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Chapter 2

Delivering Your Message

Good communication is as stimulating as black coffee and just as hard to sleep after.

- Anne Morrow Lindbergh

The meanings of words are not in the words; they are in us.

- S. I. Hayakawa

Getting Started

INTRODUCTORY EXERCISES

1. Can you match the words to their meaning?

--- 1. phat	A. Weird, strange, unfair, or not acceptable
--- 2. dis	B. Something stupid or thoughtless, deserving correction
--- 3. wack	C. Excellent, together, cool
--- 4. smack	D. Old car, generally in poor but serviceable condition
--- 5. down	E. Insult, put down, to dishonour, to display disrespect
--- 6. hooptie	F. Get out or leave quickly
--- 7. my bad	G. Cool, very interesting, fantastic or amazing
--- 8. player	H. To be in agreement
--- 9. tight	I. Personal mistake
--- 10. jet	J. Person dating with multiple partners, often unaware of each other

2. Do people use the same language in all settings and contexts? Your first answer might be “sure,” but try this test. For a couple of hours, or even a day, pay attention to how you speak, and how others speak: the words you say, how you say them, the pacing and timing used in each context. For example, at home in the morning, in the coffee shop before work or class, during a break at work with peers or a break between classes with classmates all count as contexts. Observe how and what language is used in each context and to what degree they are the same or different.

Answers

1. 1-C, 2-E, 3-A, 4-B, 5-H, 6-D, 7-I, 8-J, 9-G, 10-F

Successful business communication is often associated with writing and speaking well, being articulate or proficient with words. Yet, in the quote above, the famous linguist S. I. Hayakawa wisely observes that meaning lies within us, not in the words we use. Indeed, communication in this text is defined as the process of understanding and sharing meaning. Pearson, J., & Nelson, P. (2000). *An introduction to human communication: Understanding and sharing*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill. When you communicate you are sharing meaning with one or more other people—this may include members of your family, your community, your work community, your school, or any group that considers itself a group.

How do you communicate? How do you think? We use language as a system to create and exchange meaning with one another, and the types of words we use influence both our perceptions and others interpretation of our meanings. What kinds of words would you use to describe your thoughts and feelings, your preferences in music, cars, food, or other things that matter to you?

Imagine that you are using written or spoken language to create a bridge over which you hope to transport meaning, much like a gift or package, to your receiver. You hope that your meaning arrives relatively intact, so that your receiver receives something like what you sent. Will the package look the same to them on the receiving end? Will they interpret the package, its wrapping and colours, the way you intended? That depends.

What is certain is that they will interpret it based on their framework of experience. The package represents your words arranged in a pattern that both the source (you) and the receiver (your audience) can interpret. The words as a package try to contain the meaning and deliver it intact, but they themselves are not the meaning. That lies within us.

So is the package empty? Are the words we use empty? Without us to give them life and meaning, the answer is yes. Knowing what words will correspond to meanings that your audience holds within themselves will help you communicate more effectively. Knowing what meanings lie within you is your door to understanding yourself.

This chapter discusses the importance of delivering your message in words. It examines how the characteristics of language interact in ways that can both improve and diminish effective business communication. We will examine how language plays a significant role in how you perceive and interact with the world, and how culture, language, education, gender, race, and ethnicity all influence this dynamic process. We will look at ways to avoid miscommunication and focus on

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constructive ways to get your message delivered to your receiver with the meaning you intended.

2.1 What Is Language?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe and define “language.”
2. Describe the role of language in perception and the communication process.

Are you reading this sentence? Does it make sense to you? When you read the words I wrote, what do you hear? A voice in your head? Words across the internal screen of your mind? If it makes sense, then you may very well hear the voice of the author as you read along, finding meaning in these arbitrary symbols packaged in discrete units called words. The words themselves have no meaning except that which you give them.

For example, I’ll write the word “home,” placing it in quotation marks to denote its separation from the rest of this sentence. When you read that word, what comes to mind for you? A specific place? Perhaps a building that could also be called a house? Images of people or another time? “Home,” like “love” and many other words, is quite individual and open to interpretation.

Still, even though your mental image of home may be quite distinct from mine, we can communicate effectively. You understand that each sentence has a subject and verb, and a certain pattern of word order, even though you might not be consciously aware of that knowledge. You weren’t born speaking or writing, but you mastered—or, more accurately, are still mastering as we all are—these important skills of self-expression. The family, group, or community wherein you were raised taught you the code. The code came in many forms. When do you say “please” or “thank you,” and when do you remain silent? When is it appropriate to communicate? If it is appropriate, what are the expectations and how do you accomplish it? You know because you understand the code.

We often call this code “**language**¹”: a system of symbols, words, and/or gestures used to communicate meaning. Does everyone on earth speak the same language? Obviously, no. People are raised in different cultures, with different values, beliefs, customs, and different languages to express those cultural attributes. Even people who speak the same language, like speakers of English in London, New Delhi, or Saskatoon, speak and interact using their own words that are community-defined, self-defined, and have room for interpretation. Within Canada, depending on the

1. A system of symbols, words, and/or gestures used to communicate meaning.

context and environment, you may hear colourful sayings that are quite regional, and may notice an accent, pace, or tone of communication that is distinct from your own. This variation in our use of language is a creative way to form relationships and communities, but can also lead to miscommunication.

Words themselves, then, actually hold no meaning. It takes you and me to use them to give them life and purpose. Even if we say that the dictionary is the repository of meaning, the repository itself has no meaning without you or me to read, interpret, and use its contents. Words change meaning over time. “Nice” once meant overly particular or fastidious; today it means pleasant or agreeable. “Gay” once meant happy or carefree; today it refers to homosexuality. The dictionary entry for the meaning of a word changes because we change how, when, and why we use the word, not the other way around. Do you know every word in the dictionary? Does anyone? Even if someone did, there are many possible meanings of the words we exchange, and these multiple meanings can lead to miscommunication.

Business communication veterans often tell the story of a company that received an order of machine parts from a new vendor. When they opened the shipment, they found that it contained a small plastic bag into which the vendor had put several of the parts. When asked what the bag was for, the vendor explained, “Your contract stated a thousand units, with maximum 2 percent defective. We produced the defective units and put them in the bag for you.” If you were the one reading that contract, what would “defective” mean to you? We may use a word intending to communicate one idea only to have a coworker miss our meaning entirely.

Sometimes we want our meaning to be crystal clear, and at other times, less so. We may even want to present an idea from a specific perspective, one that shows our company or business in a positive light. This may reflect our intentional manipulation of language to influence meaning, as in choosing to describe a car as “preowned” or an investment as a “unique value proposition.” We may also influence other’s understanding of our words in unintentional ways, from failing to anticipate their response, to ignoring the possible impact of our word choice.

