Foundations of Communication

When you've finished this chapter, you will be able to:

- Describe the nature of communication.

- Define key components in the communication process.

- Explain the characteristics of communication.

- Assess messages using the principles of ethical communication.

- Develop a personal communication improvement plan.

MindTap

Start with a quick warm-up activity.

Jennifer was running late. She stood at the kitchen counter eating a piece of toast while preparing a grocery list she would use on her way home from work. She noticed that the Weather Channel was forecasting heavy rain and wondered where she left her umbrella. She added "get umbrella" to her shopping list. Jennifer quickly texted Greta, a coworker she was driving with to work today, to ask if Greta had an extra one she could borrow.

As she was texting Greta, Jennifer's 16-year-old daughter, Hailey, bounded into the kitchen and asked, "Mom, can I get a tattoo? Kayla and Whitney are both getting them and we want to match."

"Not now, Hailey. I'm late for work. We can talk about it tonight."

"But mom. . . ."

"Yes, Hailey, yes, alright. We'll talk more tonight. . . ." Jennifer exclaimed as she headed to the door. Just then she heard her computer signal an incoming e-mail message. Jennifer thought, "I'd better just get going. I can check it on my phone on the way to pick up Greta."

As Hailey waited for the school bus, she quickly texted her friends, "Awesome! My mom said YES!"

2

MindTap

Read, highlight, and take notes online.

APPLY IT

Consider a time when someone started reading or sending texts on their smart phone while you were talking to them. How did that influence your opinion of them? Of their interest in you? Of the value they place on your relationship?

MindTap

Photo 1.1 What are your career goals? How might effective communication help you achieve them?

Can you relate to Jennifer? We live in an era when multitasking has become a norm. Part of that multitasking includes communicating both with ourselves and with others. Like Jennifer, we get ready for work or school while checking voice messages and Facebook pages, answering texts and e-mails, as well as eating breakfast, monitoring the forecast, and getting dressed.

Some argue that the same technology that was supposed to simplify life has actually made it more complex. In fact, communication today extends across interpersonal, group, and public communication settings through flat print, face-to-face, and mediated technology-enhanced channels. Jennifer, for example, composed her grocery list on *a piece of paper* while learning about the weather forecast on *television* and texting Greta on her *smart phone*. Then, when Hailey tried to talk to her *face to face*, Jennifer was so distracted that her communication signals implied to Hailey that she had granted Hailey permission to get a tattoo.

Unfortunately, one of the negative consequences of having so many modes through which we can communicate is the false sense of competence it gives us about our ability to have several conversations at once. This chapter and the ones that follow focus on *why* it's important to improve our communication skills and *how* to do so. As a result, we can avoid the negative consequences of ineffective communication that can hurt our personal and professional relationships.

At its core, communication is the attempt to satisfy the innate human desire to share our thoughts, feelings, and ideas with others. We do this through the messages we send and receive every day. Messages are made up of a combination of verbal symbols (words), nonverbal cues (behaviors), and visual images.

New technologies provide new channels and new challenges for communicating. For example, e-mailing, texting, tweeting, blogging, Skyping, and Facebooking are expanding our ability to communicate with distant others around the world. With these opportunities, however, comes an intensified need to tailor our messages for the different channels we use and the different audiences those channels might address.

What this book intends to help you learn, then, is how to communicate effectively (1) in various settings such as interpersonal encounters, small groups, and public forums, as well as (2) using a variety of channels ranging from flat print to face-to-face to technology-driven ones.

Our ability to make and keep friends, to be good members of our families, to have satisfying intimate relationships, to participate in or lead groups, and to prepare and present formal speeches and presentations depends on our communication skills. Time and time again, surveys and studies conclude that employers of college graduates seek oral communication, teamwork, and interpersonal skills (College Learning for the New Global Century, 2008; Darling & Dannels, 2003; Hansen & Hansen, 2007; Hart, 2006; Young, 2003). Unfortunately, these same employers also say communication skills are the ones many new graduates lack (Hart, 2010). Thus, what you learn from this book can not only improve your personal relationships, but also increase your ability to get a job and be successful in your chosen career (Photo 1.1).

