



Communication is an essential life skill. Students often confuse communication skills with public speaking skills. While public speaking is a valuable skill, good communication requires a variety of other tools.

Communication skills include speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Successful college students will learn and be comfortable using multiple communication skills and methods with a variety of constituents, including faculty, administration, parents, employers, and their peers. This chapter will help you get started on communicating in a healthy way especially when it comes to conflict mediation. Specifically, we will discuss:

## **Communication Skills**

- Active Listening
- Verbal Communication
- Written Communication
- Working in Teams

## **Communication Methods**

- Written
- Email
- Face to Face
- Social Media

## **Communication with Various Constituents**

- Communication with University Administration
- Communication with Parents
- Communication with Faculty
- Communication with Employers and the Community
- Communication with Other Students

# Communication Skills

## Active Listening

As mentioned earlier, many people equate “communication” with “speaking”, but communication actually begins with listening. Active listening is a way of attending, or paying attention, to the verbal and non-verbal aspects of a message in order to fully grasp the sender’s meaning before responding. Active listening is also referred to as reflective listening because the person receiving the message paraphrases the message and repeats (or reflects) it back to the sender for their verification or clarification.

Active listening involves verbal and non-verbal feedback. The person receiving the message should ask questions to be sure they understand the message, but should also demonstrate through their body language (facing toward the speaker, keeping posture open) and facial expressions (making eye-contact, smiling, nodding) that they are engaged with and focused on the sender and the message in a non-judgmental way. Do a self-check on your active listening skills: if you are planning your response while the other person is still speaking, you are not listening actively!

## Verbal Communication

Basic speaking skills are essential for success in college. Students must be able to express themselves clearly when asking questions or presenting their ideas and opinions, and must be able to relate to others socially and academically. Verbal communication includes not only the words you say, but how you say them. Your tone of voice, formality or informality, and the speed and directness of your speech all impact the effectiveness of your verbal communication.

Strong verbal skills are invaluable not only to your success as a student, but also are integral to making the most of your education after you graduate. Successful internship and job candidates demonstrate verbal communication through the interview process, and the Stony Brook University Career Center is a great resource for practice and improvement with these skills.

## Written Communication

Written communication consists of your written and/or typed work, including correspondence with University faculty and professionals, potential employers, internship supervisors, and peers, as well as your assignments (tests, term-papers, homework, etc.).

Clarity is a key element in written communication – you are not there to clarify or provide feedback to the reader, so your work must speak for itself. You will participate in activities and assignments that will contribute to an ongoing improvement of your writing skills throughout your undergraduate career, so focus on the basics from the beginning:

- Use appropriate grammar and sentence style, and always check for errors in structure and spelling.
- Clearly state your purpose questions, concepts, ideas and opinions. Be sure to provide appropriate details.
- Do not use abbreviations or “texting spell.” The recipient of your written communication may not know what the abbreviation means or they may form unintended opinions of you by the spellings you use.

Here are a few examples of how written communication skills may impact effective communication between students and University professionals:

- A student sends an email to a professor that says, “I don’t understand the assignment.” They don’t include their name, class, or SBU ID. The professor does not respond.
- A student sends an advisor an email request for a letter of recommendation. The student includes their name and Stony Brook ID number, but they do not provide details on the opportunity they are applying for, or what qualities (personal, academic, etc.) they hope the advisor can describe. The advisor responds to the student with a request for additional information, but by the time the student answers back the deadline has passed and the student has missed the opportunity.

## Working in Teams

Working in teams brings all of the communication skills and attributes we've discussed (active listening, verbal and written communication) into play. Students must navigate between different roles (group leader or member, etc.) and different responsibilities: oral presentation, writing or organizing components of assignment, conveying details to other members.

As with the other aspects of communication we've explored, clarity in communication between team members is absolutely essential for a successful group project and experience. When participating in a team assignment, it is important for students to clarify the instructions, as well as the details on how members will be graded by their instructor or supervisor. Team members need to communicate with each other to define goals and to determine who will be responsible for various aspects of the assignment. Here are some examples of how work done in teams can be impacted by communication issues:

- An instructor gives a group assignment to his class, and assigns students to specific teams. The students on team A decide among themselves that three of the four members will do individual sections of the project, and the fourth member will be responsible for organizing and submitting the assignment. At the end of the semester, one of the students meets with their academic advisor to discuss the grade of F they received for the class; the student relates that although he did his part, the person responsible for submitting the project did not do so, and as a result all team members failed the assignment.
- A student is placed on a team for a group assignment; she quickly falls into the role of leader, and the other members seem comfortable following her instructions. After the project is submitted, the team members are surprised to find out that their rating of other group members' participation on the team, including willingness to collaborate and individual initiative, will factor into their final grades for the project.