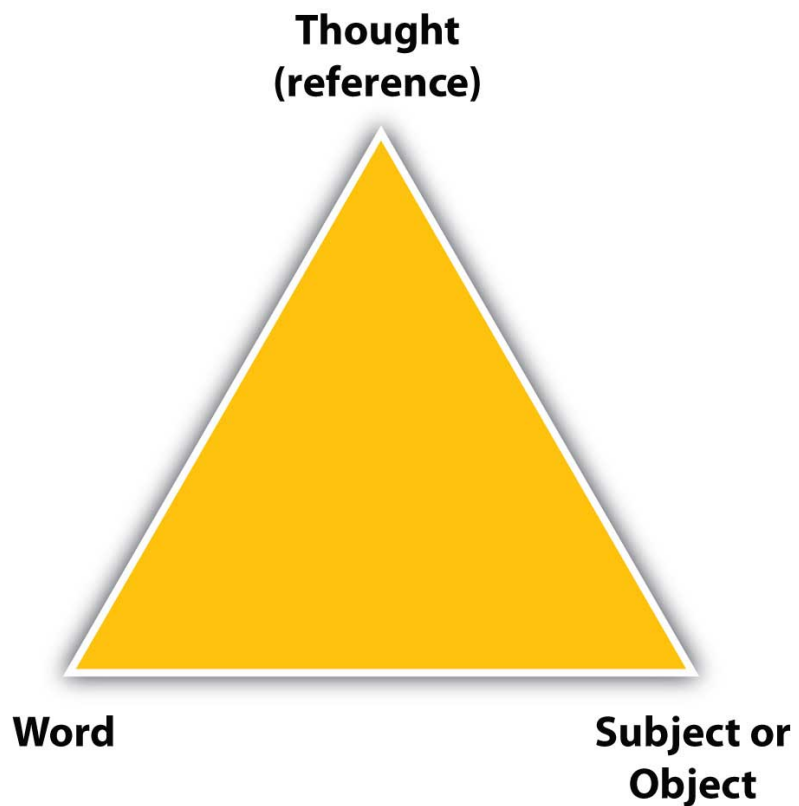
Languages are living exchange systems of meaning, and are bound by context. If you are assigned to a team that coordinates with suppliers from Shanghai, China, and a sales staff in Vancouver, you may encounter terms from both groups that influence your team.

As long as there have been languages and interactions between the people who speak them, languages have borrowed words (or, more accurately, adopted—for they seldom give them back). Think of the words “boomerang,” “limousine,” or

“pyjama;” do you know which languages they come from? Did you know that “algebra” comes from the Arabic word “al-jabr,” meaning “restoration”?

Does the word “moco” make sense to you? It may not, but perhaps you recognize it as the name chosen by Nissan for one of its cars. “Moco” makes sense to both Japanese and Spanish speakers, but with quite different meanings. The letters come together to form an arbitrary word that refers to the thought or idea of the thing in the **semantic triangle**² (see [Figure 2.9](#)).

Figure 2.1 *Semantic Triangle*



Source: Adapted from Odgen, C., & Richards, I. (1932). *The meaning of meaning: A study of the influence of language upon thought and of the science of symbolism*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & World.

2. Three-part model in which a symbol refers to a thought, which in turn refers to the thing it symbolizes.

This triangle illustrates how the word (which is really nothing more than a combination of four letters) refers to the thought, which then refers to the thing itself. Who decides what “moco” means? To the Japanese, it may mean “cool design,” or even “best friend,” and may be an apt name for a small, cute car, but to a Spanish speaker, it means “booger” or “snot”—not a very appealing name for a car.

Each letter stands for a sound, and when they come together in a specific way, the sounds they represent when spoken express the “word” that symbolizes the event. McLean, S. (2003). *The basics of speech communication*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon. For our discussion, the key word we need to address is “symbolizes.” The word stands in for the actual event, but is not the thing itself. The meaning we associate with it may not be what we intended. For example, when Honda was contemplating the introduction of the Honda Fit, another small car, they considered the name “Fitta” for use in Europe. As the story goes, the Swedish Division Office of Honda explained that “fitta” in Swedish is a derogatory term for female reproductive organ. The name was promptly changed to “Jazz.”

The meaning, according to Hayakawa, Hayakawa, S. I. (1978). *Language in thought and action*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. is within us, and the word serves as a link to meaning. What will your words represent to the listener? Will your use of a professional term enhance your credibility and be more precise with a knowledgeable audience, or will you confuse them?

KEY TAKEAWAY

Language is a system of words used as symbols to convey ideas, and it has rules of syntax, semantics, and context. Words have meaning only when interpreted by the receiver of the message.

EXERCISES

1. Using a dictionary that gives word origins, such as the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, find at least ten English words borrowed from other languages. Share your findings with your classmates.
2. Visit several English-language Web sites from different countries—for example, Australia, Canada, and the United States. What differences in spelling and word usage do you find? Discuss your results with your classmates.
3. From your viewpoint, how do you think thought influences the use of language? Write a one- to two-page explanation.
4. What is meant by *conditioned* in this statement: “People in Western cultures do not realize the extent to which their racial attitudes have been conditioned since early childhood by the power of words to ennoble or condemn, augment or detract, glorify or demean?” Moore, R. (2003). *Racism in the English language*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon. Discuss your thoughts with a classmate.
5. Translations gone wrong can teach us much about words and meaning. Can you think of a word or phrase that just doesn’t sound right when it was translated from English into another language, or vice versa? Share it with the class and discuss what a better translation would be.

2.2 Messages

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe three different types of messages and their functions.
2. Describe five different parts of a message and their functions.

Before we explore the principles of language, it will be helpful to stop for a moment and examine some characteristics of the messages we send when we communicate. When you write or say something, you not only share the meaning(s) associated with the words you choose, but you also say something about yourself and your relationship to the intended recipient. In addition, you say something about what the relationship means to you as well as your assumed familiarity as you choose formal or informal ways of expressing yourself. Your message may also carry unintended meanings that you cannot completely anticipate. Some words are loaded with meaning for some people, so that by using such words you can “push their buttons” without even realizing what you’ve done. Messages carry far more than the literal meaning of each word, and in this section we explore that complexity.

Primary Message Is Not the Whole Message

When considering how to effectively use verbal communication, keep in mind there are three distinct types of messages you will be communicating: primary, secondary, and auxiliary. Hasling, J. (1998). *Audience, message, speaker*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.

Primary messages³ refer to the intentional content, both verbal and nonverbal. These are the words or ways you choose to express yourself and communicate your message. For example, if you are sitting at your desk and a coworker stops by to ask you a question, you may say, “Here, have a seat.” These words are your primary message.

Even such a short, seemingly simple and direct message could be misunderstood. It may seem obvious that you are not literally offering to “give” a “seat” to your visitor, but to someone who knows only formal English and is unfamiliar with colloquial expressions, it may be puzzling. “Have a seat” may be much more difficult to understand than “please sit down.”

3. Refer to the intentional content in a message, both verbal and nonverbal.

Secondary messages⁴ refer to the unintentional content, both verbal and nonverbal. Your audience will form impressions of your intentional messages, both negative and positive, over which you have no control. Perceptions of physical attractiveness, age, gender, or ethnicity or even simple mannerisms and patterns of speech may unintentionally influence the message.

Perhaps, out of courtesy, you stand up while offering your visitor a seat; or perhaps your visitor has an expectation that you ought to do so. Perhaps a photograph of your family on your desk makes an impression on your visitor. Perhaps a cartoon on your bulletin board sends a message.

Auxiliary messages⁵ refer to the intentional and unintentional ways a primary message is communicated. This may include vocal inflection, gestures and posture, or rate of speech that influence the interpretation or perception of your message.

When you say, “Here, have a seat,” do you smile and wave your hand to indicate the empty chair on the other side of your desk? Or do you look flustered and quickly lift a pile of file folders out of the way? Are your eyes on your computer as you finish sending an e-mail before turning your attention to your visitor? Your auxiliary message might be, “I’m glad you came by, I always enjoy exchanging ideas with you” or “I always learn something new when someone asks me a question.” On the other hand, it might be, “I’ll answer your question, but I’m too busy for a long discussion,” or maybe even, “I wish you’d do your work and not bother me with your dumb questions!”

