

3: Intercultural and International Communication

Chapter Objectives

The purpose of this chapter is to:

- Define high-context and low-context cultures
- Explain the differences between globalization and global reach
- Understand how business writing can bridge cultural differences
- Define culture and intercultural communication
- Define monochronic and polychronic time factors
- Understand how business writing can foster community peacebuilding

WET Design Company and Its Corporate Culture

Employees at WET Design ("Wet and Wild") created the Fountains of Bellagio in Las Vegas, Nevada. What business communication significance does the Fountains of Bellagio hold? The answer is collaboration and innovation. Mark W. Fuller is the founder and CEO of WET Design. He has implemented a collaborative corporate culture model in which every employee is immersed in the company's structure.

When employees begin employment at WET, they spend two weeks working in all departments and experiencing a variety of tasks in each department. Throughout their tenure, employees are offered training opportunities pertaining to the company, in addition to creative classes on a variety of subjects such as meditation, woodworking, comedy improvisation, and fitness. Mr. Fuller believes this structure sparks creativity, innovation, collaboration, communication, and versatility, which are characteristics of strong teams. The goal is to give clients the best product and to give employees the opportunity for professional and personal development and growth.

Types of Cultural Communication

Culture is a learned system of behaviors and meanings that is shared amongst groups within a family, a community, or a nation. It is a set of common values, ideas, and actions that are passed from one generation to the next. Culture is multifaceted; therefore, it influences communication. It requires thinking beyond tolerance to learning about and embracing cultural differences.

Diversity recognizes individual differences and lived experiences. Subculture represents the ideas and ways of life of people within a diverse group. The range of human differences include but not limited to:

- Religious and spiritual beliefs
- Race
- Ancestry
- Nationality or ethnic origin
- Sex or gender
- Gender identity and/or gender expression
- Sexual orientation
- Ability
- Health
- Age and generation
- Military or veteran status
- Socioeconomic status and background
- Personal life experience
- Learning style and personality

The lived experiences of individuals in a subculture may differ from individuals within a larger culture.

Inclusive Language

Business communities and stakeholders are diverse. To ensure your writing promotes inclusion, justice, and equity, it is essential to use nondiscriminatory language.

Gender identification is an individual's personal choice. Stakeholders may not fit traditional gender categories; therefore, to presume gender is an act of exclusion. In business writing it is acceptable to use the plural pronoun *they/their* as a singular nongendered pronoun.

Example:

Each **associate** uploaded the performance training questionnaire to **their** evaluation folder.

You may add your preferred gender pronouns to your signature block closing.

Example:

Sincerely,

Valerie A. Gray, Professor of English

Pronouns: She/Her/Hers

When you are communicating the same message to several receivers, for example a letter to employees regarding additional health care coverage, use plural pronouns or plural titles (associates, coordinators, facilitators, supervisors, trainers, etc).

Example:

All **coordinators** were invited to the debriefing meeting.

To learn more about gender cultural aspects and the history of inclusive pronouns, visit the [University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer Plus \(LGBTQ+\) Resource Center](#)

Ethical Consideration

It is important to learn about cultures and subcultures. However, it is equally as important to avoid stereotyping individuals within a culture and subculture. A stereotype is an oversimplified opinion of a group and applying that opinion to everyone in that group. Stereotyping can lead to prejudice, bias, racism, and discrimination.

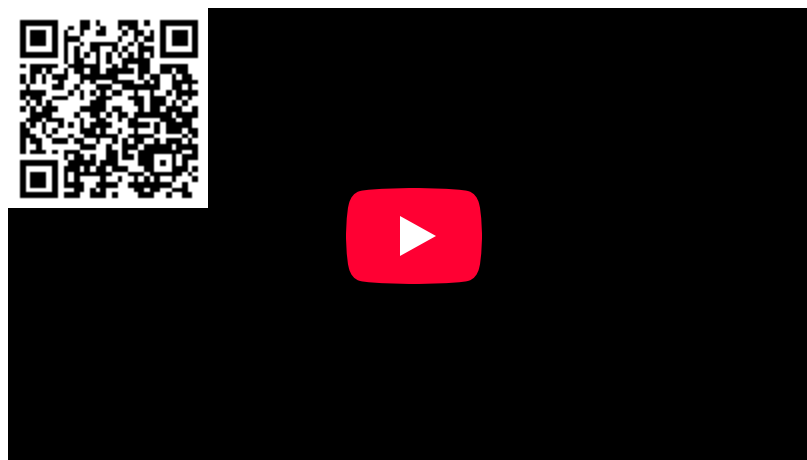
Understanding International Communication

