
Topic ► Introduction to 1 Communication

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this topic, you should be able to:

1. Explain what is meant by the word “communication” in general;
2. Identify the main elements in the communication process;
3. Differentiate between oral and written communication;
4. Highlight some basic tips on writing; and
5. List the common pitfalls to avoid in written communication.

► INTRODUCTION

This topic gives you an overview of communication and introduces you to the main elements in the communication process. It also highlights the importance of writing clear, positive messages and offers you some basic tips and guidelines on this form of communication so that you may become more proficient in the kind of writing needed at home as well as in the college and workplace. You will also learn about some of the common pitfalls which may impede the effectiveness of written communication.

1.1

WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

Communication is a learned skill. However, while most people are born with the physical ability to talk, not all can communicate well unless they make special efforts to develop and refine this skill further. Very often, we take the ease with which we communicate with each other for granted, so much so that we sometimes forget how complex the communication process actually is.

1.1.1 Elements in Communication

Have you ever wondered why some people can communicate so well while others fail to get their message across? What are the elements that must be present in the communication process before it can be successful and effective?

Well, communication has been defined as the act of giving, receiving or exchanging information, ideas and opinions so that the “message” is completely understood by both parties. Look at Figure 1.1 below. The illustration shows clearly that in a communication process, there must be a sender who speaks or sends a message, and a receiver who listens or receives the message.

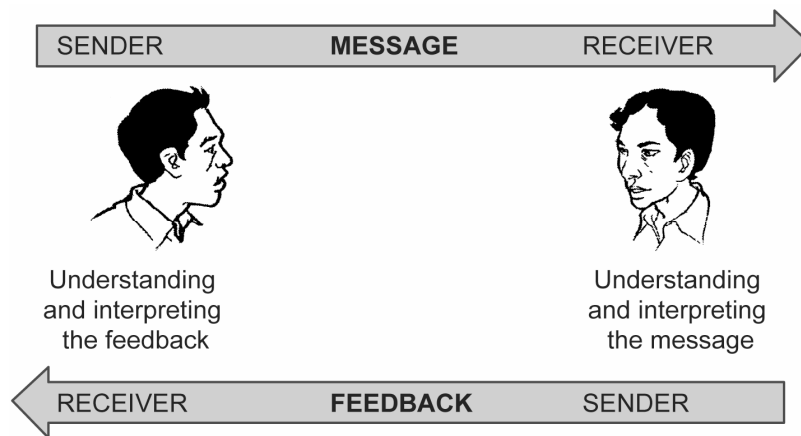


Figure 1.1: The communication process

The sender sends a message with a certain intention in mind. The receiver of the message tries to understand and interpret the message sent. He then gives feedback to the original sender, who in turn interprets the feedback. This process, repeated continuously, constitutes communication.

Clearly, there are several major elements in the communication process – a sender, message, channel, receiver, feedback, context. There is both a **speaker’s intention** to convey a message and a **listener’s reception** of what has been said. Thus, listening skills are just as important as speaking skills in order for communication to be effective.

This means that if you want to get your message across accurately, you need to consider these three things:

- The message;
- The audience or receiver; and
- How the message is likely to be received.

A message is only considered successfully communicated when both the sender and the receiver perceive and understand it in the same way. If this does not happen, then there may be a breakdown in communication, which may ultimately stand in the way of you realising your goals, either personally or professionally.



ACTIVITY 1.1

The meaning of communication lies in the way that it is received.

Do you agree with the above statement? Discuss with your friends during the next tutorial session.

1.1.2 Factors Affecting Communication

As mentioned earlier, effective communication is a two-way process but there are a number of factors which may disrupt this process and affect the overall interpretation and understanding of what was communicated. Myriad problems can pop up at different stages of the communication process. These can relate to any of the elements involved – the sender, message, channel, receiver, feedback and context. It is therefore important to understand some of the factors that affect communication so that you can try to get your message across with minimal misunderstanding and confusion.

Below are some possible problem areas that may turn out to be barriers to effective communication:

(a) **Status/Role**

The sender and receiver of a message may be of equal status within a hierarchy (e.g. managers in an organisation) or they may be at different levels (e.g. manager/employee, lecturer/student, business owner/clients). This difference in status sometimes affects the effectiveness of the communication process.

(b) **Cultural Differences**

Cultural differences, both within or outside the organisation (for example, inter-departmental dealings and communication with outside organisations or ethnic minorities) may impede the communication process.

(c) **Choice of Communication Channels**

Before you choose your communication channel, you should ask yourself whether the channel is appropriate for a particular purpose and the person/receiver you have in mind. Sending messages via inappropriate channels can send out wrong signals and end up creating confusion.

(d) **Length of Communication**

The length of the message also affects the communication process. You need to be sure that it serves the purpose and is appropriate for the receiver. Is the message too long or too brief?