Parts of a Message

When you create a message, it is often helpful to think of it as having five parts:

1. Attention statement
2. Introduction
3. Body
4. Conclusion
5. Residual message

Each of these parts has its own function.

The **attention statement**⁶, as you may guess, is used to capture the attention of your audience. While it may be used anywhere in your message, it is especially useful at the outset. There are many ways to attract attention from readers or listeners, but one of the most effective is the “what’s in it for me” strategy: telling

4. Refer to the unintentional content in a message, both verbal and nonverbal.

5. Refer to the intentional and unintentional ways a primary message is communicated.

6. The way you focus the audience’s attention on you and your speech.

them how your message can benefit them. An attention statement like, “I’m going to explain how you can save up to \$500 a year on car insurance” is quite likely to hold an audience’s attention.

Once you have your audience’s attention, it is time to move on to the introduction. In your **introduction**⁷ you will make a clear statement your topic; this is also the time to establish a relationship with your audience. One way to do this is to create common ground with the audience, drawing on familiar or shared experiences, or by referring to the person who introduced you. You may also explain why you chose to convey this message at this time, why the topic is important to you, what kind of expertise you have, or how your personal experience has led you to share this message.

After the introduction comes the **body**⁸ of your message. Here you will present your message in detail, using any of a variety of organizational structures. Regardless of the type of organization you choose for your document or speech, it is important to make your main points clear, provide support for each point, and use transitions to guide your readers or listeners from one point to the next.

At the end of the message, your **conclusion**⁹ should provide the audience with a sense of closure by summarizing your main points and relating them to the overall topic. In one sense, it is important to focus on your organizational structure again and incorporate the main elements into your summary, reminding the audience of what you have covered. In another sense, it is important not to merely state your list of main points again, but to convey a sense that you have accomplished what you stated you would do in your introduction, allowing the audience to have psychological closure.

The **residual message**¹⁰, a message or thought that stays with your audience well after the communication is finished, is an important part of your message. Ask yourself of the following:

- What do I want my listeners or readers to remember?
- What information do I want to have the audience retain or act upon?
- What do I want the audience to do?

7. Part of a speech that establishes a relationship with your audience and clearly states your topic.

8. Main content area of a speech.

9. Part of a speech that provides the audience with a sense of closure by summarizing the main points and relating the points to the overall topic.

10. Idea or thought that stays with your audience well after the speech.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Messages are primary, secondary, and auxiliary. A message can be divided into a five-part structure composed of an attention statement, introduction, body, conclusion, and residual message.

EXERCISES

1. Choose three examples of communication and identify the primary message. Share and compare with classmates.
2. Choose three examples of communication and identify the auxiliary message(s). Share and compare with classmates.
3. Think of a time when someone said something like “please take a seat” and you correctly or incorrectly interpreted the message as indicating that you were in trouble and about to be reprimanded. Share and compare with classmates.
4. How does language affect self-concept? Explore and research your answer, finding examples that can serve as case studies.
5. Choose an article or opinion piece from a major newspaper or news Web site. Analyze the piece according to the five-part structure described here. Does the headline serve as a good attention statement? Does the piece conclude with a sense of closure? How are the main points presented and supported? Share your analysis with your classmates. For a further challenge, watch a television commercial and do the same analysis.

2.3 Principles of Verbal Communication

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Identify and describe five key principles of verbal communication.
2. Explain how the rules of syntax, semantics, and context govern language.
3. Describe how language serves to shape our experience of reality.

Verbal communication is based on several basic principles. In this section, we'll examine each principle and explore how it influences everyday communication. Whether it's a simple conversation with a coworker or a formal sales presentation to a board of directors, these principles apply to all contexts of communication.

Language Has Rules

Language is a code, a collection of symbols, letters, or words with arbitrary meanings that are arranged according to the rules of syntax and are used to communicate. Pearson, J., & Nelson, P. (2000). *An introduction to human communication: Understanding and sharing* (p. 54). Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.

In the first of the [Note 2.1 "Introductory Exercises"](#) for this chapter, were you able to successfully match the terms to their meanings? Did you find that some of the definitions did not match your understanding of the terms? The words themselves have meaning within their specific context or language community. But without a grasp of that context, "my bad" may have just sounded odd. Your familiarity with the words and phrases may have made the exercise easy for you, but it isn't an easy exercise for everyone. The words themselves only carry meaning if you know the understood meaning and have a grasp of their context to interpret them correctly.

There are three types of rules that govern or control our use of words. You may not be aware that they exist or that they influence you, but from the moment you put a word into text or speak it, these rules govern your communications. Think of a word that is all right to use in certain situations and not in others. Why? And how do you know?

11. Govern the order of words in a sentence.

Syntactic rules¹¹ govern the order of words in a sentence. In some languages, such as German, syntax or word order is strictly prescribed. English syntax, in contrast,

is relatively flexible and open to style. Still, there are definite combinations of words that are correct and incorrect in English. It is equally correct to say, “Please come to the meeting in the auditorium at twelve noon on Wednesday” or, “Please come to the meeting on Wednesday at twelve noon in the auditorium.” But it would be incorrect to say, “Please to the auditorium on Wednesday in the meeting at twelve noon come.”

Semantic rules¹² govern the meaning of words and how to interpret them. Martinich, A. P. (Ed.). (1996). *The philosophy of language* (3rd ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. Semantics is the study of meaning in language. It considers what words mean, or are intended to mean, as opposed to their sound, spelling, grammatical function, and so on. Does a given statement refer to other statements already communicated? Is the statement true or false? Does it carry a certain intent? What does the sender or receiver need to know in order to understand its meaning? These are questions addressed by semantic rules.

Contextual rules¹³ govern meaning and word choice according to context and social custom. For example, suppose Greg is talking about his coworker, Carol, and says, “She always meets her deadlines.” This may seem like a straightforward statement that would not vary according to context or social custom. But suppose another coworker asked Greg, “How do you like working with Carol?” and, after a long pause, Greg answered, “She always meets her deadlines.” Are there factors in the context of the question or social customs that would influence the meaning of Greg’s statement?

Even when we follow these linguistic rules, miscommunication is possible, for our cultural context or community may hold different meanings for the words used than the source intended. Words attempt to represent the ideas we want to communicate, but they are sometimes limited by factors beyond our control. They often require us to negotiate their meaning, or to explain what we mean in more than one way, in order to create a common vocabulary. You may need to state a word, define it, and provide an example in order to come to an understanding with your audience about the meaning of your message.

Our Reality Is Shaped by Our Language

What would your life be like if you had been raised in a country other than the one where you grew up? Malaysia, for example? Italy? Afghanistan? Or Bolivia? Or suppose you had been born male instead of female, or vice versa. Or had been raised in the Maritimes instead of the West Coast, or Northwest Ontario instead of Southern Alberta. In any of these cases, you would not have the same identity you have today. You would have learned another set of customs, values, traditions,

- 12. Govern the meaning of words and how to interpret them.
- 13. Govern meaning and word choice according to context and social custom.

other language patterns, and ways of communicating. You would be a different person who communicated in different ways.