International communication, also referred to as **global communication**, is the verbal, nonverbal, and oral communication that occurs between individuals from different international locations.

Global reach refers to the ability of a company to have customers worldwide.

Globalization refers to a company from one country agreeing to conduct business with a company in another country.

This video explains the complexities of globalization and its impact on various segments in business. As you view the video, consider the ways in which it is easy to hinder written business communication in global situations.



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Ethical Considerations for Cultural Global Advantage

In order to understand why businesses are willing to operate in a complex global environment, it is important to understand two fundamental concepts that drive almost all business decisions: absolute and comparative advantage. Countries and companies are willing to assume the risk of engaging in global trade because they believe that they have an advantage over the competition that they can turn into profits. Not all countries have the same natural resources, infrastructure, labor force, or technology. These differences create advantages that can be exploited in global trade, to a country's (or company's) benefit. As you analyze the audience and explain advantages and benefits, it is necessary to acknowledge concerns that citizens of the country have regarding their community in order to avoid damage to it.

Absolute Advantage

An entity (country, region, company, or individual) is considered to have an **absolute advantage** if either of the following conditions exists:

1. It is the only source of a particular product, good, or service. This kind of absolute advantage is very rare and usually depends on a particular natural resource being available only within a certain region or country.
2. An entity is also considered to have an absolute advantage if it is able to produce more of something than another entity while using the same amount of resources (factors of production).

Comparative Advantage

An entity (country, region, company, or individual) is considered to have a **comparative advantage** over another in producing a particular good or service if it can produce the good or service at a lower relative opportunity cost. (The section Ethical Considerations for Cultural Global Advantage is a derivative of *Absolute and Comparative Advantage*. **Authored by:** Linda Williams. **Provided by:** Lumen Learning. **License:** [CC BY: Attribution](#)).

The following videos explain the role globalization plays in international businesses.



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Cultural Competence

This video will assistance you with understanding how the formation of cultural competency will improve your international communication skills.



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Understanding Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is the ability to communicate sensitively, authenticity, and clearly with people from other cultures and countries. In order to be successful in cultural communication, intercultural awareness is a necessity. Anthropologist Edward T. Hall's cultural awareness led to the development of the types of culture: high-context and low-context.

In **high-context cultures**, interpersonal nonverbal communication is the primary way in which meaning is interpreted. Interpersonal nonverbal communication is expressed through eye contact, gestures, and the time it takes to respond to business correspondence. Because of their ability to read nonverbal cues, communicators in high-context cultures expect communicators from low-context cultures to interpret nonverbal communication; therefore, high-context communicators are more reserved in their speech. Hierarchical leadership is the business communication model.

In **low-context cultures**, verbal communication is the primary way in which meaning is interpreted. Verbal communication is expressed openly through discussing a topic face-to-face and reading detailed business documents.

Business-Specific Cultural Differences

Collectivism and Individualism

Within a business, **collectivism** is reflected in the team or collaborative approach; the performance of the group has precedence over each individual in the group. The preferred structure to complete tasks for high-context cultures is through collectivism.

Within a business, **individualism** is reflected in the individual approach; the performance of the individuals within the group has precedence. Individuals are expected to contribute to the group process. The preferred structure to complete tasks for low-context cultures is through individualism. Group members are often encouraged to share their opinions.

Knowledge is based on what is already known about the topic, in order to understand context and meaning. Communicators read nonverbal behavior and the environment in which the communication takes place. The following table provides additional categories of intercultural nonverbal communication.

