

# 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 meanings and words as you can before you read.

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.

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

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 – Gap Fill

🔊 <http://blog.esllibrary.com/2017/02/22/podcast-talking-to-technology/>

Fill in the blanks as you listen to the recording.

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

**ANSWERS:**