You didn't choose your birth, customs, values, traditions, or your language. You didn't even choose to learn to read this sentence or to speak with those of your community, but somehow you accomplished this challenging task. As an adult, you can choose to see things from a new or diverse perspective, but what language do you think with? It's not just the words themselves, or even how they are organized, that makes communication such a challenge. Your language itself, ever changing and growing, in many ways determines your reality. Whorf, B. L. (1956). *Science and linguistics*. In J. B. Carroll (Ed.), *Language, thought and reality* (pp. 207–219). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. You can't escape your language or culture completely, and always see the world through a shade or tint of what you've been taught, learned, or experienced.

Suppose you were raised in a culture that values formality. At work, you pride yourself on being well dressed. It's part of your expectation for yourself and, whether you admit it or not, for others. Many people in your organization, however, come from less formal cultures, and they prefer business casual attire. You may be able to recognize the difference, and because humans are highly adaptable, you may get used to a less formal dress expectation, but it won't change your fundamental values.

Thomas Kuhn, T. (1996). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (3rd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. makes the point that “**paradigms**¹⁴, or a clear point of view involving theories, laws, and/or generalizations that provide a framework for understanding, tend to form and become set around key validity claims, or statements of the way things work.” McLean, S. (2003). *The basics of speech communication* (p. 50). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon. The paradigm, or worldview, may be individual or collective. And paradigm shifts are often painful. New ideas are always suspect, and usually opposed, without any other reason than because they are not already common. Ackerman, B. A. (1980). *Social justice in the liberal state*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

As an example, consider the earth-heavens paradigm. Medieval Europeans believed that the Earth was flat and that the edge was to be avoided, otherwise you might fall off. For centuries after the acceptance of a “round earth” belief, the earth was still believed to be the centre of the universe, with the sun and all planets revolving around it. Eventually, someone challenged the accepted view. Over time, despite considerable resistance to protect the status quo, people came to better understand the earth and its relationship to the heavens.

14. A clear point of view involving theories, laws, and/or generalizations that provide a framework for understanding.

In the same way, the makers of the Intel microprocessor once thought that a slight calculation error, unlikely to negatively impact 99.9 percent of users, was better left as is and hidden. Emery, V. (1996). The Pentium chip story: A learning experience. Retrieved from <http://www.emery.com/1e/pentium.htm> Like many things in the information age, the error was discovered by a user of the product, became publicly known, and damaged Intel's credibility and sales for years. Recalls and prompt, public communication in response to similar issues are now the industry-wide protocol.

Paradigms involve premises that are taken as fact. Of course the Earth is the centre of the universe, of course no one will ever be impacted by a mathematical error so far removed from most people's everyday use of computers, and of course you never danced the macarena at a company party. We now can see how those facts, attitudes, beliefs, and ideas of "cool" are overturned.

How does this insight lend itself to your understanding of verbal communication? Do all people share the same paradigms, words, or ideas? Will you be presenting ideas outside your audience's frame of reference? Outside their worldview? Just as you look back at your macarena performance, get outside your frame of reference and consider how to best communicate your thoughts, ideas, and points to an audience that may not have your same experiences or understanding of the topic.

By taking into account your audience's background and experience, you can become more "other-oriented," a successful strategy to narrow the gap between you and your audience. Our experiences are like sunglasses, tinting the way we see the world. Our challenge, perhaps, is to avoid letting them function as blinders, like those worn by working horses, which create tunnel vision and limit our perspective.

Language Is Arbitrary and Symbolic

As we have discussed previously, words, by themselves, do not have any inherent meaning. Humans give meaning to them, and their meanings change across time. The arbitrary symbols, including letters, numbers, and punctuation marks, stand for concepts in our experience. We have to negotiate the meaning of the word "home," and define it, through visual images or dialogue, in order to communicate with our audience.

Words have two types of meanings: denotative and connotative. Attention to both is necessary to reduce the possibility of misinterpretation. The **denotative meaning**¹⁵ is the common meaning, often found in the dictionary. The **connotative meaning**¹⁶ is often not found in the dictionary but in the community of users itself. It can

15. A word's common meaning, often found in the dictionary.

16. A meaning often not found in the dictionary but in the community of users; it can involve an emotional association, and can be individual or collective, but is not universal.

involve an emotional association with a word, positive or negative, and can be individual or collective, but is not universal.

With a common vocabulary in both denotative and connotative terms, effective communication becomes a more distinct possibility. But what if we have to transfer meaning from one vocabulary to another? That is essentially what we are doing when we translate a message. In such cases, language and culture can sometimes make for interesting twists. The *New York Times* Sterngold, J. (1998, November 15). Lost, and gained, in the translation. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com> noted that the title of the 1998 film *There's Something About Mary* proved difficult to translate when it was released in foreign markets. The movie was renamed to capture the idea and to adapt to local audiences' frame of reference: In Poland, where blonde jokes are popular and common, the film title (translated back to English for our use) was *For the Love of a Blonde*. In France, *Mary at All Costs* communicated the idea, while in Thailand *My True Love Will Stand All Outrageous Events* dropped the reference to Mary altogether.

Capturing our ideas with words is a challenge when both conversational partners speak the same language, but across languages, cultures, and generations the complexity multiplies exponentially.

Language Is Abstract

Words represent aspects of our environment, and can play an important role in that environment. They may describe an important idea or concept, but the very act of labelling and invoking a word simplifies and distorts our concept of the thing itself. This ability to simplify concepts makes it easier to communicate, but it sometimes makes us lose track of the specific meaning we are trying to convey through abstraction. Let's look at one important part of life in Canada: transportation.

Take the word "car" and consider what it represents. Freedom, status, or style? Does what you drive say something about you? To describe a car as a form of transportation is to consider one of its most basic and universal aspects. This level of abstraction means we lose individual distinctions between cars until we impose another level of labelling. We could divide cars into sedans and coupes simply by counting the number of doors (i.e., four versus two). We could also examine cost, size, engine displacement, fuel economy, and style. We might arrive at a classic, the Mustang, and consider it for all these factors and its legacy as an accessible sports car. To describe it in terms of transportation only is to lose the distinctiveness of what makes a Mustang a desirable sports car.

We can see how, at the extreme level of abstraction, a car is like any other automobile. We can also see how, at the base level, the concept is most concrete. “Mustang,” the name given to one of the best-selling sports cars, is a specific make and model with specific markings; a specific size, shape, and range of available colours; and a relationship with a classic design. By focusing on concrete terms and examples, you help your audience grasp your content.

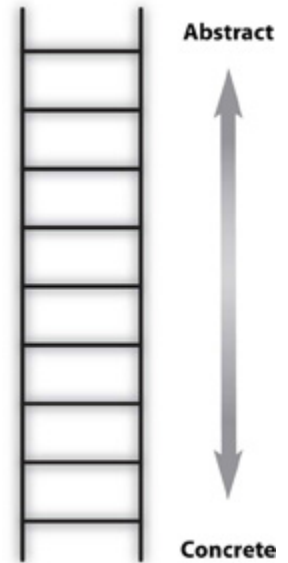
Language Organizes and Classifies Reality

We use language to create and express some sense of order in our world. We often group words that represent concepts by their physical proximity or their similarity to one another. For example, in biology, animals with similar traits are classified together. An ostrich may be said to be related to an emu and a nandu, but you wouldn’t group an ostrich with an elephant or a salamander. Our ability to organize is useful, but artificial. The systems of organization we use are not part of the natural world but an expression of our views about the natural world.

