Communication in Practice

COMMUNICATION IN PRACTICE

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ABOUT THE COVER

The cover image is a "galaxy vortex marble," created by glassblower Dan Neff of Duluth, Minnesota. Photos of the marble, including the author photo above, were taken by Beverly Hawkins, and the hands holding the marble in the cover photo belong to Maria Galarneault.

Preface

Why choose a picture of a marble for the front cover of a book about communication? One reason is because it suggests the infinite complexity of the communication process. You can hold it in your hands, but if you start falling into the enticing world of studying communication, it feels a little like you may never “hit bottom.” Communication takes a wide variety of forms, can be intentional or unintentional, and often goes wrong. Depending on how you define it, Communication Studies has existed as an academic discipline for more than 100 years, although people have been trying to figure out the mysteries of communication throughout human history. My philosophy is that everyone on earth is a student of communication, trying our best to figure out this complex and vital phenomenon.

Psychologist Paul Watzlawick famously said “You cannot not communicate,” meaning that every form of behavior — as well as silence and lack of behavior — has the potential to convey meaning. Literally millions of books have been written with the explicit or implicit goal of helping people communicate with each other, and colleges and universities throughout the world teach numerous courses on the subject (whether or not they are labeled “Communication Studies” courses). So what can one author possibly hope to accomplish in a single book?

My goal is to provide an introductory look, aimed at college undergraduate students, into the useful concepts people have figured out about communication in a variety of contexts. This is certainly not intended as a comprehensive survey of an entire academic discipline: The International Encyclopedia of Communication, Stephen Littlejohn, Karen Foss and John Oetzel’s Theories of Human Communication (11th edition), and Em Griffin, Andrew Ledbetter and Glenn Sparks’s A First Look At Communication Theory (11th edition) have done that far better than I could. My aim is to focus on the “good stuff” that my target audience will find useful, which means that I will spend less time summarizing research studies than some textbooks do.

How do I know what the reader will find relevant and valuable? My answer comes in part from teaching communication courses to college undergraduates for over 35 years, including Introduction to Communication Theory, Small Group Communication, Organizational Communication, Family Communication, Persuasion, Argumentation, the Psychology of Communication, Public Speaking, and a seminar on Credibility. (A department chair once referred to me as the “utility infielder” of the department.) When I switched majors from psychology to “Speech” (as it was known back in 1982), I never turned back, and got a Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Ph D in the subject. In addition to teaching, for 25 years I also held an interesting “side job” as a trial consultant for NJP Litigation Consulting, working with attorneys to improve their communication in the courtroom. It was a humbling profession, putting everything I thought I knew about communication to the test.

I would not, however, want to put myself out there as a comprehensive expert in everything communication-related. When I taught my first class, I was nervous about my ability to be a convincing authority on the subject, thinking that my role as a teacher was to be The Person With All The Answers and my job was to dole out pearls of wisdom. I soon changed my perception of a teacher’s role, and now think of my job as posing good questions instead of providing answers. My concept of a "good question," by the way, is one with no simple answer. To put it another way, if my students leave my classroom thinking they understand everything, I've done them a disservice. If they leave the classroom still puzzling over a question I put to them, and continue to be bothered by that question long after the course is over, then I've done my job because I've started them on a journey of exploration.

I don't think of communication as a simple and easy process, so I don't have much respect for simple and easy answers to communication-related questions. There are some principles that I and my students have found useful over the years, which is what I tried to put in this book — but I also recognize that those principles all have limitations and exceptions. I am fond of statistician George E.P. Box's expression **"All models are wrong, but some are useful."** Models are, by their nature, attempts to neatly encapsulate phenomena that are messy, complex, inconsistent, unpredictable, and baffling — all words I would use to describe communication. Any time I get too complacent in thinking that I understand the communication process well, I am proven wrong. Like perhaps all communication teachers, there have been times in my life when someone pointed an accusing finger at me and said, "I thought you were supposed to be good at communication!"

Everyone knows something about communication. No one knows everything about communication. We are all learning, and I hope this book helps you on your journey.

I am also reassured that my target audience of college undergraduates will find the concepts in this book useful because two of them agreed to serve as stand-ins for everyone else. So I must start my acknowledgements with the two students who read the book and told me their thoughts about it: Lauren Vander Pas and Evelyn Taylor, both students at the University of Minnesota. They knew they couldn't represent the reactions of all possible readers, but I trusted their insights implicitly and am grateful for their diligence in reading every word.

Next on the list of people that must be thanked profusely is Stephanie Galarneault, my colleague and collaborator, who was immensely helpful in helping me think through this entire process, filling in my areas of deficiency in several chapters, and serving as a project manager, taking care of all the tasks I'm lousy at. Stephanie's teaching experience is as broad as mine, but I've stolen more good classroom ideas from her than from anyone else. After much discussion, we decided that I would be listed as the sole author of the book, but even though I did the actual writing, much of the thinking came about through conversations with her. Perhaps more important than all of that, however, is how incredibly supportive she has been.

Speaking of incredibly supportive people, I am grateful for the trust and support of Micah Gjeltema and Shane Nackerud of the University of Minnesota Library's Partnership for Affordable Learning Materials program.

In Chapter 2, I tell the story of switching majors from psychology to Communication Studies, and the person most responsible for "seducing" me into my new major was Art Bochner, who taught me Family Communication at Temple University in 1982 (and later went on to become president of the National Communication Association), so I want to thank him for starting me on that road. I must also thank my mentor at NJP Litigation Consulting, Susie Macpherson, who has devoted her life to understanding how to communicate effectively in a courtroom.

Finally, I want to acknowledge two people who never took a college communication course: my mother, Louise Rose, the best storyteller I know; and my father, Frank S. Rose, who taught me more about communication than anyone else.

2.4 QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES

Quantitative methods are based on the fundamental principle that good research must be objective, and they rely on procedures borrowed from the physical sciences, such as chemistry, engineering, and physics. If you want to discover the boiling point of water, for example, you don't want to gather opinions and perceptions: you want to discover facts that can be represented in numbers. Imagine two scientists tackling that question, and one says "In my opinion, the boiling point of water is 108 degrees Celsius" and the other responds, "That doesn't seem right to me; it feels like it's 94 degrees Celsius instead." That's not good science. Another way to look at it is to spell out what *doesn't* count as a source of scientific knowledge. Michael Beatty (1996) listed six unscientific sources of knowledge[1]:

Intuition: "I just know in my gut"

Tenacity and tradition: "We've always known that to be true"

Common sense: "C'mon, get real: everybody knows that…."

Personal experience: "Well, it happened to me, so I assume it's universal"

Authority: "My doctor said it's true"

Rationalism and deduction: "Logically speaking, it has to be true."

This is a rather intimidating list, and it may include most of the ways you reach conclusions in your daily life. But science has often shown that what we "know" to be true isn't true, and putting aside what we "know" and looking only at what the numbers actually show has led to many surprises and scientific advancements. In the field of communication and deception, for example, people have long believed that not being able to maintain eye contact is a give-away that someone is lying. When scholars started doing rigorous research on deception, however, they found this wasn't true at all. [See Box 17.3, in the chapter on Nonverbal Communication, Ch. 17]. To be a good scientist, it is important to put aside preconceived notions and be open to finding out that you are wrong about things you thought you knew. Biologist Martin Schwartz put it more bluntly in an essay titled "The Importance of Stupidity In Scientific Research":[2] "The more comfortable we become with being stupid, the deeper we will wade into the unknown and the more likely we are to make big discoveries."

You may be thinking, "Well, I can just observe communication and learn from what I see." You're in a classroom group already, so you can just watch what happens in that group. Several problems, however, immediately arise with this approach. One is the problem of **selective perception**: only noticing some

1. Beatty, M.J. (1996). Thinking Quantitatively. In An Integrated Approach to Communication Theory and Research, Ed. by Salwen, M.B. & Stacks, D.W. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

2. Schwartz, M.A. (2008). The Importance of Stupidity in Scientific Research. *Journal of Cell Science* 121, 1771.

examples and overlooking others. It's hard to see everything that is going on, and give all examples equal weight. In your group, for example, you think there is equal participation because you can think of a time when each of the eight members spoke, and when Shonda pipes up and says something, it's always funny and memorable. What you didn't notice is that she only does that two or three times per meeting, while Peter talks far more often, but his comments are generally more mundane and not funny, and his voice is quieter. In other words, to conduct good research you can't wait until a meeting is over and then rely on your *impression* of who spoke up how often. If you want an accurate picture, you're going to have to count things: how many times each member made a contribution, and perhaps how long their statements were.

Another reason humans aren't perfect at observation is because they tend to overreact to vivid examples. If you ask people "Which animal has killed the most humans?," they may guess sharks because shark attacks get so much attention. People rarely guess the correct answer — mosquitoes — because the image of a mosquito bite is not as vivid. Likewise, more people are afraid of elevators than stairs, because they can picture what it would be like to be caught in a plunging elevator, while stairs are so ordinary (far more people, however, are injured on stairs than in elevators). This **vividness effect** can give us a distorted view of reality. In your classroom group, Kyle once shot down a suggestion of Pauline's in a very harsh way, and another time got so frustrated with Will that he shouted in his face and stormed out of the room. High-drama moments like those can be extremely vivid, which might leave you with the impression that yours is a high-conflict group and Kyle is deeply unhappy in it. What you didn't notice, however, is that during the group's 11 meetings, those were the only two times Kyle got upset, and that most of the time his comments are civil and positive.

A third problem is **confirmation bias**: the tendency to seek out information that confirms that you're right, and avoid sources that show you're wrong. If you are convinced that Rachel is the most influential person in the group and shows leadership potential, you'll be on the lookout for proof that you are right. Confirmation bias is a very strong human tendency, so it should come as no surprise that scholars and scientists can fall prey to it just like everyone else.

Selective perception, vividness effect, and confirmation bias are each understandable human tendencies, which illustrates that in order to be a good scientist, you need to fight human nature. This is where we turn to the **scientific method**. Scientists learn to conduct research by formulating hypotheses, devising ways to measure variables, eliminating extraneous variables as much as possible, setting up experimental and control groups, altering variables for the experimental group and measuring the effects, and comparing the two groups. Using some version of this process has helped scientists make extraordinary progress in many fields.

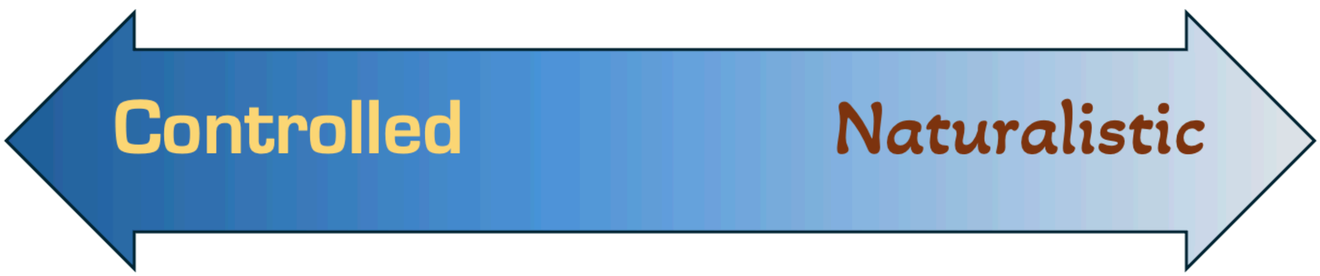
Let's see how you could use this process to study the effects of group size on participation. The first method you could employ is experimentation.

Experiments. When designing an experiment, you need to create clear and measurable definitions. In this case, you'll need an **operational definition** of "participation," which you might define as "speaking aloud for at least ten seconds." You could then set up groups of varying sizes: five participants, 10, 18. If you have the resources, record as many group discussions as you can, and create a spreadsheet to tally who spoke when and for how long. This painstaking cataloging would take a long time, so you could take a reasonable shortcut by relying on "random sampling": take a recording of a group meeting, fast forward to a random spot, jot down who is speaking at that moment, and repeat the process a few dozen times; you'll have a representative picture of participation without having to listen to the entire meeting.

Some challenges arise, however. The problem of **controlling for extraneous variables** is always an issue when it comes to experiments. For example, what topic is the group talking about? If they're discussing something that all group members have opinions about, that's entirely different from a group that gets on the topic of obscure anime movies, where only two members have anything to say. Do the group members know each other, or is this their first meeting?

The need to control variables illustrates why studying communication is so different from studying physics: communication is an inherently complex and multi-faceted process, and there is a potentially huge number of variables to consider. And the more you try to control for those extraneous variables, the more artificial the research becomes. If the topic of conversation is a variable, for example, the experimenter might have to dictate what the group talks about, and most normal group discussion isn't restricted to only one topic. To control for members knowing each other, you might decide to use "zero history" groups where everyone is a stranger to each other — which is rare in real-life groups. The cleaner the experiment, the further it is from studying real people in a natural environment.

You could sort communication experiments along a continuum of highly controlled on one end and naturalistic on the other.



The continuum illustrates the tradeoffs you must make in experiments: **the more controlled the experiment, the less natural it is**, and vice versa. If you want to conduct a rigorous experiment on the influence of gender on persuasiveness, for instance, you could have speakers of different genders give speeches and have the audience rate their persuasiveness on a 10-point scale, but first you would have to control for variables such as age, height, ethnicity, attractiveness, voice quality, gestures, speech topic, speaker order (does the one who goes first have an advantage over other speakers?), and probably two dozen other variables you haven't thought of yet. In the name of controlling variables, it's probably better to use a recorded video message that you can digitally alter rather than a live speaker. In the low-tech era, researchers might have handed audiences a written script and a photograph and told them "Imagine this speech being delivered by that person." This is what Albert Mehrabian did in a 1963 experiment on the relative influence of verbal vs. nonverbal channels, described in Box 12.1. His results — that only 7% of meaning is conveyed through words

— are still widely cited, but most people who quote that statistic don't realize that it's based on a highly artificial experiment that did not involve live people actually speaking to each other.

An alternative is to incorporate more variables into the research instead of trying to eliminate them. The issue here, as any statistician can tell you, is that **the more variables you incorporate, the weaker the patterns tend to be**. In the 1980s, for example, many books addressed the effects of birth order on a child's personality and relationships. Those books usually divided children into one of three categories: oldest child, middle child, and youngest child. More recent scholars, however, recognized many more variables that need to be taken into account:

- How large is the family? (In a family with 12 children, are children 2–11 all the same?)
- How long are the gaps between children? (If a child is born 15 years after their next oldest sibling, are they essentially an oldest child?)
- What about stepfamilies? (A child who is a member of two stepfamilies simultaneously can be an oldest child in one and a middle child in the other)
- What about twins and triplets?
- What about disability? (If the oldest has a severe disability, does a middle child function as the oldest?)
- What if a child dies?
- What is the role of gender, ethnicity, and culture? (If birth order patterns are universal, they should function the same in Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Paraguay.)

Once those factors were taken into account, the strong patterns asserted in the 1980s started to fade, leading the National Academy of Sciences to report in 2015 that "the search for birth-order effects on personality has not yet resulted in conclusive findings."[3]

A final challenge when it comes to conducting communication experiments is **permission**. Some of the most famous early psychology experiments were psychologically damaging to their research subjects. Recognition of this damage led to the creation of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), charged with regulating experiments on human subjects. The IRB is, thankfully, very protective of the dignity and mental health of anyone who participates in an experiment, and has strict guidelines that must be met. I point this out because I want to make sure readers of this book know that ***you can't do secret experiments on people without IRB permission!***

Surveys. Another common way to gather quantitative data about communication-related topics is to conduct surveys. If you want to find out about participation in groups, why not just ask people if participation is equal in the groups they belong to? Note, however, that what you'll get through this approach is a **measure**

3. Rohrer, J.M., Egloff, B. & Schmukle, S.C. (2015). Examining the effects of birth order on personality. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*. 112(46):14224-14229.

of perception, not reality, which is true for most surveys related to communication. Still, surveys are common in subdisciplines like organizational communication, where researchers want to learn how employees respond to different leadership styles or what makes remote workers feel a sense of identification with their company, or mass communication, where researchers want measures of how audiences respond to health awareness campaigns or advertising slogans. There are many polling companies that gather vital data on products, political issues, and social problems. Even if you don't hire or work for such a company, if you have a college degree related to communication, odds are that sooner or later someone will ask you to "throw together a consumer survey for us, will you?" Technologically, it is easier to construct surveys, administer them, and analyze the data than it has ever been. The thing to keep in mind, though, is that it is easy to do a "bad" survey, and the people you present your data to may never realize its flaws. Doing a survey well, on the other hand, is hard work, and you should be aware of the basic requirements.

Much of the effort should go into crafting **good survey questions** — questions that are not biased or leading, make sense to respondents, and are easy to answer (or, stated in the negative, hard to misinterpret). When I was an undergraduate, I was in a project group that designed a survey, and I was shocked when our teacher handed it back saying "It's too biased." We tried to figure out ways that it could be biased, and turned it in again. "Still too biased." None of us in the group could see the problem, but that doesn't mean it wasn't there. It took about five versions before the teacher accepted it— but luckily we had a teacher who was on the lookout for bias, or we would have just administered the survey and gathered results that *looked* legitimate.

Another basic issue to consider is whether to use closed- or open-ended questions. **Closed-ended questions** ask the respondent to choose from a set of predetermined responses, which can be as simple as "yes" or "no," or can involve many possible answers (in a question about jobs, for example, you might have respondents pick from a list of categories, such as professionals, laborers, craft workers, etc.). These questions have the advantage of being easy to process; you can generate charts instantaneously. It's more difficult, however, to figure out what the answers mean, and if the respondent answered them correctly. If you're using a 5-point Likert scale to measure how satisfied people were with their latest doctor visit, an inattentive respondent might not notice that the scale is not what they are used to (1 = very satisfied), and click 5 ("very unsatisfied") even though they were happy with the visit. For decades, pollsters have been asking voters "Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in this country?" If they are dissatisfied, does that mean they think the country is getting too conservative, too liberal, or something else entirely?

The best way to find out what people are really thinking is to use **open-ended questions**, which require the respondent to write something. These questions give the researcher more insight than closed-ended questions, but also create an extra job: what do you do with those responses? Summarizing or coding them takes a lot more time and thought than automatically generating a chart.

An additional challenge with surveys is where to find **respondents**: who takes the survey? Most of the time you want a representative sample — a set of people who reflect the views of the broader population (it doesn't have to be the whole country: it can be employees in a specific company, users of a product or service, or a demographic group such as "Millennials"). No matter the size of the sample or broader population, the issues are the same: who will fill out the survey and who won't, and how do they find out about it? These factors can be strongly affected by simple questions such as: (1) Did you (the researcher) select the respondents, or did they choose themselves? If they chose themselves, do they have motives you don't know about? (2) What format will you use? Telephone survey, internet survey? If it's the latter, what website will it appear on? Because of the self-selection issue, political polling about which candidate is ahead in a race is still largely done via telephone, which makes pollsters worry that whole categories of people aren't represented because they won't answer the phone. (For more, see Chapter 5 on Audience Analysis).

These challenges are serious enough that, even if you could do it on your own for cheap, it may be worth hiring a polling company to design and conduct the survey for you. If it was your boss who asked you to do it, the hard part may be convincing her to do it the expensive way.

Interaction Coding. Some scholars don't want to rely on perceptions; they are interested in what people actually say in different contexts, which can be recorded and coded (after acquiring IRB approval, of course). Much of our understanding of group decision-making (Chapter 16), for instance, is based on putting people in groups, having them work out a problem, then sorting the statements of group members into categories and looking for patterns. First, researchers develop a limited set of categories into which they classify every utterance, then they train a group of coders how to sort the infinite variety of things people could say into those categories. In early decision-making research, for example, Robert Bales devised a 12-category coding scheme with items like "Asks for suggestion" and "Shows antagonism" and "Agrees." While this approach provides a way to gather objective data on actual conversation, it's labor-intensive, and coming up with coding categories takes a long time.

Content Analysis. People who study written communication — examining what companies put in their mission statements or how celebrities apologize for scandals — have the advantage of being able to look at real communication without many of the concerns listed above. This research can be done quantitatively or qualitatively, depending on what techniques you use to analyze the words. You may have seen examples of "word clouds," which are just a visual way to represent the frequency of words in written texts.

The Limits of Quantitative Research

As mentioned, the basic assumption of every quantitative research technique is that objectivity is possible, and that success in using these techniques in the "hard sciences" can be matched in the social sciences. Not all scholars agreed, however, and some began to worry that the efforts to mimic the physical sciences was just window dressing. If you are very concerned about controlling extraneous variables and you design a highly artificial experiment, how do you know that the results will apply to real-life communication situations? If your research leads to specific findings about a particular variable, how well does it combine with other research on related variables? (You've probably noticed this with research on nutrition: one study shows that eating a particular food is good for your pancreas, another shows that it increases your risk of brain cancer, and a third shows that helps your digestive tract but aggravates your joints, leaving you to wonder, "Am I supposed to eat that food or not?"). What researchers often want is answers to the question, "How does it all fit together?," and isolated studies don't get you there.

Then there is the issue of **awareness**. In a chemistry experiment, you don't need to worry that the chemicals will change their behavior so they look good to the researcher. In human communication, however, that is always a concern. The IRB frowns on secret recording, so researchers often have to trust that subjects will act naturally in a lab setting and forget about the cameras.

Chemists also don't have to worry about a chemical acting one way on one day and another way the next day; chemicals don't have **free choice**. Science works best when it is looking at deterministic situations: Factor A predictably determines Outcome B. It has a harder time with "Well, it depends on what mood a person is in," which is often a variable in communication. Some social scientists take the view that there is no such thing as free will, but because that goes against most people's experience and belief systems, it's not an easy argument to win. As Em Griffin put it, "Human choice is problematic for the behavioral scientist because as individual freedom goes up, predictability of behavior goes down."[4]

It is because of these concerns that some researchers gravitate toward **qualitative methods** instead of quantitative ones. They believe that you miss a lot if you only focus on measurable variables, and they prefer to look at the communication process holistically. Instead of thinking of free choice as a research problem, they look at it as a topic worth studying, so they often focus on why a communicator chooses to make the choices they do (which is why qualitative research is often called "interpretive"). They are interested in looking at natural phenomena in context, which often means a greater willingness to embrace the messiness of life. They also think it is more honest to admit that the researcher is a human being, who attempts to be objective and unbiased but, knowing these efforts will never be completely successful, owns up to the problem. Sometimes this means that the researcher acts as a participant in the conversation instead of as an observer behind a two-way mirror.

4. Griffin, E. & Ledbetter, A., & Sparks, G. (2015). A First Look at Communication Theory (9th edition). New York: McGraw Hill.

CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

1.1 FOUR COMMUNICATION SCENARIOS

Four Communication Scenarios

Scenario 1. After doing a late-night run to a 24-hour grocery store, you drive home along a well-lit street. A car coming the other direction flashes their headlights at you, which leads you to check your own headlights and realize they aren't on. You say a quiet "thanks" to that stranger, but the car has already passed.

Scenario 2. An elderly man approaches his wife and says "Have you seen my —" and she replies "It's in your bottom drawer" before he even finishes the question.

Scenario 3. A young person watching television sees a celebrity in front of a bank of microphones and cameras, looking sad and saying "I am deeply sorry for what I said; I did not mean to use insensitive language or imply any disrespect toward any particular group of people. That is not who I am or what my values are, and I will never do it again." The viewer rolls their eyes and says "What a liar! He doesn't mean a word of it."

Scenario 4. Sonja comes back from an auto body shop, her car freshly painted a bright turquoise, and pulls into her driveway. Her partner opens the front door and steps outside. Sonja gets an anxious look on her face, and asks, "Well? Do you like it?" Her partner does not change their expression or say a word, and simply turns around and walks back into the house. Sonja calls out, "I thought you'd love it! You said you hated the dull gray of our car, and this seemed to be your color."

None of these scenarios is rare, yet they show the complexities of communication. In fact, whether they all qualify as "communication" is debatable: In the first scenario, no words were spoken, and the two people involved never saw each other's faces or even knew who the other person was. In the second, a question was answered before it was even asked (at least explicitly). In the third, the celebrity's message was heard but not believed, and their attempt to remedy a problem may have made it worse. And in the fourth, only one of the participants in the conversation said anything at all.

On the other hand, all four scenarios could indeed be called communication, perhaps even effective communication: in the first scenario, a simple message was conveyed quickly and it solved a problem; in the second, the elderly couple has become so efficient at communication that they don't need to finish their sentences; in the third, one particular audience member might reject the celebrity's apology, but millions of others could find it completely convincing; and in the fourth, the partner who didn't say a word still got a message across through their silence and blank expression.

So is it more accurate to call the scenarios "communication" or "miscommunication"? The first one illustrates how simple an act of communication can be: a person can convey a vital message to a total stranger in a second, and the fact that the two people involved may not even speak the same language is not a barrier. The third scenario, in contrast, illustrates the opposite: that a carefully and deliberately crafted message reaching a large audience through technology may achieve nothing at all.

The lesson? Sometimes communication is very easy, and sometimes it's very hard. Anyone who assumes that communication is a simple, risk-free process is bound to find out that they are wrong.

Let's look at another example, from the television series *Better Call Saul*. In Season 2, Chuck (played by Michael McKean) is at his law firm early in the morning, and another lawyer Kim (Rhea Seehorn) startles him by coming into the office. They have this exchange:

> Kim: It's good to see you here.
>
> Chuck: Yeah, I'm trying something new – coming in and working until 9:00. It's easier before the place opens, without all the lights and the phones ringing. **How about some coffee?**
>
> Kim: No, thank you.
>
> Chuck: [awkwardly] Umm. Would you mind making me some?

