

Chapter 1

Communication and Culture

The Basic Concepts

“Why do I have to take a public speaking class if I’m not a communication major?” is a common lament of college freshmen. Well, there are at least three good reasons to do so. First, communication is necessary to function in society. Second, the U.S. democratic process relies on an oral tradition. Third, globalization and expanding information technologies are making our world much smaller, putting you in contact, both domestically and internationally, with people who communicate differently than members of the dominant U.S. culture. These events have increased the need for everyone to become a better communicator.

The chances for your success as a speaker are greatly improved by acquiring some specialized communication skills. These skills are so essential in today’s society that most universities and organizations offer students and employees courses in effective communication. They do so because learning about communication instills an ability to think critically, solve problems, manifest high levels of personal credibility, adapt to social changes, develop self-confidence and poise, present creative and important ideas, and communicate interculturally. The main point should be clear: *Without communication skills we are unable to share thoughts and feelings with others.*

Because of this ever-increasing importance of communication and because communication can be improved, we have written this book to show you how to become a better communicator. This text is primarily concerned with how to effectively share opinions and ideas

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with people from other cultural backgrounds. First, however, you must understand the processes involved. Therefore, this initial chapter examines what communication is and how it works, discusses the ways communication and public speaking are both alike and different, looks at the interface of culture and communication, and explains how to overcome the fear of speaking before an audience.

The Importance of Communication

Communication is an integral part of daily life. Indeed, an argument can be made that every waking moment involves communication. Even when not communicating with another person, you are engaged in a variety of intrapersonal communication activities, such as watching TV, listening to music, reading ads, determining when to change lanes on the freeway, deciding whether to go to class, and so on. A communication act can be something as seemingly inconsequential as complimenting someone on his or her appearance or as important as explaining symptoms to medical workers during an emergency. Regardless of the level or type, a communication act always has a consequence. Another important consideration is that because communication is a social activity, it can be changed—people can increase and improve their communication skills. This book is designed to help you achieve those two objectives in a way that benefits both you and the people you interact with.

The ability to communicate effectively is indispensable in professional life and a commonly specified employment prerequisite. This requirement has become even more salient as the United States moves from a manufacturing to a knowledge-based economy. Workforce diversity and globalization have introduced an additional factor—you must be able to communicate competently with people from many different cultures.

Communication is also important in social relationships. People engage in interpersonal communication for a variety of reasons—including entertainment (telling a funny story), therapy (complaining about a difficult exam), emotional expression (telling someone you love them), and explanation (revealing the reasons behind our actions). Your relationships will be more rewarding if you have the ability to communicate effectively. Knowing how to listen and to talk in a sincere, skillful manner to a family member, a close friend, a

work associate, or someone from another culture can be beneficial to both parties.

The Communication Process

To understand the nature and function of speech, we must first examine the process of communication, of which speech is but one aspect. This text uses the terms “communication,” “speech communication,” “public speaking,” “oral communication,” and “speech” interchangeably, because a speaker is primarily engaged in communication whenever he or she, consciously or unconsciously, affects the behavior of others.

People ask and answer questions, take part in conversations, exchange ideas in meetings, participate in class discussions, and deliver formal and informal presentations. In every case, factors such as culture, credibility, interest, motivation, organization, listening skills, clarity, feedback, and delivery come into play. For example, although usually only one person talks during a public speaking event, the “other person” (i.e., audience members) is still sending messages. Nonverbal communication is present in all public speaking situations, and the way the audience responds is a type of message.

Defining communication is an assignment analogous to having to explain to someone why you love him or her. In both instances, it is often easier to remain silent and hope that you and your partner share similar meanings. The difficulty in both instances is that definitions of concepts as complex as love and communication are bound to be incomplete. The reason, of course, is that both can take many forms. But for our purposes, we can use a simple, straightforward definition. *Communication is the process of one person sending a message that creates meaning in another person.*

A key word in this definition is “process,” which implies an interaction consisting of parts. Understanding these parts, or components, of the communication process is a prerequisite to becoming an effective public speaker.

The Components of Communication

The process of communication requires you to simultaneously manage eight important structural components. The first and most obvious component is the **sender**—the individual or group originating the message. In public speaking, the sender is the person

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who has a need or desire to communicate with others. To fulfill this motivation, the sender prepares and transmits the message to the receiver(s).