What is a doctor? A nurse? A teacher? If a male came to mind in the case of the word “doctor” and a female came to mind in reference to “nurse” or “teacher,” then your habits of mind include a gender bias. There was once a time in the United States where that gender stereotype was more than just a stereotype, it was the general rule, the social custom, the norm. Now it no longer holds true. More and more men are training to serve as nurses. *Macleans* noted in 2008 that 52 percent of doctors under the age of 35 are female. In addition, the majority of students at nearly all of Canada’s 17 medical schools are female. CATHY GULLI AND KATE LUNAU (2008, January 2). Adding fuel to the doctor crisis. *Macleans*. Retrieved from http://www.macleans.ca/science/health/article.jsp?content=20080102_122329_6200.

We all use systems of classification to navigate through the world. Imagine how confusing life would be if we had no categories such as male/female, young/old, tall/short, doctor/nurse/teacher. These categories only become problematic when we use them to uphold biases and ingrained assumptions that are no longer valid. We may assume, through our biases, that elements are related when they have no relationship at all. As a result, our thinking is limited and our grasp of reality

Figure 2.2 Abstraction Ladder



Source: Adapted from J. DeVito’s *Abstraction Ladder* in DeVito, J. (1999). *Messages: building interpersonal communication skills* (p. 119). New York, NY: Addison Wesley Longman.

impaired. It is often easier to spot these biases in others, but it behooves us as communicators to become aware of them in ourselves. Holding them unconsciously will limit our thinking, our grasp of reality, and our ability to communicate successfully.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Language is a system governed by rules of syntax, semantics, and context; we use paradigms to understand the world and frame our communications.

EXERCISES

1. Write at least five examples of English sentences with correct syntax. Then rewrite each sentence, using the same words in an order that displays incorrect syntax. Compare your results with those of your classmates.
2. Think of at least five words whose denotative meaning differs from their connotative meaning. Use each word in two sentences, one employing the denotative meaning and the other employing the connotative. Compare your results with those of your classmates.
3. Do you associate meaning with the car someone drives? Does it say something about them? List five cars you observe people you know driving and discuss each one, noting whether you perceive that the car says something about them or not. Share and compare with classmates.

2.4 Language Can be an Obstacle to Communication

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Demonstrate six ways in which language can be an obstacle or barrier to communication.
2. Explain the differences between clichés, jargon, and slang.
3. Explain the difference between sexist or racist language and legitimate references to gender or race in business communication.

As you use language to make sense of your experiences, as part of our discussion, you no doubt came to see that language and verbal communication can work both for you and against you. Language allows you to communicate, but it also allows you to miscommunicate and misunderstand. The same system we use to express our most intimate thoughts can be frustrating when it fails to capture our thoughts, to represent what we want to express, and to reach our audience. For all its faults, though, it is the best system we have, and part of improving the communication process is the clear identification of where it breaks down. Anticipate where a word or expression may need more clarification and you will be on your way to reducing errors and improving verbal communication.

In an article titled “The Miscommunication Gap,” Susan Washburn lists several undesirable results of poor communication in business: Washburn, S. (2008, February). The miscommunication gap. *ESI Horizons*, 9(2). Retrieved from <http://www.esi-intl.com/public/Library/html/200802HorizonsArticle1.asp?UnityID=8522516.1290>

- Damaged relationships
- Loss of productivity
- Inefficiency and rework
- Conflict
- Missed opportunities
- Schedule slippage (delays, missed deadlines)
- Scope creep...or leap (gradual or sudden changes in an assignment that make it more complex and difficult than it was originally understood to be)
- Wasted resources
- Unclear or unmet requirements

In this section we discuss how words can serve either as a bridge, or a barrier, to understanding and communication of meaning. Our goals of effective and efficient business communication mean an inherent value of words and terms that keeps the bridge clear and free of obstacles.

Cliché

A **cliché**¹⁷ is a once-clever word or phrase that has lost its impact through overuse. If you spoke or wrote in clichés, how would your audience react? Let's try it. How do you react when you read this sentence: "A cliché is something to avoid like the plague, for it is nothing but a tired old war horse, and if the shoe were on the other foot you too would have an axe to grind"? As you can see, the problem with clichés is that they often sound silly or boring.

Clichés are sometimes a symptom of lazy communication—the person using the cliché hasn't bothered to search for original words to convey the intended meaning. Clichés lose their impact because readers and listeners tend to gloss over them, assuming their common meaning while ignoring your specific use of them. As a result, they can be obstacles to successful communication.

Jargon

Let's pretend you've been assigned to the task of preparing a short presentation on your company's latest product for a group of potential customers. It's a big responsibility. You only have one opportunity to get it right. You will need to do extensive planning and preparation, and your effort, if done well, will produce a presentation that is smooth and confident, looking simple to the casual audience member.

What words do you use to communicate information about your product? Is your audience familiar with your field and its specialized terms? As potential customers, they are probably somewhat knowledgeable in the field, but not to the extent that you and your coworkers are; even less so compared to the "techie" who developed the product. For your presentation to succeed, your challenge is to walk a fine line between using too much profession-specific language on the one hand, and "talking down" to your audience on the other hand.

While your potential customers may not understand all the engineering and schematic detail terms involved in the product, they do know what they and their organizations are looking for in considering a purchase. Your solution may be to focus on common ground—what you know of their past history in terms of contracting services or buying products from your company. What can you tell

17. A once-clever word or phrase that has lost its impact through overuse.

from their historical purchases? If your research shows that they place a high value on saving time, you can focus your presentation on the time-saving aspects of your new product and leave the technical terms to the user's manual.

Jargon¹⁸ is an occupation-specific language used by people in a given profession. Jargon does not necessarily imply formal education, but instead focuses on the language people in a profession use to communicate with each other. Members of the information technology department have a distinct group of terms that refer to common aspects in their field. Members of the marketing department, or advertising, or engineering, research, and development also have sets of terms they use within their professional community. Jargon exists in just about every occupation, independent of how much formal education is involved—from medicine and law; to financial services, banking, and insurance; to animal husbandry, auto repair, and the construction trades.

Whether or not to use jargon is often a judgement call, and one that is easier to make in speaking than in writing. In an oral context, we may be able to use a technical term and instantly know from feedback whether or not the receiver of the message “got it.” If they didn't, we can define it on the spot. In written language, we lack that immediate response and must attend more to the context of receiver. The more we learn about our audience, the better we can tailor our chosen words. If we lack information or want our document to be understood by a variety of readers, it pays to use common words and avoid jargon.

Slang

Think for a moment about the words and expressions you use when you communicate with your best friends. If a coworker was to hang out with you and your friends, would they understand all the words you use, the music you listen to, the stories you tell and the way you tell them? Probably not, because you and your friends probably use certain words and expressions in ways that have special meaning to you.

18. An occupation-specific language used by people in a given profession.

19. The use of existing or newly invented words to take the place of standard or traditional words with the intent of adding an unconventional, nonstandard, humorous, or rebellious effect.

This special form of language, which in some ways resembles jargon, is slang. **Slang**¹⁹ is the use of existing or newly invented words to take the place of standard or traditional words with the intent of adding an unconventional, nonstandard, humorous, or rebellious effect. It differs from jargon in that it is used in informal contexts, among friends or members of a certain age group, rather than by professionals in a certain industry.

If you say something is “phat,” you may mean “cool,” which is now a commonly understood slang word, but your coworker may not know this. As word “phat”

moves into the mainstream, it will be replaced and adapted by the communities that use it.