What is happening here? Does Chuck think Kim, whom he has known for years, is only an assistant, not a lawyer? Is he an arrogant jerk who thinks that female colleagues are just there to serve him coffee? In fact, it's because of a "condition" he has, something he refers to as a "sensitivity to electromagnetic fields" and that Kim is aware of. So Chuck has to add:

> "I apologize. It's just… I can't do it myself… with the electricity."

Interpreting "How about some coffee?" as an offer instead of a request is a simple mistake. Even highly educated people can get tripped up by ambiguous language like this, and it just takes a few more words to clear it up. Except that, in this case, it's not entirely cleared up: Chuck explaining what he meant is not enough to convince Kim that he is *not* an arrogant jerk — she already knows what kind of person he is from many things he has done and said in the past, and this exchange is only a brief fragment of a conversation that has been going on for years. Communication, then, is not just about words: it's about who the participants are, the relationships they have with each other, the context in which the interaction occurs, and how person each interprets the messages from the other.

In this case, however, we're only looking at communication between two people. Much communication takes the form of an individual communicating to a group (small or large), or to a diffuse audience of millions across the globe. Communication may come from an organization, not an individual, and it may transcend not just geographic boundaries but also time: written messages, art, and architecture can speak to us from centuries past. Think of how often you read a message but have no idea who wrote it (because it is a written sign, or anonymously posted, or all you get is a username but can't learn anything about the person). And from the other direction, many people broadcast messages to the world but, without sophisticated audience analysis techniques, they may not have any idea how many people receive the messages or who those people are.

Learning to communicate is not a simple task you can master in a day, like learning to convert a fraction to a percentage or to change the oil in your car. In many ways, you learned to communicate long before you started attending school (the home is sometimes called "the first classroom for communication"), and someone who never attended a day of school can do it alongside someone who studied it in college. In other ways, however, communication is a lifelong struggle, and there is always more to learn. You could compare it to cooking: you may have gotten the hang of making toast or boiling an egg early in life, but there is always more to learn, and even if you consider yourself a good chef, that doesn't eliminate the risk of a meal going disastrously wrong. Is it worth studying cooking in college? For many people, the answer would be no, and they can get by on their rudimentary skills or rely on others who are better cooks. Others find it useful to take many cooking classes, and the more they study, the more they realize they need to learn.

In a similar vein, one could debate the value of studying communication in college. Some may think it's something they've already mastered, so taking a course in communication seems as superfluous as taking a course in walking. But consider this: if you ask companies — regardless of industry or country — what skills they are looking for in new employees, their answers are remarkably consistent: they are looking for communication skills. If those skills were easy to acquire and universal, the companies wouldn't list them as a valuable asset (it would be the equivalent of starting a job notice with the phrase "Applicants must be able to breathe").

BOX 1.1: What Nineteen Surveys Say About the Value of Communication

The University of Kent produced a summary chart of "The Top Ten Skills That Employers Want," based on surveys conducted by Microsoft, Target Jobs, the BBC, Prospects, NACE, AGR and other organizations. Even though it's billed as a top ten list, I'll include items 11 and 12 as well:

Skill	Number	Description
VERBAL COMMUNICATION	1	Able to express your ideas clearly and confidently in speech
TEAMWORK	2	Works confidently within a group
ANALYZING & INVESTIGATING	3	Gathers information systematically to establish facts & principles. Problem solving
INITIATIVE/SELF MOTIVATION	4	Able to act on initiative, identify opportunities & proactive in putting forward ideas & solutions
DRIVE	5	Determined to get things done. Makes things happen & constantly looking for better ways of doing things
WRITTEN COMMUNICATION	6	Able to express yourself clearly in writing
PLANNING & ORGANIZING	7	Able to plan activities & carry them through effectively
FLEXIBILITY	8	Adapts successfully to changing situations & environments
COMMERCIAL AWARENESS	9	Understands the commercial realities affecting the organization
TIME MANAGEMENT	10	Manages time effectively, prioritizing tasks and able to work to deadlines
Other skills seen as important:		
NEGOTIATING & PERSUADING	11	Able to influence and convince others, discuss and reach agreement
LEADERSHIP	12	Able to motivate and direct others

I would argue that five of these 12 items — #1, 2, 6, 11 and 12 — are about communication. It's perhaps worth noting that I found this survey on a subpage of the website of the Medical University of South Carolina, as well as on the site of Beijing Foreign Studies University, suggesting that this list is valuable for people in a wide variety of industries and geographic regions,

This list lines up nicely with Forbes' list of "11 Essential Soft Skills in 2024", in which the first three items are Communication, Leadership, and Teamwork (see Chapter 16), and items #9 and #10 are Critical Thinking (Chapter 7) and Conflict Management (Chapter 17).

Here are 17 other surveys of valued workplace skills where "communication" is at or near the top of the list:

- Target UK's list of "the top 10 skills that'll get you a job when you graduate"

- Indeed.com's "Top 11 Skills Employers Look For in Job Candidates"
- Monster.com's "15 Examples of Soft Skills Employers Value"
- Jobscan.co's "Top 10 soft skills employers want"
- GoSkills.com's "Top 10 Skills Employers Want to See on a Resume in 2024"
- LinkedIn's "LinkedIn 2024 Most In-Demand Skills"
- SkillArena's "Top Skills Employers Are Looking For"
- The Muse's "Top 10 Examples of Soft Skills Employers Want in 2024"
- GlassDoor's "Top Skills That Employers Look For By Category"
- WayUp's "Top 10 Skills Employers Want In An Intern"
- CNBC's "The 10 most in-demand skills employers want to see on your resume right now"
- Pitman Training's "Top 10 Skills Employers Look For – Key Skills for your CV"
- Zety's "Top 10 Employability Skills"
- The Bloomberg Report's "Job Skills Companies Want But Can't Get"
- The National Association of Colleges and Employers' "Key Attributes Employers Are Looking For on Graduates' Resumes"
- National Network of Business and Industry Associations "Common Employability Skills"
- Business News Daily's "Soft Skills Every Tech Professional Should Have"

This list was compiled in 2024: try it yourself and see what pops up in the #1 spot of what employers want. Has it changed?

The surveys summarized in Box 1.1 not only show the consistency of the value of communication skills in the workplace, but illustrate how many different kinds of jobs this applies to: not just jobs monitoring social media sites or managing salespeople, but jobs that some would consider purely industrial. Perhaps the most startling is an article called "What Aviation Employers Expect" that, like most of the 19 surveys in Box 1.1, lists "Good Communication Skills" as the top skill, but goes on to point out that "competence in the field" is not on the list. Sure, anyone who applies for an aviation job is expected to know how to fly an airplane, but the articles stresses that this is not enough: if you're not good at communicating, you won't be a good pilot.

The academic field of communication studies, however, has always faced a conundrum: no one questions the need for a pilot to study aviation in school, but if they want to develop that "soft skill" of communication, where are they supposed to learn it? According to some people, the answer is "not in school"; communication as an academic discipline is met with skepticism, and sometimes considered a "joke major." Why is there such a discrepancy between what employers want college graduates to know and what people consider valuable to study? One particularly harsh blogger in 2017 wrote "[A degree in Communications] is nearly worthless in that it won't be of much use to you after college. It teaches you how to communicate effectively, a skill that anyone can learn quite easily without the need of professors or extra homework."

The assessment that communicating effectively is "a skill that anyone can learn quite easily" would be news to the health officials who in 2020 struggled to keep the public abreast of developments in the COVID-19 pandemic and puzzled over how to convince people to adopt behaviors that would save their lives. It would be news to world leaders trying to achieve approval ratings higher than 50%, juries struggling to figure out how to get past disagreements and reach a unanimous verdict, parents puzzling over how to stop their child from swearing, advertisers working to draw attention to a new product, and advocates fighting to overcome societal problems without creating backlash.

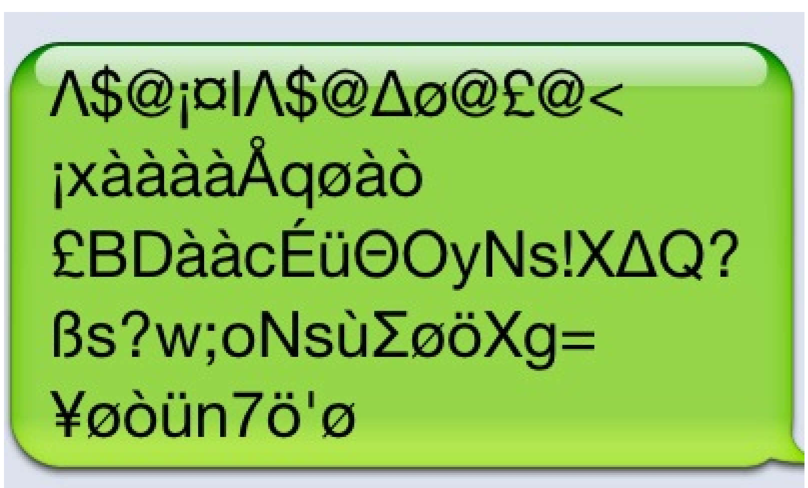
That said, even people who teach college-level communication courses still struggle to communicate effectively, and I can't promise that one textbook will teach you everything you need to know. My point is that communication is a field worthy of study, and this book is intended to be a starting point.

1.2 DEFINING COMMUNICATION

First, let's try to define what communication is, and some of the different ways to represent the process.

In Scenario 4, Sonja's partner did nothing but stand motionless and expressionless for a moment before walking inside the house, but Sonja got the message, loud and clear, that her choice of car color was not well-received. Silence and lack of response can communicate volumes, but if a neighbor happened to also step out of their door at the same time, and stood in a similar way and walked back into the house at around the same time, Sonja wouldn't interpret that neighbor as sending a message. The problem with trying to come up with a definition of communication, in other words, is that *anything* can potentially convey meaning — words, lack of words, behavior, lack of behavior, time, space, silence. Have you ever been in a waiting room with a stranger and started wondering if they were sending you any kind of signals, or worried that they thought you were sending them signals? The command "Don't communicate" may be impossible to obey, which suggests that it's also impossible to study communication since it's so all-encompassing. To make it a manageable topic to study, you have to put some boundaries and limitations around the definition of "communication" — when it occurs and when it doesn't, and what is happening when it does.

Thankfully, scholars have been working on models of communication since the 1940s. The curious thing is that the first scholars to tackle the subject of communication models were not concerned with human beings talking to each other. They were looking at the budding field of electronic communication, and how a message could be sent electronically without things going wrong. If you type a text message into your phone and hit "Send," what exactly happens, and what prevents the message from ending up as an incomprehensible mess of gibberish symbols at the other end?



One of the pioneers of this field was a mathematician, Norbert Wiener, who is considered the originator of cybernetics (communication in the electronic sense: sending and receiving electronic signals). He broke the communication process down into components such as source, receiver, signal, filter and noise. In 1948, another mathematician, Claude Shannon, refined this into a model of communication that has been put forth as the starting point for the systematic study of communication.

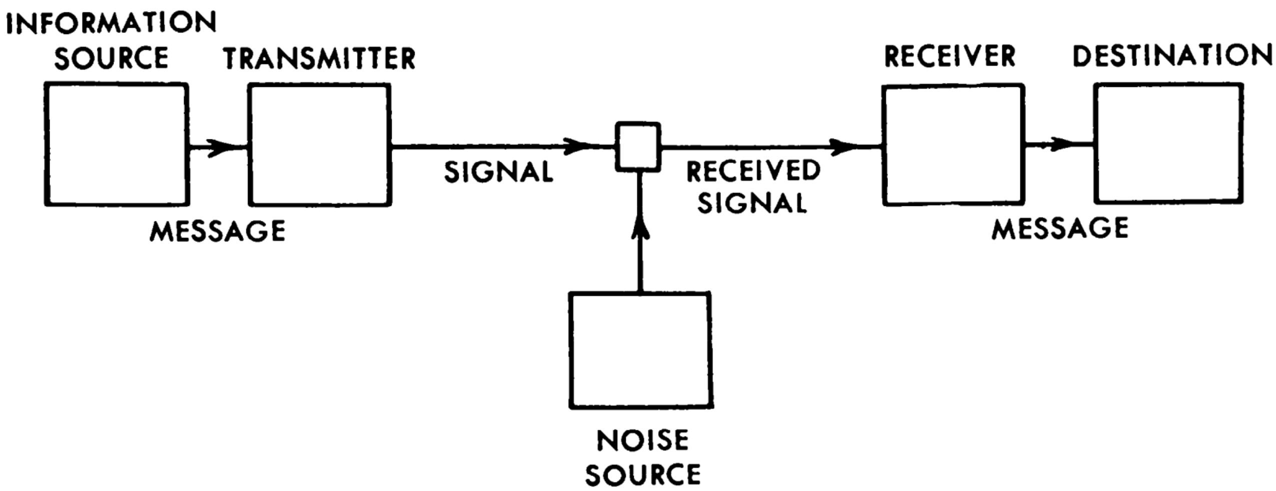
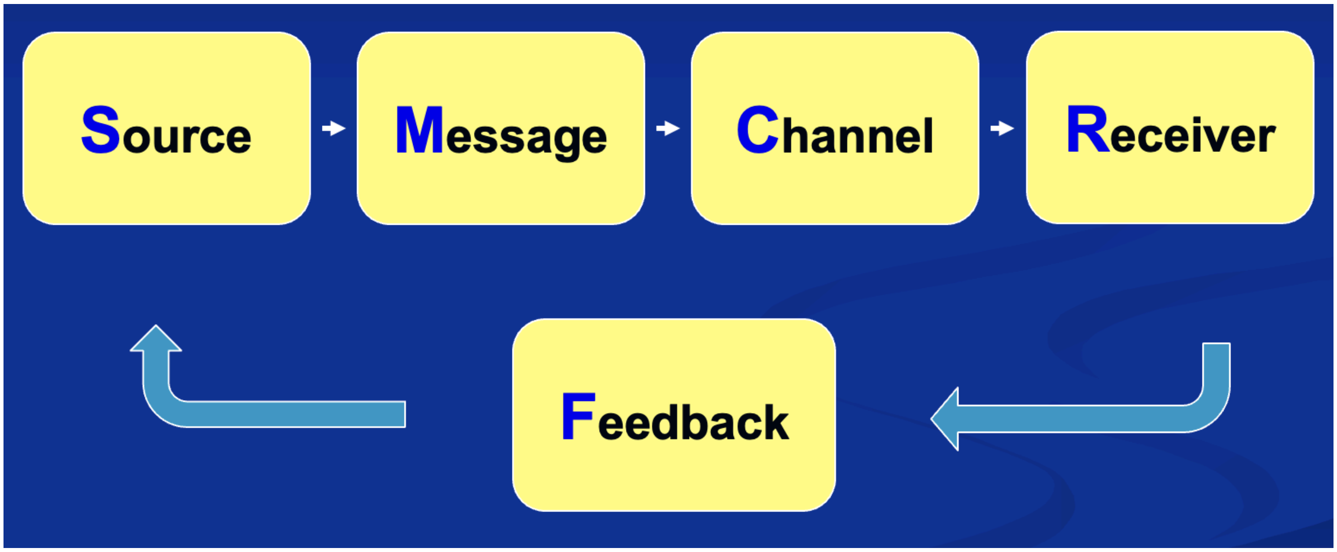
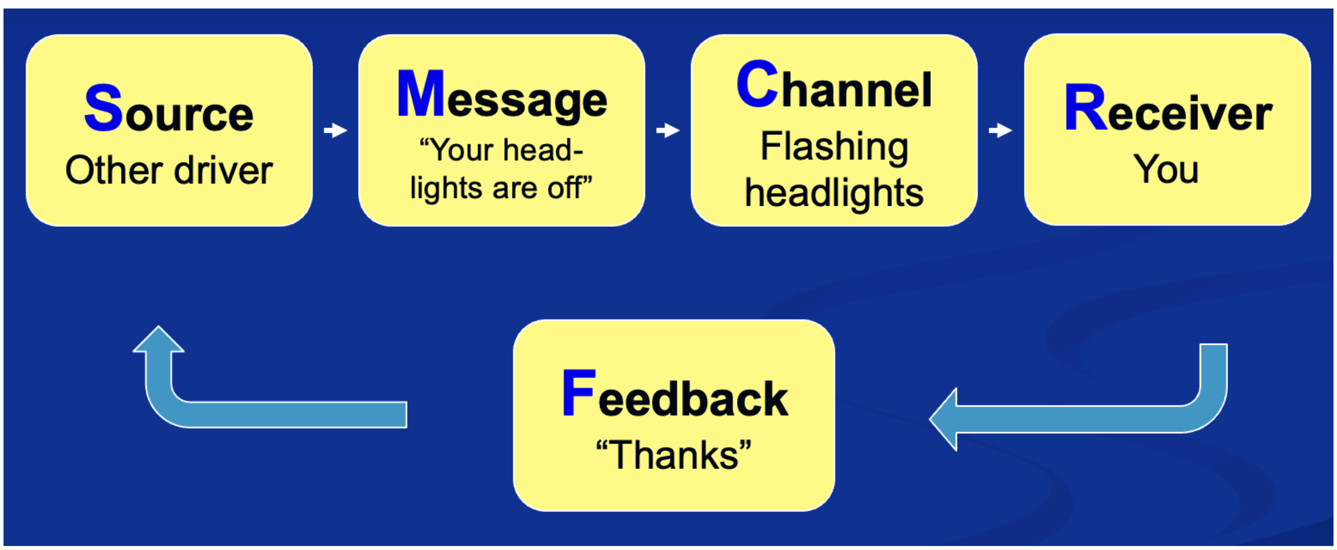


Image from THE MATHEMATICAL THEORY OF COMMUNICATION by Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, p7

Like Wiener, Shannon was not looking at human beings talking to each other, or at anything like the four scenarios that began this chapter. But other scholars who were interested in people talking to each other found it useful, and realized that it could be adapted to many forms of human — and even animal — communication. In the 1960 book *The Process of Communication*, David Berlo reframed Shannon's model as the Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver (SMCR) Model, in which communication occurs when a source sends a message through a channel to a receiver. Later scholars added one more component: feedback, the mechanism necessary for the sender to find out if the receiver got the message, and perhaps what they thought about it.



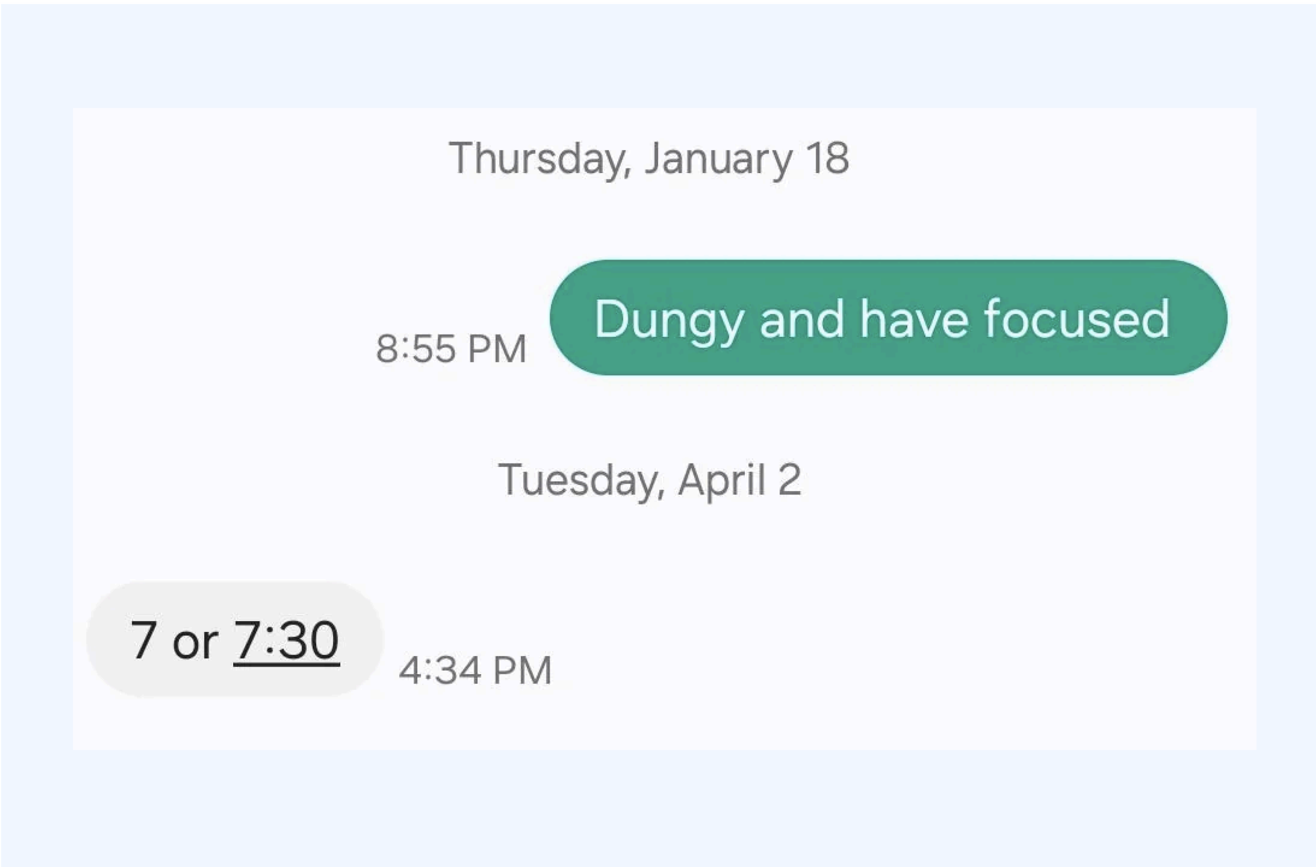
On its face, the model does not tell us much, but it provides a framework for thinking about the component parts of communication, and gives us terms that I will use throughout this book. Returning to the four scenarios, the first one can be depicted as:



The model also shows how the communication process can fail, either because one element is missing or because something just goes awry. Scenario 1 ends with you saying "Thanks," but the other driver never hears it, so that can hardly be counted as feedback. That's a channel problem: quietly speaking a word to another driver when your windows are rolled up doesn't work. In Scenario 2, before her husband even finishes his sentence, the elderly woman knows, because of context, what he is talking about; they've had this same conversation before. Mathematicians like Wiener and Shannon didn't address situations where the receiver understands the message even though the source didn't finish sending it.

In Scenario 3, the issue isn't the channel, it's the fact that the message sent by the apologetic celebrity is not the same as the message heard by the home viewer. This is called a "fidelity" problem in the mathematical model, but it's always good to keep in mind that in many situations in life, the message sent does not equal the message received. In Scenario 4, Sonja gets the message that her partner hates the new car color, but that's only based on what her partner did *not* say or do.

Starting with an electronic or mathematical model to try to understand the communication process is helpful, but as we can see, it has inherent limitations. Think about texting. You can't assume that good communication has occurred just because a text message that appears on a recipient's screen is identical to the message sent by a source.



The S-M-C-R model is an example of what I'll call the **"Voicemail Model"** (in academic circles, this is known as a "Transmission Model"): if you call a phone number and the person doesn't answer, you figure out what message you want to leave, say it at the proper time, and your job is done. This ignores many aspects of the actual communication process.

A more sophisticated model is one I'll call the **"Birthday Present Model,"** which views communication as being like giving someone a wrapped gift. First, the sender has to figure out how to "encode the message" (wrap the gift): what are the right words to convey my meaning? What about nonverbal communication — tone of voice, facial expressions and gestures? Then the recipient has to "decode the message" (unwrap the gift), figuring out what the sender meant. This model puts much more emphasis on the receiver, and recognizes that listening is an active process (SEE Chapter 4: Listening). It also sheds light on how complex the encoding and decoding process can be. In Scenario 1, you may or may not know what an opposing driver means when they flash their headlights: is it a threat of some kind? A thank you? If the communication channel was more complex than a simple headlight flash, it might make the meaning clearer… or muddier. If the sender and receiver come from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds, the risk of misunderstanding is great.

In the 2021 film *Dune*, Duke Leto Atreides takes over as the new ruler of a desert planet, and his first encounter with one of the natives is highly charged. The native, Stilgar, looks at the duke and then spits on the ground. In many contexts this would be considered an insult, and a bodyguard draws his sword. But another person present, Duncan, has studied the culture, knows what this means, and replies, "Thank you, Stilgar, for the gift of your body's moisture. We accept it in the spirit in which it was given." Once he learns what spit means in this extremely arid environment, the Duke also spits and a new alliance is formed. You can watch this conversation here:

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://open.lib.umn.edu/commpractice/?p=135#oembed-1

Even when we factor in the process of encoding and decoding, however, this approach oversimplifies the communication process, and masks the fact that communication is not really a process of sending anything at all: it's a process of mutual construction. I'll call this process **"The Lego Model"** (scholars call it the Constitutive Model). The name is based on a classroom exercise I use to demonstrate the nature of communication. I take two tables and two chairs, facing away from each other, and ask for two volunteers to sit at the desks. I then give them each a small pile of Lego blocks, and ask Volunteer A to build something out of them, called a "construct." Then the true exercise begins: Volunteer A must talk Volunteer B through the process of building the same construct with their Lego blocks, but without turning around to peek. Volunteer B is allowed to ask as many questions as they want, and it quickly becomes a two-way conversation. It generally takes about 20 minutes for Volunteer B to recreate what Volunteer A built in seconds, and most of the time the constructs are fairly close to each other.

It's not meant to be an impossible game, but it does illustrate what communication really is, which can be summarized roughly as: **"Communication is a process in which one person with a construct in their mind uses symbols such as language to try to get another person to formulate the same construct in their mind."** You can't transfer thoughts directly into someone else's head — and you can't see into their head to see if their construct matches yours — but if the conversation goes on long enough, you can be reasonably assured that you've achieved mutual understanding.

