

### From phone box to mailbox

The telephone is a very important item of technology. Nobody could imagine living in a world without phones. Everywhere you go, you see people using their mobiles to talk to friends, send texts, read emails, pay for car parking tickets, even watch TV programmes. And all this has happened within less than a generation. This handy (!) gadget (BE: mobile phone, AE: cellphone) really has come a long way from the days of phone boxes, dials and operators.



Telephones are basically "old tech", of course. But two generations ago, when your grandparents were young, most people had to go to a phone box to make a phone call. You often had to queue, you needed coins, and in many countries, especially for long-distance calls, you needed the help of an operator. In Britain there were "party lines": Many people saved money by sharing a telephone line with their neighbours. If you picked up the phone and heard Mrs Smith talking about the new love in her life, you were supposed to put the phone down straightaway and not listen to all the details. (Supposed to ...) And the phones were very low-tech: most of them had dials, not buttons, there were no loudspeakers, so only one member of the family could hear when Grandma phoned, and, worst of all, if you as a teenager did not want everybody to hear what you were saying, that was a mega problem. How far from the rest of your family could you go with a phone that always had a ... cable?!

At the start of the new millennium, mobile phones had been around for a while. They were no longer the heavy "bricks" of the 1980s and 1990s. Actually, they were smaller and lighter than today's smartphones. But they couldn't do much. You could phone, of course, and send texts, but internet access was rare and very expensive. Pay-as-you-go (prepaid) hadn't really started. You usually paid per minute, with the costs appearing on your monthly bill. Unlimited minutes and texts were still a thing of the future.



And today? Imagine visitors from the past, say from 1970, walking around a big city today. They would look for phone boxes – and find none, or, if they were very lucky, they might find one of those open public telephones on a windy corner. They would think it strange that everybody had either earache ("I wonder why everybody has a hand on one ear", psychological difficulties ("they're all talking to themselves") or had problems with their hands ("they keep tapping one hand with the other"). They would try to call out to somebody to ask the way, but wouldn't be heard ("must be those earplugs they all seem to have got from the doctor's") and would soon want to go back to the 1970s. Back to the time when *mail* was what the (American) mailman/mailwoman brought every morning, when *texts* were what you read at school, when a *mailbox* could only be what the British call a letter box, when *twitter* was what birds did and when the whole country watched the same TV programme at the same time. (For example films in which people at the scene of a car crash try to organize help: "There's been a terrible accident. Quick, where's the nearest phone box?")

How did we survive without mobiles? And what will the next generations' "must-haves" be? Can we not already do all we want with our mobiles? – No! Never! We're never happy with our technology for long. And if we were, I'd be writing this with this



Item Artikel, Gegenstand; handy praktisch; gadget technische Spielerei; Gerät; dial Wählscheibe; operator Telefonist/in, Vermittlung; basically im Grunde genommen; coin Münze; long-distance call Ferngespräch; straightaway sofort; button Taste, Knopf; loudspeaker Lautsprecher; millennium Jahrtausend; access Zugang; rare selten; unlimited unbegrenzt; either ... or entweder ... oder; to tap (leicht) klopfen; earplug Ohrstöpsel; doormat Fußmatte

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#### 1 Find the words in the text.

- Easy to use, useful: \_\_\_\_\_
- Americans say "wait in line": \_\_\_\_\_
- Somebody who connects (connected!) phone calls: \_\_\_\_\_
- A way of entering somewhere or something: \_\_\_\_\_
- The Germans call it "Flatrate": \_\_\_\_\_
- Where British people put their letters: \_\_\_\_\_

#### 2 True, false or not in the text?

- Two generations ago you sometimes needed the help of an operator.
- At that time, everybody had to share a telephone line with their neighbours.
- But some phones had loudspeakers.
- In the 1980s and 1990s mobile phones were very heavy.
- In the 1970s most people had a walkie-talkie.
- The writer thinks we will always expect better technology.

	True	False	Not in the text
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			

#### 3 Make lists. Write ...

- ... what you can do with a mobile phone.
- ... what you think is "old tech".
- ... what you would like to be able to do with a mobile phone one day.
- ... what modern things you could do without.

#### 4 Together with a partner, choose one of the discussion topics below.

Plan and act a role play in class.

- Two neighbours: You've just discovered that your neighbour has been listening to your "party line" conversations. Remember: you're in the 1970s!
- Grandad and grandchild: Your grandad has an old "brick" telephone that he wants to keep as a souvenir. You can get a lot of money for it on the internet.
- Two friends: You and your friend are visiting your English aunt in London. You're at a great party and you want to stay till the next morning. Discuss the best text (not more than 160 characters) to send her to ask for permission.

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