The **message** contains the information the sender desires to have understood. Messages take the form of verbal or nonverbal behaviors, which are encoded and transmitted via a channel to the receiver. The **channel** is the method used to move the message from the sender to the receiver. The message may be transmitted through a direct channel or may be mediated. For example, an oral message can be sent directly when in the presence of the receiver or can be mediated through a cell phone, radio, or television broadcast when at a distance. A visual, or nonverbal, message can be transmitted by waving good-bye to a friend as you drive away or can be mediated through a video camera or a photograph.

The **receiver** is the intended recipient of the message and the one who interprets the message. Because the receiver assigns a meaning, which may or may not be what the sender intended, communication is often said to be *receiver based*. If you tell your audience that the next meeting will start at four o'clock, most members will probably understand that you mean in the evening. However, someone may misinterpret your message and show up for an early morning breakfast meeting. After interpreting the message and assigning a meaning, the receiver may formulate a **response**. This is the action taken by the receiver as a result of the meaning he or she assigns to the message. In public speaking, the response is not usually immediate. Audience members will usually wait until the presentation is over before asking questions or making comments. The audience's response may also come later, depending on the speaker's message. Audience response can take many forms, such as voting for a political candidate, changing diets, or purchasing a particular product.

Feedback is another important component of communication related to, yet separate from, the response. Feedback is what allows the speaker to assign a qualitative evaluation to the effectiveness of his or her message. Perhaps the audience will smile and nod their heads, frown, or look confused after decoding the speaker's message. This behavior provides a clue as to how the message has been interpreted and facilitates adjustment of speaker behavior. Depending on the feedback, you may rephrase or amplify your message to provide greater clarity, or even retract the statement.

Every communicative interaction takes place in both a physical and a social **environment**. The physical environment is the actual place where the communication takes place, such as a classroom, conference room, or restaurant. The contextual, or social, environment is more abstract and influences the style of communication used. Think about the different communication approaches for conducting an interview, asking a friend for a favor, visiting your professor during office hours, apologizing for being late for a date, giving a presentation to a group of close friends, or addressing a large audience where you know very few of the people. People vary their communicative style in response to the occasion—the contextual or social environment.

Noise, the final component of communication, refers to the various types of distractions that can plague any communication event. *Physical noise* is separate from the communication interaction and can take many forms, such as a skateboarder rolling past the open classroom door, a noisy air conditioner fan, static from the instructor's microphone, or your cell phone cutting out.

Noise that is intrinsic to the people participating in the communication episode can also take a variety of forms. Suppose that during a Friday afternoon speech class you find yourself thinking more about other topics instead of paying attention to your classmate's presentation. Maybe you had a disagreement with your significant other and are trying to think of a way to patch things up, or you are excited about plans for the weekend. Perhaps you are even worried about the speech you have to give in class next week. These are all examples of *psychological noise* that can affect your mental state and reduce understanding of your classmate's presentation. *Physiological noise* relates to the physical well-being of the people engaged in the communication activity. Being sleepy, hungry, or plagued by allergies will detract from your ability to understand a speaker's message.

The final type of noise is one common to intercultural communication and most likely to produce misunderstandings. For intercultural communication to be effective, the participants must use a common language, which means that one or more of the people involved may not be using his or her native tongue. Complete fluency in a second language is difficult to attain and somewhat rare. As a result, many people who use another language have an accent or sometimes misuse a word or phrase, which can make understand-

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ing the message more difficult. This type of distraction, referred to as *semantic noise*, also includes jargon, slang, and even technical or professional terminology (West and Turner, 2004).

Taken collectively, these eight components provide an overview of factors that enable and influence a communication encounter, be it interpersonal or public speaking. Also of importance is the role of culture in each component, which is especially influential in intercultural communication. To appreciate culture's impact on communication, we must first have an understanding of culture itself.

Culture

Like communication, culture has many definitions, most of which can be complex and abstract, attesting to the difficulty of explaining this social concept. For purposes here, however, we propose a simple, more applied definition. Recall the first time you went to an ethnic restaurant. If you were given a menu, did you know what to order? If you were accustomed to using a knife and fork, were you comfortable with chopsticks? If you had only eaten cooked fish, how did you react to sushi or sashimi? Any one of these situations may have caused you some confusion and apprehension. But you probably encountered other people in the restaurant who exhibited no difficulty in knowing what to order or how to eat it. This was because the other people knew the proper rules for obtaining and eating the different types of food. Think about meeting someone from another culture for the first time. Did you know the appropriate greeting—shaking hands, bowing, embracing, or a kiss on the cheek? These examples suggest an easily understood definition of culture: *Culture constitutes the rules for living and functioning in a particular social group.* The rules differ from one society to another; to function and be effective in a particular culture, you must know the rules and how to apply them.