In order for this to work, however, there are several conditions:

- You need a **shared vocabulary**. Even if you played with Legos often, you probably don't have a name for the piece with eight circles in four rows, or one with a rounded edge, so students have to make up a lot of new terms.

What do you call this piece?

Vocabulary doesn't only refer to the pieces: when Volunteer A says "Take the red four-hole piece, and put it straight on top of the green piece, sticking out two holes over the front," Volunteer B needs to understand what terms like "straight" and "sticking out" and "front" and even "red" mean.

- In normal conversation, **people don't take 20 minutes to ensure that their construct looks like yours**; they just move on at a steady pace, assuming there is mutual understanding until they discover a problem. Someone says "Mothers! You know what they're like!" and another person replies, "Yeah, mothers! I hear you," instead of saying "No, exactly what do you mean? What are mothers like?" And even if they explain "Oh, I mean mothers are loving," that doesn't guarantee that the other person has the same idea of what "loving" means.
- **The building blocks are experiences**, and in order for people to communicate effectively, it helps for them to have the same set of blocks. (I actually play a trick with the students: the sets of Lego blocks are *almost* the same as each other, but not quite). Does that mean it's difficult or impossible to communicate with someone who does not have a background identical to yours? Of course not, but it does mean that when communicating with someone whose life has been very different from yours, it may take more work to find those shared building blocks. If someone says "It feels like a Friday today," that will mean nothing to someone who doesn't divide their time into seven-day weeks or get weekends off from work. The first person would need to articulate their feelings a little more: "Today feels a little more relaxed than usual, which is a nice but somewhat disorienting feeling." The feelings of being relaxed or disoriented are universal regardless of one's employment situation. (SEE Chapter 4.B: We Are All Translators).
- You have a construct in your head of the person you're communicating with, and who they are. When you interact with another person, whether a stranger or a family member you know intimately, you're not talking to the actual person: **you're talking to your Lego construct of that person** — the way you perceive them, and the assumptions you have about them. These constructs may not be accurate,

but if a person is heavily invested in a particular image of another person, the construct will block their view of reality. For example, in the *Harry Potter* series Harry's Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia think of Harry as incompetent and worthless, and see their son Dudley as a perfect angel. Even when Dudley shouts in their faces, Vernon and Petunia are so invested in their image of their child as an angel that they can't recognize him for who he is.

1.3 PERCEPTION AND METAPERCEPTION

These more complex models underscore the role of **perception** in the communication process: it's more accurate to say that Sonja "perceived" her partner to be unhappy about the color choice than to say Sonja "got the message" (which implies that the interpretation is correct). In *Harry Potter*, Petunia Dursley perceives Dudley to be a perfect angel despite rather overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Examples such as these have led some people, such as political advisors, to say "Perception is reality": if, for example, people perceive a candidate to be powerful, competent, and smart, they will vote for the candidate, regardless of how inaccurate that perception may be. Likewise, if a product is perceived to be the best on the market, people will pay a high price for it — and the high price itself can contribute to the perception of superiority. This explains the origins of professions such as PR (Public Relations) and crisis management, and of "spin doctors" who work hard to put a positive spin on unflattering news.

Sociologist Erving Goffman coined the phrase **"impression management"** to refer to efforts by a person to shape how others see them. In his 1959 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, he talked about observing people approaching someone else's front door, and seeing them "put on their game face" before ringing the doorbell. His book explored how people try to control the impressions others have of them, which led to a large body of research on what people do to create desired impressions, how they are motivated to act in certain ways (even making life more difficult for themselves by, for example, sporting high heels or buying cars they can't afford), and how this relates to concepts such as authenticity.

Psychologist Mark Snyder developed the **self-monitoring scale** to measure the degree to which people are concerned about other people's reactions to them, and how much they adjust their behavior in response.[1] High self monitors are very sensitive to other people's reactions and good at putting on the expected expressions (such as showing delight at receiving a gift they don't like, or concealing disgust at someone's appearance because they don't want to hurt their feelings), but can struggle with feeling "two-faced" because they come across as totally different people in different settings. Low self monitors look inward for guides on how to behave and aren't concerned with what others think (if, for example, a member of the "fashion police" scolds them for wearing socks with sandals, they say "I don't care; it's comfortable"). To find out where you fit along this continuum, take the test yourself.

Jones and Pittman took this approach a step further by posing the question, "What *kind* of impression do people want to create?" and hypothesized five categories:

1. Snyder M (1987). Public Appearances, Private Realities: The Psychology of Self-Monitoring. New York: W. H. Freeman.

ingratiation: I want you to like me

intimidation: I want you to be scared of me

self-promotion: I want you to be impressed by my intelligence or skills

exemplification: I want you to be impressed by my moral purity

supplication: I want you to feel sorry for me[2]

Think of when you had your picture taken for a student ID badge or driver's license: what kind of image did you want that picture to portray? If you normally choose ingratiation and go for a big smile, but found out that you're not allowed to smile in passport photos, what expression did you go for instead? All of this applies not just to facial expressions, but to uniforms and clothing. For instance, doctors in most medical settings might like to wear a white lab coat because it conveys expertise (self-promotion), but in a children's hospital they might prefer to wear more "cheerful" scrubs because it makes them look friendlier (ingratiation).

Image from Unsplash

If "perception" refers to "how I see you," "**metaperception**" is "how I think you see me" (you can even take it a step further: "metametaperception" is "how I think you think I see you"). Try this experiment: if you've been in a close relationship with someone for a while, sit down with them and have a talk about perception. Start off by talking about how you see the other person, then switch to how you think they see you, and then what you think their perception of you is: it could be very revealing. Of course, any of those levels of perception could be inaccurate, which is one reason people have to keep communicating in relationships — to clear up misperceptions.

How does social media affect this picture? There is a great deal of research proving that social media has seriously harmful effects on people's self-esteem, and these effects to be rooted in the obsession with metaperception: how do other people perceive me? The harm comes in part from the constant comparison effect — no matter how cool and attractive I am, everywhere I look I see people who are more perfect. Social media can become an endless impression management game, and no one wins. So while there is some value in

2. Jones, E.E., & Pittman, T.S. (1982). Toward a general theory of strategic self-presentation. In J. Suls (Ed.), Psychological perspectives on the self (Vol. 1). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

thinking about the impression you are giving to others, there is also value in ignoring all of that. This explains why people so often give the trite advice, "Just be yourself."

1.4 TWO BASIC THEORIES OF COMMUNICATION

This book will delve into many aspects of communication, and touch on a number of theories that help explain the process, but first it's useful to review two fundamental theories that help explain communication as a whole. The first is a fairly simple theory whose fundamental lesson can be grasped quickly and easily; the other is less intuitive, and may even sound a little improbable. Let's begin with Howard Giles' CAT.

Underlying Theory #1: Communication Accommodation Theory.

I don't know if Howard Giles actually has a cat, but his CAT — Communication Accommodation Theory[1] — put a name to something people have observed for centuries: that **communication works best when it is adapted to the audience**. A communicator should tailor or accommodate their message or communication style to the receiver — speaking more loudly, for instance, to someone with hearing loss, or avoiding jargon when emailing someone who probably doesn't know that terminology.

This seems so fundamental as to hardly be worth saying, but I've known many people who don't do it very well. Perhaps they lack a fundamental skill that's a necessary precursor for accommodation: being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes and imagine what life is like for them. It shouldn't be a surprise that some people aren't good at this, because none of us are at first: newborn babies can't distinguish the boundaries between themselves and their mother, for example, and it takes a while for them to catch on that their mother is a separate person. But even a few years after a child has figured this out, they still make predictable mistakes: a six-year-old boy loves baseball, and when he hears that his mother's birthday is approaching he thinks, "I know the perfect present: I'll get her a baseball mitt!" Sorry, kid: your mother loves you, but that doesn't mean she wants the same kind of birthday present you would.

Twenty years later, the boy is a full-grown adult but might make the same mistake, dragging a romantic partner to a baseball game, and if that partner says "I'd rather go to the opera instead," he can't quite wrap his mind around that bizarre idea. Still, he could use the theory to figure out ways to talk his partner into going to a baseball game, perhaps by drawing analogies to opera. He could take a note from Reginald (played by Tom

1. Giles, H. (2009). Accommodation Theory. In *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, Vol. 1. Ed. Foss, S. & Foss, K.A. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Courtenay) in the 2012 film *Quartet*, who did the opposite, explaining to a class of teenage rap fans why they should be able to relate to opera: "Opera is: when a guy's stabbed in the back, instead of bleeding, he sings. It seems to me, after much research, that rap is when a guy is stabbed in the back, instead of bleeding, he talks — rhythmically, even with feeling." That may not be enough to make opera fans out of them, but CAT would say Reginald is on the right track.

Adapting to your audience can go too far as well: your elderly aunt might find it insulting or unnecessary that you talk so loudly to her, or someone from another culture could be offended if you try too hard to adopt their dialect (like the "cash me outside" girl). High self monitors may be too good at adjusting their behavior in response to others, and get accused of being insincere as a result (see the discussion of the problem with "just telling them what they want to hear" at the end of Chapter 5). When the son in the cartoon above decides he should "just be [him]self," it's a reminder to not adapt his style too much in order to attract someone else — and the father's response is funny because he can see the other side of the coin.

In other words, there are forces pulling in opposite directions. Are there any theories about *that*? Funny you should ask....

Underlying Theory #2: Dialectical Theory.

Leslie Baxter's Relational Dialectics Theory, which began in the study of interpersonal relationships but grew to other domains, is based on an idea that can sound illogical: the principle that, as a human being, you have fundamental needs, but you also need the opposite of those needs. When you think, for example, of thirst, you know that bodies need liquids to survive — but how can that need have an opposite? We don't really have a name for the need to get rid of liquids (other than specific ways to do that, such as perspiration or urination), so you might not think of that as a need.

When it comes to social and interpersonal needs, however, it's easy to identify opposing sets of needs that do have common names: people have a fundamental need for **connection** with other people (research shows how damaging social isolation, such as solitary confinement in prison, is to the human psyche), but they also have a fundamental need for **autonomy** and individuality (you may have felt, for instance, that you've spent too much time around someone and never get to do your own thing). People have a need for stability and **predictability** — having some sense of what is going to happen next so that life doesn't feel completely chaotic all the time — but also an opposing need for change and **novelty** so life doesn't get stultifyingly monotonous (which is why the character of Phil in the movie *Groundhog Day* starts attempting suicide after he has relived the exact same day a few hundred times in a row). And specifically related to communication, humans have a deep-seated need for expression — the ability to open up and share what's in their heart — but also an opposing need for **privacy** and the ability to conceal things from others.

Like CAT, Relational Dialectics Theory includes many facets beyond what is discussed here, but for the purposes of this book, the important part is the concept of opposing needs, which will crop up in many later chapters. I will often talk about the importance of a particular facet of communication, then seemingly contradict myself by shifting gears and looking at the other side of the coin. For example, over the years I have heard countless students suggest that the solution to many problems in the workplace or in relationships is to be "**open and honest**," and while I agree that a shortage of openness and honesty is often where the problem begins, I am skeptical that addressing this shortage would solve everything. There are times when keeping your mouth shut is the wise thing to do, and **sometimes the best kind of communication is not communicating**. The other issue with the "open and honest" advice is that it usually ignores people's motivations to clam up; suggesting they "tell all" is not going to work if you don't acknowledge the reasons they might not want to do that. So keep in mind that when I look at one side of the communication coin, you can expect a look at the other side of the coin to follow.

1.5 FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

The four scenarios at the start of this chapter cover communication in a variety of forms, so let's systematically lay out what these forms can be. One way to sort them is by the size of the audience:

Mass Communication, which we'll explore in Chapters 18 and 19, is communication from a person or organization to a large number of listeners/viewers, using technology. The technology can vary from television to a printed book to music to social media. Although the use of mass communication has increased dramatically in the last century, forms of it existed thousands of years ago, such as architecture (pyramids, statues, temples) that sent a message to all passersby. And while it's possible for communication intended for just a few recipients to "go viral" and be distributed on a mass scale, the term "mass communication" usually refers to messages intended for a large audience. Another feature of mass communication is a clear delineation between the source and the audience, although social media has broken down that distinction in some ways.

Public Communication, which we'll look at in Chapters 13 and 14, implies an audience of more than a dozen people or so (usually in physical proximity to the speaker), but less than thousands. A politician giving a stump speech at a rally, a CEO addressing employees, a bridesmaid giving a speech at a wedding, a religious leader preaching to a congregation, and a protestor speaking through a megaphone are all examples of public communication. Usually some technology is required, although Abraham Lincoln's famous Gettysburg address ("Four score and seven years ago…") is an example of public communication before microphones or cameras existed.

Group Communication includes small group discussions, such as students working together on a classroom project, a hiring committee evaluating applicants for a job, or a jury reaching a verdict. Typically, all group members speak, although not necessarily equally. The study of group communication has focused on issues such as decision-making, conflict, leadership, power, and teamwork (Chapters 16 and 17). The field of organizational communication has focused on many of the same topics, although on a broader scale, looking at issues such as how new employees learn the culture of the company they are joining, rivalry between departments in an organization, or how a company can successfully implement a change.

Interpersonal Communication is focused on romantic relationships, friendships, and family relationships. Commonly studied topics include attraction and relationship formation, the navigation of opposing needs (in line with Baxter's relational dialectics, discussed earlier), conflict management, and how relationships fall apart. No chapters in this book are explicitly focused on interpersonal communication, although lessons from many chapters apply to those relationships.

Intrapersonal Communication is about self-communication. Do you talk to yourself? While this has sometimes been associated with mental illness, the answer is "Of course you do, constantly, although not usually out loud." Contrary to the stereotype that talking to yourself means you are mentally ill, learning helpful and constructive self-talk methods is essential to mental health. For example, one key to overcoming public speaking anxiety (covered in Chapter 14) is to learn how to break the habit of berating yourself ("I sound so stupid! This speech is bombing") and replace those "head bullies" with more positive and optimistic messages ("I have something valuable to say"). Although scholars have recognized the importance of self-talk, it has not received much attention in the field of communication studies, largely because it is difficult to study. We won't focus on it here.

We can also make distinctions based on the channel of communication:

Face-to-Face verbal communication refers to situations where two or more communicators can hear each other, and are communicating by spoken word, not relying on technology.

Nonverbal communication refers to all the forms of communication that do not depend on words, ranging from facial expressions to gestures to clothing to touch to all the ways we communicate by using space and time. In terms of spoken messages, nonverbal communication refers to aspects other than the words themselves, including tone of voice, speech rate, volume, and vocal expressions such as sighs and grunts. See Chapter 12 for more on this.

Written communication means all forms of communication that depend on the written word, whether it be on paper, an electronic screen, or elsewhere. One thing that distinguishes written communication from other forms is that it is not time-dependent: we can still read words written by authors from thousands of years ago.

Mediated communication can mean any communication that relies on any form of technology (which could overlap with written communication), although the term is usually reserved for electronic media, including radio, television, film, and social media (Chapters 18 and 19). It also typically denotes channels of communication that can convey several different forms of information at once, such as visual images, sounds, and words.

Artistic/expressive communication is the term we can use for all the different forms of art, crafts, and expression: painting, sculpture, music, acting, dance, figure skating, expressions of sexuality, graffiti, home decoration and landscaping, and countless others. Although these are vital to human experience and count as communication, they fall outside the scope of this book. Scientists have, by the way, observed that these forms of expression are not restricted to humans: frogs singing in a pond, birds performing mating rituals, dogs marking their territory, and wolves howling at the moon are all forms of communication that humans can borrow and adapt.

This book will only offer a glimpse into what you can learn about these forms of communication. A college with a sizable Communication Studies department typically provides dozens of courses that span all of these domains except the last one (but you can often take those classes from other departments). The next chapter attempts to draw boundaries around what is and is not included in the academic field of communication studies, and explains why that's not easy to do. A recurring theme of this book is that everyone is a student of communication — a process that affects virtually every other human endeavor.

Not all forms of communication involve speaking, but I'd like to end with an in-depth exploration of just how remarkable the act of speaking is.

1.6 THE MIRACLE OF SPEECH

Image from PickPik

Lili said her first word when she was 15 months old, and started to form simple two-and-three-word phrases before she turned two. A few years later, she began school, where her teachers taught her how to read and write, a visually dominated process that would go on for many years: showing her how to read and write letters, how to formulate those letters into written words with spaces in between, and how to punctuate those word strings into sentences and paragraphs. The thing is, this process was just a visual representation of something Lili had *already been doing* for years. She learned to speak without the help of those visual tools, and could always speak more quickly than she could write.

Take a moment to consider how that came to be:

- Around 4 months old, Lili discovered that her mouth was capable of making lots of fun noises. Those sounds were produced by organs that were almost all designed for another primary purpose — lungs for breathing, lips for sealing and opening her mouth, teeth (which hadn't come in yet) for chewing solid food, and tongue for transporting food back to her throat. Before she could be taught any of this, Lili subconsciously figured out that all those body parts could also be recruited for the "side job" of making vocal sounds. Add to that mix the one body part that does not have a "day job": the vocal cords (also known as "vocal folds"), which Lili used to make a satisfying humming sound. Whenever Lili indulged in her new hobby of making noises with all those body parts, the adults in the vicinity responded enthusiastically. For instance, one day Lili put her lips together at the same time she made a humming sound ("mmm") and then opened her lips ("aaa") and then closed them again ("mmm") and then opened them again ("aaa"), and her mother got terribly excited and shouted *"My daughter just called me Mama!"*

- Over the next few months, the people around Lili spent a lot of time making vocal sounds to her, and somehow Lili learned to imitate those sounds, without any conscious realization of how she could translate a sound that she *heard* into a particular combination of lip, tongue, teeth, and vocal cord movements she could *make*. Some of the sounds that Lili made didn't happen to belong to the set of sounds in the language of the people around her, so she stopped making those noises. Sometimes the adults made a big point of saying a single word with a nice clean silent pause before and after the word, and repeated it several times until Lili could say it back. But most of the time, the adults just talked in a long string of continuous noise, such as "Youresuchabeautifulbabyarentyou," and Lili's young brain somehow learned to separate out different words. Lili's father spent a lot of time teaching her specific words like body parts, but he never took the time to explain incredibly complex words like "of" and "for" and "as" and "with" and "than." By the time she reached 18 months, Lili was learning eight new words a day, every day.

Fast forward a decade and a half, and Lili is a fast-talking teenager who, when she gets excited, speaks at a rate over 240 words per minute (four words per second). She is not conscious of the fact that some of those words contain a dozen or more phonemes (distinct speech sounds), especially when the spelling of that word fails to represent all the nuances of pronunciation. One day her mother is driving her to school and Lili spots a classmate she wants to avoid, and blurts out the phrase "Don't stop." What has Lili just done? She has:

- Made the "d" sound by placing her tongue against the roof of her mouth, toward the front, while making her vocal cords hum, and then quickly dropping her tongue down. If you asked Lili where she placed her tongue when she made that sound, she wouldn't have the slightest idea.
- Made her mouth into a hollow channel to produce the vowel "o."
- Closed her lips partway to make another vowel, "uw" (without even realizing that the "o" in "don't" is two different vowel sounds in a row, called a diphthong).
- With her vocal cords still humming, put her tongue back against the roof of their mouth, but a little further back than for the "d," in order to make the "n" sound.
- Stopped her vocal cords humming at precisely the right time, which she thought of as making the "t" sound, but really she was just stopping vocalizing altogether (which is known as a "glottal stop").
- Dropped her tongue down far enough to make a hissing sound, "s" (being careful to not start her vocal

cords humming just yet, so she didn't make the equivalent "z" sound).

- Lifted her tongue up up to the roof of her mouth again to make the "t" sound, this time releasing a little puff of air (so it's a different "t" sound than the previous one, even though she thinks they are the same sound since they are spelled using the same letter).
- Done two things at exactly the same time: lowered her tongue to just the right position to make the "o" vowel, while making her vocal cords start humming again (making a vowel sound which she *thinks* is the same as the vowel sound in "don't" because of spelling, but it isn't).
- Again done two things at precisely the same time: put her lips together, and stopped the vocal cords from humming (if she didn't, she would make the "b" sound instead of the "p" sound).

Image from Pexels

She performs all nine of those steps flawlessly, in the space of less than half a second. She also does it with a Chicago accent, which means she makes all those sounds in a manner so similar to everyone around her that an expert could pinpoint where she lived within a few hundred miles. She grew up in Atlanta, where they pronounce their vowels and consonants differently (holding her tongue or lips a millimeter away from where she used to), speak at a different rate, and hold the length of the sounds a microsecond longer or shorter, but Lili abandoned her Georgia accent and picked up a Midwestern accent instead to fit in with her social group.

Meanwhile, her mother, who was just about to put her foot on the brake, immediately lifts her foot because she heard and correctly interpreted her daughter saying "Don't stop." What has just happened? The sound waves that Lili produced traveled through the air inside the car and reached her mother's ears. Her mother, of course, had no direct knowledge of exactly what Lili just did with her tongue and lips and vocal cords, and wasn't watching Lili's face, so it just became a pattern of sound waves at specific frequencies. But based on those frequencies alone, Lili's mother can distinguish between a "d" and a "t" and an "s" and an "f" sound, and knows exactly what Lili meant.

Lili goes on to say "That's Amanda, who sits behind me in Geography class, and says she wants to be my friend, but she's so bossy and full of herself, and she tried to steal Jodi's boyfriend, and I just don't want to deal with all that." What's noteworthy about this 42-word sentence, as with most sentences that Lili and everyone around her says, is that it has never been uttered before in the history of humankind, and never will be again. Lili was able to draw on her vocabulary (which at this point is around 10,000 words), formulate the words into a grammatically correct sentence following all the rules of verb tense and inflection and word order, and say it in an emotionally expressive way — in less than 10 seconds. It is also worth noting that while one part of her brain is concentrating on this monumental feat, another part is just making sure that her lungs are taking in and expelling the right amount of air.

Yes, Lili sometimes makes mistakes, mispronouncing or mishearing a word, or making a slight grammatical error, but most of the time her speech is error-free and fluent…and effortless. It's a good thing it's so effortless, because she sometimes keeps it up for hours on end. On this particular day, she uttered 23,719 words without making a single mistake.

CHAPTER 2: HOW COMMUNICATION IS STUDIED

2.1 EVERYONE IS A STUDENT OF COMMUNICATION (JUST NOT IN SCHOOL)

When I enrolled in Temple University as a psych major in the early 1980s, someone suggested I take a course in public speaking, which sounded like a good idea. In those days, course catalogs were printed books, not searchable databases, so my question was "Where do you take a public speaking course from?" That's when I discovered that there was a major called "Speech," and that right next to the public speaking course were classes in other things that sounded very interesting: small group communication, family communication, argumentation, persuasion, and more. I took three speech courses that first semester, switched my major, and never turned back. But a curious thing happened: the name of my academic discipline kept changing. I received a bachelor's degree in "Speech," a master's degree and doctorate in "Speech Communication," and I now teach in the "Communication Studies" department.

I discovered that the discipline was much older than I first thought; its history is hard to track because of all those changes (including names I had never heard before: see below). This history illustrates the identity crisis long faced by communication as an academic field. When I was an undergraduate, some older adults would ask me what I was studying in school, and if I said "Communication" (no "s"), they would reply "Communications? Oh, you mean radio." Why did they make that assumption? Because they knew someone who had served as a "communications officer" in World War II, in charge of radio transmissions. I would tell them "No, radio is part of the Radio-Television-Film major, not mine." Others heard the word "Speech" and thought it meant helping people overcome speech impediments and regain their ability to talk after a stroke, and I would say "No, that's something else called Speech and Hearing Science." Meanwhile, I couldn't help noticing that much of the material from my speech textbooks was borrowed from social psychology, philosophy, sociology, English, linguistics, journalism, political science, and a wide range of other academic fields. Where are the boundaries of this particular discipline?

Ultimately, drawing precise boundaries around "Communication Studies" is unnecessary, and even counterproductive. Communication is a universal endeavor: everyone on earth does it (even if they cannot speak), and communication affects every human activity. To put it another way, although only a small portion of college students call themselves "Communication Majors," **everyone is a student of communication in some way**. It would thus be absurd to draw a thick wall around what a certain set of scholars study and say "That's our turf — stay off of it."

A calculus or nanotechnology professor may say to new students, "You don't know anything about this subject, so let's start at the very beginning," but instructors in communication know that all of their students have been learning about communication since they were babies. Leaders, from low-level managers to rulers of empires, can benefit from taking courses in leadership, but they learn about leadership communication every day even without such courses. Most soccer coaches and bridesmaids who give speeches never took a college public speaking class; juries reach unanimous verdicts even if none of their members has studied group decision-making; salespeople learn tricks of the trade without reading a persuasion textbook; and even without the benefit of a media literacy course, any television watcher can notice patterns in what they are seeing. In every case, however, someone who *does* take a course in one of those areas should have an advantage. And, of course, scholars who study the communication process have brought us insights that filter into the general knowledge, reaching students and non-students alike.

You may have seen a cynical expression in offices: “You don’t have to be crazy to work here … but it helps.”

“Be crazy” by Mikhail Esteves, shared with CC-BY-NC license

Communication scholars could turn that expression around to say “You don’t have to read textbooks to learn about communication … but it helps.”

2.2 WHAT DOES THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF COMMUNICATION LOOK LIKE?

Here's the short version of how Communication Studies became a discipline. Scholars in a wide variety of fields noticed that their interests overlapped with those of scholars in other fields. English departments were teaching how to communicate clearly through writing, but some instructors included spoken communication as well, and taught classes in "eloquence" (which referred not just to how to enunciate words clearly, but how to compose a good speech). As journalism expanded from newspapers to include new media like radio and television, professors realized that they were looking at some of the same topics as theater departments and film schools. Philosophy departments taught courses in how to make logical arguments, while social psychology and political science departments examined persuasion techniques that were not purely logical. Sociology departments became interested in group dynamics and decision-making, and family therapists realized that they were studying much of the same things. As noted in the previous chapter, people interested in electronics were the first to develop models of the communication process. Slowly, scholars from all of these fields realized that it was time to form a distinct new academic discipline.