Since our emphasis in business communication is on clarity, and a slang word runs the risk of creating misinterpretation, it is generally best to avoid slang. You may see the marketing department use a slang word to target a specific, well-researched audience, but for our purposes of your general presentation introducing a product or service, we will stick to clear, common words that are easily understood.

Sexist and Racist Language

Some forms of slang involve put-downs of people belonging to various groups. This type of slang often crosses the line and becomes offensive, not only to the groups that are being put down, but also to others who may hear it. In today's workplace there is no place where sexist or racist language is appropriate. In fact, using such language can be a violation of company policies and in some cases antidiscrimination laws.

Sexist language²⁰ uses gender as a discriminating factor. Referring to adult women as “girls” or using the word “man” to refer to humankind are examples of sexist language. In a more blatant example, several decades ago a woman was the first female sales representative in her company's sales force. The men resented her and were certain they could outsell her, so they held a “Beat the Broad” sales contest. Today, a contest with a name like that would be out of the question (and by the way, she won).

Racist language²¹ discriminates against members of a given race or ethnic group. While it may be obvious that racial and ethnic slurs have no place in business communication, there can also be issues with more subtle references to “those people” or “you know how *they* are.” If race or ethnicity genuinely enters into the subject of your communication then naturally it makes sense to mention customers belonging to that group. The key is that mentioning racial and ethnic groups should be done with the same respect you would desire if someone else were referring to groups you belong to.

20. Uses gender as a discriminating factor.

21. Discriminates against members of a given race or ethnic group.

22. Involves substituting an acceptable word for an offensive, controversial, or unacceptable one that conveys the same or similar meaning.

Euphemisms

In seeking to avoid offensive slang, it is important not to assume that a euphemism is the solution. A **euphemism**²² involves substituting an acceptable word for an offensive, controversial, or unacceptable one that conveys the same or similar meaning. The problem is that the audience still knows what the expression means,

and understands that the writer or speaker is choosing a euphemism for the purpose of sounding more educated or genteel.

Euphemisms can also be used sarcastically or humourously—“H-E-double-hockey-sticks,” for example, is a euphemism for “hell” that may be amusing in some contexts. If your friend has just gotten a new job as a janitor, you may jokingly ask, “How’s my favourite sanitation engineer this morning?” But such humour is not always appreciated, and can convey disrespect even when none is intended.

Euphemistic words are not always disrespectful, however. For example, when referring to a death, it is considered polite in many parts of Canada to say that the person “passed” or “passed away,” rather than the relatively insensitive word, “died.” Similarly, people say, “I need to find a bathroom” or “I need to use the washroom” when it is well understood they are not planning to take a bath or do the laundry.

Still, these polite euphemisms are exceptions to the rule. Euphemisms are generally more of a hindrance than a help to understanding. In business communication the goal is clarity, and the very purpose of euphemism is to be vague. To be clear, choose words that mean what you intend to convey.

Doublespeak

Doublespeak²³ is the deliberate use of words to disguise, obscure, or change meaning. Doublespeak is often present in bureaucratic communication, where it can serve to cast a person or an organization in a less unfavourable light than plain language would do.

When you ask a friend, “How does it feel to be downsized?” you are using a euphemism to convey humour, possibly even dark humour. Your friend’s employer was likely not joking, though, when the action was announced as a “downsizing” rather than as a “layoff” or “dismissal.” In military communications, “collateral damage” is often used to refer to civilian deaths, but no mention of the dead is present. You may recall the “bailout” of the U.S. economy in 2008, which quickly came to be called the “rescue” and finally the “buy in” as the United States bought interests in nine regional and national banks. The meaning changed from saving an economic system or its institutions to investing in them. This change of terms, and the attempt to change the meaning of the actions, became common in comedy routines across North America.

23. The deliberate use of words to disguise, obscure, or change meaning.

Doublespeak can be quite dangerous when it is used deliberately to obscure meaning and the listener cannot anticipate or predict consequences based on the (in)effective communication. When an insurance company says, “We insure companies with up to twenty thousand lives,” is it possible to forget that those “lives” are people? Ethical issues quickly arise when humans are dehumanized and referred to as “objects” or “subjects.” When genocide is referred to as “ethnic cleansing,” is it any less deadly than when called by its true name?

If the meaning was successfully hidden from the audience, one might argue that the doublespeak was in fact effective. But our goal continues to be clear and concise communication with a minimum of misinterpretation. Learn to recognize doublespeak by what it does not communicate as well as what it communicates.

Each of these six barriers to communication contributes to misunderstanding and miscommunication, intentionally or unintentionally. If you recognize one of them, you can address it right away. You can redirect a question and get to essential meaning, rather than leaving with a misunderstanding that impacts the relationship. In business communication, our goal of clear and concise communication remains constant, but we can never forget that trust is the foundation for effective communication. Part of our effort must include reinforcing the relationship inherent between source and receiver, and one effective step toward that goal is to reduce obstacles to effective communication.

KEY TAKEAWAY

To avoid obstacles to communication, avoid clichés, jargon, slang, sexist and racist language, euphemisms, and doublespeak.

EXERCISES

1. Identify at least five common clichés and look up their origins. Try to understand how and when each phrase became a cliché. Share your findings with your classmates.
2. Using your library's microfilm files or an online database, look through newspaper articles from the 1950s or earlier. Find at least one article that uses sexist or racist language. What makes it racist or sexist? How would a journalist convey the same information today? Share your findings with your class.
3. Identify one slang term and one euphemism you know is used in your community, among your friends, or where you work. Share and compare with classmates.
4. How does language change over time? Interview someone older than you and someone younger than you and identify words that have changed. Pay special attention to jargon and slang words.
5. Is there ever a justifiable use for doublespeak? Why or why not? Explain your response and give some examples.
6. Can people readily identify the barriers to communication? Survey ten individuals and see if they accurately identify at least one barrier, even if they use a different term or word.

2.5 Emphasis Strategies

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe and define four strategies that can give emphasis to your message.
2. Demonstrate the effective use of visuals in an oral or written presentation.
3. Demonstrate the effective use of signposts, internal summaries and foreshadowing, and repetition in an oral or written presentation.



One key to communication is capturing and holding the audience's attention. No one likes to be bored, and no communicator likes to send boring messages. To keep your communications dynamic and interesting, it often helps to use specific strategies for emphasis. Let's examine some of these strategies and how to use them to strengthen your message.



Visual Communication



Adding the visual dimension to a document or speech can be an excellent way to hold your audience's interest and make your meaning clear. But be careful not to get carried away. Perhaps the most important rule to remember in using visuals is this: the visuals are to support your document or presentation, not to take the place of it. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but it is the words that really count. Make sure that your communication is researched, organized, and presented well enough to stand on its own. Whatever visuals you choose should be clearly associated with your verbal content, repeating, reinforcing, or extending the scope of your message.

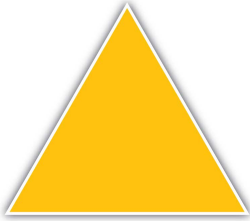
Table 2.1 "Strategic Use of Visuals" lists some common types of visuals and gives examples of their strategic uses.