We begin this chapter by describing the nature of communication and the communication process followed by several characteristics of communication and ethical considerations. Finally, we explain how to become a more competent communicator by developing and following your own personal communication improvement plan.

The Nature of Communication

Communication is a complex process through which we express, interpret, and coordinate messages with others. We do so to create shared meaning, to meet social goals, to manage personal identity, and to carry out our relationships. At its core, then, communication is about messages.

Messages are the verbal utterances, visual images, and nonverbal behaviors used to convey thoughts and feelings. We refer to the process of creating messages as **encoding** and the process of interpreting them as **decoding**. So when a toddler points to her bottle and cries out "Ba-ba," her message (comprised of a nonverbal gesture—pointing—and a verbal utterance—"Ba-ba") expresses her desire for her caregiver to give her the bottle of milk. How the caregiver responds, however, depends on how he or she decodes the message. The caregiver might respond by handing her the bottle or by saying, "Sorry, cutie, the bottle is empty." Either response is also a message. **Feedback** is a response message that indicates how the initial message was interpreted.

Canned Plans and Scripts

But how do we actually go about encoding (or forming) and decoding (or interpreting) messages? We begin based on our canned plans and scripts. A **canned plan** is a "mental library" of scripts each of us draws from to create messages based on what worked for us or others in the past (Berger, 1997). A **script** is an actual text of what to say and do in a specific situation. We have canned plans and scripts for a wide variety of interactions like greeting people, making small talk, giving advice, complimenting or criticizing someone, and persuading others. Each canned plan may contain many scripts tailored to different people and occasions. For example, we may have a "canned greeting plan" that contains a different script for greeting a friend, family member, co-worker, or supervisor. It may also include tailored scripts for doing so in person, over e-mail, or on social media. Patricia, for example, typically begins e-mail messages to her friends by greeting them with their first name. However, when she writes to her professors, she always begins with "Dear Professor." Doing so helps convey respect for their authority.

Suppose you spot a good friend sitting at a table across the room from you at a restaurant. How might you say hello? How might you tailor your greeting if that person is a romantic partner, work supervisor, co-worker, or classmate?

We develop canned plans and scripts from our own previous experiences and by observing what appears to work or not work for other people, even fictitious people we see on TV or in movies (Frank, Prestin, Chen, & Nabi, 2009) (Photo 1.2). When our canned plan doesn't appear to include a good script for a specific situation, we search for scripts that are *similar to* the current situation and customize an appropriate message. For example, if you have never met a celebrity, you probably don't have a greeting script for doing so in your canned plan mental library. Suppose you are waiting to board a plane and spot a famous athlete, singer, or actor also waiting to board. What would you say?

communication
the process through which we express, interpret, and coordinate messages with others

messages
the verbal utterances, visual images, and nonverbal behaviors used to convey thoughts and feelings

encoding
the process of putting our thoughts and feelings into words and nonverbal behaviors

decoding
the process of interpreting another's message

feedback
responses to messages

canned plan
a "mental library" of scripts each of us draws from to create messages based on what worked in the past

script
an actual text of what to say and do in a specific situation

APPLY IT

What do you say when you greet (a) a stranger you pass on the sidewalk, (b) a casual friend or classmate, (c) a romantic partner, or (d) a family member? In what ways are your scripts similar and different? Why?

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As you figure that out, you are likely to draw from similar scripts and customize them for the person and occasion.

The point here is that we don't usually start from scratch to form messages. Instead we recognize what type of message we want to form, search our mental canned plan library for an appropriate script, and then customize it to fit the unique parts of the current situation. All of this mental choosing typically happens in nanoseconds. We also use our canned plans and scripts to interpret messages from others. Obviously, the larger your canned plan library is, the more likely you will be to form appropriate and effective messages, as well as understand and respond appropriately to the messages of others.

