

Three Keys to Effective Communication

Your Words Matter series

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About the Author and the Document

This document has been developed as part of a series of professional development resources for students at the College of Business Administration by a staff member who has almost 20 years of corporate experience. These materials are reviewed by corporate executives and others as we work to provide helpful information now, as students prepare for careers.



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Keys to Effective Communication

Keys to communication: understand your audience, know your materials, revise your work (or practice your presentation).

Three Keys to Effective Communications

Whether you are writing an email, a formal executive summary, or giving a presentation, three crucial items will help you to communicate effectively: Know the audience(s) to whom you are communicating, know your materials and what you want to communicate, and be ready to revise your work. While these topics are keys to effective communication, they are not the only ones. However, if you do these well, the quality of the rest of your work will be better.

Audience, Audience, Audience (or, the Granny-CEO Factor)

Whenever we communicate, we need to understand our audience – the people to whom we are communicating. We need to understand what they already know about our topic, and the importance of the topic we are addressing to them. While you likely will never know everything you need to about an audience, there are some things we know and some assumptions we can make to help us connect with our audience(s).

First, let's think about how we know about audience needs – which goes back to some skills you learned in your childhood. For example, when you talk to your grandparents or another elder as a college-student, you typically use different terms than you do with



your friends. But why do we do this? We do this because we're familiar with these audiences. We know grandma won't understand some of the more modern terms we commonly use with our friends. We describe things differently to her than we do to our peers.

Be sure to use words that your audience understands; if unsure, define the terms.

We have grown up around grandparents and our peers so we just naturally know what terms and concepts we need to define, explain something, or we need to know how to get them interested, right? Not exactly. Our ability to change how we talk to our grandparents happened because they trained us by asking questions when they didn't understand something, or provided us clear non-verbal signals, like confused looks. We immediately read this type of information and further explained or defined what we were talking about. As we mature, we use that previous information, and inherently make the adjustments because we know what is confusing. Our interactions change how we communicate.

You should feel free to draw some conclusions about your audience and what they know by clearly understanding the assignment and how people will be accessing your information. Are you presenting to your college Business Law class? If so, you know the material that has been covered in the class. You know the general age of your fellow students, which helps drive an understanding of what they have experienced. These are two important pieces of information that should inform how you reach the audience with your information.

Always have a primary audience and a clear purpose in mind for any communication.

Are you writing a blog post about social media strategies currently employed by nonprofits? If this is the case, you cannot write the piece for a general audience because it's accessible to any visitor with a computer. You'll need to familiarize yourself with the needs of nonprofits so you can write on the topic effectively, so you can connect with your audience(s) of non-profit employees and leaders. This point takes us to another: What about when we communicate with those about whom we have little information?

When you are faced with a person or audience you do not know, you need to treat communications with them more formally – especially when writing or orally presenting information. In these cases, it's often smart to ask some questions/take a poll on some basics of your topic at the start of the presentation/discussion, and let that help guide you.

Let's next consider some audiences you will need to reach in your college and work career.

Professors

What do our professors expect? Professors need you to address all parts of an assignment; always read the assignment closely. They need to see that you understand the material and are answering the questions that the assignment asks. You need to synthesize the material you have learned in a way that shows your understanding

Be sure to understand the assignment/topic before you begin your research.

of the topic. And be specific! This is the most common shortcoming of students in their writing and thinking. Of course, we can't assume that all professors want the same thing, but these are some aspects they most certainly want.

Professors today come from all different generations and from across the globe. While you are presenting an assignment in a classroom, you need to keep the presentation formal because the audience is composed of your peers and your professor. Think about it as practice for when you enter the business world. You also certainly need to write formally in written work; many students are much too informal in their written work.

Company Managers, Executives, and Peers

What about our managers and executives – how do we meet and exceed their expectations when we start our careers? Note that how you go about interacting in the corporate world will be a big change from what professors want.

Neither managers nor executives have a lot of time to spare, and they typically have far more expertise in the company and industry than you will. What does this mean when you have a written assignment or a presentation? This doesn't mean you skip a quick review of the business landscape, but it does mean you get to your conclusions/recommendations quickly and be ready to support them.

