

Communication for Professionals

Planning Effective Communications

Cultural Context



Culture and Communication

Culture refers to the values, beliefs, attitudes, accepted actions, and general characteristics of a group of people. We often think of culture in terms of nationality or geography, but there are cultures based on age, religion, education, ability, gender, ethnicity, income, and more. Consider cultural contexts as you plan and draft your communications. And realize that your consideration occurs through your own cultural lens.



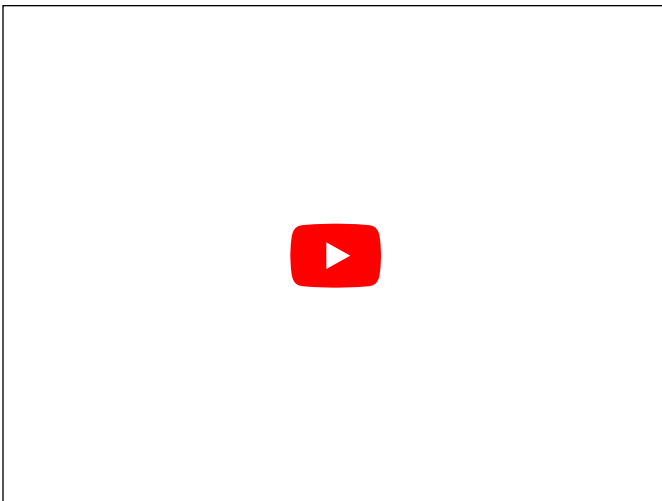
According to Bovee and Thill:

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The interaction of culture and communication is so pervasive that separating the two is virtually impossible. The way you communicate is deeply influenced by the culture in which you were raised. The meaning of words, the significance of gestures, the importance of time and place, the rules of human relationships—these and many other aspects of communication are defined by culture. To a large degree, your culture influences the way you think, which naturally affects the way you communicate both as a sender and receiver....In particular, your instinct is to encode your message using the as-


sumptions of *your* culture. However, members of your audience decode your message according to the assumptions of *their* culture. The greater the difference between cultures, the greater the chance for misunderstanding.^[1]

Although it may seem that cultural variables are too plentiful to ever master, simply being aware of cultural contexts and trying to develop fuller cultural awareness, as well as fuller self-awareness of your own assumptions and cultural lens, can help you as you analyze communication situations. The video below offers tips intended to help you communicate with more cultural awareness.



One major aspect to consider in your analysis of various national and social cultures is the concept of high-context vs. low-context cultures. High-context cultures, such as those in Asia, Greece, France, Africa, South America, or Southern India (which the narrator describes in the

video above), value personal, trusting relationships. In high-context cultures, you might expect discussion of family, health, and other common topics before entering into the topic of a professional discussion. High-context cultures rely on non-verbal communications as well as verbal (e.g., there is a specific physical protocol for presenting business cards in Japan). High-context cultures also emphasize group as opposed to individual work, and members of high-context cultures are often comfortable with physical closeness in face-to-face business situations.

In contrast, low-context cultures, such as those in Northern Europe, Scandinavia, and North America, value directness and task-oriented business relationships. In low-context cultures, you might expect quick focus on the task with relatively little context-setting; the task itself provides the context. Low-context cultures rely on more on verbal communications as well as task-oriented protocol, as opposed to non-verbal communications, in order to move toward goals (e.g., minutes of last meeting, overview of agenda, discussion of agenda items in order, maintaining the time allotted to each item). Low-context cultures also emphasize individual as opposed to group work, and members of low-context cultures usually maintain their physical space in face-to-face business situations. 

For an interesting discussion of becoming aware of diverse cultures, which includes examples of high- and low-context cultures, view the following video.

How Culture Drives Behaviours | Julien S. Bourrelle |...



The next video offers additional ways of considering cultural context, in terms of power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, “masculine” and “feminine” traits, and long-term orientation.

International Business - Cross-Cultural Communica...



TRY IT

This short video offers a few simple scenarios that deal with cultural context. Pause the video at each multiple-choice question and choose your answer before viewing the explanation.

cultural Differences-Team Challenge 2



As you can see, there are many aspects to cultural context to consider when planning professional communications. The main idea in analyzing cultural context is to try to understand the lens through which your audience experiences the communication, to strengthen the focus on creating and receiving a message respectful to the audience.

Applying an Understanding of Culture to Communications

In general, when considering cultural context, consider the following factors as you create communications:

- **Amount of Detail Expected** – High-context cultures such as Japan, China, and France provide little details in their writing. Since a high-context culture is based on fewer, deeper relations with people, there are many unspoken social rules and understandings within the culture. People in these cultures expect readers to have enough knowledge about the communication before they begin reading. In areas such as instructions, for example, it is assumed

that readers have enough background knowledge or experience to avoid detailed explanation of every step or tool used. People in low-context cultures such as the United States, Great Britain, and Germany assume readers know very little before they begin reading. Low-context cultures have a greater number of surface-level relations; rules are more explicitly defined so others know how to behave. People in low-context cultures expect detailed writing that explains the entire process. You should consider the cultural audience for your communication so that they are not insulted by an excess or lack of information.