Communication issues can contribute to conflicts within group work. We'll explore ways to use communication to avoid and resolve conflicts later in the chapter.

# Communication Methods

College students today have many choices when it comes to communication – not only the use of face-to-face, telephone, and written communication, but also email, text messages, instant messaging, and social networks. Students often fail to use the appropriate communication method in the correct circumstance. While there may not be specific guidelines for certain communication methods, students may encounter difficulties by selecting an inappropriate method. For example:

- A student is directed to attend a face-to-face judicial hearing (the message includes deadlines and procedures that pertain to this hearing). The student misses the hearing and calls two weeks later to reschedule. They are told that the case is closed, and they are past the deadline to appeal.
- A student leader on campus is given a staff member's mobile phone to be used in case of emergency. Instead of calling the office, the student sends a text to the supervisor and says that they won't be in to work because they are sick. The staff member counts their absence as a no-show.

It is important to recognize that not all communication styles are appropriate in all situations. As a general rule, **written** communication – typewritten or printed on a computer, not handwritten – is appropriate for almost all academic assignments and papers.

**Email** is most appropriate for friends and family, but may also be appropriate for communication with faculty and university administrators, depending on the circumstances and the content of the message.

**Face-to-Face** communication includes making an appointment or walking into an office to see an individual. This method is usually best for conflict resolution, asking questions to clarify or ease confusion, and debating differing viewpoints, although some offices have specific policies and practices about dispute resolution that need to be followed.

**Social Media**, such as text messaging and instant messaging, are best used for social or “non-official” business. Students should not expect faculty or administration to use social networks for critical information. As an exception, the University uses the SB Alert system to send text messages to students in the event of an emergency.

# Communication with Various Constituents

## Communication with University Administration

Stony Brook University uses many ways for communicating with students; however, almost all communication that the university sends to students is “paperless,” meaning that it will be sent via e-mail, SOLAR or Blackboard. You are responsible for checking your accounts on a regular basis. If you live in the residence halls, you may also receive information on bulletin boards, in your mailbox, and from your RA/RHD. Stony Brook University also requires students to use their Stony Brook email addresses as their primary email address. If you choose to use a different email address, you must arrange to have messages forwarded from your school address. Students who fail to check and respond to these items by the designated deadline can have severe consequences, including increased tuition bills, loss of financial aid, deregistration from classes, loss of health insurance coverage, or loss of campus housing. Below are some examples of problems students have had when they fail to respond to notices from University administration:

The screenshot displays the SOLAR SYSTEM interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the SOLAR SYSTEM logo, a Home link, an Add to Favorites link, and a Sign out link. Below the navigation bar, there are two main sections: the Action Center and the Message Center. The Action Center is divided into two tabs: Holds and To Do List. The Holds tab shows 'No Holds.' The To Do List tab shows a list of tasks: 'FA Award Response 2012-2013' and 'Complete Health Waiver by 9/15', with a 'view details' link. The Message Center is divided into two tabs: new message(s) and read message(s). The new message(s) tab shows a list of messages: 'Online Room Selection Reminder', 'Graded/Pass/No Credit and Withdrawal Option Friday, April 5 @ 4 p.m. Deadline', 'Registrar's Academic Google Calendar!', 'Google Apps for Education', 'Student Health Insurance Waiver Deadline', and 'Reminder - September 15', with a 'view details' link. The Home Page is divided into several sections: Security and Personal Data (with links for Change My Solar Password, NetID Maintenance, Whom to contact if I'm missing, User Preferences, Addresses, Ethnicity, Veteran Status, Names, Phone Numbers, Email Addresses, and 2 More...), SB Alert Emergency Information (with a link for SB Alert - Registration), Elections (with a link for Student Elections), Student Records & Registration (with links for Academic Planning, Enrollment, Academic Records, and Degree Progress/Graduation), Campus Financial Services (with links for Account Information/Payment, Financial Aid, Required Health Insurance/Waiver, and Set Billing Notification Email), Campus Housing (with links for Continuing Room Deposit, Room Selection, Graduate / Family Apt. Deposit, and Summer Room Payment), and Student Employment Service (with links for Enter Timesheet, Timesheet Paid, View Paycheck, Federal Work Study Balance, Payroll Periods, and Student Employment Handbook).