Unlike grandma and your peers, the CEO won't gently teach you how he or she wants you to communicate. Often, more blunt feedback should be expected because time is a precious commodity in the corporate world. It is smart to talk to your manager and co-workers who have presented to those higher in the corporate hierarchy about how they presented their material. Whatever you do, address this audience in a mindful, measured, formal way, and dress well.

Check out the company website to review executive biographies. Checking these is a matter of good course and it's clearly important before you make any presentation to such a group. It also is important to thoughtfully observe others' presentations with an eye for what the presenter does well so you can copy those aspects.

When you are face-to-face with someone you do not know and is an executive at your company, what should you do? Above all, be willing to engage that person. Even though the executive might be considerably older than you and might have had many different life experiences, you already have some things in common – you both work at the same



Be relaxed but formal in your communication when addressing company managers and executives.

*You must be **willing** to engage with people face-to-face. Ask questions; say “good morning.”*

company. Break the ice by introducing yourself, and mentioning what you do, even if you’ve met the person before. Try to make it easy for the executive, who might have difficulty remembering names of the many people they meet. By always introducing yourself to executives and others with whom you are less familiar helps the conversation start off well and be more fluid. After introducing yourself, you can strike up a conversation about how the executive started their career, what advice they might have, and don’t forget to be able to tell your “story” as it relates to your career aspirations.

What about someone you do not know at work, who looks your age? Will you talk with that person as you would your peers? Halt! Don’t be tricked! In a professional setting, you need to communicate with that person formally, until you are confident it is appropriate to talk with them more casually. Even then, choose your words carefully because you are in a public relationship in a public place.

Take-aways

Learn as much as you can about the audience who is receiving your communication, whether you are writing a piece of giving a verbal presentation. Let this understanding drive the terms and concepts you use, and what aspects you might choose to explain more fully, depending on the situation. Don’t forget to provide brief explanations of any term that isn’t a common one.

Don’t assume a person knows everything. If they did, you likely wouldn’t have been asked to write or present on a topic. Others don’t want to waste your time, and you must avoid wasting others’ time. This means that you need to get to specific information that you believe will be meaningful to your audience.

This leads us to the next section: learning about your topic.

Research and Think (or, There are No Short Cuts)

Even if you’ve always been told you’re a good writer or presenter and you’ve never had to work very hard at it, you will need to adjust your research and expectations of the amount you’ll have to practice or revise. You’ve heard the world is complex – and once you are working in a career, you’ll learn that’s not half of it. When you need to give a recommendation or explain a complex topic, you’ll need to be very well-versed in the subject matter. The work that goes into proper preparation takes time.

As you prepare to enter the corporate world, you need to understand the expectations. When you are at a company, you will be

Skills from college will help you learn about your industry and company.



Do your own company research by reading reports; this will help you ask informed questions.

When preparing a presentation, ask yourself the next logical question and know how to answer it.

expected to understand your company, your industry, and the other major influencers (economy, regulation, etc.). Business school gave you some analytical tools, which you now need to apply to really begin understanding business.

As a college junior or senior, and when you are in your career, you will be asked to make recommendations based on your analyses. You also will be getting more feedback on your assumptions, analyses, and critical thinking in the form of spoken or written questions. You will need to provide your rationale for statements you make, which means you need to make sure you have researched topics thoroughly and have a sound basis for your recommendations. The following are two examples of what we mean:

1. You have been asked to perform a top-line revenue analysis on your organization for the past five years. Don't tell your audience revenue went up for three years and down the past two. The chart you are including says that. What you need to provide are answers for many further questions, such as:

- Why is it down?
- What does it mean for the company that it's down?
- How does it compare to others in our industry?
- If others are experiencing different performance, why do you think that is?
- How does each product line contribute to the revenue each year? Which have fluctuated the most and why?
- Does it mean that the organization is in a maturing market with some products? If so, what are the implications for the company?
- What are the sales and margins on each product line?
- How do these compare to the competitors?
- What can be expected to occur next and why?

