

Common Dialogue Blockers and Effective Responses

The following list specifies common dialogue blockers that function rhetorically to silence a perspective or divert the conversation away from a critical insight. Each of these common dialogue blockers is followed by possible responses that redirect the conversation back to the perspective to which the blocker was responding.

Explain Always	<p>Otherwise known as Perfectly Logical Explanations, explain-always make appeals to the rationale and authority of dominant narratives as a way to side-step critique without necessarily addressing the key issues at stake.</p> <p>Restore dialogue with:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) “That may be true; here’s how I see it... or another way to view it is...” 2) “There may be a number of factors that contributed to this situation. Another one that <i>does</i> have to do with identity might be...” 3) “You could be right that this one specific time it had nothing to do with prejudice. It feels so similar to so many other times I’ve experienced/witnessed when this type of thing was rooted in discrimination... it’s hard to know.”
Yeah, but...	<p>These blockers avoid engaging with the original perspective entirely, minimizing the importance of the insight the speaker voiced.</p> <p>Restore dialogue with:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) “You may not have intended this. When you say “Yea, but”, it can lead people to feel their perspective/ experience has been discounted.” 2) “I’m curious what you were hoping to communicate with that statement.”
That happens to me/my group, too	<p>This blocker attempts to diminish the specificity of the original perspective by stripping it of context and representing it as a universal experience. For example, “Everyone has a hard time catching a cab in New York, so racism has nothing to do with it.”</p> <p>Restore dialogue with:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) “This dynamic/situation does happen to other groups, too. The difference might be <i>how often</i> it happens to them, and <i>why</i> it happens to them. For instance: most white people have received bad customer service. It rarely happens to them because of their race, and it probably doesn’t happen to them as frequently.” 2) “How does it feel when it happens to you? How often does that happen? Why does it happen to you? Thinking through these situations can help you empathize with someone who experiences this all the time because of identity.”

<p>I know someone who...and they don't agree with you...</p>	<p>By appealing to the authority of someone else, this type of blocker attempts to undermine the authority of the original speaker, or at the very least attempt to undermine the speaker's identification of a pattern by suggesting that outliers disprove that a pattern exists, reducing systemic issues such as racism to individual experiences.</p> <p>Restore dialogue with:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) "There are likely people who don't agree with this. That doesn't mean this perspective is any less valid." 2) "Not all ___ feel the same. There may be people here who do agree and have had very similar experiences. Are you open to hearing more about these experiences?"
<p>That doesn't happen to me... (so it doesn't exist)</p>	<p>Much like "I know someone who... and they don't agree with you," this blocker attempts to reduce broader issues to individual experiences.</p> <p>Restore dialogue with:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) "I'm glad that it doesn't, and I hope you never do experience this. Unfortunately, this is what happened to __, and I've heard many other people describe all too similar experiences." 2) "It might not, and it could be so subtle that it's hard to even notice... here's what I've noticed in my life..."
<p>I don't see it that way... (therefore, it doesn't really happen...)</p>	<p>Similar to the two blockers above, this blocker attempts to use individual perspective to undermine the recognition of broader observable patterns. It is often spoken by a person of considerable privilege who trusts that if racism, for example, were as big of a problem as the original speaker suggested, they would have known about it by now.</p> <p>Restore dialogue with:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) "You might not have ever recognized this dynamic before or seen it happen. I can remember when I didn't know about this dynamic. After witnessing it happen so many times and not being able to find any other explanation, I now believe that there most often is some prejudice underneath this type of reaction."
<p>Don't you think that...</p>	<p>This blocker avoids directly communicating one's perspective by putting pressure on the original speaker. It is often used in the spirit of "playing devil's advocate" or an attempt to make the original speaker stumble on their own position without adopting any risk associated with directly communicating their own position.</p> <p>Restore dialogue with:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) "I'm wondering if you have a statement/perspective behind your question..." 2) "Do you have a specific example that illustrates what you're trying to ask or say?" 3) "I'm curious what <i>you</i> think about that..."

<p>You're overreacting... you're too sensitive</p>	<p>This type of blocker is a form of gas-lighting, suggesting that a speaker's emotions have no rational basis. It suggests that the problem isn't with the thing that caused the offense but with the person who was offended.</p> <p>Restore dialogue with:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) "You may not agree; some people feel very strongly about this. And it is important to respect them enough to acknowledge their perspective." 2) "Your intent might be to try to help or support; the impact of that statement is..."
<p>They are a good person... they never meant to do that...</p>	<p>This appeal to the character of the person whom the original speaker is critiquing emerges from a defensive belief that a critique of someone's behavior is a disparagement of their character and that intent matters more than impact.</p> <p>Restore dialogue with:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) "Many 'good people' do hurtful and harmful things. Regardless of the intent, this was the impact of their actions..." 2) "I didn't hear that they were questioning if they're good or bad; I think they are talking about the impact of their actions."
<p>That had nothing to do with (an "ism")! It's just their personality!</p>	<p>Another appeal to character, this blocker functions similarly to the two blockers above. It suggests that no harm was intended, and the person critiquing the behavior is being oversensitive to a person who is just old fashioned, aggressive, a flirt, or particularly brash, etc.</p> <p>Restore dialogue with:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) "That is a very valid perspective. I have observed/experienced this type of situation many times and have come to see it differently. Here's the way I see it..."
<p>That was not my intent! You misunderstood me!</p>	<p>While misunderstandings happen, and it is reasonable to want to have the chance to clarify intent, this blocker, like the one above, turns the attention away from the impact of what was said or done to the intent behind what was said or done. It can also quickly turn into claims of victimization where the harm done by "misunderstanding" is seen as outweighing the harmful impact of the supposedly misunderstood comment or action.</p> <p>Restore dialogue with:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) "We are very open to hearing your intent; first, I hope you can acknowledge the impact of your comment/actions." 2) "What was your intent? I hear your intent was..., and I hope you can also realize the impact was different than what you intended."