It should be no surprise that the first question— "What should we call this new discipline?" — would take some time to answer. Those who started off by focusing on public speaking and rhetoric naturally thought that the word "speech" covered the field well. A national organization, founded in 1914, was at first called the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking. It then went through a series of name changes, becoming the Speech Communication Association in 1970, and finally, in 1997, the National Communication Association. The names shift happened in part because the field grew to incorporate nearly 50 subdisciplines, and many scholars didn't feel that their discipline was represented by the narrow word "speech."

Naturally, the scholars who came into this new academic field from disparate areas brought their own academic traditions with them. Some fit under the general umbrella of "humanities" (such as philosophy), some under the umbrella of "social sciences" (such as psychology and sociology). This explains why Communication Studies students sometimes get frustrated writing papers, because half of their teachers ask them to use the MLA citation style (used in the humanities) and the other half insist on APA style (used in social sciences).

To add to the confusion, the discipline also has a long history of merging with and splitting off from many other fields. Long before I got there, my department at the University of Minnesota was called the Department of Speech and Theatre. It split into two departments in the 1950s, and it's now the Communication Studies department, and is adjacent to the School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Many professors have moved from one department to another, and other department mergers have been proposed but not adopted. Meanwhile, other colleges and universities have formed different alliances:

- The University of New Mexico has a Department of Communication and Journalism
- Depauw University has a Department of Communication and Theater
- Carroll University has a Department of Communication and Sociology
- The University of Idaho has a Department of Psychology and Communication Studies
- Boston University has a Department of Mass Communication, Advertising and Public Relations
- The University of Mary Washington has an English, Linguistics and Communication department.

If any of these combinations have changed by the time you read this, it only proves the point that "what discipline goes with what" is a question that's continually being revisited.

This is all a way of showing that Communication Studies is an inherently cross-disciplinary field, which is not a bad thing. The academic world recognizes the value of "cross-pollination" between disciplines, and Communication Studies may be better positioned than any other to make those connections. If the cost is a little confusion about what things are called or where to take particular courses, that is a small price to pay. It may mean that in a job interview, a student with a communication degree will need to take a little longer than, say, a chemistry major to explain what they studied in school, but it also makes communication majors adaptable to a wider variety of jobs than a student with a narrower focus. The previous chapter tackled the issue that communication degrees don't always get the respect they deserve, but that appears to be changing: the *Princeton Review* listed "Communications" as the second most valuable degree, saying "It will prepare you for a wealth of career options in business, advertising, human resources, public relations, government, education, media and social services."

2.3 METHODS FOR RESEARCHING COMMUNICATION

When a new academic discipline arises, scholars have to ask: How do we gain knowledge about this discipline? How can we study it? With people originally coming into the field of Communication Studies from many different directions and bringing their preferred methodologies with them, there are many methods that scholars still use to study communication. As a guide for walking through the most common ones, let's take the example of one particular phenomenon: **participation in group discussions**.

As a college student, imagine being placed in a group of eight students in a social psychology class and asked to work on a project that will make up a large percentage of the course grade. After a few weeks of meetings, you notice that there are three members who do a lot of talking, three who speak up occasionally (including you), and two who rarely say a word. This makes you curious about many things: is this unequal participation typical of groups like this? Does it depend on the size of the group? Would it be better or worse if the group was smaller? What other factors affect group participation? Do groups with more equal participation function better than groups where only a few members dominate the discussion? Are methods that enforce equal participation (such as a literal or metaphorical "talking stick") effective?

You start to think about studying the topic of group participation in more depth, and picture yourself going on to graduate school and conducting actual research to help you answer these questions. But first, before looking at the best research methods to use, it helps to have a solid understanding of a broader distinction: the difference between quantitative and qualitative methods, and the assumptions and habits that go along with each school of thought.

2.4 QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES

Quantitative methods are based on the fundamental principle that good research must be objective, and they rely on procedures borrowed from the physical sciences, such as chemistry, engineering, and physics. If you want to discover the boiling point of water, for example, you don't want to gather opinions and perceptions: you want to discover facts that can be represented in numbers. Imagine two scientists tackling that question, and one says "In my opinion, the boiling point of water is 108 degrees Celsius" and the other responds, "That doesn't seem right to me; it feels like it's 94 degrees Celsius instead." That's not good science. Another way to look at it is to spell out what *doesn't* count as a source of scientific knowledge. Michael Beatty (1996) listed six unscientific sources of knowledge[1]:

Intuition: "I just know in my gut"
Tenacity and tradition: "We've always known that to be true"
Common sense: "C'mon, get real: everybody knows that…."
Personal experience: "Well, it happened to me, so I assume it's universal"
Authority: "My doctor said it's true"
Rationalism and deduction: "Logically speaking, it has to be true."

This is a rather intimidating list, and it may include most of the ways you reach conclusions in your daily life. But science has often shown that what we "know" to be true isn't true, and putting aside what we "know" and looking only at what the numbers actually show has led to many surprises and scientific advancements. In the field of communication and deception, for example, people have long believed that not being able to maintain eye contact is a give-away that someone is lying. When scholars started doing rigorous research on deception, however, they found this wasn't true at all. [See Box 12.9, in the chapter on Nonverbal Communication]. To be a good scientist, it is important to put aside preconceived notions and be open to finding out that you are wrong about things you thought you knew. Biologist Martin Schwartz put it more bluntly in an essay titled "The Importance of Stupidity In Scientific Research":[2] "The more comfortable we become with being stupid, the deeper we will wade into the unknown and the more likely we are to make big discoveries."

You may be thinking, "Well, I can just observe communication and learn from what I see." You're in a classroom group already, so you can just watch what happens in that group. Several problems, however, immediately arise with this approach. One is the problem of **selective perception**: only noticing some

1. Beatty, M.J. (1996). Thinking Quantitatively. In An Integrated Approach to Communication Theory and Research, Ed. by Salwen, M.B. & Stacks, D.W. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

2. Schwartz, M.A. (2008). The Importance of Stupidity in Scientific Research. *Journal of Cell Science* 121, 1771.

examples and overlooking others. It's hard to see everything that is going on, and give all examples equal weight. In your group, for example, you think there is equal participation because you can think of a time when each of the eight members spoke, and when Shonda pipes up and says something, it's always funny and memorable. What you didn't notice is that she only does that two or three times per meeting, while Peter talks far more often, but his comments are generally more mundane and not funny, and his voice is quieter. In other words, to conduct good research you can't wait until a meeting is over and then rely on your *impression* of who spoke up how often. If you want an accurate picture, you're going to have to count things: how many times each member made a contribution, and perhaps how long their statements were.

Another reason humans aren't perfect at observation is because they tend to overreact to vivid examples. If you ask people "Which animal has killed the most humans?," they may guess sharks because shark attacks get so much attention. People rarely guess the correct answer — mosquitoes — because the image of a mosquito bite is not as vivid. Likewise, more people are afraid of elevators than stairs, because they can picture what it would be like to be caught in a plunging elevator, while stairs are so ordinary (far more people, however, are injured on stairs than in elevators). This **vividness effect** can give us a distorted view of reality. In your classroom group, Kyle once shot down a suggestion of Pauline's in a very harsh way, and another time got so frustrated with Will that he shouted in his face and stormed out of the room. High-drama moments like those can be extremely vivid, which might leave you with the impression that yours is a high-conflict group and Kyle is deeply unhappy in it. What you didn't notice, however, is that during the group's 11 meetings, those were the only two times Kyle got upset, and that most of the time his comments are civil and positive.

A third problem is **confirmation bias**: the tendency to seek out information that confirms that you're right, and avoid sources that show you're wrong. If you are convinced that Rachel is the most influential person in the group and shows leadership potential, you'll be on the lookout for proof that you are right. Confirmation bias is a very strong human tendency, so it should come as no surprise that scholars and scientists can fall prey to it just like everyone else.

Selective perception, vividness effect, and confirmation bias are each understandable human tendencies, which illustrates that in order to be a good scientist, you need to fight human nature. This is where we turn to the **scientific method**. Scientists learn to conduct research by formulating hypotheses, devising ways to measure variables, eliminating extraneous variables as much as possible, setting up experimental and control groups, altering variables for the experimental group and measuring the effects, and comparing the two groups. Using some version of this process has helped scientists make extraordinary progress in many fields.

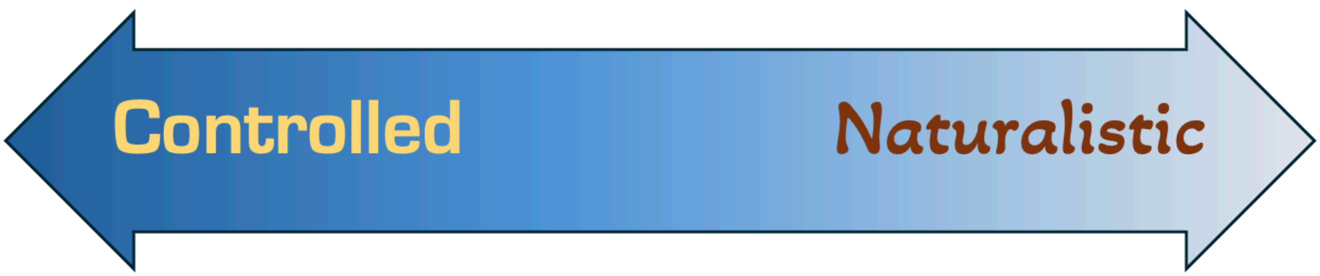
Let's see how you could use this process to study the effects of group size on participation. The first method you could employ is experimentation.

Experiments. When designing an experiment, you need to create clear and measurable definitions. In this case, you'll need an **operational definition** of "participation," which you might define as "speaking aloud for at least ten seconds." You could then set up groups of varying sizes: five participants, 10, 18. If you have the resources, record as many group discussions as you can, and create a spreadsheet to tally who spoke when and for how long. This painstaking cataloging would take a long time, so you could take a reasonable shortcut by relying on "random sampling": take a recording of a group meeting, fast forward to a random spot, jot down who is speaking at that moment, and repeat the process a few dozen times; you'll have a representative picture of participation without having to listen to the entire meeting.

Some challenges arise, however. The problem of **controlling for extraneous variables** is always an issue when it comes to experiments. For example, what topic is the group talking about? If they're discussing something that all group members have opinions about, that's entirely different from a group that gets on the topic of obscure anime movies, where only two members have anything to say. Do the group members know each other, or is this their first meeting?

The need to control variables illustrates why studying communication is so different from studying physics: communication is an inherently complex and multi-faceted process, and there is a potentially huge number of variables to consider. And the more you try to control for those extraneous variables, the more artificial the research becomes. If the topic of conversation is a variable, for example, the experimenter might have to dictate what the group talks about, and most normal group discussion isn't restricted to only one topic. To control for members knowing each other, you might decide to use "zero history" groups where everyone is a stranger to each other — which is rare in real-life groups. The cleaner the experiment, the further it is from studying real people in a natural environment.

You could sort communication experiments along a continuum of highly controlled on one end and naturalistic on the other.



The continuum illustrates the tradeoffs you must make in experiments: **the more controlled the experiment, the less natural it is**, and vice versa. If you want to conduct a rigorous experiment on the influence of gender on persuasiveness, for instance, you could have speakers of different genders give speeches and have the audience rate their persuasiveness on a 10-point scale, but first you would have to control for variables such as age, height, ethnicity, attractiveness, voice quality, gestures, speech topic, speaker order (does the one who goes first have an advantage over other speakers?), and probably two dozen other variables you haven't thought of yet. In the name of controlling variables, it's probably better to use a recorded video message that you can digitally alter rather than a live speaker. In the low-tech era, researchers might have handed audiences a written script and a photograph and told them "Imagine this speech being delivered by that person." This is what Albert Mehrabian did in a 1967 experiment on the relative influence of verbal vs. nonverbal channels, described in Box 12.2. His results — that only 7% of meaning is conveyed through words

— are still widely cited, but most people who quote that statistic don't realize that it's based on a highly artificial experiment that did not involve live people actually speaking to each other.

An alternative is to incorporate more variables into the research instead of trying to eliminate them. The issue here, as any statistician can tell you, is that **the more variables you incorporate, the weaker the patterns tend to be**. In the 1980s, for example, many books addressed the effects of birth order on a child's personality and relationships. Those books usually divided children into one of three categories: oldest child, middle child, and youngest child. More recent scholars, however, recognized many more variables that need to be taken into account:

- How large is the family? (In a family with 12 children, are children 2–11 all the same?)
- How long are the gaps between children? (If a child is born 15 years after their next oldest sibling, are they essentially an oldest child?)
- What about stepfamilies? (A child who is a member of two stepfamilies simultaneously can be an oldest child in one and a middle child in the other)
- What about twins and triplets?
- What about disability? (If the oldest has a severe disability, does a middle child function as the oldest?)
- What if a child dies?
- What is the role of gender, ethnicity, and culture? (If birth order patterns are universal, they should function the same in Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Paraguay.)

Once those factors were taken into account, the strong patterns asserted in the 1980s started to fade, leading the National Academy of Sciences to report in 2015 that "the search for birth-order effects on personality has not yet resulted in conclusive findings."[3]

A final challenge when it comes to conducting communication experiments is **permission**. Some of the most famous early psychology experiments were psychologically damaging to their research subjects. Recognition of this damage led to the creation of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), charged with regulating experiments on human subjects. The IRB is, thankfully, very protective of the dignity and mental health of anyone who participates in an experiment, and has strict guidelines that must be met. I point this out because I want to make sure readers of this book know that ***you can't do secret experiments on people without IRB permission!***

Surveys. Another common way to gather quantitative data about communication-related topics is to conduct surveys. If you want to find out about participation in groups, why not just ask people if participation is equal in the groups they belong to? Note, however, that what you'll get through this approach is a **measure**

3. Rohrer, J.M., Egloff, B. & Schmukle, S.C. (2015). Examining the effects of birth order on personality. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*. 112(46):14224-14229.

of perception, not reality, which is true for most surveys related to communication. Still, surveys are common in subdisciplines like organizational communication, where researchers want to learn how employees respond to different leadership styles or what makes remote workers feel a sense of identification with their company, or mass communication, where researchers want measures of how audiences respond to health awareness campaigns or advertising slogans. There are many polling companies that gather vital data on products, political issues, and social problems. Even if you don't hire or work for such a company, if you have a college degree related to communication, odds are that sooner or later someone will ask you to "throw together a consumer survey for us, will you?" Technologically, it is easier to construct surveys, administer them, and analyze the data than it has ever been. The thing to keep in mind, though, is that it is easy to do a "bad" survey, and the people you present your data to may never realize its flaws. Doing a survey well, on the other hand, is hard work, and you should be aware of the basic requirements.

Much of the effort should go into crafting **good survey questions** — questions that are not biased or leading, make sense to respondents, and are easy to answer (or, stated in the negative, hard to misinterpret). When I was an undergraduate, I was in a project group that designed a survey, and I was shocked when our teacher handed it back saying "It's too biased." We tried to figure out ways that it could be biased, and turned it in again. "Still too biased." None of us in the group could see the problem, but that doesn't mean it wasn't there. It took about five versions before the teacher accepted it— but luckily we had a teacher who was on the lookout for bias, or we would have just administered the survey and gathered results that *looked* legitimate.

Another basic issue to consider is whether to use closed- or open-ended questions. **Closed-ended questions** ask the respondent to choose from a set of predetermined responses, which can be as simple as "yes" or "no," or can involve many possible answers (in a question about jobs, for example, you might have respondents pick from a list of categories, such as professionals, laborers, craft workers, etc.). These questions have the advantage of being easy to process; you can generate charts instantaneously. It's more difficult, however, to figure out what the answers mean, and if the respondent answered them correctly. If you're using a 5-point Likert scale to measure how satisfied people were with their latest doctor visit, an inattentive respondent might not notice that the scale is not what they are used to (1 = very satisfied), and click 5 ("very unsatisfied") even though they were happy with the visit. For decades, pollsters have been asking voters "Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in this country?" If they are dissatisfied, does that mean they think the country is getting too conservative, too liberal, or something else entirely?

The best way to find out what people are really thinking is to use **open-ended questions**, which require the respondent to write something. These questions give the researcher more insight than closed-ended questions, but also create an extra job: what do you do with those responses? Summarizing or coding them takes a lot more time and thought than automatically generating a chart.

An additional challenge with surveys is where to find **respondents**: who takes the survey? Most of the time you want a representative sample — a set of people who reflect the views of the broader population (it doesn't have to be the whole country: it can be employees in a specific company, users of a product or service, or a demographic group such as "Millennials"). No matter the size of the sample or broader population, the issues are the same: who will fill out the survey and who won't, and how do they find out about it? These factors can be strongly affected by simple questions such as: (1) Did you (the researcher) select the respondents, or did they choose themselves? If they chose themselves, do they have motives you don't know about? (2) What format will you use? Telephone survey, internet survey? If it's the latter, what website will it appear on? Because of the self-selection issue, political polling about which candidate is ahead in a race is still largely done via telephone, which makes pollsters worry that whole categories of people aren't represented because they won't answer the phone. (For more, see Chapter 5 on Audience Analysis).

These challenges are serious enough that, even if you could do it on your own for cheap, it may be worth hiring a polling company to design and conduct the survey for you. If it was your boss who asked you to do it, the hard part may be convincing her to do it the expensive way.

Interaction Coding. Some scholars don't want to rely on perceptions; they are interested in what people actually say in different contexts, which can be recorded and coded (after acquiring IRB approval, of course). Much of our understanding of group decision-making (Chapter 16), for instance, is based on putting people in groups, having them work out a problem, then sorting the statements of group members into categories and looking for patterns. First, researchers develop a limited set of categories into which they classify every utterance, then they train a group of coders how to sort the infinite variety of things people could say into those categories. In early decision-making research, for example, Robert Bales devised a 12-category coding scheme with items like "Asks for suggestion" and "Shows antagonism" and "Agrees." While this approach provides a way to gather objective data on actual conversation, it's labor-intensive, and coming up with coding categories takes a long time.

Content Analysis. People who study written communication — examining what companies put in their mission statements or how celebrities apologize for scandals — have the advantage of being able to look at real communication without many of the concerns listed above. This research can be done quantitatively or qualitatively, depending on what techniques you use to analyze the words. You may have seen examples of "word clouds," which are just a visual way to represent the frequency of words in written texts.

The Limits of Quantitative Research

As mentioned, the basic assumption of every quantitative research technique is that objectivity is possible, and that success in using these techniques in the "hard sciences" can be matched in the social sciences. Not all scholars agreed, however, and some began to worry that the efforts to mimic the physical sciences was just window dressing. If you are very concerned about controlling extraneous variables and you design a highly artificial experiment, how do you know that the results will apply to real-life communication situations? If your research leads to specific findings about a particular variable, how well does it combine with other research on related variables? (You've probably noticed this with research on nutrition: one study shows that eating a particular food is good for your pancreas, another shows that it increases your risk of brain cancer, and a third shows that helps your digestive tract but aggravates your joints, leaving you to wonder, "Am I supposed to eat that food or not?"). What researchers often want is answers to the question, "How does it all fit together?," and isolated studies don't get you there.

Then there is the issue of **awareness**. In a chemistry experiment, you don't need to worry that the chemicals will change their behavior so they look good to the researcher. In human communication, however, that is always a concern. The IRB frowns on secret recording, so researchers often have to trust that subjects will act naturally in a lab setting and forget about the cameras.

Chemists also don't have to worry about a chemical acting one way on one day and another way the next day; chemicals don't have **free choice**. Science works best when it is looking at deterministic situations: Factor A predictably determines Outcome B. It has a harder time with "Well, it depends on what mood a person is in," which is often a variable in communication. Some social scientists take the view that there is no such thing as free will, but because that goes against most people's experience and belief systems, it's not an easy argument to win. As Em Griffin put it, "Human choice is problematic for the behavioral scientist because as individual freedom goes up, predictability of behavior goes down."[4]

It is because of these concerns that some researchers gravitate toward **qualitative methods** instead of quantitative ones. They believe that you miss a lot if you only focus on measurable variables, and they prefer to look at the communication process holistically. Instead of thinking of free choice as a research problem, they look at it as a topic worth studying, so they often focus on why a communicator chooses to make the choices they do (which is why qualitative research is often called "interpretive"). They are interested in looking at natural phenomena in context, which often means a greater willingness to embrace the messiness of life. They also think it is more honest to admit that the researcher is a human being, who attempts to be objective and unbiased but, knowing these efforts will never be completely successful, owns up to the problem. Sometimes this means that the researcher acts as a participant in the conversation instead of as an observer behind a two-way mirror.

4. Griffin, E. & Ledbetter, A., & Sparks, G. (2015). A First Look at Communication Theory (9th edition). New York: McGraw Hill.

2.5 QUALITATIVE APPROACHES

Qualitative methods include in-depth interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic research, as well as textual analysis of written and visual messages.

Interviews. What is the difference between a survey and an interview? It's mostly about depth vs. breadth: a survey is a large collection of very short interviews, whereas an interview is a long survey done with one person. A more stark difference emerges when you look at the results: survey results are usually expressed numerically, but interviews can't be boiled down to numbers. To put it another way, quantitative researchers like to see graphs; qualitative researchers like to see quotes.

Of course, just as it's easy to do a bad survey and hard to do a good one, the same applies to interviews. The question of **who do you interview** is even more crucial when you are talking about only a few interviewees instead of hundreds of survey respondents. Unbiased questions are just as big a concern as they are with surveys, and interview questions can also be open-ended or closed-ended (although, if you're not a lawyer doing cross examination or a police officer trying to pin down a suspect, most interviewers prefer open-ended questions). Interview guides often stress the importance of establishing **rapport** with the interviewee — putting them at ease, creating a sense of connection so that the conversation is more open and free-flowing. Whether it's possible to establish rapport and still be objective is a good philosophical question, and relates to issues such as whether it's okay for the interviewer to express any opinions of their own.

Focus groups are a form of group interview, but with some advantages. In some cases, you don't want an interviewee to be influenced by anyone else's opinions, but in a focus group such influence can be a good thing: people can bounce ideas off each other, and bring up topics that one person might not think of on their own. In a typical focus group, 6–10 respondents are brought together in a room, along with a moderator who asks questions and facilitates a free-flowing discussion for an hour or two. One advantage of a focus group is that it allows you to expose the group to a stimulus of some kind — a new product, a television commercial, a legal case — and get their feedback about it. This is routinely done with full-length movies as well, and may lead the director to change the ending or come up with a new title. If you have the time and money, you can conduct multiple focus groups about the same thing, but it's usually feasible to conduct only a small number of groups, so you get the views of dozens of people and extrapolate that to the masses. For this reason, choosing representative respondents is crucial.

Ethnographic research involves going out into the world and observing up close, while taking lots of notes on what you observe. The idea derives from anthropologists who studied tribes all over the world, but it can be done in any kind of social environment. When I was first in graduate school, I thought a great model of research would be summarized as "Go out there and experience interesting things, then come back and tell us about it." Later I discovered the scholarly journal *Symbolic Interaction*, which is full of such research.

A typical issue included studies of war veterans who became antiwar activists, contestants in a reality show, cheerleaders who deal drugs, musicians who collaborate digitally with other musicians they've never met, and an examination of prison parolees.

One question that arises in ethnographic research is whether the people you are studying know that you are a researcher. When Margaret Mead went to Samoa in 1926, there was no way she could pass as a Samoan, so her role as a researcher was clear from the start. Other people don't want to influence the people they are studying, so they keep their status as researchers secret.

One form of ethnographic research is **participant observation**, in which the researcher is an active participant in the community they are observing. A well-known example is Arlie Hochschild, who wanted to find out what it was like to have to smile for your job all day long, so she got a job as a flight attendant and interviewed many of her co-workers, helping create an field of research on "emotional labor." Some research is more autobiographical, such as James Baldwin's *No Name in the Street* (1972), recounting his personal experiences during the civil rights movement in America.

Possibly the oldest form of qualitative research is **textual analysis** (also known as rhetorical analysis) — the detailed examination of texts such as speeches and films. What was Sojourner Truth doing in her "Ain't I a Woman?" speech in 1851? What made Winston Churchill's speeches great? What are the techniques employed by Greta Thunberg in her address to the United Nations Climate Summit in 2019? Why is the Macintosh computer ad that aired in 1983 considered one of the greatest commercials of all time? What are the underlying messages in *Forrest Gump*? What gives Taylor Swift songs their power?

What distinguishes textual analysis (a qualitative method) from content analysis (a quantitative method) is that textual analysis is interpretive and typically only focused on one message, whereas content analysis is quantitative and has a broad scope, summarizing hundreds or thousands of messages in the same category. Calling it "interpretive" may imply that textual analysis is free-form and completely subjective, but rhetorical scholars will stress that you have to use a particular method or framework, such as the Burkean Pentad, the Toulmin Model, or Standpoint Theory.

One form of textual analysis is **semiotics**, the study of visual codes and symbols in particular cultures. Why do so many commercials feature images of a woman staring at a man? What are the visual codes that tell us to love the Na'vi and hate Colonel Quaritch in *Avatar*? Why are so many Disney villains thin? Why are funeral homes designed the way they are? One of my personal favorites is the visual codes used in the television series *Breaking Bad*, which is about the transformation of a nerdy high school teacher into a ruthless drug lord.

All of these forms of research are based on different assumptions, habits, and values, yet they all count as "studying communication," and they all contribute to our understanding of this vast domain of experience. And as with everything else to do with communication, some form of these methods can be done by anyone, whether they studied them formally or not, but taking the time to learn how to utilize them properly is worth the trouble.