- **Distance Between the Top and Bottom of Organizational Hierarchies** – Many organizations in the United States and Western Europe have great distances with many layers between top-level management and low-level workers. When the distance is large, writing to employees above and below tends to be more formal. In cultures where companies are more flatly organized, communication between layers tends to be less formal.
- **Individual versus Group Orientation** – Many Asian and South American cultures are collectivist, meaning people pursue group goals and pay attention to the needs of the group. In individualistic cultures such as the United States and Northern Europe, people are more interested in personal achievement. Understanding individual vs. group orientation will help you know whether to emphasize “we” or “you/I” in your communications.
- **In-person Business Communications** – There are several differences that one should be aware of when meeting a colleague with a different cultural background. For instance, some cultures stand very close to each other when talking and some prefer to have distance. Some cultures make eye contact with each other and some find it disrespectful. There are also certain cultures where an employee will not disagree or give feedback to their superior. It is

seen as disrespectful. In these cultures, it is usually unacceptable to ask questions.

- **Preference for Direct or Indirect Statements** – People in the United States and Northern Europe prefer direct communications, while people in Japan and Korea typically prefer indirect communications. When denying a request in the U.S., a writer will typically apologize, but firmly state that request was denied. In Japan, that directness may seem rude. A Japanese writer may instead write that the decision has not yet been made, delaying the answer with the expectation that the requester will not ask again. In Japan, this is viewed as more polite than flatly denying someone; however, in the United States this may give false hope to the requester, and the requester may ask again.

- **Basis of Business Decisions** – In the United States and Europe, business decisions are typically made with reference to objective points such as cost, feasibility, timeliness, etc. In Arab cultures, business decisions are often made on the basis of personal relationships. As a communicator, you should know if a goal-oriented approach is best, or if a more personable communication would be preferred.

- **Interpretation of Images, Gestures, and Words** –

Words, images, and gestures can mean different things in different cultures. Knowing how images will be interpreted in another culture is crucial before



sending documents to unfamiliar audiences. For example, hand gestures are interpreted differently around the world, and graphics showing hands should generally be avoided. Also, religiously affili-

ated wording can cause offense by readers. “I’ve been blessed to work with you” and comments that lend themselves to religious references should be avoided in the business setting.

Learning About Cultures



Even though it’s important to know as much about your audience as possible before starting a communication, it’s often difficult to determine cultural context: cultural biases, assumptions, and customs. To use a really simple example, professionals in the U.S. write the date with the month, day, and year, but professionals in other countries write a date with the day, month, and year. Not knowing this can cause confusion. Research as many resources as feasible if you know you’ll be commun

cating with people from specific cultures, since understanding expectations and differences reduces the amount of miscommunication. Your audience will appreciate your knowledge of their customs.

Coworkers are also a great source of intercultural information. People familiar with you and the company provide the best information about your audience’s expectations. If coworkers have previously written to your audience, they may be able to offer insight as to how your writing will be interpreted. Previous communications kept by your company can also be a useful tool for determining how to write to another culture.

Note that there are countless resources dealing with cultural context and communication, from the Peace Corp’s [Culture Matters Workbook](#), to websites such as Syracuse University’s Disability Cultural Center’s [Language Guide](#), to various websites on specific cultures. Research your audience as much as time allows to learn more about their cultural contexts.

TRY IT

1. Read a [sample letter](#) based on an actual letter sent to a director of an online college program from an organization in Indonesia. What can you determine about the author of the letter? What is the author's purpose? What parts of the letter help you understand the author's purpose? Consider how the author's style of communication is like or unlike business letters that you are familiar with. What specific similarities and/or differences do you observe?
2. Then do some brief research on Indonesian culture. If you search the Internet for "doing business in Indonesian culture," you'll find multiple short articles. Read one. What are some main characteristics of doing business in this culture that you see exemplified in this letter?
3. Consider the following:
 - What specific characteristics of Indonesian culture do you need to know in order to respond appropriately, with this particular cultural context in mind?
 - If you were to respond, compose one specific sentence or strategy that you might take, given what you learned from the sample letter and your brief research.





Analyzing Your Own Cultural Lens

In addition to considering characteristics of cultures other than your own, realize that people receive information and make meaning through their own cultural lenses. Your cultural lens is the set of values, expectations, beliefs, actions, etc. with which you are familiar. In fact, you may be so familiar with understanding things through this lens that it's hard to realize your own assumptions and attitudes. Think of a situation in which you were out of your usual context, e.g., celebrating a holiday with your new partner's family for the first time, moving to a different city, or even moving from one department to another at your workplace.

Experiencing a new situation may have made you more aware of some of your own values, attitudes, and beliefs. When analyzing cultural context, try to develop awareness of your own **cultural lens** as well as characteristic values, attitudes, and beliefs of other cultures.

For example, look at the images of Indonesia included at the end of the last Try It exercise on this page. Because this text is written from the lens of western, and particularly U.S. culture, and because the purpose of the exercise was to highlight differences in culture, images were chosen that

highlighted place differences between Indonesia and the U.S., playing to the cultural lens through which U.S. residents might view Indonesia (e.g., exotic pagoda architecture, hot climate and rice production). Consider how you might have reacted had you viewed these images of contemporary Indonesia at the end of the exercise.



If you're intrigued by the concept of cultural lens, the following video offers fuller explanation of the concepts of culture, cultural lens, and organizational culture. Note that you do not need to delve this deeply into cultures when you're doing a situational analysis as a prelude to creating a professional communication; however, the information may interest you.

Cultural Lens Overview - part 1 - summer 2017



[1]Bovee, Courtland and John Thill. Business Communication Today. 13th ed. Boston: Pearson, 2016, pgs. 65-66.



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