(e) **Use of Language**

Poor choice of words or weak sentence structure also hampers communication. The same goes for inappropriate punctuation. The two sentences below illustrate clearly how different placement of punctuation can change the entire meaning of a sentence:

Woman, without her, man is nothing.
Woman, without her man, is nothing.

(f) **Disabilities**

Disabilities such as impaired sight, dyslexia and poor mental health can also be barriers to good communication, and should be taken into consideration when evaluating the effectiveness of the communication process. You may need to use hearing aids, sign language, magnifying systems, and symbols to alleviate problems caused by disabilities.

(g) **Known or Unknown Receiver**

Whether the receiver is known or unknown to you also plays a major role in determining the effectiveness of your communication. A known receiver may be better able to understand your message despite having insufficient information as both of you probably have common experiences and a shared schemata. An unknown receiver, on the other hand, may require more information and time to decode the message.

(h) **Individual Perceptions/Attitudes/Personalities**

Sometimes, the method of communication needs to take into consideration the receiver's personality traits, age and preferred style. The elderly and children, for example, have different communication needs and preferences when compared to young adults. Is the receiver of your message a visual, auditory, or kinesthetic sort of person? How do you think they will react to your message? Can you adapt your communication style to suit theirs?

- (i) **Atmosphere/Noise/Distracted**
Our surroundings can sometimes pose as barriers to effective communication. A noisy place (a party, for instance) usually puts a strain on oral communication as both the sender and the receiver need to put extra effort to get the message across and ensure that it is understood clearly and correctly.
- (j) **Clarity of Message**
Is the message conveyed in a clear or ambiguous manner?
- (k) **Lack of Feedback**
Feedback is important as it enables confirmation of understanding to be made by both parties. The lack of feedback can sometimes create problems as it can lead to uncertainty and confusion.



ACTIVITY 1.2

Your father is not keen on your decision to study medicine in the United Kingdom. How can you persuade him, bearing in mind the barriers to communication that you might encounter?

When choosing the most appropriate channel of communication, you should heed the following:

- (a) Consider all aspects of the communication process (interpretation, understanding, feedback).
- (b) Think carefully about possible barriers.
- (c) Evaluate the complexity of the message and decide how it might be best conveyed.
- (d) Ask yourself these questions:
- Who? – Characteristics of the receiver(s).
 - Why? – Purpose of the communication.
 - What? – Content of the message.
 - How? – Oral, written, visual or a combination of all three.
 - Where? – Location of the meeting.
 - When? – Timing/time limit/expected response time.

- (e) Determine whether you are meeting or writing to the people concerned. Is the communication via face-to-face interaction, telephone, letter, e-mail, memo or a report?
- (f) Decisions about the most appropriate channel of communication also depend on factors such as cost, time, confidentiality, convention, urgency and whether written documentation is required.

1.2

DEFINING WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

As mentioned earlier, communication can be oral or in written form. What is the difference between these two main types of communication?

Oral communication involves conveying ideas, thoughts or information via a spoken language. In written communication, however, information is exchanged using written symbols, that is, via words and sentences. Written communication is the sharing and exchanging of written symbols between individuals or groups. It is also the presentation of ideas in a coherent manner in written form.

Written communication can take place via:

- Letters;
- Faxes;
- Email;
- Reports;
- Memos; and
- Advertisements.

You can acquire good writing skills through extensive reading, note-taking and listening. In order to communicate effectively via writing, you need to have a sound grounding in grammar and vocabulary so that you can present ideas, together with supporting details, in a unified and coherent manner.

1.3

WHY WRITTEN COMMUNICATION?

The next question that arises is: “Why do we need to communicate in written form? Why is there a need to document our work or keep written records?” The answers to these questions are many and varied.

For one thing, once you put something into writing, the message is there for posterity, so that others can read it again and again, whenever they like. This is

especially useful for research purposes where you need to build up on existing pools of knowledge.

Writing also means that information can be stored and transferred from individual to individual and group to group without relying on memory. Through the written word, records can exist independently of the writer.

The written document also helps you to keep abreast of development in whatever project you are involved in as it provides an avenue not only for the sharing of ideas or opinions, but also for the presenting and defending of viewpoints.

Written communication can also serve as a form of acknowledgement – proof that something has been done in case verification is needed later.

Sometimes, documenting work helps to clarify thoughts and thinking processes as it allows you to mull over things slowly, at your own pace. It is “thinking made public”.

So, what must be documented? Any idea, logic, argument or phraseology derived from an outside source must be documented. In academic writing, you must give credit for all borrowed materials, for example, quotations, references, information from primary and secondary sources, facts, data, statistics, opinions, ideas and interpretations which you have gathered from your reading and research.