**SOLAR:** A view of the interface and common reminders for students.

- A student does not follow through with his/her To-Do items in SOLAR and loses a financial aid award.
- A student ignores SOLAR messages about the Time Option Payment Plan and incurs late fees. They are not allowed to register for classes next semester because they have a balance due.
- A student does not respond to an email from his/her Academic Advisor alerting them that they are only registered for 11 credits on the final day of the add/drop period. The deadline then passes and the student is no longer considered to be a full-time student and can lose his or her financial aid, housing, and/or health insurance.
- A student who lives in the residence halls ignores posters and notices about the housing lottery. They miss the deadline to participate in the housing lottery and are denied housing for the following year.
- A student who already has health insurance fails to waive their required Health Insurance and receives an additional charge on his/her tuition bill.

Here are some things you can do to make sure you develop strong communication with University administration:

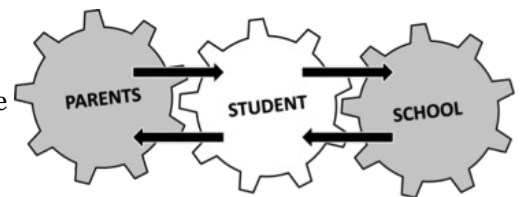
- Thoroughly read all SOLAR Messages, Holds and To-Do items. You should check SOLAR at least once per week.
- Thoroughly read all emails or letters that come from the University. Remember when you receive a mass email, there is likely information that is important to all students, such as academic deadlines or policies. It is recommended that you check your email once a day.
- Be aware of and respond by all dates and deadlines. Most deadlines on this campus are “non-petitionable,” which means that if you miss the deadline, you cannot request an extension/exemption from the deadline.
- If any information that you receive is not clear, contact the office via phone, email or in person and politely request help or ask for clarification before the deadline.
- Always be professional in your communication with University administration. Sign your full name and include your SBU ID number in any email correspondence and have this information ready if you call or walk into an office.

Stony Brook is a large university and you may have to visit multiple offices to resolve a problem or a question on campus. Staff members are here to help you and treat you with respect, although it is expected that you will also be respectful of them and the policies they are required to enforce. If you are not sure where to go to resolve a problem, your Undergraduate College Advisor is usually a good place to start.

## Communication with Parents/Guardians

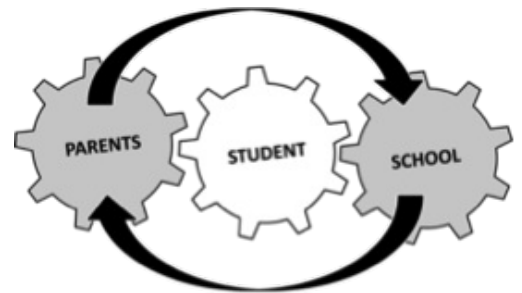
Communication dynamics between students and their parents, guardians, or other involved family members change significantly during the college experience. As a college student, you are ultimately responsible for your own college career, and the responsibility to communicate with others and advocate for yourself to achieve academic success lies with you - the student, not with parents or other individuals such as teachers or administrators.

This means that the university may give information to the student, and the student has the responsibility to pass that information on to the parent. Parents may provide information to students that should be passed on to the administration. Parents and university administrators rarely communicate directly with one another. The student is the center of the communication model and communication flows through the student.



There are rare circumstances where parent/administration communication **may bypass the student**; however, this only occurs in emergency situations or after student-centered communication has failed.

Although your parents may have helped you apply to college, complete your Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and pay your college expenses, your college education is your responsibility. Parents do not have access to SOLAR, Blackboard or your email unless you have given them access to your account. It is your responsibility to make sure they are aware of items and deadlines such as bills or health insurance information when relevant.



