



## Avoiding Ambiguity

Welcome to Digimar videos!

In this video, we will focus on ambiguity in VHF communication.

After watching this video, you will be able to understand the concept of ambiguity in VHF communication, and identify how abbreviated forms and homophones can create ambiguity, ultimately leading to misunderstanding.

This video uses examples from real-life scenarios. They may have been kept in their authentic form to support learning, even when they include mistakes or deviate from maritime communication standards.

### What is ambiguity?

Ambiguity arises when a message can have more than one interpretation. In VHF communication, ambiguity can lead to confusion, delays, or even safety risks. Understanding how ambiguity occurs is key to effective communication.

### Ambiguity in abbreviated forms

Abbreviations save time but can cause confusion. Let us look at an example. Digimar VTS asks the vessel if they are carrying any dangerous goods.

VTS	VESSEL
Any DG onboard?	
	Please say again. Over.
Do you carry any dangerous cargo? Over.	No, Sir. We are in ballast condition. Over.

Many abbreviations are so commonly used in normal speech they are more familiar than the original, unabbreviated form (e.g., radar).

Abbreviations in VHF communication may be used if:

- they are quicker and easier to use than the full word (e.g., ETA/ETD in place of Estimated Time of Arrival/Estimated Time of Departure);
- they are sufficiently well known to avoid any confusion and subsequent confirmatory transmissions; and
- there is any confusion, the full term is readily substituted.

### Ambiguity from homophones

Another source of ambiguity are homophones, i.e., words that sound alike but have different meanings. Consider the following example:



VESSEL	VTS
We are <b>clear</b> of the channel. Over.	Copy. You are still <b>near</b> the channel. Over.

The ambiguity arises here as the word *clear* is pronounced similarly to the word *near*, and because the word *clear* can mean ‘leaving the channel’ or ‘the absence of obstacles’.

Significant risks can occur if the incorrect use of “won’t” (meaning “will not”) is overlooked. Consider the following example:

VESSEL 1	VESSEL 2
You <b>won’t</b> pass ahead of me, right?	Yes, I <b>want to</b> pass ahead of you.

The ambiguity arises because “won’t” and “want” are pronounced similarly. Importantly, “won’t” and “want” are homophones but have opposing meanings, and can pose a significant navigational risk.

### Best practices to avoid ambiguity

To reduce ambiguity, always follow these practices:

1. Use precise and standardized phrases.
2. Avoid abbreviations unless context is clear.
3. Confirm critical information, especially when homophones are involved.
4. Read back instructions to ensure mutual understanding.
5. Pay attention to exchanges between vessels that use “won’t” instead of “will not”.

In the VTS Voice Communications and Phraseology published by the International Association of Lighthouse Authorities you will find more suggestions on how to avoid ambiguity on pages 16–17.

We hope that this video has been useful and that it will help you to successfully complete the chatbot exercises available at: <https://digimar.si/category/digital-tools/chatbots/>.

Thank you for watching and stay tuned for more DigiMar videos on effective maritime communication.



Co-funded by  
the European Union