You began learning your own culture's rules and norms at birth and have continued to increase that cultural knowledge throughout your life. As a result, the rules and behavioral expectations are ingrained, enabling you to react to recurring social situations without thinking. However, when you enter another culture, with different rules, problems can arise, especially in communication situations.

Communication and Culture

Communication and culture are inextricably interwoven. The communication style of a social group is a function of its culture, while culture is formed and transmitted through communication. Why do Euro-Americans normally shake hands when meeting someone in a formal setting? How did they learn this behavior? Why do the Japanese almost never use first names? Where did they learn this? Why do Arabs stand so close to each other in interpersonal settings? When did they learn this? The answer to all these questions is the same. People learn the culturally appropriate and expected social deportment, or rules, through communication.

If the behaviors of people from diverse cultures differ, we should rightly expect their communication styles to also vary. These differences extend far beyond the obvious dissimilarities of language and encompass variances in both verbal and nonverbal communication. How communication is used, the style employed, and even when to communicate are all products of culture. And what works in one culture may not work in another culture. Indeed, in a cross-cultural exchange, the accepted, normal communication practices of one participant may even be offensive to the other person. In such situations, communication can be seriously impeded by a lack of cultural awareness. This text is designed to help you increase your awareness of different communication practices and learn how to be a more effective communicator in our ever-increasing multicultural society.

In addition to the considerations discussed earlier in this chapter, another factor can influence communication interactions, especially when giving a speech. You have probably had limited public speaking opportunities. Therefore, it is important to recognize early on that stage fright, or communication apprehension, is a common experience. It is, however, something that is easily managed, as we explain in the final section of this chapter.

Managing Communication Apprehension

Most Americans find public speaking to be an extremely stressful experience and many place it above fears related to flying, heights, snakes, or even death. There are no scientifically validated explanations for this fear, but it is certainly quite common. Media celebrities, politicians, public figures at all levels, and even rock

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stars must deal with varying levels of stage fright. Regardless of how much public speaking experience an individual has, occasions will still arise when he or she experiences a degree of apprehension before and during a presentation. Competent speakers have simply learned how to manage their fear.

Within the field of communication, this sensation of mental—and, on occasion, physical—anxiety is termed *communication apprehension*. What you may feel when giving speeches, especially at the beginning of the semester, is a mild form of communication apprehension. The psychological apprehension may cause you to fumble for words or forget to present a particular visual aid when needed, and the physical anxiety might cause increased sweating, nervousness, dry mouth, or even shortness of breath. These nervous feelings are no different from what is sometimes experienced during a job interview or when preparing to ask someone out for the first time.

Basically, speech anxiety is the speaker's mind and body reacting to the fear of having an audience negatively evaluate his or her message and delivery style. As with any task, no one likes to think he or she might fail or perform poorly, and public speakers are constantly faced with the uncertainty of how their ideas and presentation skills will be perceived by the audience.

People who come from cultures that do not have a rhetorical tradition or who have learned English as a second language may have increased levels of anxiety. Many Asian cultures do not value speaking skills and place greater emphasis on the ability to listen empathetically. Second-generation Vietnamese Americans or Korean Americans, for example, may experience speech anxiety because they have not been enculturated to value oratory skills. However, everyone who aspires to be successful in the U.S. dominant culture will have to learn to make presentations to groups.

This discussion of communication apprehension is not meant to be frightening or discouraging. We are simply trying to increase your awareness and understanding of the possible influence of the phenomenon. Most of you will probably experience minimal or no anxiety. Additionally, you can use a number of methods to overcome or lessen these feelings of anxiety. As you read about the following measures to combat speech anxiety, keep in mind that they should be implemented well before the time comes to actually present a speech. Waiting until the last moment will only increase your apprehension.