BOX 2.5 What does "Square One" look like?

I don't know if I'm jealous of Louise Banks or not. I enjoy the luxury of teaching communication classes to students with whom I share a baseline of common knowledge; although roughly 10–15% of my students hail from countries on the other side of the world, I get to lecture in my own language and mention things like COVID, artificial intelligence, and Zoom, knowing my students get those references. I can also use terms like "square one" and assume they know what that means or are able to look it up (or if I say that the phrase "square one" comes from board games, they know what a board game is). Even if I were to find myself in Laos or Cote D'Ivoire, I'm sure I could find ways to communicate at least rudimentary concepts with the locals, since human travelers have, for thousands of years, found techniques to communicate with people who don't share their language.

What I have never had to do was test my communication skills by trying to have a conversation with a creature with whom I have no common baseline at all — not a single word, gesture, visual symbol, or shared experience. But Louise Banks (Amy Adams) is recruited to do just that in the 2016 film *Arrival*. It is, obviously, a film written by human beings who had to imagine what first contact with aliens would be like, as opposed to an actual first encounter with true aliens, but it is a very useful exercise in figuring out where "square one" really is.[1]

Long before the movie was made, real life scientists were trying to figure out how to communicate with aliens who might intercept messages from humans. In 1977, two Voyager probes were sent into space; one carried a golden record designed by astronomer Carl Sagan and a team from Cornell

1. This film is just one of many that pondered the same "where to begin" question, but in most of the other movies (Contact, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, The Day the Earth Stood Still, Starman), the alien race had either been to earth before or took the initiative to make it easy for us humans. In other films, the aliens are hostile and have no desire to communicate (A Quiet Place, Independence Day, Signs).

University. They spent a year deciding what to put on this disc, finally including photographs, diagrams, written messages, and audio recordings of music, nature sounds, and human speech (greetings in 55 languages and a message from U.N. Secretary General Kurt Waldheim). Sagan said "The spacecraft will be encountered and the record played only if there are advanced space-faring civilizations in interstellar space, but the launching of this 'bottle' into the cosmic 'ocean' says something very hopeful about life on this planet." Sagan is not clear about whether we are "saying something very hopeful" to each other, or to potential recipients in the constellation Camelopardalis, which it will approach in 40,000 years, but if it's the former, the target audience is actually us, not aliens. And though very smart people worked on this challenge for a long time, you can't help but wonder why they included the Latin phrase "Per aspera ad astra" in Morse code, considering how few people on this planet can decipher Morse code or Latin. Even teaching those potential aliens how to play the disc relies heavily on an enormous number of assumptions and shared knowledge. There are two potential take-away messages from this:

- Communicating remotely with a non-earth species is impossible.
- Square One is farther back than most of us can imagine.

So in *Arrival*, when 12 extraterrestrial spacecraft park themselves around the world, one of the first questions world leaders face is: who should we recruit to try to communicate with them? Call a linguist! They could have involved someone from Communication Studies, or any of the numerous related academic disciplines mentioned in this chapter. But linguist Louise Banks is the right call, largely because she knows that the army's view of communicating with extraterrestrials is hopelessly naive. They want to rush straight to asking about the aliens' intentions, but she recognizes why you can't just jump to asking "What is your purpose on Earth?" There are an awful lot of fundamentals that need to be established first, as she explains:

> First, we need to make sure that they understand what a question is: the nature of a request for information, along with a response. Then we need to clarify the difference between a specific you and a collective you, because we don't want to know why Joe Alien is here, we want to know why they all landed. And purpose requires an understanding of intent. We need to find out, do they make conscious choices or is their motivation so instinctive that they don't understand a "why" question at all. And biggest of all, we need to have enough vocabulary with them that we understand their answer.

Those are huge questions that even someone who has been teaching communication courses for years can't begin to answer. Still, I have been tempted to make the movie required viewing for my students, because it is perhaps the best exploration of the fundamental nature of communication I've ever seen. And when Louise and the aliens form enough common ground for the aliens to say "offer weapon," she's smart enough to figure out that "weapon" means "tool" or "gift." And what is the gift these aliens came to give us? A new language.

CHAPTER 3: ETHICS

3.1 IS IT OKAY TO SAY THAT?

As movie themes go, you just can't beat the one from *Spiderman*: **"With great power comes great responsibility."** Even those of us who can't shoot spiderwebs out of our wrists can recognize the truth in it, and see the connection between power and the ethical responsibility to use that power well. Since this is a book about communication, it raises the question: does communication count as "great power"?

Consider this: some forms of great power are clearly social in nature, but others don't appear to be. In the non-social category, "great power" may evoke images of vast armies, unlimited wealth, the ability to maintain a position of leadership for decades, the authority to throw rivals in prison and the liberty to kill anyone in your way without fear of punishment, and a large company's ability to act as it pleases. But all of these powers actually depend on communication. A vast army can turn on you, and is only a form of power if you can *command* that army, which depends on the ability to communicate authority and inspire loyalty in your followers. As for unlimited wealth, how does "one hundred trillion dollars" sound? That was an actual unit of currency in Zimbabwe in 2009 during their hyperinflation crisis … but it was only worth roughly $30 in American currency.

Money is a social construct, which means it is only real if others agree that it is real, so it too depends on communication. As for staying in political power for decades, modern rulers who have done that (such as Vladimir Putin in Russia) know that the perception of power is vital, the control of news media is an essential component, and you'll probably still need to keep winning elections. The authority to kill or imprison rivals is just that: authority, which must be upheld through communication. And massive corporations that can seemingly do whatever they want still pour huge amounts of money into advertising, PR campaigns, and keeping healthy relationships with governments.

In short: **there is no such thing as power without communication.**

To those of us who don't command armies or corporations, it is even more obvious that our power comes from our ability to communicate. How do you get a well-paying job? How do you lead a team? How do you gain Instagram followers? How do you talk a professor into giving you an extension on a term paper? How do you haggle over the price of a car? How do you sweet-talk that attractive person into going on a date with you? Those are all forms of exercising power, so if Peter Parker's uncle is right, they all carry a sense of moral responsibility with them as well.

This moral responsibility can be abused, not just by dictators and business moguls, but by all of us. The personal goals listed in the previous paragraph (getting a job, gaining social media followers, convincing someone to go on a date) could be achieved by immoral means: faking a resume, manipulating followers, seduction. Dramatic historical examples of immoral communication are easy to find: cult leader Jim Jones, for instance, convinced over 900 people to drink cyanide-laced juice that they knew was poisoned (from which we got the expression "drink the Kool-Aid" to refer to "accepting a deadly, deranged, or foolish ideology or concept based only upon the overpowering coaxing of another"). Bernie Madoff bilked investors out of $170 billion dollars in a decades-long Ponzi scheme, but his widely publicized arrest in 2008 didn't seem to slow down the use of such schemes. Most scams, however, are carried out not by highly organized and motivated masterminds, but by petty criminals who discover how easy it is to make a wealthy widow fall in love with them, or get a desperate cancer patient to buy a bottle of snake oil (a generic term for medicines that do nothing). If you include things like putting a little "spin" on your resume, lying to a friend about why you didn't come to their party, or forwarding a tweet without verifying if it's true, most of us have misused the power of communication.

If you look closely at the ills facing modern society — war, racism, health, climate change, financial crises, politics, sexual abuse — **you will always find unethical communication hiding under those rocks**. Someone somewhere is lying about something, covering something up, distorting evidence, manipulating people, making promises they can't keep, or unfairly attacking someone's credibility. I would go so far as to say that when people are absolutely determined to fight for a cause, even one they believe is morally right, truth is the first casualty of that war. If you believe that your political candidate *must* win, for the good of the country or state, a little deceit and "dirty fighting" seems like a small price to pay. Often ignored in that equation, however, is the greater cost to society: the erosion of faith in institutions, government, news media, advertising, or any of the forms of communication we all depend on.

3.2 WHAT IS LYING?

When it comes to ethical communication, the most obvious problem is lying: instead of using our ability to communicate to create shared meaning and accurate perception, we use it to mislead. When humans developed the ability to speak, the ability to "mis-speak" and deceive came right along with it. (Humans are not alone in this: animals make good liars, too — from birds who feign a broken wing to draw predators away from a nest to dogs that put on a good show of being ashamed when they're caught getting into the garbage). Well, you might think: along with our ability to deceive, we also developed the ability to *detect* deception, so it all evens out, right? Not exactly: our ability to pull off a convincing lie is far more advanced than our ability to tell when others are lying to us, which is usually no better than chance (see Box 12.9: SPOTTING LIARS). Even with training, polygraph machines and fact-checking, much of the time we still have to just trust that others are not lying to us.

How do you define "lying"? If the definition is simply "Saying things that you know are factually untrue," then you are missing many other forms of deception. Here are ten forms to consider:

1. **Factual lies:** intentionally stating facts that are inaccurate ("I wasn't speeding")
2. **Emotional lies:** misrepresenting your emotional or inner state ("I'm fine" or "I love that sweater you knitted for me")
3. **Rationalizing or excusing your actions or motivations** ("I was only trying to protect you" or "I didn't mean to offend you")
4. **Lies by omission:** not telling "the whole truth"; leaving out information that the listener probably would deem important ("I didn't use AI to write that term paper" ... I had my friend do it for me)
5. **Paltering**[1]**:** telling the truth with the intention of misleading ("made with FDA-approved ingredients," which sounds like the product itself is "FDA approved").
6. **Exaggeration:** stretching the truth ("I've had five years of experience in the field" on your resume, instead of the more accurate "I've occasionally gotten a few days of experience doing that work in the summers, starting five years ago")
7. **Speaking beyond your expertise:** pontificating about things you don't really know much about, sometimes because someone asked you a question and you don't want to sound ignorant ("Yes, the paleo diet is the most healthy because it matches what humans used to eat 50,000 years ago"). *Note: this is an*

1. For a recent analysis of paltering in negotiation situations, see Rogers, T., Zeckhauser, R., GIno, F., Norton, M.I. & Schweitzer, M.E. (2017). Artful paltering: The Risks and Rewards of Using Truthful Statements to Mislead Others. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 112(3):456-473.

occupational hazard for college professors.

8. **White lies:** telling small lies that are considered harmless, for the sake of preserving social harmony ("So sorry we have to leave your party; we're picking up a friend from the airport.")
9. **Polite fictions:** closely related to white lies, a polite fiction is "a social scenario in which all participants are aware of a truth, but pretend to believe in some alternative version of events to avoid conflict or embarrassment" (Wikipedia). The difference is that the listener may not know that a white lie isn't the truth, but in polite fictions, everyone knows the actual truth. In the 2016 film *Florence Foster Jenkins*, a wealthy patron of the arts wants to try her hand at opera singing, and in her debut concert most of the audience humors her, except for Mrs. Stark, who bursts into laughter, saying "She is the worst goddamn singer in the entire world!" When the concert organizer asks if she is "unwell," Mr. Stark calls her laughter "a coughing fit" and they escort her out because "she needs fresh air." Sure, we'll go with that.
10. **Unmet promises:** "I'll come to your play next Saturday." The speaker may or may not mean it when they make a promise, but if they don't show up on Saturday, what they said earlier wasn't true.

Do all of these forms constitute unethical communication? Do *any* of them automatically count as unethical? It is not hard to imagine scenarios where any one of them could be excused — including intentional factual lies, if the circumstances are right. It can be fascinating to discuss the ethics of specific situations, and it is relatively easy for participants in the discussion to reach their own conclusions. What is much more difficult is to articulate guidelines that everyone can agree on, and use those guidelines to explain to others why Scenario A is acceptable but Scenario B is not.

One approach to finding such guidelines is to look to the law, since there are many laws that address communication issues: fraud, false advertising, defamation, hate speech, obscenity, etc. There will always be a problem, however, with the relationship between laws and ethics, and it is important to understand the difference between the two.

Laws are, by their nature, perimeters: they draw fences that delineate acceptable from unacceptable behavior. If a behavior falls on one side of the fence, it's illegal; if it falls on the other side, it's legal. One purpose lawyers serve is to instruct on exactly where that fence is, and if a client wants to push right up against that fence, it's okay as long as they don't go over it. Ethics, on the other hand, are about core principles, and are usually expressed as "You should act this way." If the principle is "Be kind to people," and you try hard to act kindly to everyone, you are very ethical; if you are "polite but a little aloof," that's further from kindness so less ethical; and if you are "snarky and mean-spirited," that's unethical behavior because it's far from the core. But "snarky and mean-spirited" isn't illegal, as long as you don't commit assault (the fence). The law can never define what "kind" is, or exactly how kind you need to be; that's the domain of ethics. The nice thing about ethical principles is that they theoretically make laws unnecessary: if everyone is trying to stay close to those core principles, they'll never get near the fences. I say "theoretically" because it seems unrealistic to create a world where everyone is trying to be good all the time, so laws will always be needed. Still, it doesn't work very well to work backwards from laws to determine what those core principles should be. Where can we turn instead for those principles?

3.3 SPECIFIC ETHICAL GUIDELINES

Philosophers have long thought about ethics, and they often define ethics in terms of two variables: **means** (or specific behaviors) and **ends** (or intentions). The **means** side looks at types of communication that are acceptable or unacceptable, and leads to guidelines such as "don't publicly humiliate anyone" or "research the facts before making public statements about something." Typically, those ethical guidelines can be sorted into "dos" and "don'ts." Such guidelines have the appeal of being categorical and, depending on the length of the lists, easy to memorize. The problem, as hinted at earlier, is that it becomes difficult to apply these guidelines universally. A guideline saying "Never deceive anyone about who you are," for example, doesn't allow for investigative journalism or undercover police work. You could keep adding qualifiers and exceptions, but then the guidelines get harder to remember and apply.

The focus on **ends** is simpler in that you can boil it down to: did you intend good, or not? Even the law frequently acknowledges that intention is a key factor, and a defining element of crimes like fraud (you may have said something false, but if it was an innocent mistake and you did not intend to mislead anyone, it's not fraud). Rather than having to stipulate all the behaviors that are acceptable or not, focusing on only one variable simplifies everything. Sort of.... The trouble is, this variable is invisible, sometimes even to the person themselves. If you've ever stopped and pondered, "Why did I do that crazy thing? What was I thinking?" it's easy to see how difficult it is to figure out why someone *else* acted the way they did. People are great at coming up with nice-sounding justifications after the fact, so what they say their intentions are is not always reliable. And there is a time dimension as well: short-term and long-term goals can look very different from each other, so which "end" should we focus on? This is why the ends vs. means debate has been raging for centuries, and will probably never be resolved.

Another often-cited philosophical principle is the **greater good**: if an action benefits society as a whole, it is ethical, and if it benefits only a few people but harms many others, it is unethical. A con man who justifies his behavior by saying "Hey, I've got to put food on the table" is thinking of his own (and perhaps his family's) needs, but not about what his actions are doing to the larger society. The simplest way to think about this criteria is to reverse it and think about what "ruins things for the rest of us." For example, when you watch a YouTube video, it can be fun to read what other people think of the video — but if a few trolls invade the comments section and fill it with toxicity, the moderators shut off the whole discussion. So: don't be a troll!

Sometimes the principle of greater good is easy to apply; other times it becomes a complicated numbers game. When Robin Hood "stole from the rich to give to the poor" in the Middle Ages, that sounded heroic...except to the rich, who were justified in being upset that now robbery was suddenly a good thing. Attempts to apply the Robin Hood approach to the modern stock market have gotten messy. And as mentioned earlier, this has been used by political zealots to justify all kinds of unethical behavior because they believe their party or candidate will save the world. Who gets to define "the greater good"?

If all of this sounds too abstract, Sherry Baker and David Martinson have boiled it down to five tangible guidelines, which they called The TARES Test.[1] The acronym stands for:

T = Truthfulness of the message. This harks back to avoiding the 10 forms of lying outlined above, especially factual lies, paltering, and lies of omission. Baker and Martinson point out that, for a message to be accurate, the source must do some research to ensure that the message is truthful and must avoid the sin of "speaking beyond your expertise." Think of people who forward urban legends without verifying them first.

A = Authenticity of the source.[2] Is the speaker acting out of integrity, sincerity, and genuineness? Do they believe what they are saying? Note that this is defined mostly by personal adjectives and synonyms, and is harder to pin down than truthfulness. This is partly because of its relationship to intentions, and the difficulty of determining true intentions. It makes me think of celebrity spokespeople and influencers who pitch products that they themselves don't use or believe in.

R = Respect for the audience. Does the speaker respect the dignity and rights of the listener? This is what the con man, above, is lacking: he thinks of his "marks" as suckers who deserve it, not as human beings. Baker and Martinson stress that this is "the heart of the TARES Test," since the model as a whole is concerned with not doing harm to the audience.

E = Equity of the appeal. Are the speaker and the listener on a level playing field, each with the freedom to make their own decisions? Is the situation fair to both parties? You may know this as the Golden Rule ("Do unto others as you would like them to do to you"), which is an idea that pops up in all major religions throughout the world. The opposite would be a situation in which the speaker takes advantage of the vulnerabilities of the listener, such as picking on the less educated, the sick, or the desperate. If you are fed up with your romantic partner and feel the urge to blast them with a litany of everything that's wrong with them and then end the conversation, the principle of Equity says you have to give them the opportunity to blast you back too.

S = Social Responsibility for the Common Good. Does your communication make society as a whole better, or worse? Are you its only beneficiary, at the cost of others? Are you leaving the world a better place than you found it, or are you spoiling it for everyone?

Since these are ethical principles, they are not always simple and easy to apply, especially to others, but they can serve as five core principles you can aim for. They can also be translated into responsibilities: to speak truthfully, be authentic, be respectful toward your audience and treat them as humans, play on a level

1. Baker, S. & Martinson, D.L. (2001). The TARES Test: Five principles for ethical persuasion. Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 16(2&3):148-175.

2. Baker and Martinson were specifically focused on persuasion, so used the term "persuader" (and "persuadee" for the next criteria), but the TARES model applies to other forms of communication besides persuasion.

playing field, and act for the greater good. If you take those responsibilities seriously, you can use the power of communication with a clear conscience.

3.4 YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO BE SKEPTICAL

Our discussion so far has included many examples of unethical people causing harm to others, such as through scams, which may have made you wish for stricter laws against that sort of thing. Let's go back and look through another lens. Starting two decades ago, before email spam filters were very effective, I began collecting examples of "advance fee scams" (originally called "the Nigerian prince scam") that arrived in my inbox. The general format was always the same: someone I don't know claimed they were related to a rich person who died leaving behind a huge bank account which the person needed help accessing, and if I was willing to help them out, I would receive a healthy chunk of that inheritance — but the details and wording of the emails were always different, every single day. The question that puzzled me was "Who falls for this?" If the answer is "no one," then why are the writers wasting all that time writing new stories? I was shocked to discover that, even after decades, thousands of people fall for this scam every year, so it's a profitable venture for the scammers.

Romance scams, in which suitors woo lonely people in order to drain their bank accounts, are equally successful. Americans lost over $735 million to these scams in 2022 alone, including a woman from Massachusetts who gave her life savings to a man she had fallen in love with over the previous six months. The FBI and other parties are working hard to prevent such outcomes, but there's one thing that would help even more than all of their efforts: if people stopped falling for the scams. As harsh as it is to blame the victim, more caution would bring all of these scams to a complete halt.

Misinformation was a big concern around the 2016 U.S. election, and investigations revealed surprising details about who was disseminating the lies: some of the heaviest contributors were teenagers in North Macedonia. They got rich from their endeavors, but it was difficult for the American government to do anything since the lies were originating on the other side of the world. Again: stopping them at the source would help, but it's ultimately about people at the receiving end — "influencing the election" means people allowing themselves to be persuaded by information they should not believe.

Responsibility, then, doesn't just apply to the source of messages: every time one of these unethical tactics succeeds, the scammer knows their efforts are worthwhile, and we all suffer as a result. Receivers thus have ethical responsibilities as well, and their social responsibility to uphold the common good isn't being met. That may seem like an extra burden to put on an elderly widow who just gave $150,000 to someone who "seemed honest and sincere," but is a reminder to all of us that gullibility doesn't just harm the gullible person; it harms everyone.

Charles Larson used the term **"reasoned skepticism"** to describe the ideal attitude the receiver of messages should hold.[1] It doesn't mean being cynical and untrusting of everyone: this approach is too automatic, and leads to people dismissing sources who should be believed (SEE Chapter 9: Credibility). Instead, skepticism means that the receiver should ask intelligent questions, and withhold judgment until those questions are answered. Instead of saying "All politicians are liars," an attitude it doesn't take much effort to maintain, reasoned skepticism brings with it the responsibility to ask, "Is this politician lying in this instance?" This isn't easy: uncertainty can be emotionally uncomfortable, and it is more comforting to be sure of something. It brings with it the willingness to admit you are wrong, which can be an ego threat. And most of all, it brings a responsibility to do intellectual work: questioning, examining, researching. Reasoned skepticism doesn't allow for laziness, but it is our ethical responsibility.

Years ago, a student in my Persuasion Theories class was eager to tell me about a marketing opportunity he had discovered, and relayed the story of going to a meeting in which everyone dressed nicely, drove fancy cars, and exuded an aura of success. That all sounded nice, but I suggested that he look up this company with the local Chamber of Commerce or the Better Business Bureau. A few months later, he came back to tell me that he never got around to making those inquiries, and he lost a few hundred dollars in admission fees to something that didn't turn out to be what it seemed. He probably learned more about persuasion from that experience than he did in my course, but it would have been even better not to have to "learn the hard way." On the other hand, there are some great career opportunities out there that people might be *too* suspicious of, and being overly skeptical can close doors that would have benefitted you greatly. Ask the questions, but be open to both negative and positive answers.

1. Larson, C.U. (1994). Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility (7th edition). Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing.

3.5 ETHICS IN PARTICULAR COMMUNICATION CONTEXTS

The discussion of ethics up to this point has been intentionally broad, but focusing on particular domains and contexts can provide more detailed insights into ethics issues. Baker and Martinson's TARES Test, for instance, was written specifically for marketers. Let's look at three other scenarios and one particular ethical facet of each.

3.6 CONTEXT #1: ETHICAL BLOGGING

Chapter 18 (Media 1) starts by looking at the contrasts between “old media” (newspapers, radio and television) and “new media” (internet, social media). One such contrast relates to the number of people who can be potential sources of messages. Going back a few hundred years, only a few people had access to printing presses, which meant that only a small minority of people ever got to see their opinions appear in print. As the newspaper industry grew over time, newspaper moguls became powerful people who ran organizations with large staffs; when radio and television came along, these organizations kept growing.

In addition to reporters, writers, editors, photographers, and on-air anchors, they had plenty of lawyers on staff. Sometimes those lawyers got involved in free speech cases that went all the way to the Supreme Court, and sometimes their work was focused on defamation cases. Naming names is central to reporting the news, but it’s inevitable that someone becomes unhappy about seeing their name in print and accuses you of telling lies about them. Originally, if someone spoke lies about you out loud, that was “slander,” and if they wrote it down, that was “libel,” but nowadays the preferred term is “defamation,” which covers all channels of communication. How did those defamation cases turn out? Sometimes in favor of the plaintiff (the person who accused the news organization of defaming them), sometimes in favor of the news organization defendant. In the early 2020s, some of the largest civil verdicts in the U.S. were defamation verdicts, with jury awards in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

Defamation law used to rest on the general assumption that, in order to ruin someone’s life by spreading harmful lies about them, you had to be a large organization, or perhaps a wealthy individual. Those were the only people who had the opportunity to communicate through mass channels, and while “little people” might spread vicious gossip over the back fence or to their friends, it couldn’t spread very far.

The internet, on the other hand, has given everyone the potential to be a source of mass media messages, at least theoretically. Some people have gained followings that rival the audiences for old media, reaching millions of people from their basement or living room, and doing so alone or with a very small staff. Does that staff include lawyers, or anyone who is even vaguely familiar with defamation law? Perhaps not. The potential to defame people has grown exponentially, but the number of people who understand the law has probably not kept up. If you are in the blogging or vlogging game already, or want to be, it’s time to read up on the law yourself and, if you can afford one, talk to a defamation attorney before a crisis arises.

When the COVID pandemic hit in 2020, many people went back and watched a prescient movie about pandemics, 2011’s *Contagion*. The non-human villain in that story is a virus, but the worst human villain is clearly the blogger Alan Krumwiede (played by Jude Law), who deliberately spreads falsehoods about the disease, attacks the reputation of scientists, and fakes illness and recovery in order to promote an ineffective herbal remedy (from which he makes millions of dollars in profit). Eventually he is arrested by the Department of Homeland Security, but while he's in the interrogation room, he relies on the support of his 12 million followers, who bail him out. Due to his online popularity, he in some ways has more power than the DHS, even though he is just one man with a social media channel. But the DHS hint that he will be hit with a staggering volley of lawsuits.

Even apart from the threat of being sued, if you want to be an ethical blogger, there are questions worth pondering about that career:

If you consider yourself a warrior "fighting the good fight" by revealing wrongdoers, are you sure you're right about the nature of the wrongdoing? Do you have the facts straight, and if you think you do, how do you know? Instead of deciding that someone is evil and using whatever material you can to prove your point, do you truly understand the situation? Did you make reasonable efforts to communicate with the person you want to talk about in your blog?

If you feel justified in attacking someone because you believe they are a bully, are you acting bully-like yourself? Think of the "E" in TARES (the Equity criteria): is this a level playing field?

If you are saying positive things about a person or product, do you have an ethical responsibility to reveal conflicts of interest or motives for what you are saying? Are you telling "the whole truth," or is there an issue with lies of omission?

If you feature your children in your social media postings, could this be harming them in the short or long term?