Photo 1.2 Sometimes we develop canned plans and scripts by observing fictional characters or people on TV. What television programs might have influenced your canned plans and scripts? Why and how?

communication context
the physical, social, historical, psychological, and cultural situations that surround a communication event

physical situation
location, environmental conditions (temperature, lighting, noise level), distance between communicators, seating arrangements, and time of day

social presence
a sense of "being there" with another person virtually

social situation
the nature of the relationship that exists between participants

historical situation
the background provided by previous communication between the participants

Communication Context

According to noted German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, the ideal communication situation is impossible to achieve, but considering context as we communicate can move us closer to that goal (Littlejohn & Foss, 2010). The **communication context** is made up of the physical, social, historical, psychological, and cultural situations that surround a communication event.

The **physical situation** includes the location, the environmental conditions (temperature, lighting, noise level), and the physical proximity of participants to each other. The physical situation may also be virtual as we interact with others via social media on our computers, tablets, and smart phones. The physical situation can influence how we interpret the messages we send and receive. We are likely to be most successful when we are present with those with whom we are interacting, either literally, as in face-to-face situations, or virtually. The term we use for creating a sense of "being there" with another person virtually is **social presence**. One technology-enhanced communication channel that does not lend itself to conveying social presence is e-mail. As a result, e-mail messages can often be misinterpreted, cause hurt feelings, or damage relationships. Jonas, for instance, gasped when he read the e-mail from his professor that seemed to be accusing him of cheating. He began to fire off a reply but stopped and made an appointment to speak in person so as to avoid the misinterpretation that can come from the lack of social presence provided via e-mail.

The **social situation** is the nature of the relationship that already exists between the participants. The better you know someone and the better relationship you have with them, the more likely you are to accurately interpret their messages and to give them the benefit of the doubt when a message seems negative.

The **historical situation** is the background provided by previous communication between the participants. For instance, suppose Chas texts Anna to tell her he will pick up the draft of the report they had left for their manager. When Anna sees Chas at lunch later that day, she says, "Did you get it?" Another person listening to the conversation would have no idea what the "it" is to which Anna is referring. Yet Chas may well

reply, "It's on my desk." Anna and Chas understand one another because of their earlier exchange.

The **psychological situation** includes the moods and feelings each person brings to the encounter. For instance, suppose Corinne is under a great deal of stress. While studying for an exam, a friend stops by and asks her to take a break to go to the gym. Corinne, who is normally good-natured, may respond with an irritated tone of voice, which her friend may misinterpret as Corinne being mad at him.

The **cultural situation** includes the beliefs, values, orientations, underlying assumptions, and rituals that belong to a specific culture (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2009). Everyone is part of one or more cultural group (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, age, sex, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability). When two people from different cultures interact, misunderstandings may occur because of their different cultural values, beliefs, orientations, and rituals. The *Communicating in the World* section in this chapter describes how the cultural ritual of mourning is changing in the United States today.

psychological situation
the moods and feelings each person brings to a conversation

cultural situation
the beliefs, values, orientations, underlying assumptions, and rituals that belong to a specific culture

COMMUNICATING IN THE WORLD

Mourning in the United States, 21st-Century Style

Mourning is a universal human communication process of celebrating the life of someone while grieving his or her death. Mourning rituals and traditions vary by culture and religion and change over time. So it is not surprising that mourning in the United States in the 21st century is adapting past practices to modern life.

Today in the United States, for instance, many of the rituals traditionally associated with funerals and memorial services often take place online. Increasingly, one or more family member may prepare a commemorative Web page that memorializes the life of the departed. For example, an article in the *Boston Globe* recounted the story of Shawn Kelley, who created a "moving tribute" to his brother Michael, a National Guardsman killed in Afghanistan. The 60-second video features a slide show of images of Michael growing up while quiet classical music plays softly and a voice-over recounts Michael's attributes and interests. Shawn reported that it made him feel good to be able to "talk" about his brother, and over a year later he was still visiting the site to watch the video and to view the messages that continue to be left by family members and friends (Plumb, 2006). The popularity of such Web sites can be summarized in the fact that Legacy.com, the most popular site for posting online memorials, boasts of more than 24 million unique visitors each month (http://www.legacy.com/ns/about/).

