

Effectiviology



Grice's Maxims of Conversation: The Principles of Effective Communication



When you write or talk, you generally do so with the purpose of conveying information, and the better you are at conveying information, the more likely

people are to understand and accept what you have to say.

However, despite the importance of being able to communicate effectively, and despite the frequency in which we attempt to do so, we often make mistakes when we try to convey information to others. Some of these mistakes are relatively minor, and only make our communication slightly less effective than it could be, while other mistakes are relatively major, and lead to serious misunderstandings.

Fortunately, there are some simple principles—known as “Grice’s maxims of conversation”—that you can use, which will help you avoid these mistakes in communication.

Simply put, ***Grice’s maxims of conversation*** are a collection of maxims proposed by linguist Paul Grice to describe principles that people intuitively follow in order to guide their conversations, in order to make their communicative efforts effective. There are four main maxims, which revolve around the quantity, quality, and relevance of what people say, as well as on the manner in which they say it.

While these maxims were originally meant to describe how people intuitively communicate, they can be used to actively guide the way you communicate in various situations. As such, in the following article you will learn about the maxims of conversation, and see what you can do in order to implement them in practice, so you can make your communication as effective as possible.

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The maxims of conversation

Paul Grice was an eminent philosopher and linguist, who researched the ways people derive meaning from language. In his book, “[Studies in the Way of Words](#)“, Grice outlined four main *maxims of conversation*, which describe how people communicate when they want to make sure that they’re properly understood by others.

Grice’s rationale for these maxims was as follows:

“Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction.

This purpose or direction may be fixed from the start (e.g., by an initial proposal of a question for discussion), or it may evolve during the exchange; it may be fairly definite, or it may be so indefinite as to leave very considerable latitude to the participants (as in a casual conversation). But at each stage, *some* possible conversational moves would be excluded as conversationally unsuitable.

We might then formulate a rough general principle which participants will be expected (*ceteris paribus*) to observe, namely: Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the

accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. One might label this the Cooperative Principle.

On the assumption that some such general principle as this is acceptable, one may perhaps distinguish four categories under one or another of which will fall certain more specific maxims and submaxims, the following of which will, in general, yield results in accordance with the Cooperative Principle. Echoing Kant, I call these categories Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner.”

— From “[Studies in the Way of Words](#)” by Paul Grice (1989)

While these maxims are meant to be primarily *descriptive* in nature, and describe how people communicate in natural situations, it’s possible to use them in a more *prescriptive* manner, by viewing them as guiding principles which can be used intentionally and actively in order to make your communication more effective.

As such, in the following sections, you will learn about each of these maxims, see some relevant examples of their use, and understand their implications for your communication in practice.

Note: Grice’s maxims of conversation are sometimes referred to as *Grice’s maxims of communication* instead, or simply as *Grice’s maxims* or the *Gricean maxims*.

Maxims of Quantity (be informative)

There are two maxims of quantity:

- **Make your contribution as informative as is required.** Provide all the information which is necessary for the purpose of the current exchange;

don't leave out anything important.

- **Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.** Leave out any unnecessary details that aren't important to the current exchange.

For example, based on the maxims of quantity, if someone asks you “how do I get from here to the library?”, your expected answer should contain enough information for them to understand how to get to the library, but no more information than that. Based on this, the following is generally a reasonable response:

“Keep walking straight until you reach the intersection, and then turn right.”

Conversely, the following response lacks important information, and therefore violates the first maxim of quantity (‘make your contribution as informative as is required’):

“Keep walking.”

On the other hand, the following response contains too much information, and therefore violates the second maxim of quantity (‘do not make your contribution more informative than is required’):

“Keep walking straight ahead; there will be some nice flowers on your right and some lovely new trees that they just planted a few months ago on your left. Anyway, once you reach the big intersection—it's one of the biggest in the area, it took forever to build it—then you need to turn to your right.”

In [his book](#), Grice uses the following analogy to illustrate the importance of this maxim:

“If you are assisting me to mend a car, I expect your contribution to be neither more nor less than is required. If, for example, at a particular stage I

need four screws, I expect you to hand me four, rather than two or six.”