Are you trying a little too hard to portray your "fabulous life"? Some people have noted that one effect of social media is the feeling that everyone is having more fun than you are: they have more friends, go to more fantastic places, and seem to experience non-stop excitement. This is only natural, since visits to beautiful places and socializing with friends are exactly the kinds of things people post about, but if it leaves others feeling lonely or left out, is it worth it? Another effect is impossible beauty standards, thanks in part to image filters and programs like Photoshop, that result in body image issues for groups like adolescent girls: no matter how attractive a person is, a few minutes on social media will make them feel like there are always more beautiful people out there. The ethical questions, then, are: are you trying to generate jealousy? Are you willing to reveal the less-than-perfect sides of your life as well? Are you contributing to impossible beauty standards?

3.7 CONTEXT #2: SECRETS AMONG FAMILY AND FRIENDS

When it comes to personal relationships, there is the inevitable question of **secrets**. Some people say there should be no secrets in healthy relationships, but given how prevalent secrets are, this seems unrealistic. As Carly Simon wrote in her 1972 song "We Have No Secrets," "Sometimes I wish / often I wish / that I never, never knew some of those secrets of yours" — suggesting that perhaps having a few secrets in relationships is a healthy thing. There is a lot of scholarly research about the difference between healthy secrets and toxic ones, but the ethical issue to consider here is not about the nature of the secret, but about the telling. Is it okay to reveal other people's secrets?

Sandra Petronio's model of secrets (called Privacy Management Theory) starts with the metaphor that a secret is like a piece of property: it is something that a person owns, and because they own it, they have the option to give it away to others. But there is a crucial difference between a secret and another kind of "property": secrets can be told and retold (unlike a car that can't just magically multiply until there are thousands of copies of it).

Say you went to a casino alone and had a particularly lucky day, bringing home $18,000. One option is not to tell anyone, keeping that secret to yourself. Another is to tell a "confidant," a person to whom you decide to entrust that secret. Some people want to be a confidant and invite others to share secrets; others are more reluctant; their friend might say "There's something I have to tell you" before they can stop them. Imagine a Loop of Secrecy, and now there's one other person inside that loop with you. You might explicitly command the confidant, "You can't tell anyone else!"; you might negotiate with them (if they ask, "Am I allowed to tell my boyfriend?" you might say, "Okay, as long as he doesn't spread it to anyone else"), or you might just assume that the confidant knows they're not supposed to spread the secret. Human nature seems to lean toward the last option; people often assume that other people know that they're not supposed to repeat the news, even if no rules are discussed.

Let's call the lucky gambler Sydney. Sydney decides to tell Terri about her winnings, but she says "Don't tell anyone about it." Terri decides to tell her boyfriend, Josh, about it, as long as he makes sure to follow the rule. So she tells Josh, "Hey, I've got to tell you a secret: Sydney won $18,000 at the casino last week — but don't blab about that to everyone." Now Josh is inside the Loop of Secrecy, but Sydney doesn't know this. Then Josh thinks, "Terri told me not to blab to *everyone*, but I'll just tell Pete; that should be safe." The number of people in the Loop keeps growing, unbeknownst to Sydney. A few weeks later, Sydney attends a party, where she meets Pete, whose first words to her are, "Oh, you're Sydney? The one who won $18,000? Cool!" Meanwhile, Pete posts the news on social media because *he* would want to tell the world if he won that much at a casino. This is what Petronio calls "boundary turbulence," and Sydney realizes it's time for a little chat with Terri and Josh and Pete — but it's too late, the secret is out, and the Loop of Secrecy has thousands of people in it.

Why did Terri violate Sydney's command and tell Josh? She thought it was safe because it was still "contained," not realizing that it would continue to spread. But some people have other reasons for spreading people's secrets:

1. They're unclear about the rules and don't see any harm in it (like Pete); \
2. It takes too much emotional or cognitive energy to "hold it in," and they can't stand the pressure or aren't very competent at keeping a secret (think of Hagrid in the *Harry Potter* universe, and his famous line "I should not have said that!");
3. It's fun to spread secrets, and might feel to some people like it increases their status in the social realm;
4. They are vicious and deliberately want to hurt the secret-holder.

Of course, if your motives fall into categories 3 or 4, you would do well to remember that if you go around telling other people's secrets, they will catch on eventually and stop telling them to you.

There's one other legitimate reason to consider as well: they can see that keeping the secret is doing more harm than good, and feel an ethical obligation to tell someone. Imagine that instead of "She won $18,000," the secret was "She's addicted to opioids" or "She has a sexually transmitted disease that she hasn't told her partner about." Some secrets serve to preserve toxic situations, and the secret is the thing that prevents the person from getting the help they need. If this is the case and you are the confidant, do you have a duty to tell someone else even though your friend commanded you not to? Petronio calls this the "confidant dilemma," and it is not an easy position to be in.

As a descriptive model, Privacy Management Theory does a great job depicting all the ways that secret keeping and revealing can go wrong, but it doesn't provide clear guidelines for what to do. If you tell someone your secret, should you always explicitly discuss what the rules are about passing that secret on? If someone tells you a secret, should you never mention it to anyone else? It's too easy for me to imagine scenarios where the answer is yes and other scenarios where it's no. Still, the model does suggest ethical questions that are worth asking:

- If you are the secret-holder, is keeping that secret preventing you from getting help that could get you out of that situation? Would loved ones want you to get that help?
- If you want to tell a secret to a confidant, are they okay with it? Does it put them in a difficult position?
- If you are a confidant, what would honor the secret-holder's wishes and be best for them? If you feel the urge to spread their secret for your own benefit, will it hurt you in the end by making people mistrust you with future secrets? Even if they told you not to tell anyone else (especially someone in authority), would it be the right thing to do anyway?
- If you heard the secret through a third party, do you have the right to pass it along to others?

3.8 CONTEXT #3: ADVERTISING

Some communication students end up in the fields of advertising, marketing, and PR, while others just remain consumers, but as the discussion of Reasoned Skepticism argued, all have ethical responsibilities. Advertising agencies know about false advertising and consumer protection laws, but aren't above playing tricks that are technically legal but ethically dubious. Out of the 10 types of lies outlined earlier, the law addresses the first one (factual lies) but may not cover not the fourth and fifth types (lies by omission and paltering).

Lies of omission are particularly tricky, since it's hard to define when not mentioning something crosses the line and becomes a lie. Think of the famous phrase used to swear in witnesses, "Do you promise to tell the truth, *the whole truth*, and nothing but the truth." The first and third criteria are relatively clear, but the middle one must be hard to enforce: should a witness tell their entire life story on the stand? In regard to advertising, are manufacturers morally obligated to mention the downsides of their product? When it comes to pharmaceutical ads, they are legally required to mention side effects (and after a few years of very fast talking, were made to slow down that part of the ad so people can actually hear it), but that's only for drug ads. Are mouthwash companies morally obligated to let you know that the burning sensation from keeping their product in your mouth for 30 seconds is a challenge?[1] Is Invisalign ethically bound to let you know in their commercials that you should keep their product in your mouth 20–22 hours a day for the rest of your life, or is it okay for them to leave it up to your orthodontist to tell you that?

As for paltering (saying things that are technically true but give the listener the wrong impression), advertisers were doing that long before Mario Pei wrote a book about "weasel words" in 1978.[2] Weasel words can take the form of numerically vague expressions, like "30% less fat" without saying what they're comparing it to: a 5-pound tub of butter?. They can also include passive voice ("it is said that") and deliberately vague verbs and adverbs. When a company says, for instance, that its product "helps" you lose weight or avoid a heart attack, there is no way to quantify exactly how much it has to "help" before it earns that word. Many consumers miss the "your mileage may vary" disclaimers and take those as concrete promises. And yes, that apartment can get away with bragging about an "ocean view" even if it takes an eagle eye to spot that narrow strip of water.

1. Listerine's "Just 30 Seconds" commercial made that clear, but that was decades ago; more recent commercials don't say anything about "the burn."

2. Pei, M. (1978). Weasel Words: The Art of Saying What You Don't Mean (1st ed.). New York: Harper & Row. The term "weasel words" traces back at least to Teddy Roosevelt, who used it in a speech in 1916.

One of my favorite legal terms is "puffery": legally allowable exaggeration that is okay precisely *because* it's so overstated and general. When advertisers use phrases like "the perfect gift for everyone on your list" or "the movie everyone's talking about," it's not considered false advertising because no one really believes it or is harmed by it. Even before the advent of false advertising laws, the principle of "buyer beware" was long established, as revealed by the fact that we use an ancient Latin phrase, "caveat emptor," to describe it.

Study examples of deceptive advertising long enough and you may end up with the impression that the whole economy depends on tricks and gimmicks like these. However, in Chapter 6 (Persuasion) there's a discussion of the problem with gimmicks: people catch on and stop listening or buying. If your business model is to make a sale even if the customer is unhappy about it, your model might work if you can keep finding new customers, but wouldn't it be a better alternative to not play games and to make sure your customers are satisfied instead? That's one more advantage to being an ethical communicator: customer loyalty. If you get a job in marketing or advertising, you may not have the power to insist on avoiding sneaky tricks, but perhaps you can convince your employer that "playing it straight" has practical advantages.

CHAPTER 4: LISTENING

4.1 "CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?"

Are You a Good Listener?

It seems like an impossible riddle: "You're driving a bus, and at the first stop, five people get on; at the second stop, two more people get on and three get off; at the next stop, three people get on and two get off; at the next stop, six people get on and four get off; at the next stop, one person gets off. **What color are the bus driver's eyes**?"

Most people just get annoyed, since it's an obvious switcheroo after doing all that math, and they don't think answer can be found in the riddle anyway. But maybe one person in 10 will get it. The most interesting scenario is when more than one person gets it, and when the first one says "brown," the riddler responds "correct," but when the second one shouts out "blue!," the riddler also says "correct!" To most listeners, this doesn't make any sense — but that's because they aren't as good at listening as they think they are. They missed the very first word: "you" (the riddle is just asking "What color are your eyes?").

Riddles aside, the lesson is a valuable one: most people are not as good at listening as they think they are. Research shows that "on the average, people are only about 25 percent effective as listeners."[1]

Have you had the experience of realizing, midway through a conversation, that you missed a crucial detail in what the other person was saying? Perhaps the conversation was with your boss, and they end by saying, "Okay? So get started on that," and you hope you can figure out what "that" refers to without having to admit that you weren't listening. Was it because you just don't like your boss and can't be bothered to listen to them, because your brain went on a temporary detour, or because you got lost in the details of what your boss was telling you and had to slow down to sort it out while your boss kept talking? Or maybe you're just a terrible person? It's probably not that, although the situation can be a good reminder that listening takes *work*, and there are a variety of reasons why that work is not always easy.

On the other hand, some people put a little too much work into listening, hearing things that the speaker did not say or even imply. I think of a tweet by a person who goes by Jawbreaker, highlighting the perils of a seemingly harmless conversation between married partners:

1. Burley-Allen, M. (1996). Listening: The forgotten skill (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.

Jawbreaker 🎄
@sixfootcandy

Me: Do you like these jeans or the ones I had on earlier?

Husband: The ones you're wearing now look great.

Me: So the other ones made me look fat?

Husband: That's not what I said.

Me: Isn't it though?

838 12:22 PM - Oct 5, 2019

Some people are eager to finish your sentences, which may seem like a nice gesture unless they get it wrong (which, in my experience, they do at least half the time), and now you have to back up and clarify, "No, what I was going to say was...".

Many people get frustrated with the poor listening skills of the humans around them, and resort to thinking "At least my *dog* is a good listener!" (SEE BOX 4.1). And yes, dogs do exhibit some of the helpful listening behaviors we'll explore below...but I also have to point out a big limitation that pet lovers often willfully ignore: *dogs don't understand English!* (Or any other human language — at least, not beyond a few dozen commands). I understand why Chuck (Tom Hanks) so desperately needed a companion to talk to in *Cast Away* (2000), and I get why he became emotionally attached to Wilson ... but even he would have to admit that talking to a volleyball is not really communication. And no, Wilson was not a good listener: "he" was an inanimate object.

If we rank good listeners on a scale of 1 to 10, the good news is that you are better than a volleyball — but probably none of us earns a 10, and those little lapses are useful reminders that we can all do better.

This is a shame, because everything about the communication process ultimately rests on the listener. To put it another way, the whole point of communication is for a listener to absorb what the speaker says, and if that step does not occur, then everything the speaker does to convey a message is pointless.

Picture two recording devices attempting to communicate with each other. The only situation in which they are actually exchanging information is when one is on PLAY and the other is on RECORD. But don't forget the PAUSE button, which means that nothing is being recorded. In face-to-face conversations, it sometimes looks like people are listening to each other, but in fact each is just waiting for their turn to talk. After the conversation is over, if neither machine was ever on RECORD, nothing happened. Yes, there are times when people express themselves regardless of whether others are listening or not — screaming into a pillow in a moment of frustration, whistling while you work, or repeating something out loud so you remember it — but most of the time, when you communicate, it's for the purpose of someone else understanding and remembering your message.

I have occasionally heard speakers who seem to lose sight of that simple truth, such as a salesperson who tries to explain a technical product to me but gets going so fast and uses so much esoteric jargon that I get completely lost. In that situation, I often wonder if I should stop them and point out that they are just wasting words, or if I should "humor" them and nod politely. Either way, I'm not getting anything out of the situation, and it doesn't seem like they are either (unless they like the sound of their own voice, need to kill a little time, or think they have some kind of abstract duty to say things just for the sake of saying them, even if the listener gets nothing out of it).

I've also heard academic presentations with the same quality, where the speaker seemed too focused on the esoteric value of just getting the words out, regardless of whether they meant anything to the audience. My favorite example is a dissertation defense where a friend showed up to provide support to the Ph.D. candidate. After the hourlong presentation, the friend said "You seemed really nervous at first, until you hit your stride. Once you started to relax and get into it, I could tell how enthusiastic you were, but I didn't understand a word you said after that." It was a charming statement of support, but may have been discouraging to the candidate. I have also tried my hand at judging high school and college debates, but the dizzying speed at which the debaters speak (topping 400 words a minute, roughly three times the normal rate) makes it nearly impossible for me to track 90% of their thoughts. From my perspective, none of those situations count as effective communication.

BOX 4.1: Are Dogs Good Listeners?

This is a question that a number of bloggers have tackled. David Wangel argues that his corgi is a good listener just because the dog isn't multi-tasking and is fully present: "When you are being present, you don't have to understand everything that is being said. You can use what you don't understand as an opportunity to learn more from the other person and help you gain an understanding. Being present is just as much about the journey as it is about the destination."

Nancy Rones adds that although dogs can't understand the verbal content of what you are saying, they are pretty good at picking up the emotional tone… and, of course, they maintain confidentiality: "Your deepest secrets and emotional outpourings are safe with your trusty canine companion."

Liz Scott concurs that dogs are "the best listeners" because of their natural empathy and compassion.

Amy Castro cites a 2010 Associated Press Poll showing that, in the UK, a third of wives and 18% of husbands thought their pet was a better listener than their married partner, and listed a dozen reasons why:

- Pets don't interrupt.
- Pets don't take over the conversation.
- Pets don't judge.
- Pets realize that how you say something is more telling than what you say.
- Pets don't try to rush you to your point.
- Pets don't tell you that your feelings are invalid.
- Pets don't try to top your stories by saying the fish they caught was bigger, their pay raise was higher, or their car is cooler.
- Pets don't criticize or laugh at your ideas.
- Pets don't hold grudges when you give them negative feedback.
- Pets don't let their emotions block what they hear.
- Pets don't ask a bunch of irrelevant and annoying questions.
- Pets will always keep your secrets.

I can't help noticing that all 12 of those advantages are things dogs *don't* do, and leaves off the things they *can't* do. On a personal note, when I was in the process of writing this book, I had many conversations in which I bounced ideas off of other humans, but I never bothered to read a chapter to a dog to get their reactions.

4.2 COMPONENTS OF THE LISTENING PROCESS

Working backwards from the goal of having a listener grasp what the speaker means is one way of examining the nature of communication. If you understand what makes it difficult for audiences to listen, you can address those barriers and craft meaningful and powerful messages.

It helps to begin by closely examining the phrase **"pay attention."** The word "pay" frames it as an economic transaction: listeners pay attention to a speech just as they pay for a sandwich from a deli. It also gets away from the idea that listening is an easy process. Saying you are "just listening" hints at other activities you could be doing while you are "putting your mind at rest." Some people listen with their eyes closed, so others can't even tell if they are listening or sleeping. And if you think of a dog or a volleyball as being a good listener, the primary feature is that they are not doing anything else. The word "pay," however, reminds you that the listener *is* doing something, and it is *costing* them. They are setting aside other things they might want to be doing, tuning out distractions, temporarily refraining from talking, and, if they are a good listener, cognitively processing and remembering what you are saying.

In economic transactions, though, customers pay for something for only as long as they get something out of it and it's not too expensive. In the case of listening, hopefully what the speaker says is as nourishing or enjoyable or satisfying as that sandwich. If it isn't, the listener's mind will drift off, either temporarily or permanently, and they will regret making the transaction in the first place. Social norms usually dictate that they try to conceal their distraction or boredom from the speaker, and do what they can to try to look like they are paying attention — but like an electrical circuit that is interrupted, nothing is actually happening.

Taking the principle that **listeners will pay attention unless it becomes too costly for them**, let's look at what those costs are. It helps to break down the listening process into component parts, and Adler and Towne identified five of them:[1]

Hearing: the physical act of receiving auditory stimuli

Attending: focusing attention and filtering out distractions

Understanding: putting mental energy into comprehending the speaker's message

Responding: giving appropriate feedback and making sure that the message heard matches the message delivered

1. Adler, R.B., & Towne, N. (1996). *Looking out, looking in* (8th ed.). Harcourt, Brace.

Remembering: A person who forgets everything that someone said to them after the conversation is over cannot be said to have listened. The point of listening, after all, is to learn and remember.

Any one of the first three elements could turn into a barrier that would prevent listening: if the listener can't physically hear the speaker; if they are distracted by something else going on (externally, such as a siren wailing in the background, or internally, such as an empty stomach or a worry on their mind); or if they can't grasp what the speaker is saying. Sometimes the speaker doesn't know if listening has occurred until the audience responds, but in public or mass communication situations, response may not be possible. Most people learn early in life how to act like they are listening even when they aren't, so nonverbal feedback can be unreliable.

One element I would add to Adler and Towne's list is **translation** (perhaps as element 3-½). On its surface, "translation" usually refers to the process of taking something expressed in one language and re-expressing it in another: translating the Japanese word "yasu" into "calm" or "peace" in English or "amani" in Swahili. You might think of this as a job that only a small number of people perform, but I will take a broader view and argue that **we are all translators**: putting things into language that the listener can understand is an essential part of the communication process. A good neurologist speaking to a patient will try to phrase things in a way that someone without a medical degree can understand; a parent taking a 3-year-old child on an international flight needs to explain the boarding process or customs in terms the child can grasp; a customer taking their car in to get repaired must have some way of explaining what's wrong with the car to the mechanic. When someone asks their romantic partner, "How was work today?", unless both of them have worked the same job at the same place, the answer will require some translation.

It would be a mistake, however, to think of translation as resting only on the shoulders of the speaker. Regardless of how much effort the speaker does or does not put into making the message understandable for the listener, the listener is an active translator, interpreting what the speaker is saying in their own frame of reference. Without the ability to translate, understanding others who have led different lives and see the world differently would be impossible. When someone says "You can't understand my experience because you haven't lived through it," they undermine the act of communication itself, presuming that words have no power to convey something that direct experience doesn't teach. What would be the point of reading a story about a person climbing Mount Everest, for example, if the reader just said "I've never climbed that particular mountain, so I don't understand this story"?

This also ignores the role of **abstraction**: a reader or listener may not share the speaker/writer's direct experience, but if they can rise up a level of abstraction and find the universal experience in common, they can understand it: "I have never climbed Mount Everest, but I have lived through a test of my endurance, and know what it's like to have to go on even when you think you can't." In other words, if the listener can connect the feeling of enduring a lengthy dental procedure to the feeling of slogging up the north face of the world's highest mountain, they can understand a mountain climbing story even if they have never left Florida.

This does not mean, however, that everyone is a *good* translator. Another term for "bias" is "consistently inaccurate translation": when a speaker says X, the listener hears Y. The listener assumes that two things are alike or connected that really aren't, consistently ignoring evidence to the contrary. A wealthy person hearing a tale about a poor person who steals might miss that it's a story about desperation, and instead hear "greedy person who takes shortcuts instead of working an honest job." Likewise, a con artist might think a person who works a moderately paying job is a fool who doesn't know what they are missing and isn't daring enough to rebel against "the system." The listener's framework here prevents them from hearing the actual story, and the assumption that they already know the story's lesson blocks them from learning a new one. This shows how listening is a key to overcoming bias and understanding others who are different from you.

BOX 4.2: The Chinese Symbol for Listening

Readers who can only read the Roman alphabet (the script this book is written in) might not appreciate how much can be packed into symbols for words in other languages. An exquisite example is the Chinese word for listening, which sounds deceptively simple: it's pronounced "ting," but the symbol combines five or six different concepts. (*Note: Since I am in the category of people who can't read Chinese symbols, I have to rely on others to interpret them for me; my apologies for any mistakes or misinterpretations.*) There are many websites that discuss the deeper meaning of this symbol, and interestingly, they disagree with each other — but that shouldn't be surprising, given how much interpretation is involved in translation. These differences also contain insights, so let's look at two contrasting discussions about the component parts of the symbol and what they mean.

SkillPacks.com identifies five elements of the symbol: ears, eyes, mind, undivided attention, and heart. In order to listen well, you must hear the person with your ears, see them with an undivided focus, and listen with your heart as well as your mind. They depict this visually as:

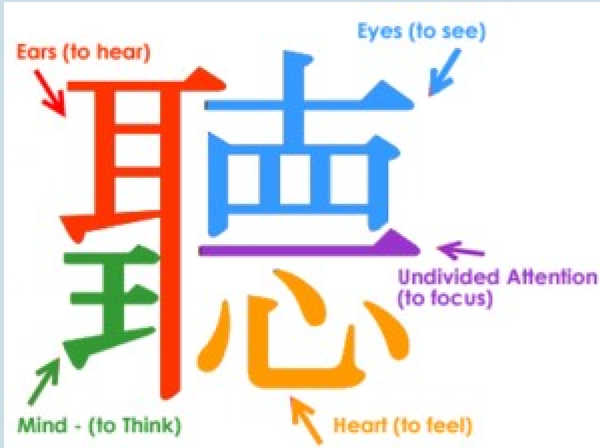


Image from Skillpacks

Tani Du Doit, from the website The Restore Method, points out that the lower left symbol can be interpreted as "king" instead of "mind," with the implication that the speaker should be treated like royalty, and should be obeyed. Think of how helpful it must be to have a written language that reminds you that listening is not a simple or effortless process.

Other sites note that the upper right corner, the symbol for eyes, has the number 10 above it, suggesting that the listener should observe the speaker "as if you had 10 eyes instead of just two" (i.e., very carefully).

4.3 UNDERSTANDING LISTENING TO BECOME A BETTER COMMUNICATOR

If you want to become an effective communicator, an understanding of what makes things difficult for listeners is a good starting point. In this section, I will delve into barriers to listening, and what the speaker can do to overcome those barriers. There are some factors that the speaker can't do much about, such as a distracting noise in the background or a worry on the mind of an audience member, so I will just focus on those factors that can be controlled.

Barrier #1: Failure to see relevance

People are constantly bombarded with information that is irrelevant to them — commercials that don't apply (see the section in Chapter 5 about unintended audiences), information they don't need to know, and messages meant for others. The demand for attention is steadily growing more intense, which means that people are steadily getting better at protecting their sanity by tuning out messages they don't need to hear.

If you're sitting at an airport gate waiting for your flight to depart, you'll hear a constant stream of announcements about other flights at nearby gates and cautions against leaving your bags unattended, most of which will begin with the phrase "Attention!" But even in more focused environments, like a banquet, a speaker who begins with the phrase "May I have your complete attention?" should realistically expect that the answer is no. Even if they succeed in getting everyone to stop talking to each other or look up from their phones, once the speech begins, audience members will still ask themselves "Why should I listen to this?" A speaker needs to answer that question, preferably early on, instead of relying on the assumption that they will automatically have the audience's attention.

> **Remedy**: It may or may not be advisable to explicitly tell people why they should listen to you, especially on a repeated basis, but occasional hints about "What's in it for them" can be helpful. At the very least, you should keep the question in mind while speaking (whether it be a formal speech behind a podium, or telling a story to friends at a bar), and if you have a thought about why your words are relevant to the audience, it should come through in some way. You should not, however, abuse the privilege of having the audience's attention by continually demanding that attention when it's not needed. One fitness club I belonged to made frequent announcements that began with "Attention *all* members," and were then followed with a message that was invariably meant for just one member (the owner of the white SUV with the lights on). This just works to teach everyone to ignore all messages.

Barrier #2: Strong emotional reactions

It is not just uninterested listeners who don't listen carefully; a listener who has an intense emotional reaction to the message (in other words, is *too* interested in it) will also have trouble listening. Imagine your romantic partner angrily shouting in your face, "You want to know what's wrong with you? I'll tell you what your problem is!" Even though people like to hear about themselves, they don't like hearing the bad stuff and will have difficulty listening objectively and accurately to what comes next. Chances are, they will start creating counter arguments in their head, trying to think of reasons the person is wrong about them. If they state those reasons out loud, it usually becomes a shouting match — another term for "two people who aren't listening to each other" (shouters make poor listeners). Even if the message is not about them, but about something they care deeply about, such as upcoming ecological or financial disasters, it will be difficult for them to hear the message.