Table 2.1 Strategic Use of Visuals

Type	Purpose	Example(s)
<p>Photograph, Video Clip, or Video Still</p>	<p>Show an actual person, event, or work of art.</p>	<p>Figure 2.3</p>  <p>Historic photo of U.S. troops raising the flag on Iwo Jima.</p> <p>Source: http://www.iwojima.com/raising/raisingb.htm</p>
<p>Video Trailer, Video Still</p>	<p>Show the visual relationships among two or more things; a shape, a contrast in size, a process or how something works.</p>	<p>Figure 2.4</p>  <p>Diagram of a process or series of relationships.</p>

Type	Purpose	Example(s)
Bar Chart	Show the amount of one or more variables at different time intervals.	<p data-bbox="1214 323 1295 348">Figure 2.5</p>  <p data-bbox="1195 869 1487 974"><i>Different coloured bars show the monthly dollar amount of sales closed by each of six sales associates for six months.</i></p>
Pie Chart	Show the percentages of the whole occupied by various segments.	<p data-bbox="1214 1178 1295 1203">Figure 2.6</p>  <p data-bbox="1195 1472 1487 1549"><i>“Pie slices” illustrate the market share held by competing products or companies.</i></p>

Type	Purpose	Example(s)
Line Graph	Show the change in one or more variables progressively across time.	<p data-bbox="1214 323 1295 348"><i>Figure 2.7</i></p>  <p data-bbox="1195 617 1425 642"><i>Graph stock prices each day.</i></p>
Actual Object	Show the audience an item crucial to the discussion.	<p data-bbox="1214 848 1295 873"><i>Figure 2.8</i></p>  <p data-bbox="1195 1176 1497 1281"><i>In a presentation on emergency preparedness, hold up a dust mask. In a presentation on auto safety, hold up a seatbelt.</i></p>

Type	Purpose	Example(s)
Body Motion	Use your body as a visual to demonstrate an event.	<p data-bbox="1214 323 1295 348">Figure 2.9</p> <div data-bbox="1192 369 1500 680" style="text-align: center;"> <p data-bbox="1295 369 1380 415">Thought (reference)</p>  <p data-bbox="1192 638 1240 659">Word</p> <p data-bbox="1419 638 1500 680">Subject or Object</p> </div> <p data-bbox="1192 722 1484 856"><i>Sit in a chair, pretend to buckle up, look at the audience, pretend to drive, and then have a mock accident, turning your chair on its side.</i></p>

Figures Source: © 2010 Jupiterimages Corporation

Signposts

Signposts (or indicators)²⁴, are key words that alert the audience to a change in topic, a tangential explanation, an example, or a conclusion. Readers and listeners can sometimes be lulled into “losing their place”—forgetting what point is being made or how far along in the discussion the writer or speaker has gotten. You can help your audience avoid this by signalling to them when a change is coming.

Common signposts include “on the one hand,” “on the other hand,” “the solution to this problem is,” “the reason for this is,” “for example,” “to illustrate,” and “in conclusion” or “in summary.”

Internal Summaries and Foreshadowing

Like signposts, internal summaries and foreshadowing help the audience to keep track of where they are in the message. These strategies work by reviewing what has been covered and by highlighting what is coming next.

24. Key words that alert the audience to a change in topic, a tangential explanation, an example, or a conclusion.

As a simple example, suppose you are writing or presenting information on how to assemble a basic emergency kit. If you begin by stating that the Canadian Government lists ten main items needed for the kit, you are foreshadowing your message and helping your audience to watch or listen for four items. As you cover each of the items, you can say, “The first item,” “The second item,” “Now we’ve got X and Y in our kit; what else do we need? Our third item is,” and so forth. These internal summaries help your audience keep track of progress as your message continues. And in case you were wondering, the ten items of a basic emergency kit can be found at getprepared.ca.

With this strategy, you reinforce relationships between points, examples, and ideas in your message. This can be an effective strategy to encourage selective retention of your content.

Repetition

Saying the same word over and over may not seem like an effective strategy, but when used artfully, repetition can be an effective way to drive home your meaning and help your audience retain it in their memory. Many of history’s greatest speakers have used repetition in speeches that have stood the test of time. For example, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill gave a speech in 1940 that is remembered as his “We Shall Fight” speech; in it he repeats the phrase “we shall fight” no fewer than six times. Similarly, in his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, Martin Luther King Jr. repeated the phrases “I have a dream” and “let freedom ring” with unforgettable effect.

Another form of repetition is indirect repetition: finding alternative ways of saying the same point or idea. Suppose your main point was, “global warming is raising ocean levels.” You might go on to offer several examples, citing the level in each of the major oceans and seas while showing them on a map. You might use photographs or video to illustrate the fact that beaches and entire islands are going underwater. Indirect repetition can underscore and support your points, helping them stand out in the memory of your audience.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Emphasize your message by using visuals, signposts, internal summaries and foreshadowing, and repetition.

EXERCISES

1. Find a news article online or in a newspaper or magazine that uses several visuals. What do the visuals illustrate? Would the article be equally effective without them? Why or why not? Share your findings with your class.
2. Find an article or listen to a presentation that uses signposts. Identify the signposts and explain how they help the audience follow the article or presentation. Share your findings with your class.
3. Find the legend on a map. Pick one symbol and describe its use. Share and compare with the class.

2.6 Improving Verbal Communication

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. List and explain the use of six strategies for improving verbal communication.
2. Demonstrate the appropriate use of definitions in an oral or written presentation.
3. Understand how to assess the audience, choose an appropriate tone, and check for understanding and results in an oral or written presentation.

Throughout the chapter we have visited examples and stories that highlight the importance of verbal communication. To end the chapter, we need to consider how language can be used to enlighten or deceive, encourage or discourage, empower or destroy. By defining the terms we use and choosing precise words, we will maximize our audience's understanding of our message. In addition, it is important to consider the audience, control your tone, check for understanding, and focus on results. Recognizing the power of verbal communication is the first step to understanding its role and impact on the communication process.

Define Your Terms

Even when you are careful to craft your message clearly and concisely, not everyone will understand every word you say or write. As an effective business communicator, you know it is your responsibility to give your audience every advantage in understanding your meaning. Yet your presentation would fall flat if you tried to define each and every term—you would end up sounding like a dictionary.

The solution is to be aware of any words you are using that may be unfamiliar to your audience. When you identify an unfamiliar word, your first decision is whether to use it or to substitute a more common, easily understood word. If you choose to use the unfamiliar word, then you need to decide how to convey its meaning to those in your audience who are not familiar with it. You may do this in a variety of ways. The most obvious, of course, is to state the meaning directly or to rephrase the term in different words. But you may also convey the meaning in the process of making and supporting your points. Another way is to give examples to illustrate each concept, or use parallels from everyday life.

Overall, keep your audience in mind and imagine yourself in their place. This will help you to adjust your writing level and style to their needs, maximizing the likelihood that your message will be understood.

Choose Precise Words

To increase understanding, choose **precise words**²⁵ that paint as vivid and accurate a mental picture as possible for your audience. If you use language that is vague or abstract, your meaning may be lost or misinterpreted. Your document or presentation will also be less dynamic and interesting than it could be.

Table 2.2 "Precisely What Are You Saying?" lists some examples of phrases that are imprecise and precise. Which one evokes a more dynamic image in your imagination?

Table 2.2 Precisely What Are You Saying?