Nonverbal Communication	Cultural Context
Body language	Checking messages on your phone, fidgeting, or having a closed body position may suggest that you are uninterested or uncomfortable. In turn, your audience may feel disrespected or believe such actions are unprofessional.
Business versus personal relationships	Discussing your interests, family, and hobbies is an effective way to break the ice and build rapport with counterparts from other cultures.
Clothing	Clothing communicates cultural norms, trends, style, tradition, religion, status, and comfort.

Expressions and Eye Contact	Nodding and maintaining eye contact may indicate agreement, but not always. To ensure that everyone agrees and/or understands, incorporate various communication modes, written and oral, to ensure everyone agrees.
Gestures	Gestures are hand or head movements used to signal information such as emotions, attitudes, and intentions. The use and interpretation of gestures are based on one's culture. Therefore, gestures are not universal.
Space	Social distancing is a term that is in the international lexicon. Personal space throughout the world is six feet. Before COVID-19, it was customary for citizens of high-context cultures to communicate in close proximity of three feet or less.
Time	Time is categorized as monochronic and polychronic. Monochronic refers to doing or focusing on one task. Polychronic refers to doing or focusing on multiple tasks, or multitasking. In addition, monochronic individuals are time sensitive. When a meeting is scheduled to begin at 1:00 p.m. they expect the meeting to begin on time. Whereas polychronic individuals are not time sensitive. When a meeting is scheduled for 1:00 p.m., they may not attend until 1:15 p.m. The lateness is not necessary disrespectful. Instead, polychronic individual prefer to take a leisurely and reflective approach to business.

High Context and Low-Context Spectrum of Countries: A Representative Table

The following chart categorizes high-context and low-context cultures.

High Context	Low Context
Brazil	Canada
China	Denmark
Colombia	Finland
Ghana	Germany
Mexico	Norway
Saudi Arabia	United States

High-Context and Low-Context Business Communication Differences: A Representative Table

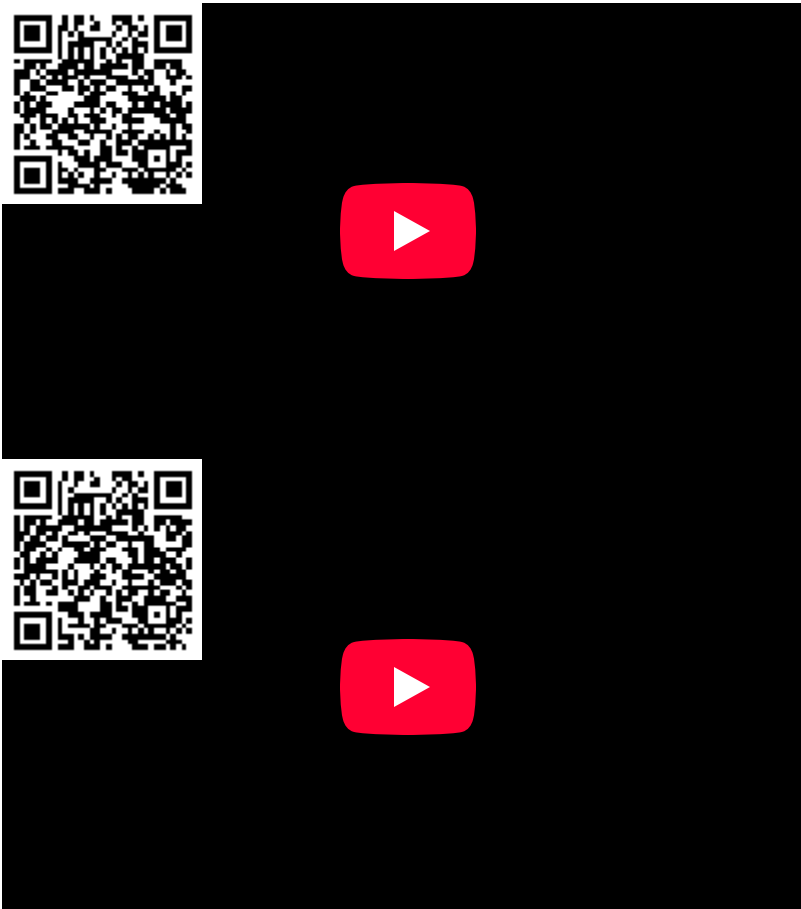
The following chart presents differences in business communication based on high-context and low-context cultures.