2. Don't say a company needs a social-media plan. Of course it needs a social media plan! The questions you need to answer could include:

- What should that plan be?
- How does it fit in the overall current marketing strategy?
- What exactly should it look like?
- Are you recommending an organization should add channels to the social-media platform mix?
- If so, why? If not, why not?
- What are competitors doing and how successful are they? What are they missing?
- What is the organization missing?
- What is your rationale for each recommendation?
- What will this cost, by channel?
- What is the anticipated return on investment?
- What are the risks?

If you are presenting on a business condition or providing a recommendation, expect to be asked about the statements you make. When preparing your materials, think about the next logical question that could be asked of you. You need sound data and reasoning to back your rationale. No one has all the answers, but you should make time to perform thorough research to have many of the answers to the more obvious questions. Remember, it's also okay to say, "I don't know, but I'll find out for you." This is much better than just guessing at an answer.

Practice, Proofread, and Revise

Whether you are drafting a report, paper, or presentation, you will need to devote some time after completing your initial draft to polishing it. First drafts for any project are never sufficient to turn into a professor or anyone else. In addition, you should always practice a final presentation several times before actually giving it to your audience.

For a document, you need to prepare a first draft after performing initial research, identifying your audience, and ensuring you're addressing all parts of the assignment. After you type your first draft, leave it for a few hours. Then, come back to read it through out loud. Identify and correct typos, grammar, sentence structure, and any unclear parts of the document. You might well have to do further research because you've realized you didn't completely answer the assignment or you don't have enough specific content. After this revision, see if a friend, classmate, or family member will read it and identify any other areas that need additional work. Be sure to double-check the assignment to make sure you are on track to complete all parts. Right before you turn in your paper, run your software program's spell check and grammar check.

For a presentation, you'll need to make certain your slides follow good design and presentation principles. Make the typed points succinct and accurate, and correct any typos. If you are working on a group presentation, you need to make sure you have plan for introductions and the sections transition smoothly. These are all important points, but the most important thing you can do to prepare a presentation is to practice it exactly how you plan to give it. This means standing up and practicing it enough that you don't need to use note cards. When you practice your presentation out loud, you'll be able to identify the points that aren't clear, and where you need to improve your transitions from slide to slide and main point to main point. Make sure your introduction and conclusion are especially solid. Make sure it fits the time requirements set by faculty or planner of the meeting.

Don't forget to include citations of the sources you've used so you won't be plagiarizing. You are typically expected to do research,

A first draft is NEVER good enough. Make sure to take the time to revise.

You are expected to use others' ideas. However, you must respect others' work and properly cite your sources.

and citing others' work is important and expected because you are using their ideas. It's dishonest to let a reader or listener think what you're saying is your own when it is not. During your research, just note where you're getting your information so you can cite your sources more easily.

Take-Aways

Keys to effective communication are to know your audience, know the material, and work hard at revising your drafts. The audience will dictate how the material is presented, what terms are used, and the overall flow of the document or presentation, based on your audience's previous knowledge. Also, remember to always be professional, formal, and cite information sources you use.

Additional Resources

Memo Writing

- [Colorado State University's Writing Studio](#)
- [Purdue Online Writing Lab \(OWL\), Purdue University](#)
- [Northern Kentucky University](#)
- [University of Northern Iowa](#)
- [University of Iowa](#)
- [YourWordsMatterAkron.org](#)
- Strunk, W., Jr., & White, E. B. (1979). *The elements of style* (3rd ed.). New York: Macmillan.

The University of Akron's Communication Resources

Springboard site:

- Navigating Corporate America
- How to Create Effective Explanations
- How to Peer Edit
- How to Avoid Plagiarism
- Write Emails the Right Way
- Ingredients for Great Presentations
- PowerPoint® Design Basics
- Common Presentation Mistakes to Avoid
- Presenting Numbers
- Presentation Introductions and Conclusions

If you do not have access to the Springboard Communication Resources site, send your student identification number, your full name, and your email address to Betsy DuWaldt, Business Practitioner – Communications, businesswriter@uakron.edu.