

Chapter 2



Developing good communication practice

After studying this chapter, you will:

- understand the foundations of good communication practice
- understand the range of purposes people have when they try to communicate
- recognise the need to spell out to yourself your own communication purposes
- recognise the importance of planning what you are to say before you say it
- develop a sense of the presence of the reader whenever you write.



There are two things to do before you engage in sending any form of communication — written, spoken, illustrated or any other kind. First, decide what you want to say and, second, work out a plan how to say it. This may seem very obvious when seen here in cold print but it is advice that very few people put into practice. When most people want to say something to others they simply plunge in, composing their message as they go along. The result is a speech or talk that rambles around the issue, taking digressions and making points that are not quite relevant to the issue. At times the speaker is lost for words and the conclusion is often limp and unconvincing.

When writing essays and reports, most people make the same mistake. They start by writing the first few points that come into their head and then simply add on points as they come to mind. This approach guarantees that writing will be a tortuous process in which the author is often lost for direction and has to agonise over how to fit his or her successive ideas into the mess that already lies there on the page. This experience of writing is slow and painful. It always involves several drafts and re-drafts and persuades many people that they have not got ‘the talent’ for writing. In reality, though, they lack not talent but technique. With a different approach, writing would come much easier to them and would also be a much more pleasant experience for their readers.

People who have good communication skills take a quite different approach. Before they put their fingers to the keyboard or step up to the microphone, they decide exactly what they want to get across to their audience and they work out a plan for the message that will do the job. The message and the plan can vary enormously: it might be an elaborate and complicated scene-by-scene plot for a novel set out in note form on a huge wall chart; or it might be three main points that someone at a meeting decides inside his or her head while waiting to get the nod from the chair. But whatever the size or difficulty of the communication, the basic principles remain the same: know what you are going to say and plan how you will say it before you do anything else.

Before they put their fingers to the keyboard or step up to the microphone, people who are good communicators decide exactly what they want to get across to their audience and they work out a plan for the message that will do the job.

Determining your purpose

People always communicate for some reason, but for many people their reasons are not always clear, even to themselves. Communications have a very wide range of purposes. Some of them are:

- to get across some information or knowledge
- to persuade someone to take an action
- to express sympathy or support
- to persuade people to reject one set of ideas for another
- to entertain or amuse an audience
- to make someone feel confident about themselves
- to gain a victory over an opponent
- to rouse people to excitement
- to lull them into a sense of security.

Most messages contain not one of these purposes but several, and some will be more important than others. Despite this complexity, the simple act of asking ‘What is this message intended to do?’ will in most cases produce a fairly clear answer. The real problem is not that the answer is difficult but that too few people bother to ask the question. The result is that their message lacks direction from the outset. This makes it much harder to write or to say what you want. It also makes it much more likely that the person on the receiving end will misunderstand what you mean and what you intend.

Let’s take an example of a familiar kind. You work with someone who has a way of doing one small job, say filing new order forms, that is mildly irritating to everyone else in your department because it involves them all in some unnecessary extra work. Apart from this, the person is a valued employee and a pleasant work mate. You have to tell this person to do the filing a different way. If you think about this message for any time at all, you should realise that it needs to do two jobs at once. It must persuade the person to act differently but it must also reassure him or her that you are only being critical about this one point, and not giving a broad hint that the person is no longer wanted at all. This dual purpose means you would approach this person with quite a different communication to the one you might have used if you had not stopped to think.

Or take a different example. You have to write to the head office of your organisation to ask for funds to expand one of your activities. If you did not stop to question your purposes you might think your letter adequate if it does two things: (1) justifies the expansion, and (2) requests the money. However, in a case like this a third purpose may well be necessary, that of explaining to your boss the nature and purpose of the new activity itself. Once you have started to clarify to yourself what your purposes are, it might become apparent that some people in head office, who are not very familiar with the detail of your job, do not have a very clear idea of what you are doing. You will realise you cannot assume that everyone reading your request and being party to the decision will have this knowledge. Trying to justify the expansion of an activity that remains unexplained to those you are approaching is not the best way to get what you want.

It cannot be emphasised too strongly that you should always start the communication process by asking the basic question, ‘What am I trying to do?’ At times, this may seem a trite and unnecessary question, but it never is. Once you have clarified your purpose or purposes, you have eliminated the most likely sources of wasted effort and confusion, for both yourself and your audience.

If you fail to identify your purposes, your message lacks direction from the outset. This makes it much harder to write or to say what you want. It also makes it much more likely that the person on the receiving end will misunderstand what you mean and what you intend.

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Developing a plan or structure

By far the most important part of any form of communication is its structure. This is the order in which ideas are presented. The structure is the process which moves the audience from ignorance to understanding of what you want to communicate. To do this effectively it is essential to develop your

Key points 2

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- Before engaging in any form of communication decide what you want to say and work out a plan how to say it.
- Once your purpose is clarified, you have eliminated the most likely cause of wasted effort and confusion, for both yourself and your audience.
- It is essential to develop your structure before you start. Know what you are going to say before you say it.
- You can improve your writing by planning chapters, paragraphs and even sentences in advance.
- Efficiency is a basic principle. The better your first draft, the less rewriting you will have to do.
- Use illustrations often, but keep them subordinate to words.
- When writing, think about the 'reader over your shoulder'.

Questions for discussion

- 1 What are the dangers of not determining your purpose before you start speaking or writing?
- 2 Why is it important to work out a plan or structure before you try to communicate a message?
- 3 What are the advantages and disadvantages of writing as a communications medium?
- 4 Why is it important to retain a sense of the presence of the reader whenever you write?

Exercises

- 1 Draw up a plan of at least ten chapters for your autobiography. Then select one of these chapters and prepare a plan for it.
- 2 Draw up a plan for a five minute speech about your family background, life history and personal interests to be given to a group of people who do not know you.
- 3 Watch a political interview on a current affairs TV program. Make a note of the issues discussed in the interview which are not explained clearly enough for the average viewer to follow. Write what questions you think should have been asked to make these issues more understandable.