How did you/do you mourn when someone you care about dies? How do you share messages with others in the process?

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Communication Settings

The communication setting also affects how we form and interpret messages. **Communication settings** differ based on the number of participants and the level of formality in the interactions (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, pp. 52–53). These settings are intrapersonal, interpersonal, small group, public, and mass.

Intrapersonal communication refers to the interactions that occur in our minds when we are talking to ourselves (Photo 1.3). We usually don't verbalize our intrapersonal communication. When you sit in class and think about what you'll do later that day or when you send yourself a reminder note as an e-mail or text message, you are communicating intrapersonally. A lot of our intrapersonal communication occurs subconsciously (Kellerman, 1992). When we drive into the driveway "without thinking," we are communicating intrapersonally on a subconscious level. The study of intrapersonal communication often focuses on its role in shaping self-perceptions and in managing communication apprehension, that is, the fear associated with communicating with others (Richmond & McCroskey, 1997). Our study of intrapersonal communication focuses on self-talk as a means to improve self-concept and self-esteem and, ultimately, communication competence in a variety of situations.

Interpersonal communication is characterized by informal interaction between two people who have an identifiable relationship with each other (Knapp & Daly, 2002). Talking to a friend between classes, visiting on the phone with your mother, and texting or chatting online with your brother are all examples of interpersonal communication. In Part II of this book, our study of interpersonal communication includes the exploration of how we develop, maintain, improve, and end interpersonal relationships.

Small-group communication typically involves three to 20 people who come together to communicate with one another (Beebe & Masterson, 2006; Hirokawa, Cathcart, Samovar, & Henman, 2003). Examples of small groups include a family, a group of friends, a group of classmates working on a project, and a workplace management team. Small-group communication can occur in face-to-face settings, as well as online through electronic mailing lists, discussion boards, virtual meetings, and blogs. In Part III, our study of small groups focuses on the characteristics of effective groups, ethical and effective communication in groups, leadership, problem-solving, conflict, and group presentations.

Public communication is delivered to audiences of more than 20 people. Examples include public speeches, presentations, and forums we may experience in person or via mediated or technology-driven channels. For example, when a president delivers the State of the Union address, some people may be in attendance on location, others watch on TV or the Internet, and still others view it later in the form of televised broadcast snippets, digital recordings, or Internet videos. The Internet is also becoming the medium of choice for posting job ads and résumés, for advertising and buying products, and for political activism. In Part IV, our study of public communication focuses on preparing, practicing, and delivering effective oral presentations in both face-to-face and virtual environments.

communication setting
the different communication environments within which people interact

intrapersonal communication
the interactions that occur in a person's mind when he or she is talking with himself or herself

interpersonal communication
informal interaction between two people who have an identifiable relationship with each other

small-group communication
three to 20 people who come together for the specific purpose of solving a problem or arriving at a decision

public communication
one participant, the speaker, delivers a message to a group of more than 20 people

Photo 1.3 We communicate intrapersonally when we talk to ourselves, reflect about people and events, and write in a journal. What are some examples of your own intrapersonal communication activities today?

Mass communication is delivered by individuals and entities through mass media to large segments of the population at the same time. Some examples include newspaper and magazine articles and advertisements, as well as radio and television programs and advertisements. The bonus chapter on mass communication and media literacy focuses specifically on effective mass communication in both flat print and digital modalities.

The Communication Process

The **communication process** is a complex set of three different and interrelated activities intended to result in shared meaning (Burleson, 2009). These activities are message production, message interpretation, and interaction coordination. They are affected by the channels used and by interference/noise.

