

4.1: Oral versus Written Communication

Learning Objectives

1. Explain how written communication is similar to oral communication, and how it is different.

The written word often stands in place of the spoken word. People often say “it was good to hear from you” when they receive an e-mail or a letter, when in fact they didn’t *hear* the message, they *read* it. Still, if they know you well, they may mentally “hear” your voice in your written words. Writing a message to friends or colleagues can be as natural as talking to them. Yet when we are asked to write something, we often feel anxious and view writing as a more effortful, exacting process than talking would be.

Oral and written forms of communication are similar in many ways. They both rely on the basic communication process, which consists of eight essential elements: source, receiver, message, channel, receiver, feedback, environment, context, and interference. Table 4.1.1 summarizes these elements and provides examples of how each element might be applied in oral and written communication.

Table 4.1.1: Eight Essential Elements of Communication

Element of Communication	Definition	Oral Application	Written Application
1. Source	A source creates and communicates a message.	Jay makes a telephone call to Heather.	Jay writes an e-mail to Heather.
2. Receiver	A receiver receives the message from the source.	Heather listens to Jay.	Heather reads Jay’s e-mail.
3. Message	The message is the stimulus or meaning produced by the source for the receiver.	Jay asks Heather to participate in a conference call at 3:15.	Jay’s e-mail asks Heather to participate in a conference call at 3:15.
4. Channel	A channel is the way a message travels between source and receiver.	The channel is the telephone.	The channel is e-mail.
5. Feedback	Feedback is the message the receiver sends in response to the source.	Heather says yes.	Heather replies with an e-mail saying yes.
6. Environment	The environment is the physical atmosphere where the communication occurs.	Heather is traveling by train on a business trip when she receives Jay’s phone call.	Heather is at her desk when she receives Jay’s e-mail.
7. Context	The context involves the psychological expectations of the source and receiver.	Heather expects Jay to send an e-mail with the call-in information for the call. Jay expects to do so, and does.	Heather expects Jay to dial and connect the call. Jay expects Heather to check her e-mail for the call-in information so that she can join the call.
8. Interference	Also known as noise, interference is anything that blocks or distorts the communication process.	Heather calls in at 3:15, but she has missed the call because she forgot that she is in a different time zone from Jay.	Heather waits for a phone call from Jay at 3:15, but he doesn’t call.

As you can see from the applications in this example, at least two different kinds of interference have the potential to ruin a conference call, and the interference can exist regardless of whether the communication to plan the call is oral or written. Try switching the “Context” and “Interference” examples from Oral to Written, and you will see that mismatched expectations and time zone confusion can happen by phone or by e-mail. While this example has an unfavorable outcome, it points out a way in which oral and written communication processes are similar.

Another way in which oral and written forms of communication are similar is that they can be divided into verbal and nonverbal categories. Verbal communication involves the words you say, and nonverbal communication involves how you say them—your tone of voice, your facial expression, body language, and so forth. Written communication also involves verbal and nonverbal dimensions. The words you choose are the verbal dimension. How you portray or display them is the nonverbal dimension, which can include the medium (e-mail or a printed document), the typeface or font, or the appearance of your signature on a letter. In this sense, oral and written communication are similar in their approach even as they are quite different in their application.

The written word allows for a dynamic communication process between source and receiver, but is often asynchronous, meaning that it occurs at different times. When we communicate face-to-face, we get immediate feedback, but our written words stand in place of that interpersonal interaction and we lack that immediate response. Since we are often not physically present when someone reads what we have written, it is important that we anticipate the reader's needs, interpretation, and likely response to our written messages.

Suppose you are asked to write a message telling clients about a new product or service your company is about to offer. If you were speaking to one of them in a relaxed setting over coffee, what would you say? What words would you choose to describe the product or service, and how it may fulfill the client's needs? As the business communicator, you must focus on the words you use and how you use them. Short, simple sentences, in themselves composed of words, also communicate a business style. In your previous English classes you may have learned to write eloquently, but in a business context, your goal is clear, direct communication. One strategy to achieve this goal is to write with the same words and phrases you use when you talk. However, since written communication lacks the immediate feedback that is present in an oral conversation, you need to choose words and phrases even more carefully to promote accuracy, clarity, and understanding.

Key Takeaway

Written communication involves the same eight basic elements as oral communication, but it is often asynchronous.

Exercises

1. Review the oral and written applications in Table 4.1.1 and construct a different scenario for each. What could Jay and Heather do differently to make the conference call a success?
2. Visit a business Web site that has an "About Us" page. Read the "About Us" message and write a summary in your own words of what it tells you about the company. Compare your results with those of your classmates.
3. You are your own company. What words describe you? Design a logo, create a name, and present your descriptive words in a way that gets attention. Share and compare with classmates.

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