High Context	Low Context
An oral agreement finalizes a deal	A written contract finalizes a deal
Complements are deflected	Complements are embraced
Word choice and style are formal	Business communication is formal or semi-formal, depending on the medium and the audience
Face-to-face communication relies more on nonverbal cues	Face-to-face communication relies more on oral cues
Time is spent discussing family, friends, and hobbies	Time is spent discussing business
Tasks are performed one at a time	Multitasking is common

Negative information is not communicated bluntly in order to avoid embarrassment for the recipient (also known as “saving face”); an indirect communication method is preferred

Negative information is communicated at times, too bluntly; a direct communication method is preferred

The following videos provide an overview of nonverbal intercultural communication. The videos are sponsored by the U.S. Department of State.



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Formalize Your Writing to Produce Clarity in Intercultural Communication

To lessen miscommunication between cultures and within cultures, focus on explaining meaning to ensure readers understand your points. Your writing goal is denotation and eliminating abstract expressions such as clichés, stock expressions. **Denotation** refers to using words that are concrete and explanations that are clear to ensure that all members in your audience have the same understanding.

Another way to clarify your writing is to eliminate euphemisms. **Euphemisms** refer to abstract expressions that are used within a culture or subculture as a way to soften a word or phrase that may be too harsh.

Nuances of Language

Readers may interpret written text based on the language and grammar conventions of their primary language. It may be difficult to switch to the standards of another language because of the variances in word choice, structure, development, grammar, and style. Additional time to complete the drafting and editing stages of the writing process, and collaborating with colleagues may be necessary.

Peacebuilding, Justice, and Business Communication

Peacebuilding is a key factor to ensuring a company does not take advantage of a country's resources. The term peacebuilding ("United Nations," para.1) was first introduced by Johan Galtung, a conflict and peace scholar, to present strategies for lasting peace by addressing the "root causes" of violent conflict. Peacebuilding addresses the reasons for conflict and establishes ways for peaceful relationships through empowerment by those in conflict to reach peaceful solutions. In this way, peacebuilding serves as a business strategy for all stakeholders to work together to create a culture of peace. Peacebuilding in business encompasses employers and employees providing a safe work environment free from harassment and bullying; governance and policing that is fair and just; safe environmental conditions regardless of location; and a global perspective that incorporates cultural differences.

Stakeholders can practice peacebuilding on a small scale by, for example:

- Marching for a social justice cause
- Boycotting a company that does not share your view on a social justice issue
- Writing to the CEO of a company to complain about its hiring policies
- Signing petitions and emailing the CEO to encourage her or him to offer only non-genetically modified foods

These categories require companies to have an environmental and social agenda:

- Safe workplace
- Fair policies
- Safe environment
- Global perspective

Cultural Considerations Summary

This chapter provides strategies for writing documents that address international and intercultural communication, and the responsibilities stakeholders assign to businesses that are local and international. To lessen miscommunication between cultures and within cultures, focus on writing with denotation and eliminating abstract expressions such as clichés, euphemisms, and expressions.

General Intercultural Writing Tips

The successful intercultural business communicator is:

- Aware that their preferred values and behaviors are influenced by culture and are not necessarily correct
- Aware that language choices can lead to miscommunication
- Flexible and open to change
- Sensitive to verbal and nonverbal behavior
- Sensitive to differences among individuals within a culture
- Aware of the values, beliefs, and practices in other cultures
- Aware that one way of conducting business is not the only way
- Celebrates commonalities and differences

All links live as of July 2021.

References

Ramberg, J.J. (reporter). (2014, April 27). "Wet and Wild: Creating A Culture Of Versatility." Your Money. MSNBC. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQf4uNeyGUo>

United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office. (n.d.). Peacebuilding & The United Nations. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/en/peacebuilding/pbso/pbun.shtml>

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