Message Production

Message production is what we do when we *encode* a message. We begin by forming goals based on our understanding of the situation and our values, ethics, and needs. Based on these goals, we recall an effective canned plan script and adapt it to the current situation.

Message Interpretation

Message interpretation is what we do when we *decode* a message. We read or listen to someone's words, observe their nonverbal behavior, and take note of other visuals. Then we interpret the message based on the canned plan scripts we remember that seem similar. Based on this interpretation, we prepare a feedback message.

Interaction Coordination

Interaction coordination consists of the behavioral adjustments each participant makes in an attempt to create shared meaning (Burgoon, 1998) (Photo 1.4). Shared meaning occurs when the receiver's interpretation is similar to what the speaker intended. We can usually gauge the extent to which shared meaning is achieved by the sender's response to the feedback message. For example, Sarah says to Nick, "I dropped my phone and it broke." Nick replies, "Cool, now you can get a Droid™." To which Sarah responds, "No, you don't understand, I can't afford to buy a new phone." Sarah's response to Nick's feedback message lets Nick know he misunderstood her. The extent to which we achieve shared meaning can be affected by the channels we use and by the interference/noise that compete with our messages.

Channels

Channels are both the route traveled by the message and the means of transportation. Face-to-face communication has three basic channels: verbal symbols,

Hero Images/Getty Images

mass communication
communication delivered through mass media to large segments of the population at the same time

APPLY IT

How much of your communication each day is intrapersonal versus interpersonal, versus public versus mass communication? What are some examples of each you've engaged in so far today?

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communication process
a complex set of three different and interrelated activities intended to result in shared meaning

message production
what we do when we encode a message

message interpretation
what we do when we decode a message

interaction coordination
the actions each participant takes to adjust their behavior to that of their partner

channel
the route traveled by the message and the means of transportation

Photo 1.4 In what ways have you engaged in interaction coordination with an advisor, instructor, or supervisor?

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emoticons
textual images that symbolize the sender's mood, emotion, or facial expressions

acronyms
abbreviations that stand in for common phrases

media richness
how much and what kinds of information can be transmitted via a particular channel

synchronicity
the extent to which a channel allows for immediate feedback

interference/noise
any stimulus that interferes with the process of achieving sharing meaning

physical noise
any external sight or sound that distracts us from the message
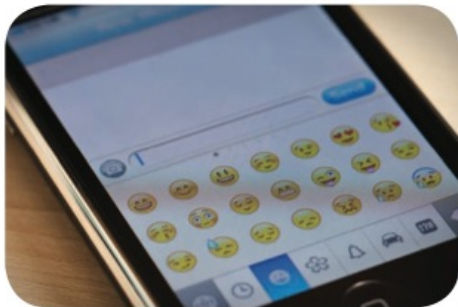
psychological noise
thoughts and feelings that compete with the sender's message for our attention

APPLY IT

What symbols do you use to express emotions virtually for anger? Frustration? Laughter? Excitement? Pride? Why?

MindTap

nonverbal cues, and visual images. Technologically mediated communication uses these same channels, though nonverbal cues such as movements, touch, and gestures are represented by visual symbols like **emoticons** (textual images that symbolize the sender's mood, emotion, or facial expressions) and **acronyms** (abbreviations that stand in for common phrases) (Photo 1.5). For example, in a face-to-face interaction, Barry might express his frustration about a poor grade verbally by noting why he thought the grade was unfair, visually by showing the assignment along with the grading criteria for it, and nonverbally by raising his voice and shaking his fist. In an online interaction, however, he might need to insert a frowning-face emoticon (☹) or the acronym "POed" to represent those emotions and nonverbal behaviors.

With so many technology-driven channels available for communicating today, we must now thoughtfully select the best channel for our purpose, audience, and situation. We can do so by considering media richness and synchronicity.

