different, despite claims of open-mindedness and lack of prejudice. Initial reactions are primal. They include the fight-or-flight survival responses of basic human preservation. Our initial reactions are more-refined versions of the cave person’s fight-or-flight behaviors.



## Learn to Eat Out

You will, at some point, have need to eat meals outside your home or workplace in a restaurant with slightly more class than your typical fast-food or take-home meal venue. Business deals, job interviews, and just plain relationship-building between colleagues or managers and employees take place in restaurants where servers serve meals. How you carry yourself and perform when you eat out communicates a level of social awareness and etiquette that reveals more about you than your job qualifications.

This chapter falls short of being a comprehensive etiquette manual for fine dining. You need to find a resource that covers etiquette in detail for the finer points of dining out. The following points are etiquette highlights to get you started and help you avoid embarrassment when you dine out. Practice these points with your family, friends, or colleagues before you put yourself in a situation where you truly must impress someone.

- Dress appropriately. Call the restaurant to ask, or ask the person who invited you, about the appropriate dress code. You want to know whether the dress code is casual (sneakers, sandals, shorts, T-shirts, tank tops, and what I call beach-wear or vacation attire); business casual (jeans with blazer, slacks, sport jacket, dresses, suits without ties, col-



## The Bling Bling

The “stuff” you wear and carry with you—accessories, jewelry, and other accoutrements that complement (or detract from) what you wear and how you look—are referred to in hip-hop culture as bling. In the study of interpersonal communication, these objects are known as artifacts.

An artifact is an inanimate object related to you that communicates messages that support your primary message. Artifacts convey a message behind the message. For example, if you proclaim yourself to be a down-to-earth, simple, faith-abiding individual and I see that you are wearing a large, diamond-encrusted Christian cross on a sterling-silver chain of significant size, the message I receive from that accoutrement is that you value material possessions far more than you will admit. If you tell me that you come from humble origins and that your mission is to remain rooted to your origins while giving back to others who are less fortunate than you, yet you gesture with your hands, displaying multiple expensive rings and a watch, the message I interpret behind your humble message is that you enjoy showing off your good fortune and need other people to validate your riches. These may not be the messages you intend to convey, but they are the subtle messages I receive based solely on the objects you choose to wear in addition to your clothing.

## THIRTEEN



# Being Noticed: Be Careful What You Ask For

The end of a busy workday finds me on board a MetroRail train—the Washington DC area’s public transportation subway-elevated train system. I settle into a bench seat in a nearly empty train car and rest my head against the hard glass window above the seat. My attempt to grab a light doze ends abruptly when a group of people board the rail car after two station stops. My attempt to doze ends because the group that boards is shouting to each other in loud voices, laughing and cursing with the same intensity as avid fans at a basketball game. I turn my head towards the disturbance and see several other passengers with annoyed looks on their faces.

When I look at the group that is disturbing the entire car of passengers, I see individuals seated one to a bench seat, talking to each other and shouting at each other across the aisle and across an entire block of seats. *Why, I wonder, can the individuals in the group not sit next to each other in close proximity and talk to each other in public conversational tones? Must they draw attention to themselves in such a negative way? Must the group represent itself in the eyes of the other passengers on the train in such a negative light? Why the need to show off in public at all?*

# FOURTEEN



## Time

**M**y father taught me a lasting lesson about timeliness. He taught me that if I am to be on time for anything, I should plan to be ten minutes early. I have, to the chagrin of friends and family, held fast this lesson. It has served me in good stead in professional and civic circles. It is advice I pass on to all who seek to successfully fulfill their commitments to others.

Different groups of people jokingly refer to being late as operating on their kind of time—CP time (for Colored People’s time) is what I grew up hearing. I have heard reference to Gay People’s time, Young People’s time, Volunteer time, and other references to time that essentially mean the same thing—a general and unchallenged acceptance that being a few minutes late is expected. Routinely being late, even by a few minutes, is just not an acceptable practice in the professional arena. Not so obvious and more-quietly unacceptable is lateness in civic or social situations.

