



Tin Can Telephone

International Telecommunications Union Phonetic Alphabet

Have you ever tried to spell your name or give your address over the phone? Was your message understood? Think about all the letters of the alphabet that rhyme or sound the same (D, B, T, C, P etc...). Why would this make radio communication difficult?

Imagine you are the radio operator on a fire and lives depend on people understanding exactly what is said. How would you do this?

The ITU Alphabet was developed for this reason. It makes communicating letters very easy to understand.

A – Alpha
B – Bravo
C – Charlie
D – Delta
E – Echo
F – Foxtrot
G – Golf
H – Hotel
I – India

J – Juliet
K – Kilo
L – Lima
M – Mike
N – November
O – Oscar
P – Papa
Q – Quebec
R – Romeo

S – Sierra
T – Tango
U – Uniform
V – Victor
W – Whiskey
X – X-ray
Y – Yankee
Z – Zulu

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Materials: You need **2 clean tin cans** (put masking tape around the rims for safety), 3 m of **string** (the kind used to tie meat is good, but a lighter weight is okay), **hammer** and a **small nail**.

Procedure: Using the hammer and nail, carefully punch a small hole in the centre of the bottom of each can. Feed the end of the string through the hole in one can, put it through until you have about 10 cm of string showing. Tie a big enough knot in the string so it will not pull back through the hole. Do the same thing with the other can. Pull the string tight. One person talks into the first can, the other listens into the other. Take turns.

Spell your name into the phone, or your street or postal code. The person listening should **write down** the information exactly as it is heard in the can. Was it understood clearly? Now try again using the **ITU Alphabet**. The message should be clear.

Discussion: Why do you think those words were chosen and not just any old words beginning with that letter?

Can you think of any other situations where this alphabet may be useful?