> **Remedy**: When delivering a message that is challenging for your audience to hear (such as "We are all doomed!" or "You have been a fool"), be aware of the ways in which emotional reactions can make it hard for them to listen. Think hard about the tone of your message, and perhaps about ways to be less confrontational. Even occasionally lightening the tone with a little humor can make it easier for the audience to accept an emotionally difficult message.

Barrier #3: Assumptions and assimilation

In face-to-face conversations, some people who are trying to be good listeners say "I know *exactly* what you mean!" Although it seems to be a hallmark of good listening, that phrase actually means they've stopped listening and started assuming. Chances are they don't know *exactly* what the speaker means, and are instead leaping to conclusions (the implication of "I know *exactly* what you mean" is that there's no point in the speaker saying anything more). Even if the listener has had a similar experience or reaction to what the speaker is describing, assuming that it is exactly the same will lead the listener to stop paying attention to the differences, increasing the likelihood that their assumptions are wrong.

Assimilation is a psychological process that occurs when we interpret new information in terms of existing cognitive structures — combining the information we're hearing with information we've learned before (e.g., "I heard a podcast about this once.") The problem comes when the listener assumes that the two kinds of information — information already learned, and new information in the message — are more similar than they really are, and doesn't pay attention to the differences.

From the speaker's viewpoint, a common assumption is that listeners have an "empty head" (known as "tabula rasa"), and that no assimilation will occur. Unless the listeners are very young children, this simply isn't true. I often see articles with the title format "Everything You Know About _____ Is Wrong," which sounds like the author has too much confidence in their ability to wipe the slate clean and start all over again. This ignores the role of assimilation.

Remedy: It can be a good idea to start with an indication that your audience will hear something new (in other words, a message that heads off the assumption "I've heard all this before"). And if you want to find out how people will interpret terms or concepts, a little advance audience research, such as an informal survey, can reveal a lot (see Chapter 5 for audience analysis techniques). For example, if you want to give a speech advocating for defunding the police, it's worth finding out what the phrase "defund the police" means to people. If it's something different than you have in mind, take the time during the speech to clarify not just what the phrase means to you, but also what it does *not* mean — or else use a term that is less likely to be misunderstood,

Barrier #4: Failure to comprehend

It takes mental energy to comprehend a complex message, and depending on an audience's motivation, they may reach a point of exhaustion, or decide the effort isn't worth it, and their attention will wander. If your audience is not well-versed in the topic, *someone* is going to have to translate concepts into terms the audience can understand. A lazy speaker will leave that job up to the audience; an effective speaker will do that job for them.

What makes comprehension difficult? A number of factors:

Barrier 4(a): Esoteric (inscrutable or cryptic) language

People in virtually any field of knowledge develop their own jargon or inside language (see Chapter 10), and when they are writing or speaking to others in the field they naturally use this inside language. One problem comes when they have to speak to others who don't know that language, such as customers, patients, or juries. But research also reveals that even among medical professionals, jargon can be a significant barrier: a fully trained nurse may not understand the doctor they work for, or a doctor trained in one region may not know the jargon used by a doctor in another region.[1] Nothing makes a person feel like an outsider quite like the experience of hearing an unfamiliar word that everyone else seems to know, but nobody takes the time to explain.

Remedy: Even if there is a wonderful esoteric term for the idea you want to talk about, resist the temptation to use it unless you're sure the listener knows the term, and search for a plain English phrase to convey the idea instead.

1. Crawford, T., Roger, P. & Candlin, S. (2017). Tracing the discursive development of rapport in intercultural nurse-patient interactions. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 27(3): 636-650.

Barrier 4(b): Difficult concepts

Even if the words themselves are simple, concepts that are complex can make people tune out. To make difficult concepts easier for the audience to understand, plain English words may not be enough.

Remedy: There is a saying: “If you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough.”[2] The first step is to think through different ways to explain or simplify the concept. Analogies and metaphors, examples, and visuals can be very helpful.

Barrer 4(c): Difficult grammar

Complex sentence structures are also difficult to follow. There are marked differences between the ways in which people write and the ways in which they speak, and people who are concerned about getting a message just right will often write it out and read it to the audience. Written style employs more complex sentence structures, fancier vocabulary words, and less repetition than spoken style. A written paragraph about Gandhi, for example, might include “Gandhi, before he became the man who liberated India from British rule, was an accomplished lawyer, training in London before honing his skills in South Africa.” Spoken style would sound more like, “Gandhi was the man who freed India from British rule, but before that he was trained as a lawyer in London, and then he practiced his legal skills in South Africa.” It’s not just that it’s easier to say the second version: it’s easier for your audience to listen to (and read) it as well.

Remedy: See Chapter 14 for guidance on public speaking and different delivery methods, but my first advice is: wherever possible, don’t read a script! If you speak from a skeletal outline rather than a word-for-word script, your phrasing will be more natural and easier for the audience to follow. If you need to read from a script, read the whole thing out loud several times to find the places your mouth stumbles over.

Barrier 4(d): Information overload

A famous Gary Larson *Far Side* cartoon features a student asking to be excused because his brain is full.

Both speed and length are factors in filling up a brain, but the effect is the same—overloading the circuits. Nervous speakers routinely talk much faster than normal and take fewer pauses than they should. In the courtroom, some lawyers take the approach of “throwing everything at the wall and seeing what sticks.” My response is: *it’s no fun being the wall*. Firing too much information at your audience is not doing them any favors, and they will respond by tuning you out.

2. This has often been attributed to Albert Einstein, but in his written works the closest he comes is “Most of the fundamental ideas of science are essentially simple, and may, as a rule, be expressed in a language comprehensible to everyone.” (The Evolution of Physics, 1938). Like many quotes attributed to Einstein, I find wisdom in it no matter who said it.

Musicians cite the rule "It's better to leave the audience wishing for more, than leave them wishing you had stopped playing half an hour ago." In English departments, they have a saying: "I was going to write you a short letter, but I didn't have time, so I wrote you a long letter instead."

What do these ideas mean? Editing is a time-consuming process, but if you skip it and instead do a "data dump" of all the information you think your audience might find interesting, you'll surely lose their attention in the process. You may think it makes you look impressive to have so much information at your disposal that you could talk for hours about it, but consider whether you are putting your needs above your audience's.

On a physiological level, it's important to understand that brains need short "holidays" from time to time, temporarily wandering off and then returning. If a message is structured so that the listener must follow every point in sequence, and crucial transitions are mentioned only once, those mental excursions will cause problems. listeners will get lost and won't be able to find their way back. Readers often have to re-read a paragraph several times, or go back and check something earlier in the reading. Listeners don't have that luxury, and need a little more help staying on track.

> **Remedy**: Be selective with the information you present, focus on presenting it in an easily comprehensible way, and organize it logically. Build a little repetition into the speech (but not too much), and use transitions (such as "The second reason that sleep is important…") that remind the listeners where you are and where you're going next. And remember that it's pointless to rattle off a lot of information if the audience doesn't absorb and remember it.

Barrier #5: Bad speech patterns

If you ask audiences what defines a bad speaker, they usually first mention a monotonous voice. Other common flaws include speaking too fast, too slowly, or too quietly, and not looking at the audience. Curiously, when it's their turn to give a speech, many of those people commit the same sins, perhaps because they are not aware they're doing them, or perhaps because it feels awkward and exaggerated to use more dramatic speaking techniques.

> **Remedy**: Keep in mind the principle that **variation facilitates listening**, so work to introduce more variation in pitch, volume, and speed into your speaking style. If you listen to newscasters, you might be surprised how much pitch variation they use: they go *way* up high and *way* down low, and are well-versed in shifting the tone. Some delivery tips are included in Chapter 14, but the most important one is to practice. If you can stand it, the best thing is to film yourself and study the video. It may be painful to watch, but focus on the net gain of becoming a better speaker.

One last tip: Be Clear on the "Take-Away" Message

I have found that the single most important factor in creating effective communication is to be clear on what you want listeners to take away from the conversation. Can it be summarized in a single sentence? Are there simple phrases you can use that they will easily remember? Why are you speaking to them in the first place? If you have a good answer to that last question and keep it forefront in your mind, there are a million approaches you can use to get it across to them.

4.4 BECOMING A BETTER LISTENER

The math is simple: you are going to spend more of your life listening than talking. This is certainly true for students: giving speeches and presentations is important, as is contributing to group discussions, but you will probably spend the majority of your time listening to teachers and fellow students. This chapter began with the argument that we could all use some help becoming better at that practice, though, so let's end by looking at ways to improve your listening skills. I'll divide the discussion into two domains: the classroom, and conversations with friends and family.

The Classroom: Taking Notes

Some students, I've noticed, sit in class without taking any notes — even if the teacher does not post their lecture materials. When I was a student, I was the opposite, taking notes as much as possible, and it's a habit I've maintained. As a result, I have piles of pads with notes on talks I attended or videos I watched, some of which I've never gone back and looked at again. Your style may vary. The central question is: **what helps you listen best**? For some people, listening attentively can be better than worrying about writing things down (just as some people at a concert prefer to take it all in rather than make recordings they'll never listen to again). If you are a note-taker, what is the best way to do it?

The research is rather surprising. An article in *Scientific American* by Cindi May, citing research by Pam Meuller and David Oppenheimer, advised students "Don't take notes with a laptop." This runs counter to the common perception that taking as many notes as possible is the ideal, and if you can type 100 words per minute, you're ahead of the game. Mueller and Oppenheimer divided students into two groups: those who took typed notes, and those who used the much slower and less efficient "old school" method of writing notes longhand. The longhand writers, it turns out, learned much more; the students weren't able to keep up with everything, so they had to be more judicious in what they wrote down. In May's words,

> taking notes by hand forces the brain to engage in some heavy 'mental lifting,' and these efforts foster comprehension and retention. By contrast, when typing, students can easily produce a written record of the lecture without processing its meaning, as faster typing speeds allow them to transcribe a lecture word-for-word without devoting much thought to the content.

The students who learned the least were the ones who downloaded the instructor's slides and just stared at them. Why? Because that required the least mental work. It's the difference between typing and listening.

This underscores an odd point about learning: learning is, by nature, an inefficient process, and efforts to make it more efficient can produce the opposite effect. In *The Matrix*, Neo is hooked up to electrodes and a few minutes later proudly announces "I know kung fu!" Outside of sci-fi movies, it doesn't work that way;

the more instantaneous the learning, the less effective it is. Instead, making conscious mental choices and being active are better than any form of downloading.

What are good note-taking practices? Listen for the point before writing something down. Think about whether exact wording matters, and if not, phrase things in whatever shorthand works for you. Use as many abbreviations as you can (as a communication student, I devised abbreviations for "communication," "language," "theory" and "relationships"). Finally, decide whether writing down examples help you understand and remember concepts, and if not, don't bother with them. If you aren't confident that you understand everything by the time test day is close, do what only a small number of students actually do: ask questions!

Conversations with Friends and Family

The context and purpose may vary: a close friend wants to open up about something that's weighing heavily on their mind; a parent wants to give you a lesson on filing your taxes; your obnoxious cousin wants to bend your ear about their political views, which differ sharply from yours. In each of these scenarios, specific listening techniques may vary, but the principles remain the same. You can distinguish between types or degrees of listening:

Passive Listening: The most basic technique is extremely simple — keep your mouth shut and just hear what the speaker says. This may leave them wondering if you are absorbing what they're saying, and whether you agree with it or not. Not giving them any indications of either factor can leave them frustrated, and leave you tempted to not actually listen but just put on a good show. To give the speaker some reassurance that you're listening, you can use obvious techniques such as nodding your head at the right moments, or giving verbal reassurances such as "Right," or "Mm-hm." The problem with both of those techniques, of course, is that they are also used to indicate agreement, and you might not agree at all. This, in turn, might make you want to avoid giving such indications. And it's difficult to let someone go on about things that you think are objectionable. In other words, while this might seem like the easiest form of listening, that isn't always the case.

Parroting: To let the speaker know that you are listening, a simple technique is to just repeat back to them what they have said, in their own words. This can be obvious and possibly annoying, but it's an improvement over passive listening.

Active Listening: This form of listening is characterized by the listener rephrasing the speaker's comments in their own words. This takes mental work, so it gives the speaker a better sense that you're thinking about what they're saying. If you're not getting it exactly right, this can lead to the "Lego exercise" kind of conversation described in Chapter 1.

Active Listening + Probing: There have been many times in my life when I was listening to someone express an opinion that I thought was ridiculous, but knew that "calling them out" and explaining why they were wrong wouldn't help much. Funny thing: people don't like being told they are stupid, and *they* tend to stop listening when you do that to them. What's the alternative?

Here's a habit that I have developed over the years, which at first took a lot of conscious effort but has become more natural, and has paid off in many ways. Instead of saying "Where'd you get that bone-headed opinion?", I now say **"I hear you saying X; tell me more about that."** It requires some humility, but if you actually want to open your mind and hear about views different from your own, I know of no better way. As a bonus, you may make unusual friends.

Of course, none of these techniques prevent you from expressing your own opinions, but timing matters: the most important listening technique of all is to **let the other person speak their mind in an uninterrupted turn**. Hopefully you'll get your turn later, but interrupting is the opposite of a good listening technique.

4.5 SUMMARY: THE PARADOX OF LISTENING

Chapter 6 explores persuasion as a form of communication, and most research on persuasion has focused on formulating effective messages. I have taught out of many good persuasion textbooks, but none has included a chapter on listening. Only recently have there been the first glimmers of acknowledgement that listening is in itself a persuasion technique. As David Leonhardt put it in a *New York Times* editorial about the failure of recent social movements ("Differ We Must," Oct. 6, 2023), "it's difficult to persuade others when you stop listening to them." He demonstrates that "refusing to listen to the other side of a debate doesn't have a very good record of success," implying that all the persuasion techniques in the world get you nowhere if the targets of your persuasion are closed off because they don't feel that you're listening to them.

How can listening be a persuasive process? Isn't trying to get someone else to adopt your point of view the very opposite of listening, which requires acceptance of what they say? Are you just humoring them, waiting politely for the right opportunity to tell them how wrong they are? Or if you truly listen to them, don't you run the risk of them changing *your* mind?

Likewise, Chapter 17, on conflict management, explores the healthiest and most productive ways to get through the conflict process. What you say is obviously key, and the chapter is not intended to diminish the importance of speaking your mind. It is, however, intended to stress the importance of the other side of the coin: without listening, nothing happens. I would not characterize the listening process as easy; it is perhaps more accurate to say that listening is an activity that's easy to do poorly, and difficult to do well. It's a fundamentally paradoxical activity: to be a good listener, you must "put yourself away" — temporarily put your own concerns on the back burner, give up your chance to speak, set aside other things you may want to be doing, and sometimes suppress your own opinions. Yet it also requires you to "be present" — to engage in a potentially demanding cognitive activity, be emotionally empathetic, and let your imagination follow where the speaker wants to take you.

Perhaps the biggest paradox of all is that people want others to be good listeners, yet are reluctant to do the work necessary to become good at it themselves. It is so easy to shout "Why aren't you listening to me?" How many people stop and ask themselves, "Why aren't I listening to you?"

If you do want to become better at listening, this exercise may help:

BOX 4.5: EXERCISE: Do You Mean?

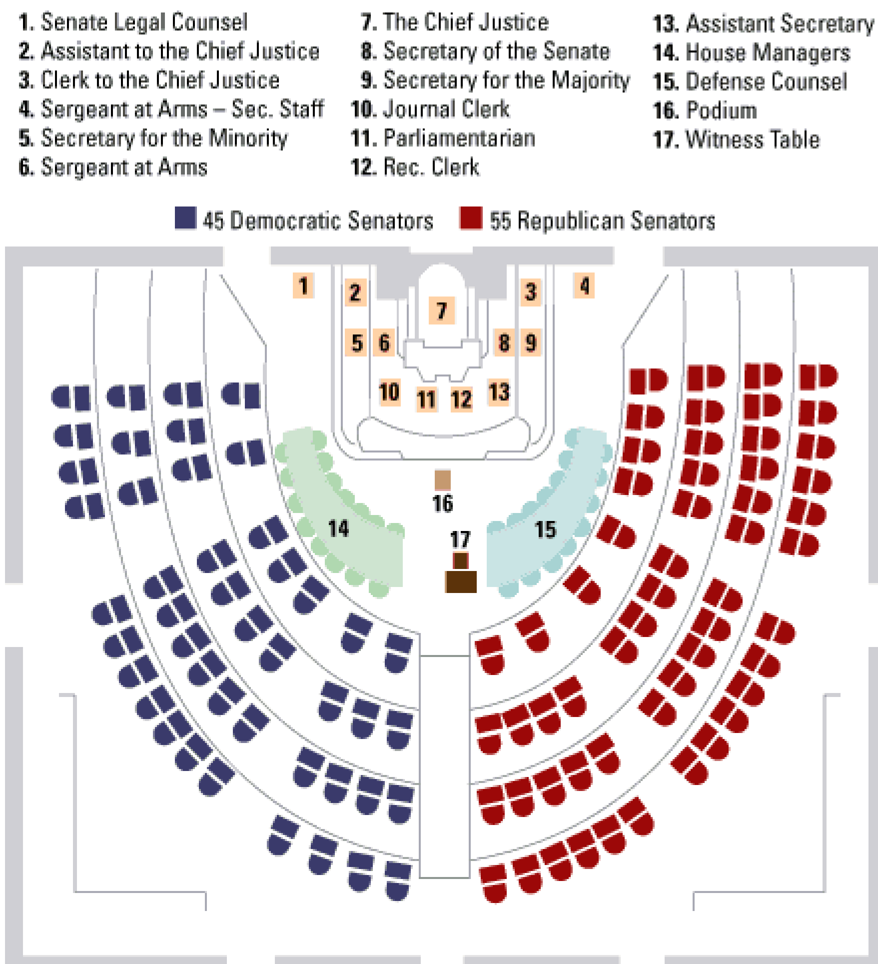
The exercise works best in groups of 4–6 people. It takes roughly 20 minutes.

- Assemble into groups of 4–6. Each member will take a turn being the speaker, while the others are listeners. One listener should also be the counter.
- The speaker makes a simple declarative statement, such as a statement of opinion or preference — "I like snow" or "I'm sorry I got rid of my old car." *The statement does not have to be cryptic or deliberately loaded with secret messages, but it should be meaningful to the speaker, not trivial.*
- Listeners ask interpretive questions beginning with the phrase "Do you mean ______?" (Examples: "Do you mean you enjoy skiing?" "Do you mean you think you didn't ask a high enough selling price for your car?").
- The speaker can respond in one of four ways:
- Yes
- No
- Irrelevant (may be true or not, but is not contained in the original statement)
- Redundant (already covered under someone else's Do You Mean question)
- The counter counts "yes" responses until reaching five ("no" responses don't count). Note: although they don't count toward the tally of five "yes" responses, "no" responses can actually be more informative.
- After five "yes" responses, a listener asks the speaker, "Is there anything else you meant by that statement that we didn't get to?" and lets them respond.
- Switch to the next speaker; repeat until everyone has had a turn.
- Ask for general observations at the end. Students are often surprised at how much can be contained in one simple sentence, how easily they make assumptions about what other people mean, and what listeners don't pick up in statements they thought were clear and simple.

CHAPTER 5: AUDIENCES

5.1 THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF SEPARATING MESSAGE FROM AUDIENCE

It must be a very strange thing, to give a speech and see half the audience stand up and applaud wildly, while the other half remains seated, scowling in silence. If that has never happened to you, that's because you've never been President of the United States and haven't delivered a State of the Union speech. Every recent president, however, has seen that sight, and it's even spatially divided: the people giving the standing ovation are all on one side of the room, and the scowlers are on the other. You may not be aware that when we refer to a politician as "left wing" or "right wing," we mean that literally: in the Senate chamber in Washington, the Democrats sit on the left side of the room (facing the podium) and the Republicans sit on the right side:



Imagine yourself at the podium. Since each side of the room responds so differently, **who do you give your**

speech to? On a formal level, the answer is "everyone," but the situation must force you to think about those different sides of the room and who you want your speech to appeal to, and even where to look. Do you only think about the "friendlies," and make points that you know they will be happy to hear? There may be political risks in tuning out the other half of the audience, but this is one of the coping strategies you could choose. You can even emphasize "wedge issues" that deliberately divide the audience, assuming that the unfriendly audience is a lost cause, and that those inflammatory issues will "mobilize the base" and stir them to action.

Another option is to tailor your speech to the "unfriendlies," seeing if you can bring them on board with policies you want to advance. In a divided group like the U.S. Senate, this could be risky, since saying something that appeals to the other party might mean alienating members of your own. You might feel confident, however, that your loyalists will stay with you no matter what you say, and that the benefit of picking up a few new supporters is worth it.

You could try the middle-of-the-road approach of saying only things that appeal to everyone in your audience — which might mean that everything you say is an empty platitude and you have no clear message. And if you're daring, you could use the "dog whistle" approach, sending messages that will be heard one way by one audience segment, and a different way by other members of the audience.[1]

No matter what you try, however, one thing is impossible: to think about your speech without also thinking about your audience.

Even if you never become President of the United States, it's worth keeping in mind the principle that you can't think about **what to say** without also considering **who you are saying it to**. You might be a podcaster, a doctor interacting with patients, or a kindergarten teacher; you might be sending a resume to a company you'd really like to work for or want your boyfriend's mother to like you — in every case, the lesson is the same: **the key to effective communication is to know your audience.**

Over 2,000 years ago, Chinese philosopher Han Fei Tzu observed that

> The difficult thing about persuading others is not that one lacks the knowledge needed to state their case. The difficult thing about persuasion is to know the mind of the person one is trying to persuade and to be able to fit one's words into it… The important thing in persuasion is to learn how to play up the aspects that the person you are talking to is proud of, and play down the aspects he is ashamed of."

Tzu was talking about an audience of one, which affords a speaker the luxury of being able to fully tailor their message to that person (is your boyfriend's mother a wine connoisseur who might enjoy a bottle of chianti, or does she not drink at all?). In other situations, the audience may change from one moment to the next: that *last* shoe customer was very concerned about price, but this *next* customer is fashion-conscious. Speakers who address crowds of people, or writers who craft messages that could be read by anyone, must contend with the challenge of appealing to many different kinds of people at once. Unlike the President giving

1. Albertson, Bethany L. (2015). Dog-whistle politics: Multivocal communication and religious appeals. *Political Behavior*, 37(1): 3–26

a speech in the Senate chamber, that they can't see with their eyes how their messages are being received by the different audience segments.

5.2 THE CONCEPT OF TARGET AUDIENCE

If you have ever played darts, been to a shooting range, or tried your hand at archery, you already know how targets work, but it is worth reviewing the concept in detail.

image from Unsplash

In this image, the archer is aiming at the bullseye — the yellow zone in the middle. If she hits it, that's success, but if she instead hits the red, blue or even black rings around the outside of the bullseye, that's not bad and she'll still earn points. If she hits the white zone, she earns no points, and if she misses the target entirely, that's failure. Dartboards, while more visually complex, are based around the same principle: hitting the bullseye is the best possible result, hitting areas around it is also good, hitting areas further out is okay, but try not to leave holes in the wall.

Let's apply that model to communication, and explore the principle that **effective communication is aimed at particular targets**. That's an easy concept to grasp, but it's not how many people think. If you want to try your hand at making a movie, for example, you may say "I want it to appeal to everyone," without putting much thought into who your ideal "bullseye" audience would be. That is equivalent to saying "I am aiming my arrow at everything," which is not how archery works. Some targets are broad, some are narrow, but there is no such thing as archery without a target. Another way to put that is: **"If you aim at everything, you hit nothing."** Think of toilet paper: it's a product that everyone uses, but toilet paper commercials aren't targeted at "everyone": they're targeted at mothers, with the assumption that mothers are the ones who actually buy it.

If you are an experienced film director like Christopher Nolan and you want to make a movie about Robert Oppenheimer, you know you must think hard about who's in that bullseye. Is it only history buffs? Americans? Males? Or do you want to aim for a broader audience of people who enjoy dramas about moral dilemmas? A director's answers to those questions will guide every choice in the movie: who is in the cast? How much historical background should you include? How is the dialogue written? What style of music will you feature? Will you include love scenes? The studio funding the film will have opinions as well, and may exert pressure to appeal to audience segments they want to see in the theater.

Of course, if millions of *Barbie* fans pay to see *Oppenheimer* too (because they heard the two movies make an interesting double feature, or because that was the only way their date would agree to sit through *Barbie*), the director and studio certainly don't mind earning a few hundred million from the "outer rings" of the target. This doesn't mean, however, that Nolan designed a movie about a nuclear scientist to appeal to fans of dolls (if he had, it would have been a very strange movie). While there were surprises about who went to the film, clarity about the target was still important.

Even if you are producing a very different kind of message with a very different goal, the principle of target audience is still helpful. Say you want to design a campaign to reduce cyberbullying. There are several target audiences you might choose:

Cyberbullies: trying to get them to stop bullying

Victims: teaching them how to avoid or cope with bullying

Bystanders, such as parents or teachers: training them how to be on the lookout for signs of bullying and how to respond

Moderators of social media platforms where cyberbullying takes place: trying to convince them to alter their policies or do their job better

Lawmakers: trying to convince them to pass new laws

Notice that your choice of strategy and message is completely tied to your choice of target audience. And deciding on the bullseye helps you dig deeper into questions about your audience so you can design a more effective message: What are their motivations and life experiences? What are the gaps in their knowledge, or misconceptions that need to be cleared up? Why might they be hesitant to do what you are asking? If your target audience includes all five target groups, you won't be able to answer any of those questions clearly.

5.3 LEVELS OF AUDIENCE INFORMATION: DEMOGRAPHICS, EXPERIENCES, AND ATTITUDES

If you have heard discussions about target audience, they have likely been on the level of **demographics**: "This product is aimed at males between the ages of 18 and 35." Demographic information generally includes gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, socio-economic status, and where they live, and could also include features such as religious affiliation or employment status. Discussions about target audiences tend to be on the level of demographics because it's the easiest kind of information to gather about audiences. This doesn't mean, however, that demographics are valuable or predictive: not all people in a demographic category think or act the same way.