Media richness refers to how much and what kinds of information can be transmitted via a particular channel. Face-to-face is the richest channel because we can hear the verbal message content and observe the nonverbal cues to interpret its meaning. Sometimes, however, communicating face-to-face is either impossible or not a good use of time. The less information offered via a given channel, the leaner it is. The leaner the channel, the greater the chances are for misunderstanding. For example, texts and "tweets" are lean because they use as few characters as possible whereas videoconferencing channels such as Skype and FaceTime are richer because we can observe nonverbal cues almost as much as in a face-to-face setting.

Synchronicity is the extent to which a channel allows for immediate feedback. Synchronous channels allow communication to occur in "real time" and asynchronous channels allow for "lag time." Synchronous channels allow for immediate feedback to clarify potential misunderstandings whereas asynchronous channels provide time to careful craft and revise our messages (Condon & Cech, 2010). Generally, you should use a rich channel if your message is complicated, difficult, or controversial. It is also usually a good idea to use a synchronous channel in these cases. You might choose an asynchronous channel, however, if you could benefit from having extra time to carefully organize and word your message. On the other hand, use a lean channel when you merely want to convey simple and emotionally neutral information. Figure 1.1 illustrates the continuum of communication channels available today.

Photo 1.5 What emoticons and acronyms do you use in text messages and why?

Thomas Weightman / Alamy

Interference/Noise

Interference, also referred to as **noise,** is any stimulus that interferes with the process of achieving shared meaning. Noise can be physical or psychological. **Physical noise** is any external sight or sound that distracts us from the message. For example, when someone enters the room, a cell phone goes off, or someone near us is texting while a speaker is talking, we might be distracted from the message. Or, when communicating online, we might be distracted when we get a Facebook or Twitter notification. **Psychological noise** refers to the thoughts and feelings we experience that compete with the sender's message for our attention. So when we daydream about what we have to do at work or feel offended when a

Figure 1.1

Continuum of communication channels

speaker uses foul language, we are being distracted by psychological noise. Recall how Jennifer in the opening vignette was distracted by both physical and psychological noise while attempting to multitask getting herself ready for work. That's why it is a good practice to close social media sites and power off smart phones while engaged in important face-to-face or online conferences, meetings, or classroom discussions.

A Model of the Communication Process

In summary, let's look at a graphic model of a message exchange between two people presented in Figure 1.2. The process begins when one person who we will call Andy is motivated to share his thoughts with another person, Taylor. Andy reviews the communication situation, including the communication context, and sorts through the scripts in his canned plan library to find one he thinks will be appropriate. Based on this script, he encodes a customized message and shares it with Taylor.

Taylor decodes the message using her understanding of the situation and matching it to scripts in her canned plan library. She might misinterpret Andy's intended meaning because she is distracted by physical or psychological interference/noise, or because her scripts don't match Andy's. Taylor encodes a feedback message using a script from her canned plan library as a guide. She then shares her feedback message and Andy decodes it. If Taylor understood what Andy was saying, he will extend the conversation. If, on the other hand, Andy believes Taylor misunderstood his meaning, he will try to clarify what he meant before extending the conversation. Finally, the communication process is not linear. In other words, both Andy and Taylor simultaneously encode and decode verbal and nonverbal messages throughout the message exchange.
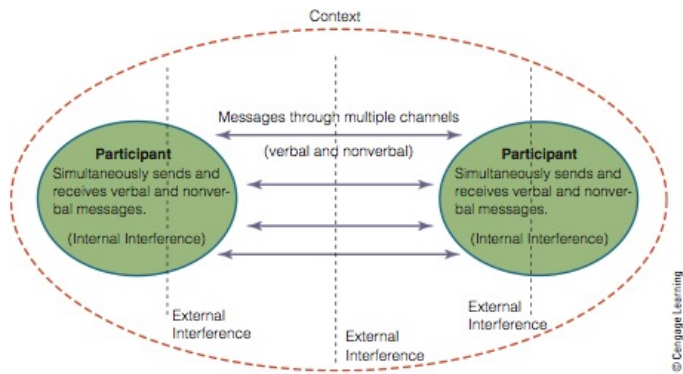

Figure 1.2

Model of communication