Such material must be acknowledged and cited, irrespective of whether you have paraphrased, summarised or quoted directly. The only exception is what is loosely termed “general knowledge” or “common knowledge”, which is information or ideas generally known and accepted by everyone, including the writer and the audience.

You must cite and document all ideas and arguments borrowed from an outside source.



ACTIVITY 1.3

Why do you think formal work should always be documented?

1.4

TIPS ON WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

“We all use language to communicate, express ourselves, get our ideas across and connect with the person to whom we are speaking. When a relationship is working, the act of communication seems to flow relatively effortlessly. When a relationship is deteriorating, the act of communicating can be as frustrating as climbing a hill of sand.”

(Chip Rose)

As the above quote shows, writing is a complex process. There is no short cut to being a good writer. If you want to write well, you need to first of all, read extensively. You must read not just books on writing but magazines, websites, newspapers, newsletters and others – anything that you can get your hands on.

Do not be overly concerned with grammar and spelling when you first start out. You can always fix those later. What is important is to put your thoughts down on paper first. The next section will outline some tips and guidelines to help you get started.

1.4.1 The Writing Process

Successful written communication requires careful thought and planning. It should contain comprehensive information about a specific subject and yet be clear, correct and easy to read.

A well-written piece of work requires you to pay attention to the following three stages in the writing process:

- Planning;
- Writing; and
- Editing.

(a) **Planning**

To write a good report, you need to plan what you want to say. After you have decided on what you want to say, list down all the points and arrange them in a logical and suitable sequence. This approach will ensure the clarity of your message and help you to avoid omitting relevant details.

(b) **Writing**

The writing stage requires careful planning. It includes a pre-writing stage where you gather all the information necessary to ensure that there is substance to your writing. Start writing in simple and plain English and move from something concrete to something more abstract and expressive.

In order to improve your writing skills, you need to practise writing in the target language everyday until you are able to express yourself clearly and meet the needs of your reader. Once you start writing, the words, sentences, paragraphs and lay-outs become writing tools which you can use to convey your message concisely, courteously, and confidently.

Sebranek, Meyer and Kemper (1996) summed it up in a nutshell when they say that writing is like "...basketball and juggling, (it) is not a God-given mysterious talent given only to a chosen few but, rather, a skill that gets better with practice, practice that involves increased challenges and, therefore, risk."

Adopt a plain, straightforward style when writing as this makes your work easy to understand and reduces the chances of misunderstanding arising from ambiguity.

(c) **Editing**

The third stage in the writing process is editing. It is crucial to check for grammatical errors and ensure that there is smooth language flow. The longer the report, the more editing is usually required. It can be useful to get someone else to read through the written piece for you.

1.4.2 Pitfalls to Avoid

Basically, there are four types of errors that you must try to avoid in written communication, as shown in Figure 1.2.

(a) **Confusing Language**

Confusing language refers to words that mislead the reader and cause communication breakdown. It may also result in barriers being erected between the writer and the reader. Avoid words which are ambiguous, bombastic, vague, sexist, exaggerated, inflated and archaic. Remember to write in plain, good English.

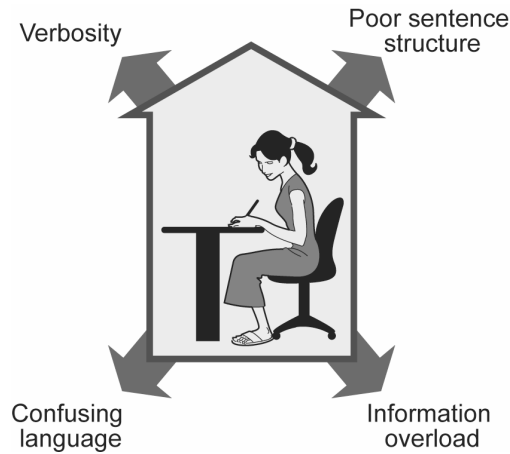


Figure 1.2: Common errors in writing

(b) **Verbosity**

Verbosity means the use of too many words, so much so that they interfere with understanding. If verbosity persists, it may antagonise, confuse, and bore the reader.

Check out the examples below:

- (i) *Adnin was the winner! (OK)*
Adnin won! (Better)
- (ii) *The rugby ball flew all the way up, over to the centre field. (OK)*
The rugby ball sailed to the centre field. (Better)
- (iii) *The stability and quality of our financial performance will be developed through the profitable execution of our existing business, as well as the acquisition or development of new businesses. (Too long, too wordy, passive voice.)*

We will improve our financial performance not only by executing our existing business more profitably but by acquiring or developing new businesses. (Better, shorter, active voice.)



ACTIVITY 1.4

In writing, why do you think it is better to omit needless words? Discuss.