Eliminate routine lateness by planning to be ten minutes early for every time-based event in your life, whether for a job interview, doctor’s appointment, church service, movie, class, or dinner with friends. Do this by first paying attention to how long it takes you to prepare yourself and your family, if applicable, to leave your residence. Note, also, the average time





## Attitude

Self-help books—including this one—and motivational speakers advise you to maintain a positive attitude. This advice is easier given than practiced, as I am sure you have come to learn. When you face the daily challenges of life and routinely encounter negativity in the world, establishing and maintaining a positive attitude takes a conscious effort, requires focus and determination, and succeeds only through repeated practice and self-affirmations. Ask yourself every day: “What will I give in to, and what will I not give in to in order to be a success?”

You have to work constantly at shutting out the negativity you see, hear, and absorb. You might have to find a whole new set of friends and colleagues with whom to associate. You might have to walk away from family members who continually put you down. You might need to seek help with issues that keep you from getting beyond where you are today.

When you succeed at maintaining an attitude that is positive and success-oriented, you create change that ultimately leads to achieving the success you work to achieve. Note that I said the success you *work* to achieve. You cannot simply *want* to be successful, *wish* it to be so, and make it happen. You do need to work for it and work on it constantly.



## **Winning Isn't Everything, but It Sure Is Nice**

**T**he noble path to follow is to view life as a series of challenges to overcome in which there are no winners or losers. There are just people with their own challenges and levels of accomplishment over their challenges. If you truly believe and feel that this reflects your path and you are fulfilled by following it, I commend you and admire you.

Let's face it! I daresay I fall short of such a noble path. I happen to like winning and am not particularly thrilled at losing... consistently losing, anyway. I can handle not winning while learning what I need to do to change the outcome. Then I pursue the knowledge and skills I need to learn and put them into practice until I achieve the "win" that I seek.

Most of what you have read so far are success tips involving what you as an individual can do. The reality of most situations in which you find yourself involves other people. Little of what you do is in a vacuum in which the results you achieve are based solely on what you alone do. Teamwork at some level usually is required. How you perform as part of a team of people or in a group dictates how successful you will be or how quickly you will achieve what you want to achieve. How well



## Work Ethic

Observe an awards ceremony of any kind, whether related to sports, entertainment, discovery, politics, or otherwise. Award winners typically thank three entities in their lives—in varying order—when they accept their awards: the people who gave birth to or raised them, their faith, and their colleagues who contributed to their achieving the recognition they currently are receiving. When they thank the people who raised them, they say, in some way or another, “I thank you, [fill in person’s name] for encouraging me when I was growing up and for teaching me the value of hard work.”

The value of hard work represents a work ethic. Your work ethic is not simply your job description, career goals, or the tasks you perform. Your work ethic is part of your belief system, and reflects in your attitude and behavior. Your work ethic is how you feel deep down inside that you should behave and respond when it comes to deciding whether to work hard or not.

The old cliché about succeeding in life is that you have to work hard to succeed and that you will not succeed at something if you do not work at it. While this may be true conceptually, the cliché smacks of motivational fluff that’s nice to hear but difficult to implement.





## **Sylvia Henderson**

Chief Everything Officer (CEO)

### **Springboard Training**

P.O. Box 588

Olney, MD 20830-0588

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



Sylvia Henderson runs a business called Springboard Training. She conducts programs for organizations that want more effective leaders and for decision makers who want better outcomes.

She facilitates workshops and conference education sessions, trains, keynotes, develops educational tools, and authors program-related articles. Sylvia integrates principles of adult learning into her programs by actively engaging audiences in the learning process, using toys and props to generate interest and emphasize points, and weaving her avocation as a motorcyclist into analogies and metaphors that tie into messages targeting your needs.

Sylvia's real-world experiences include 20+ years as a corporate trainer, team leader, and manager, practicing the leadership, communication, and motivational skills she now presents in her programs. She also serves on numerous professional and community-based association boards and is president of a national association.

You will find frequently updated articles and other tools for your personal and professional development at the Springboard Training Web site. Contact Sylvia to discuss how she can meet your needs or those of your organization.