Maxims of Quality (be truthful)

There is one supermaxim of quality:

- **Try to make your contribution one that is true.**

Furthermore, based on this supermaxim, there are two more-specific maxims of quality (sometimes referred to as *submaxims*):

- **Do not say what you believe to be false.** Avoid stating information that you believe might be wrong, unless there is some compelling reason to do so. If you do choose to include it, then provide a disclaimer that points your doubts regarding this information.
- **Do not say that for which you lack evidence.** Avoid including information that you can't back up with supporting evidence. If you do choose to include such information for some reason, provide a disclaimer that points out your doubts.

In [his book](#), Grice uses the following analogy to illustrate the importance of this maxim:

“I expect your contributions to be genuine and not spurious. If I need sugar as an ingredient in the cake you are assisting me to make, I do not expect you to hand me salt; if I need a spoon, I do not expect a trick spoon made of rubber.”

Maxim of Relation (be relevant)

There is one maxim of relation:

- **Be relevant.** Make sure that all the information you provide is relevant to the current exchange; omit irrelevant information.

In [his book](#), Grice uses the following analogy to illustrate the importance of this maxim:

“I expect a partner’s contribution to be appropriate to the immediate needs at each stage of the transaction. If I am mixing ingredients for a cake, I do not expect to be handed a good book, or even an oven cloth (though this might be an appropriate contribution at a later stage).”

Maxims of Manner (be clear)

There is one supermaxim of manner:

- **Be perspicuous [clear].**

There are various additional maxims of manner (sometimes referred to as *submaxims*), that are based on this supermaxim. Grice lists four specific ones in his original work:

- **Avoid obscurity of expression.** Avoid language which is difficult to understand, such as because it contains words that the listener doesn’t know.
- **Avoid ambiguity.** Avoid ambiguous language which can be interpreted in multiple ways, and which therefore makes it difficult for your recipient to understand what exactly you’re trying to say.
- **Be brief.** Provide information in a concise manner, that allows your recipient to focus on the key details.
- **Be orderly.** Provide information in an order that makes sense, and makes it easy for your recipient to process it.

Note that, unlike the previous maxims, which have to do primarily with *what* is said, the maxims of manner have to do with *how* what is said is said.

Using the maxims of conversation as guiding principles

In a way, the maxims of conversation might seem almost trivial, since they're all fairly intuitive, and follow what common sense tells us our communication should be like. For example, it seems obvious that, if we want to communicate effectively, we should make sure that what we say is relevant to the discussion at hand.

However, in reality, people often violate many of these maxims without realizing that they're doing so, which hinders their communication efforts. Therefore, in order to ensure that your communication is as effective and free of issues as possible, you can actively use these maxims as guiding principles, and actively remind yourself to abide by them when you're trying to convey information to others.

One way to accomplish this is to ask yourself the following questions, whenever you engage in an important act of communication:

- Am I including all the necessary information?
- Am I being as concise as possible, by omitting unnecessary details and irrelevant information?
- Am I certain that everything that I'm saying is true, and can be backed up with evidence? If not, am I sure that this information should be included, and did I provide a disclaimer showing my doubts about it?
- Am I using language that is clear and without any ambiguity?

- Am I presenting the information in a structured, well-organized, and logically ordered manner?

If the answer to any of the above questions is “no”, then you should adjust your communication accordingly, in order to fix the relevant issue.

You will likely discover that improving your communication by implementing all these principles takes a lot of work at first. If this is an issue, you can make this process easier by focusing on only a few of these principles initially, and adding the others to your mental checklist later on, once you feel more comfortable with them.

However, make sure to stick with it, as you will find that the benefits of abiding by these principles are well worth it, and that it gets easier to follow them once you have a bit of practice.

Summary and conclusions

- Grice's *maxims of conversation* are a set of observations that describe how people communicate when they want to be properly understood by others; you can use these maxims as guiding principles to make your communication as effective as possible.
- The first maxim is *be informative*: include as much information as is necessary for the purpose of the current exchange, and no more than that.
- The second maxim is *be truthful*: include only information that you believe is true and that can be backed up with evidence; if you choose to include information that you're unsure about, provide an appropriate disclaimer regarding your uncertainty.

- The third maxim is *be relevant*: include only information that is relevant to the current exchange.
- The fourth maxim is *be clear*: avoid difficult-to-understand or ambiguous language, and present information in a concise and well-ordered way, that makes it easy for your listeners to figure out what you're trying to say.

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