(c) Poor Sentence Structure

Poor sentence structure often leads to fragmented writing and choppy sentences that impede understanding. Try to keep your sentence(s) short and concise to ensure that they are correct, logical and easy to understand. Word order is important for meaning. Remember that words should be structured in such a way that those which precede should be in accordance with those that follow.

**ACTIVITY 1.5**

The following examples have misplaced modifiers*. Re-order the words to make them acceptable, presentable and grammatically correct.

- *For sale. Antique desk suitable for lady with thick legs and large drawers.*
- *Enraged cow injures farmer with an axe.*

(Ratner, B.D., 2004)

(*A modifier is an adjective or adverb that changes the meaning of a noun or verb. It is an optional element in a sentence.)

(d) Information Overload

Information overload means giving so much information till you feel overwhelmed and confused. This may cause frustration and cast doubts on the writer's credibility. Therefore, as a writer, you must decide on the type of information required and present this to produce a clear, concise and relevant piece of written work.

**ACTIVITY 1.6**

Tell me and I'll forget.
Show me and I may not remember.
Involve me and I'll understand.

In your opinion, how does this saying relate to the art of written communication?

1.5**CHALLENGES IN WRITTEN COMMUNICATION**

Although some people are intimidated by writing, there are times when writing is perceived as the best way to communicate and to get your message across. Some people consider written communication to be more concrete and “solid”, as there is less room for errors and mistakes when compared with other forms of communication like oral communication.

1.5.1 New Technologies

Written communication, however, poses challenges such as spelling, grammar, punctuation, style of writing, and actual wording. Thankfully, today’s technology makes writing memos, reports, letters, and proposals a breeze by providing tools that can check and even correct misspelt words and incorrect grammar.

Unfortunately, these tools are not foolproof and will require your attention, thus making knowledge in this area important. Currently, you can even send messages electronically via e-mails or networking technologies such as SMS. Irrespective of the form that written communication takes, you need to adhere to certain accepted norms when communicating; otherwise, others might not be able, or want to, communicate with you.

1.5.2 When Others Fail to Respond

In order to get messages conveyed effectively, you must understand what your message is, who you are sending it to, and how it will be perceived. You must also be able to carefully consider the circumstances surrounding your communication such as the situation, context, culture, and whether it is formal or informal.

Sometimes, people may not respond to your communication for the following reasons:

- Their own poor writing skills (for example, language deficiencies).
- Too much information in the text/message.
- Too many grammatical errors and mistakes.
- Barriers between the sender and receiver (cultural, status, role).
- Message is not clear or precise.

- Wrong choice of delivery channel/ format.
- Past experiences (e.g. treatment received).
- Documents not structured, messy or not laid out well.



ACTIVITY 1.7

Think of possible reasons why people have failed to respond to your written communication in the past. Share this with your friends at the next tutorial session.

1.5.3 Asking the Right Questions

If a channel of communication is blocked or has come to a standstill, you may need to pause a moment, and re-evaluate the situation. You have to find out where things have gone wrong. One way to start doing this is by posing questions to yourself:

- Where did it go wrong?
- Why was the message not understood or misinterpreted by the receiver?
- Was the timing bad?
- Did I use the correct channel to deliver the message?
- Are there many errors or mistakes in the document?

The answers to these questions may shed some light on where the communication had gone wrong.

In order to make it easy for others to understand your communication and respond accordingly, you should make sure that you provide the following:

- A clear indication of your purpose.
- Accurate and objective information.
- Appropriate headings and sub-headings.
- A suitable order of information.
- Concise and precise instructions.
- Desired action clearly spelled out.

Upon receiving the written communication or report, the reader should understand the contents of the report clearly; know precisely what action needs to be taken; how to do it; when to do it; and in what manner it should be done.

SUMMARY

- This topic highlights the importance of communication, its meaning, and the relationship between the message, sender and receiver.
- Communication is defined as the giving, receiving or exchanging of information, opinions or ideas so that the message is completely understood by everybody involved.
- A two-way process, communication comprises the following elements – the sender, message, channel, receiver, feedback, and context.
- Barriers to effective communication include status and roles, cultural differences, choice of communication channel, length of communication, disabilities, use of language, individual perceptions, noise and distraction, clarity of message, and feedback.
- There are three important stages to producing good written communication:
 - Planning;
 - Writing; and
 - Editing.
- The pitfalls to avoid in written communication are using confusing language, verbosity, poor sentence structure, and information overload.
- All borrowed materials must be cited.
- People sometimes fail to respond to written forms of communication for various reasons, for instance, the message is not clear, the language is weak or there is too much information.
- The receiver of any written report should be able to understand the contents of the report, know precisely what action needs to be taken, how to do it and in what manner it should be done.



KEY TERMS

Communication channel	Sender
Information overload	Status/roles
Receiver	Verbosity



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