Prior to Speaking

1. *Develop a positive attitude.* Fear of speaking in public can become a minor phobia. One way to develop a positive attitude is by selecting a topic of personal interest. Having strong feelings about a subject is likely to instill a sense of confidence. However, if you choose a topic you dislike, the entire speaking experience will probably be disagreeable.
2. *Be thorough in your knowledge of the audience.* A familiarity with the composition of the audience can lessen uncertainty about how they may receive the presentation.
3. *Think of speech anxiety as short-lived.* Anxiety is often highest just before standing up to speak. A satisfactory speech introduction usually dissipates anxiety.
4. *Start preparation early.* Lack of preparation is a major cause of stage fright. Waiting until the night before the presentation to begin preparing a speech is a sure invitation to disaster.
5. *Rehearse the speech several times, preferably in front of others.* Also, try to speak extemporaneously. Attempting to commit every word to memory can contribute to speech anxiety.
6. *Inspect the physical environment where you will be speaking.* Prior familiarity with the actual setting helps reduce anxiety and aids in making any needed adjustments.
7. *Try to engage in some relaxing behaviors just before the speech.* Tension-relieving techniques include (a) walking around or doing isometric exercises to help release nervous energy, (b) taking deep breaths or yawning to increase your supply of oxygen, and (c) taking a drink of water to keep your mouth from becoming dry.

While Speaking

When it is finally time to give the speech, several behaviors can help you maintain control over anxieties.

1. *Use effective delivery techniques.* Hand gestures, shifting your posture, and moving about will help dissipate the natural tension and simultaneously reinforce the verbal message. If

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you use visual aids, the physical movements involved in manipulating and gesturing toward the visuals can help reduce nervous energy.

2. *Make proficient use of your voice.* Too many beginning speakers talk too fast. A hurried pace signals nervousness, further contributes to anxiety, and detracts from the audience's ability to understand you. Slow down and pause often.
3. *Do not apologize for minor mistakes, just continue with the speech.* In most instances, the audience will not be aware of minor errors or an omitted illustration. However, if the mistake involves a major distortion of the facts, ethics demand that the speaker pause and correct the misunderstanding. Also, if a person's name or a place name is mistakenly mispronounced, a brief "sorry," followed by the correct pronunciation is appropriate.
4. *Remember that the audience will usually not know you are nervous.* Most of the symptoms associated with speech anxiety are not evident to the listeners. In reality, the speaker is usually the only one who knows. Do not add to the apprehension by thinking everyone else is aware of your stress.

Chapter Summary

Communication is one of the most important aspects of work and social life, and people spend the major part of their waking hours engaged in various communication activities. Globalization and increased domestic diversity have created a growing need to be able to communicate effectively. This text is intended to help you become a competent and ethical public speaker, especially in a multicultural environment.

In its broadest sense, communication is the process of sending and receiving messages. The process, however, can be divided into eight separate parts—sender, receiver, message, channel, response, feedback, environment, and noise. Semantic noise can be a significant detraction in intercultural communication.

Culture can be described as the rules for living and managing social interaction in a particular social group, and the rules will vary from one culture to another. Communication and cultural are inter-

twined, and each culture has its own set of socially appropriate communication protocols.

Fear of public speaking, or communication apprehension, is a common condition, even for experienced speakers. Although its causes are not fully understood, it seems to surface when a speaker is faced with an unfamiliar role in an unfamiliar environment before an unfamiliar audience. The key to controlling communication apprehension is to remove as much uncertainty and unfamiliarity as possible. Thorough preparation and practice, coupled with a good mental attitude, will help guard against the disabling effects of communication apprehension.

Concepts and Questions

1. How can training in communication help in your specific career choice?
2. How often do you communicate with people from cultures different from your own? What are those cultures?
3. When interacting with someone from another culture, do you ever notice any differences in their communication style? If so, can you describe the differences?
4. What do think are the major differences between public speaking and private conversation?
5. What do you find most troubling when you are asked to speak before a group in public?

Activities and Exercises

1. Prepare a two-minute talk to deliver in class that mentions the intercultural experiences you have had at work, at school, or during your travels. Tell the class what you have learned from the experiences.
2. Interview a member of the class. Try to gather cultural or ethnic information that will aid the other members of the class in getting to know your interviewee. In a 30-second speech, introduce the classmate to the entire class.
3. Bring a personal picture or object to class and explain how the item offers insight into your culture or ethnicity.

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4. Give a short talk that discusses why you believe so many people have a fear of public speaking.
5. Interview someone who you believe is a good public speaker. Ask the person what measures she or he uses to cope with communication apprehension.

Reference

West, R., and Turner, L. H. (2004). *Introducing communication theory: Analysis and application* (2nd ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill. ♦