Some students feel that giving their parents access to their accounts is “easier”; however, this philosophy has three potential problems:

1. By giving parents access to records/email, they also have access to grades, messages from faculty, and notices about disciplinary actions with which you may be involved.
2. Your parents may not regularly monitor your accounts – after all, they are not Stony Brook students; you are.
3. Giving your parents access to your accounts does NOT waive your responsibility as a Stony Brook student; you are still ultimately responsible for your college experience. Taking responsibility now will prepare you for responsibilities later in life, such as graduate school applications and tuition, job searches and negotiations, apartment leases, and paying rent.

Most disciplinary records at the college level are not shared with parents. Depending on the severity of the incident and the risk to the student or others, parents may be notified at the discretion of university officials.



Despite the fact that parents are not notified, Stony Brook encourages open communication between students and parents. Many parents are “investing” in their student’s college education and deserve to know how this investment is helping their child to grow and develop. Parents often express shock and dismay that they are only informed of issues that their student is having after it is too late to help. Parents generally want to help and support their children. Communicating with parents provides them the opportunity to offer support, yet also allows students to exercise independence and practice responsibility while alleviating some fear and stress that can often be associated with these new situations.

Students who fail to communicate regularly with parents may face circumstances that will likely need to be explained to them eventually, including:

- A student on academic first semester warning decides not to tell his/her parents. The following semester, the student is academically suspended and cannot return to Stony Brook.
- A student gets written up multiple times in the residence halls for policy violations. After his/her final warning, they are required to move out of campus housing.
- A student gets treatment/medication for a medical condition but does not tell his/her parents. During an emergency over winter break, parents and medical staff are unaware that the student has this condition or that they are on medication.

Here are some things you can do to make sure that you develop strong communication skills with your parents during college:

- **Talk to your parents** and keep them informed of how things are going. Use a communication style that works for everyone. Try discussing expectations about frequency and method of communication and remember, two-way communication is the key.
- **Take responsibility** for both communicating with them and informing them of academic and social issues you are dealing with. They won’t always know what questions to ask, so you will have to offer information about how things are going – both good and bad.
- **Ask for help** when you are faced with a problem or issue that you can’t resolve, but do not wait until it is too late for anyone to help you.

Remember that your education is your responsibility, but parents can help to support, encourage, and direct you throughout the experience. If you communicate early and often with your parents, they can work on solutions with you before problems get out of hand.

## Communication with Faculty

One of the greatest differences from high school that students will experience in college is communication with University faculty. As you read in the Academic Success chapter, it is your responsibility to communicate with faculty both in and out of class. This may be intimidating at first in a large lecture classes, but faculty and teaching assistants are available to help you as long as you communicate with them appropriately and in a timely manner.

First and foremost, be sure to read your syllabus. If you are going to see your professor, make sure to visit them during the office hours they have provided. It is also a good idea to let your professor know ahead of time that you are planning to stop by and what it is specifically you need help with. This will allow them to prepare ahead of time when possible.

Make sure to address your professor by the appropriate title. The syllabus will indicate if they have their PhD, M.D., EdD, PsyD, etc. If they do have one of these degrees, you should address them as Doctor, but when in doubt use the title Professor.

Be honest with your professor; they get frustrated when students are not being truthful. Professors may be more empathetic if you admit that you forgot the assignment at home and will be sure to send it to them as soon as possible.

If you have to miss class, make sure to discuss this with your professor ahead of time. If you are sick, be sure to email the professor and bring any necessary documentation such as a doctor’s note to the next class session. Remember, you are responsible for making up any work you missed so be sure to follow up to get the assignment.

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## Important Notes about Sending Emails to Professors

- When sending an email to a professor make sure to keep it professional and to always include your full name, student ID number, as well as the course subject and number. Make sure to proofread and spell check.
- Keep it short and concise. If you are finding it difficult to explain your situation/concern, it might be better to approach your professor in person.
- Don't use all capital letters when trying to get a point across since it can sometimes be perceived as rude.
- Humor and jokes don't always translate well over email so remain serious in your writing.
- Consider what your e-mail address is. For example `likestoparty@yahoo.com` might not give someone a very good impression of who you are.