Elwy Yost, longtime TV host, died in 2011; he was over eighty.	Elwy Yost, the host of programs such as TVOntario’s iconic Saturday Night at the Movies and a recipient of the Order of Canada, died of natural causes at his home in Vancouver in 2011; he was 86.
Shih Tzus are small dogs.	The Canadian Kennel Club describes the breed as a “solid, sound little dog,” standing 23 to 27 centimetres high.
It is important to eat a healthy diet during pregnancy.	Eating a diet rich in whole grains, fruits and vegetables, lean meats, low-fat dairy products can improve your health during pregnancy and boost your chances of having a healthy baby.
We are making good progress on the project.	In the two weeks since inception, our four-member team has achieved three of the six objectives we identified for project completion; we are on track to complete the project in another three to four weeks.
For the same amount spent, we expected more value added.	We have examined several proposals in the \$10,000 range, and they all offer more features than what we see in the \$12,500 system ABC Corp. is offering.
Officers were called to the scene.	Responding to a 911 call, RCMP Officers Raymond and Mitchell sped to the intersection of Regional Road 9 and Highway 7A.

25. Words that paint as vivid and accurate a mental picture as possible for your audience.

The victim went down the street.	The victim ran screaming to the home of a neighbour, Mary Lee of 31 Orchard Street.
Several different colourways are available.	The silk jacquard fabric is available in ivory, moss, cinnamon, and topaz colourways.
This smartphone has more applications than customers can imagine.	At last count, the BlackBerry Tempest has more than 500 applications, many costing 99 cents or less; users can get real-time sports scores, upload videos to TwitVid, browse commuter train schedules, edit e-mails before forwarding, and find recipes—but so far, it doesn't do the cooking for you.
A woman was heckled when she spoke at a town hall event.	On August 25, 2011, Mayor Craig Dwyer hosted a “town hall” meeting on the city budget where some audience members heckled and booed a woman in a wheelchair as she spoke about the need for more affordable transit options for citizens with disabilities.

Consider Your Audience

In addition to precise words and clear definitions, contextual clues are important to guide your audience as they read. If you are speaking to a general audience and choose to use a word in professional jargon that may be understood by many—but not all—of the people in your audience, follow it by a common reference that clearly relates its essential meaning. With this positive strategy you will be able to forge relationships with audience members from diverse backgrounds. Internal summaries tell us what we've heard and forecast what is to come. It's not just the words, but also how people hear them that counts.

If you say the magic words “in conclusion,” you set in motion a set of expectations that you are about to wrap it up. If, however, you introduce a new point and continue to speak, the audience will perceive an expectancy violation and hold you accountable. You said the magic words but didn't honour them. One of the best ways to display respect for your audience is to not exceed the expected time in a presentation or length in a document. Your careful attention to contextual clues will demonstrate that you are clearly considering your audience.

Take Control of Your Tone

Does your writing or speech sound pleasant and agreeable? Simple or sophisticated? Or does it come across as stuffy, formal, bloated, ironic, sarcastic,

flowery, rude, or inconsiderate? Recognizing our own tone is not always easy, as we tend to read or listen from our own viewpoint and make allowances accordingly.

Once we have characterized our tone, we need to decide whether and how it can be improved. Getting a handle on how to influence tone and to make your voice match your intentions takes time and skill.

One useful tip is to read your document out loud before you deliver it, just as you would practice a speech before you present it to an audience. Sometimes hearing your own words can reveal their tone, helping you decide whether it is correct or appropriate for the situation.

Another way is to listen or watch others' presentations that have been described with terms associated with tone. Former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney has one style while his son, Ben, has another. The writing in *The Atlantic* is far more sophisticated than the simpler writing in *Sports Illustrated*, yet both are very successful with their respective audiences. What kind of tone is best for your intended audience?

Finally, seek out and be receptive to feedback from teachers, classmates, and coworkers. Don't just take the word of one critic, but if several critics point to a speech as an example of pompous eloquence, and you don't want to come across in your presentation as pompous, you may learn from that example speech what to avoid.

Check for Understanding

When we talk to each other face-to-face, seeing if someone understood you isn't all that difficult. Even if they really didn't get it, you can see, ask questions, and clarify right away. That gives oral communication, particularly live interaction, a distinct advantage. Use this immediacy for feedback to your advantage. Make time for feedback and plan for it. Ask clarifying questions. Share your presentation with more than one person, and choose people that have similar characteristics to your anticipated audience.

If you were going to present to a group that you knew in advance was of a certain age, sex, or professional background, it would only make sense to connect with someone from that group prior to your actual performance to check and see if what you have created and what they expect are similar. In oral communication, feedback is a core component of the communication model and we can often see it, hear it, and it takes less effort to assess it.

Be Results Oriented

At the end of the day, the assignment has to be complete. It can be a challenge to balance the need for attention to detail with the need to arrive at the end product—and its due date. Stephen Covey, S. (1989). *The seven habits of highly effective people*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster. suggests beginning with the end in mind as one strategy for success. If you have done your preparation, know your assignment goals, desired results, have learned about your audience and tailored the message to their expectations, then you are well on your way to completing the task. No document or presentation is perfect, but the goal itself is worthy of your continued effort for improvement.

Here the key is to know when further revision will not benefit the presentation and to shift the focus to test marketing, asking for feedback, or simply sharing it with a mentor or coworker for a quick review. Finding balance while engaging in an activity that requires a high level of attention to detail can be challenging for any business communicator, but it is helpful to keep the end in mind.

KEY TAKEAWAY

To improve communication, define your terms, choose precise words, consider your audience, control your tone, check for understanding, and aim for results.

EXERCISES

1. Choose a piece of writing from a profession you are unfamiliar with. For example, if you are studying accounting, choose an excerpt from a book on fashion design. Identify several terms you are unfamiliar with, terms that may be considered jargon. How does the writer help you understand the meaning of these terms? Could the writer make them easier to understand? Share your findings with your class.
2. In your chosen career field or your college major, identify ten jargon words, define them, and share them with the class.
3. Describe a simple process, from brushing your teeth to opening the top of a bottle, in as precise terms as possible. Present to the class.

2.7 Additional Resources

Benjamin Lee Whorf was one of the twentieth century's foremost linguists. Learn more about his theories of speech behaviour by visiting this site.

<http://grail.cba.csuohio.edu/~somos/whorf.html>

Visit Infoplease to learn more about the eminent linguist (and U.S. senator) S. I. Hayakawa. <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0880739.html>

iDictionary is a free online Canadian dictionary and thesaurus.

<http://www.idictionary.ca/>

The CLB-OSA is an online self-assessment tool for people who are interested in assessing their English or French as a Second Language. <http://www.clb-osa.ca/>

Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker is one of today's most innovative authorities on language. Explore reviews of books about language Pinker has published. <http://pinker.wjh.harvard.edu/books/index.html>

Reference.com is an American Web site that offers a wealth of definitions, synonym finders, and other guides to choosing the right words.

<http://dictionary.reference.com>

Visit Goodreads and learn about one of the most widely used style manuals, *The Chicago Manual of Style*. http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/103362.The_Chicago_Manual_of_Style

For in-depth information on how to present visuals effectively, visit the Web site of Edward Tufte, a Professor Emeritus at Yale University, where he taught courses in statistical evidence, information design, and interface design.

<http://www.edwardtufte.com/tufte/index>

The "I Have a Dream" speech by Martin Luther King Jr. is one of the most famous speeches of all time. View it on video and read the text.

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkhaveadream.htm>

To learn more about being results oriented, visit the Web site of Stephen Covey, author of the best seller *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.
<https://www.stephencovey.com>