## Communication with Employers and the Community

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) conducted a survey of over 450 employers in 2002 and asked them the most important things they are looking for in perspective employees (Coplin, 2003). The most important skill cited by employers was Communication Skills (verbal and written). Among the top five were (1) communication skills, (2) honesty/integrity, (3) teamwork (works well with others), (4) interpersonal skills (relates well to others), and (5) strong work ethic (Coplin, 2003). Teamwork and interpersonal skills also strongly relate to one's communication skills.

Do you want to know how important GPA was to employers? It ranked #17 (Coplin, 2003). This is not to state that your GPA is not important; it certainly is, especially if you plan on attending graduate school after Stony Brook. However, your communication skills may prove to be more valuable in the workplace, as well as during internships and volunteer work and in leadership roles you assume throughout your life.

It is usually fairly simple for students to understand how poor communication skills may cause difficulties with employers:

- A student makes multiple typos or grammatical errors on a resume/cover letter and is not offered an interview for the position.
- A student does not make eye contact during a job interview and fails to get a job offer.
- A recent graduate sends an inappropriate email to a co-worker, which is rerouted to a supervisor, resulting in a sexual harassment charge and probation.

## Communication with Other Students

College is a time for students to make new friends and acquaintances. Learning to communicate openly with new friends and classmates will help to facilitate better understanding of differences, as well as form new relationships based on mutual understanding.

College is a new environment, and students are likely to encounter a much more diverse group of peers in college than they did in high school. Students come from different ethnic, religious, cultural, and geographic backgrounds, many of which have communication norms and styles with which students may not be familiar. Students should be sensitive to differences when communicating with peers.

Students may (adventently or inadvertently) cause harm to others or themselves by not carefully considering their communication. For example:

- In high school, a student regularly used a derogatory saying (i.e. "that's gay" or "that's retarded") around his peers. Upon using the same saying in college, he is told by a new friend that they find the saying insulting, hurtful, and bigoted.
- In working with a classmate on a project, a student uses profanity via e-mail to voice her frustration with the



assignment. The classmate forwards the email to the professor, stating that they find the student's behavior inappropriate and disrespectful.

- A student has a new roommate who is disrespectful of the student's space and possessions. In high school, the student never spoke up for themselves when someone bothered them because they felt it wasn't worth it. The roommate's behavior is getting worse and the student is becoming unhappy living at college. People have different ways of approaching and responding to conflict, which was learned from examples around them while growing up. Communication is improved when both parties have the ability to speak and be heard. Ineffective or unhealthy communication can contribute to conflict. Criticism, defensiveness, and disrespect are aspects of unhealthy communication, and conflict becomes personal and destructive. Conflict is a natural part of life, and when dealt with constructively, can contribute to growth. When communication is healthy and effective, it is positive and respectful, and conflict is resolved with compromise and humor. *Conflict resolution skills* are communication strategies that can help avoid or de-escalate conflict between students.

Here are some basic ways of approaching conflict constructively:

- Stay calm
- Clearly express feelings or concerns (Using "I" statements: "I'm upset because...")
- Be specific; deal with one issue at a time
- No personal attacks or accusations
- No generalizations or exaggerations
- Don't withdraw or deliver 'the silent treatment'
- No violence, or threats of violence

If conflict or interpersonal violence is an issue in your life, support is available. Contact CAPS (Counseling and Psychological Services) for help, located on the 2nd floor of Student Health Services or via phone (631) 632 – 6720.

Students may find that they need to change their communication style in college in order to be successful. For example, a student who was shy in high school might have to be more outgoing in their residence hall or in classes. A student who was very talkative in high school might have to start listening more in order to form good friendships.

Students can take positive steps to improve their communication with peers by remembering the following:

- Look for opportunities to **learn about diversity and differences on our campus**. You may learn about new ways to communicate, new cultures, and new traditions. Your understanding of these differences will help you communicate with diverse audiences on campus and beyond.
- **Be aware of your online presence**. Many students are far too liberal with the information and photos that they post on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and other social media websites. Remember that you are judged by your online presence, as well as your in-person presence. Your words and actions should be consistent in both arenas. Hurting or insulting someone online is the same as doing so in person. Online communication lasts forever, and is open to the whole world to see (regardless of how strong you think your privacy settings are); make sure you are sending a positive message.

In summary, remember that your communication skills will make a **lasting impression** on the people you meet. Leave them with a positive impression of you.