You could also gather information about your audience's **life experiences**: what has happened to them? If you want to understand bullies, for example, you might start by asking if they've been victims of bullying themselves. Do they belong to a tight-knit group, or are they socially isolated? How much time do they spend online? Are there caring and attentive parents in their lives? It is easy to see how these factors can have much more impact on someone's behavior than their age or what state they live in.

A third level of information is **attitudes and personality traits**. Are members of your audience naturally empathetic, or are they insensitive to others? How much do they care about acceptance from their peers? Are they resentful and angry? If you want to truly understand your audience, this is the level that matters — but it's also the information that is hardest to discover. These factors may or may not be tied to life experiences (a person may lack empathy because they have been victimized, or because their parents neglect them), and life experiences may or may not be tied to demographics — but beware of making assumptions about how strong those connections are.

In the American court system, the defense and prosecution in a case each have some control over who serves on the jury, which is why trials are preceded by jury selection. It's a commonly misunderstood process, partly because "selection" makes it sound like the attorneys get to choose the jury members. It should really be called "de-selection," since it's a process of removing people who should *not* be on the jury due to bias or knowing someone involved in the case.

Jurors typically fill out a card asking for basic demographic information, and they are also interviewed to find out more about them. This process is based on the recognition that people do not vote solely based on their age, race, or gender: if you want to find out who is too biased to be a juror on a case, you need to talk to each potential juror, and ask questions such as "Have you ever been a victim of crime similar to what this case is about?" or "Do you feel there are too many frivolous lawsuits?" Asking about racial bias takes particular skill, since people often can't recognize their own biases [See 5.1]. What you should *not* do, however, is assume that because a juror is Hispanic or Lutheran or belongs to a motorcycle club, you know exactly how they will vote.

BOX 5.3: How to Ask Jurors if They are Biased

The problem with asking jurors about prejudices is obvious: if you directly ask if they hold any racial biases, no one will say yes. Yet if you ask people if they know any racists, they usually say yes, which creates a mathematical impossibility — how can everyone *know* a racist if no one *is* one?

The problem is twofold. **Social desirability** means that people don't like expressing anything they think will make them look bad in the eyes of others. You can tell jurors "there is no right or wrong answer," but that doesn't stop them from feeling that there is. And even if they realize that a certain answer will get them out of jury duty, they are extremely reluctant to admit to prejudices. **Lack of awareness** is also a problem. Research on implicit biases proves that people are not aware of all their own attitudes, and that their self-concept may not be accurate. Asking if they are biased is essentially asking "When you look in the mirror, do you see a fair person?" The legal system wants to eliminate juror bias as much as possible, so the question is: how do you ask about it?

Jury consultants have some ideas. They have found that jumping straight to asking jurors questions about their attitudes and the "can you be fair?" question is not fruitful. It is easier for people to **talk about their experiences**, so you can ask "Have you ever had a negative experience with someone of a different race?" If they have, ask follow-up questions to learn as much about that experience as possible: When did it happen? What were the consequences? How did it affect your life? Do you think about that incident often? Once they have told the full story, asking "Do you think that experience might affect your ability to be a neutral juror in this case?" may lead them to recognize issues they didn't see before.

Another technique is **the triangulation method**: if a juror does say they know someone who expresses troublesome attitudes (say, their Uncle Thad), ask more about what Uncle Thad says, then follow up with, "What do *you* think about what Thad says?" The difference between "I can't believe I'm related to that bigot" and "He may have a point" can tell you a lot.

Finally, there is a larger-scale version of the same technique, called **"some people"**

questions. Instead of making a juror feel like they need to admit to unacceptable attitudes that only they hold, send the message that there are reasonable people who hold a variety of attitudes, then ask which camp they belong to. For example: "Some people think undocumented immigrants play an important role in our economy; other people think undocumented immigrants are hurting our economy. Which side do you agree with?"

For more, see this article about how to ask effective questions in jury selection.

5.4 TYPES OF AUDIENCES

In addition to target audiences, it may be useful to think about other audience categories. For example, when the president gives a State of the Union speech, the people in the Senate chamber are not the only ones listening; the speech will be broadcast to voters and nonvoters, donors, political rivals, and international allies and enemies. While a speaker could get paralyzed worrying about who might be listening and what could happen as a result, it is still wise to think of audiences in terms of segments. Here is one model:

The **target audience**, as discussed, is the group of people the speaker wants to reach. Sometimes the speaker, or the source of the message, uses a two-step model to reach the ultimate target, starting with one audience who can't enact the behavior on their own and assuming that they will put pressure on the second audience (SEE BOX 5.2). The source gets to choose the target, so this category is under their full control. If they want to make a movie that is intended for fans of classic dolls who also love war movies, why not?

The **actual audience** is the set of people who hear or see the message, whether or not the speaker wants them to. This audience is automatically determined just by the fact of who is exposed to the message, but it is heavily affected by the message's location, channel, and timing.

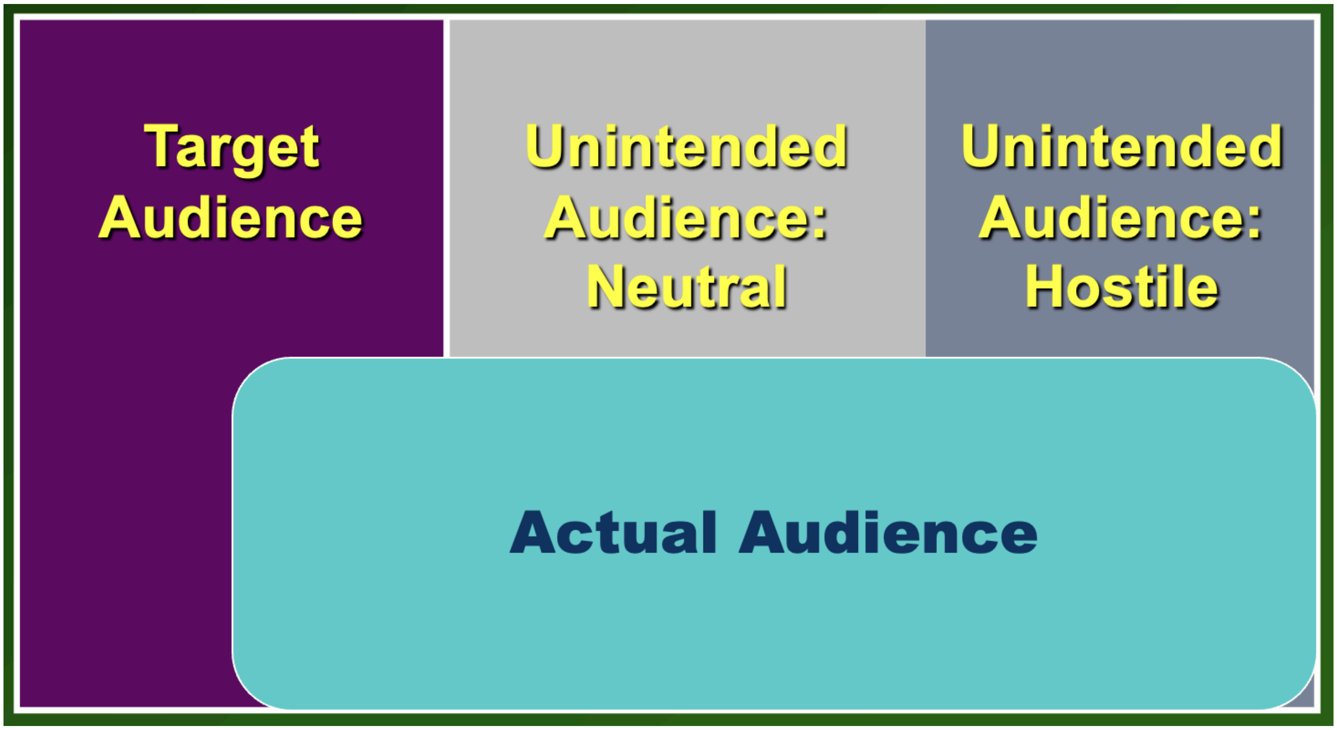
Unintended audiences are the members of the actual audience who are outside the target audience — people the speaker did not target. The nature of broadcasting and advertising means that there will always be people in this category. It is useful to further subdivide this segment into the **neutral** unintended audience and the **hostile** unintended audience. If you're watching television and see a political ad for someone running for governor of a neighboring state, you can easily recognize that the message isn't intended for you (you can't vote for them anyway), but you may not have any strong feelings about that. But if you are the candidate's political rival, you will pay careful attention to everything in the ad, and if you find anything you think would help your side and hurt theirs, you'll definitely use it, putting you in the hostile category. You're still part of the unintended audience, because the original candidate would prefer that rivals not scrutinize their messages.

While some politicians will do whatever they can to make sure there is no unintended audience and that everyone in the room is on their side, the political landscape is littered with people who found out the hard way that this is easier said than done. In 2012, presidential candidate Mitt Romney's campaign was damaged by a comment he made at a $50,000-per-plate fundraiser. The comment may not have bothered any of the donors present, but it offended a bartender who filmed it and leaked the video.

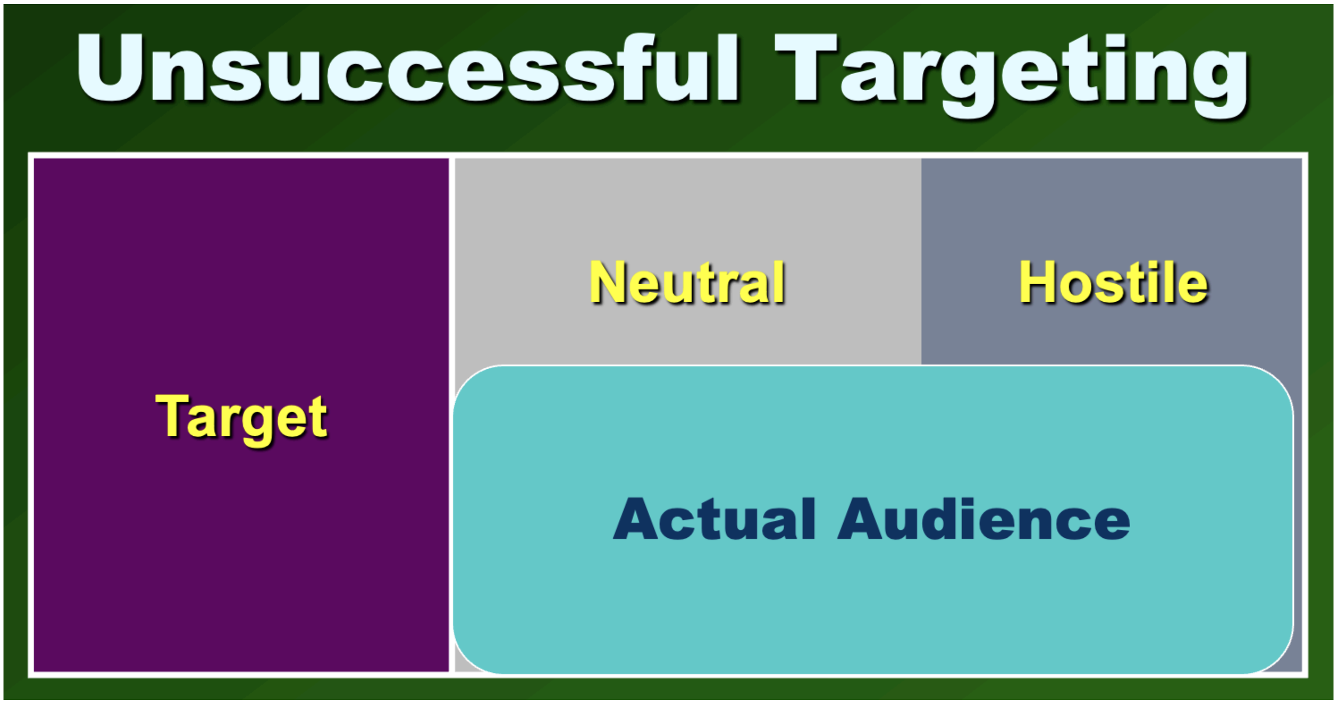
Unintended audiences can also be created when a secure website is breached by hackers, or an insider shares the password. And there's the "hot mic" situation, where a public figure says something intended to be heard only by those sitting close to them, and is unaware that a nearby microphone is recording everything.

It's worth remembering how easily a message can reach an unintended audience. Many employees who work in high-stress jobs find relief in sending humorous messages to each other, making fun of customers or clients.

All it takes is one co-worker clicking the "forward" button, and you're fired. Likewise, there are innumerable examples of job applicants who survive a rigorous interview process and are close to receiving a job offer, only to have the company check out their social media postings (especially if the applicant wrongly assumed that the employer wouldn't be able to see those messages). Some people create multiple social media profiles — some visible to the public, some that only close friends know about — to avoid these dangers, but juggling too many identities can itself be risky.



Depicting this model visually illustrates several ways in which communication can go wrong. If the target audience and the actual audience don't overlap at all, the source is using the wrong channel or picking the wrong time and place to reach the target. In this case, it's time for some creative rethinking about how to reach the target audience.



This also raises the question of width: how big are these audience segments? It depends on the situation, of course, but here are two interesting scenarios:

Narrow target, large unintended neutral audience. A common example is a television ad for a medication that treats a rare disease such as tardive dyskinesia (I don't know anyone with that condition, but I've seen hundreds of ads for treatments). Although targeted advertising can be efficient, non-targeted advertising is the norm in many contexts. As department store mogul John Wanamaker is credited with saying over 100 years ago, "Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is, I don't know which half."

Extremely narrow target, large hostile audience. Think of "spam" emails or "robocall" phone messages that annoy everyone. Have you ever wondered who actually falls for those messages and, if the answer is "no one," why do spammers keep sending them? The answer is not quite "no one": a 2008 study of spam messages revealed that while only 1 in 12,500,000 emails gets a response, that one person makes the work economically worthwhile for the spammers. In one month, 350 million emails led to only 28 sales, but those sales resulted in $7,000 in profits per day. And spammers don't care if the rest of the world hates them.

One other noteworthy audience category is the **imagined audience**, which plays a role when a source needs to get themselves in the right psychological framework to deliver an effective message, but there is no real audience in front of them. For thousands of years, theater actors and musicians have gained energy and feedback from a live audience, but with the advent of recording and broadcasting technology, it became possible for actors, radio hosts, and musicians to perform without any audience in front of them. Now, even highly successful film actors say they prefer performing on stage because of that interaction, and musicians who play in large stadiums get nostalgic for the nightclub days when they could see their audience's faces. Talk shows feature live audiences because it puts the hosts at ease and enlivens the conversation, even though the much bigger home audience is never seen. When shows stopped having a live audience during the pandemic, comedians had to get used to the daunting sound of silence after their jokes, and professors accustomed to in-person lectures learned how to record them in an empty office. Even after the lockdown ended, technology and economics have meant that many people once able to react to other live humans now have to rely on their imagination. (Think of being an actor in a science fiction film, and having to "react" to a tennis ball that will be replaced later with a computer-generated scary monster).

All of these scenarios illustrate the principle that **delivering an effective message often requires the speaker to have a strong imagination**. It helps if that imagination is built on a backlog of real audience reactions, but people with little experience in how people will respond to their message still have to conjure *someone* to talk — a person, rather than a blank wall or an unblinking camera.

If you're in this situation, it may help to imagine just one person you know, whether they are physically present or not, and give your speech to that person. The 2010 film *The King's Speech* provides a great example. King George VI knows that, despite his severe stutter, he will have to address his nation, and his speech therapist, Lionel Logue, has done everything he can to prepare him for this terrifying experience. How does a king with a stutter address an audience of tens of millions of people? Alone in a room with a microphone and his friend Lionel, who instructs the King to speak just to him. On the other hand, if it helps to imagine a huge and adoring crowd, put that image in the front of your mind instead. Getting comfortable talking to an audience that's not physically present is a skill that is likely to pay off many times in your life.

BOX 5.4: TWO-STEP TARGETING

Logically, TV ads for prescription drugs don't make any sense. No matter how much a patient may want a prescription drug, they can't obtain it without going to a doctor, who will decide what the patient should take. Knowing this, for most of the 20th century drug companies didn't bother advertising directly to patients: they targeted doctors, visiting their offices, attending medical conventions, and putting notices in medical journals.

So why did they change their mind in the 21st century and start pouring billions of dollars into advertising straight to the consumer? Because they know how effective it is when a patient demands a certain medicine from their doctor.[1] And why would doctors, with far

1. In 2015, the AMA considered calling for a ban on this practice, but never pursued it.

more medical training than their patients, give in to these requests? One clue can be found in the stilted language you often hear in those commercials: if you've ever heard a normal person describe their plaque psoriasis as "moderate to severe," let me know, but I'm willing to bet that when the doctor looks it up in the official drug guidelines, the language matches precisely. In other words, the ads are training patients to use the language that will be most effective in getting them the drug.

The 2009 documentary *The Corporation* delves into two-step targeting when it comes to children, and the discovery that getting children to nag their parents is extremely effective. In the film, Lucy Hughes of Initiative Media reports on research showing that "anywhere from 20% to 40% of purchases would not have occurred unless the child had nagged their parents." She acknowledges that parents don't like it when this happens ("We do have to break through this barrier where they say they don't like it when their kids nag"), but dodges the question of whether this is ethical communication. Perhaps the guidelines in Chapter 3 would help her answer that question.

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5.5 AUDIENCE RESEARCH

The success of the *Barbenheimer* duo of movies in 2023 was fascinating, but it's just as illuminating to look at movies that do very badly at the box office. In 2002, Castle Rock Entertainment released a science fiction comedy called *The Adventures of Pluto Nash*, with a production budget of $100 million and starring Eddie Murphy, Rosario Dawson, and other big actors. The critics were savage, audiences were uninterested, and the movie netted a worldwide total of only $7.1 million, becoming one of the biggest box office bombs in history.

It's not just movies that fail in the marketplace, of course:

- In April, 1985, Coca Cola announced that it was changing the flavor of its signature drink, calling it "New Coke." The public hated it and demanded a return to the old flavor, which Coca Cola did three months later.
- In 2007, Microsoft came out with an mp3 player called Zune, which only lasted four years before being discontinued.
- In 2014, Google introduced a wearable computer called Google Glass, which never took off, and the product was abandoned in 2023.
- in 2021, Mark Zuckerberg announced that he was transforming Facebook into Meta Platforms, and Meta's Reality Labs division invested $45 billion in developing the virtual reality "Metaverse." The public was uninterested, and Zuckerberg's net worth fell by $100 billion in 2022.

Not all new ideas work, of course, and sometimes the reasons for failure are unforeseeable. Still, companies hate losing large sums of money, so naturally they would all like to know what the public is going to think of a new product *before* it flames out in the marketplace. One thing you could say about all these failures is that "nobody wanted that" (even if a CEO or investor thought it was a great idea). This is what led to the creation of the market research industry, and ways to measure what the public does want before it's too late.

What are the most common market research techniques?

- **Informal research**: Ask around, among friends and acquaintances, or, if you know any, shopkeepers and people who can observe the public's buying habits. This has the advantage of being free, but the disadvantage of being unreliable. One thing that many failed contestants on *American Idol* had in common was that they said "All my friends told me I was a great singer and would become the next American Idol!" Maybe your friends are just being nice, or aren't representative of the general public. Likewise if your friends tell you your invention or business idea is going to make you a millionaire, don't bank on it until you've done more research.

- **Surveys**: The best way to find out what the general public thinks of anything is to do a large-scale survey, but, as discussed in Chapter 2, this is harder than it looks. **Online surveys** are cheap and easy, but the representativeness question is an enormous challenge: where will you post the survey, and how do you know that the people who respond are typical of the population? This is particularly challenging with online surveys because of the self-selection issue: if you count on people to choose to take the survey, you lose control of knowing what their motives are. Yes, there are ways to guarantee demographic diversity, but as the "Levels of Information" section was intended to prove, demographics are not everything. This is why political polling still relies heavily on **phone surveys**: because the pollster, not the recipient, is deciding who the respondents will be. Still, there can be issues with who takes the call and who doesn't, and phone surveys are labor-intensive and therefore expensive. Another disadvantage of surveys is that it may not be easy to have the recipients experience the thing you want feedback about. It's easy to ask them what they think of well-known presidential candidates; it's harder to figure out how they can taste your new popcorn flavors.
- **Focus groups:** As mentioned in Chapter 2, this is a way to gather more in-depth information from a small sample of people, and is especially useful when you want people to be able to bounce ideas off of each other. Producers of movies, television shows, and commercials gather small groups, have them watch the video in question or sample the product, and then pick their brains for their reactions. Because these groups are expensive to run, most sources can't afford to do more than a few, so it's wise to remember that just because several dozen people liked your political ad or popcorn flavor, you can't be sure the same will be true of the general public.
- **Rebates and special offers.** When you see an offer for a "freebie" of any kind, it is worth stopping to ask "If they want to give me something for free, what are *they* getting out of it?" Often, it's information: to receive that offer or rebate, you typically need to provide details about yourself, which can be valuable market research data. This has led to the observation that *"If you're not paying for it, you're not the customer: you are the product being sold."* If you don't like the sound of that, perhaps you shouldn't accept free offers.

Recently, large-scale data mining has replaced a lot of these techniques, but since it does not involve directly communicating with audience members, it's beyond the scope of this book. It also has some of the disadvantages mentioned already: you can only mine data about things that people are already doing, not potential things that they might like or would consider, and while large-scale information is excellent at showing trends it's not as good at providing understanding.

5.6 THE BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF TARGETING: WHY IS MY FEED FULL OF OTTERS?

When John Wanamaker made that comment about half of advertising money being wasted but not knowing which half, he didn't have the benefit of modern audience analysis techniques. He would probably be impressed with the current world of targeted advertising, in which video streaming services, online retailers, and news sources know a lot about what you like to watch, buy, and read. Theoretically, this should lead to a world in which no one is bothered by ads for things they don't want, or wastes their time checking out television shows that don't suit them. Certainly the system is not perfect (a Facebook friend recently complained, "I am getting so tired of the way I have to scroll through literally dozens of stupid 'Otter lovers' or 'Sloth lovers' or 'Giraffe lovers' pages every time I sign on to Facebook"), but it is nice to get alerts about things that are tailored to you, or hear news you might not otherwise have heard about an obscure musician you like.

So what is the downside of all this data collection? Marketing expert Jason Voiovich has thoughts on the issue:

> Despite the geometric rise in the amount of data available about all aspects of consumer behavior; despite the increase in the immediate accessibility of that data; and despite increasingly sophisticated tools to (supposedly) help make sense of it all, marketing remains the least improved of all the business disciplines.

In his view, it has actually become too easy to collect data on audiences, lulling researchers into thinking that they understand audiences, and making them forget the role of conscious thought and freedom of choice in purchasing decisions. "More data has pushed us further away from our audience, not moved us closer to them. Paradoxically, the more we know *about* audiences, the less we know *them*."[1]

If more information about your audience improves communication, why do so many people feel like the music world is artistically dead, movies are formulaic, and the divisiveness in the political realm is unsolvable? Social media has been accused of fostering an "echo chamber," where people just reinforce pre-existing beliefs and no one listens to new ideas. Internet activist Eli Pariser has warned of "filter bubbles" that result in different people getting markedly different results when they search for the same things, because search engines and news sources already know what the user likes to hear, leading to "intellectual isolation and social

1. Personal correspondence with Jason Voiovich, 7/29/2024.

fragmentation."[2] Algorithms also rest on the fundamental assumption that people already know exactly what they like and what they believe, and are not interested in anything new.

One clue can be found in the 1994 film *Shawshank Redemption*. Ellis "Red" Redding (played by Morgan Freeman) is serving a life sentence, and gets the chance to appeal to the parole board. When they ask him if he's been rehabilitated, Red's answer is "Oh yes sir, absolutely sir. I've learned my lesson. I can honestly say that I'm a changed man. I'm no longer a danger to society. That's God's honest truth." His appeal is rejected. For years I have shown students that scene and asked why they think his message failed; many students say it's because Red is ***only telling them what they want to hear***. Why is that a bad thing? The main theme of this chapter is that tailoring your message to your audience is the key to effective communication, so what is wrong with "telling them what they want to hear"?

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For one thing, it's sometimes **too obvious**, which is made clear when Red gets another parole board hearing 10 years later and gives the identical speech. For another thing, it leads to **predictability and uniformity**: if prisoners figure out what the parole board is listening for, that's all the board will hear from every prisoner. But the biggest problem is that "telling what they want to hear" lacks the other key ingredient they are looking for: **sincerity.** Over-tailoring the message means that what the source wants to say is no longer part of the equation and, paradoxically, that is part of what audiences want to hear.[3] All of these problems apply to advertising, music, and political messages as well: if the techniques are too obvious, the results too predictable and formulaic, and the audience doesn't sense any sincerity, the message will fail.

Data collection tends to make people risk-averse. As mentioned, Coca Cola, Microsoft, Google, and Facebook don't like to lose money, and would have preferred to avoid product launches that ended up failing. I suggested that some thorough audience analysis in advance would have spared them huge losses. But if a

2. Kitchens, B., Johnson, S. L., Gray, P. (2020). Understanding echo chambers and filter fubbles: The impact of social media on diversification and partisan shifts in news consumption. *MIS Quarterly*, 44(4): 1619–1649.

3. Seven years before Shawshank Redemption, another movie that featured a parole board scene made fun of this issue. In Raising Arizona (1987), prisoner H.I. McDonough gets confused about what exactly the parole board does want:

Parole Board chairman: You're not just telling us what we want to hear?

H.I.: No, sir, no way.

Parole Board member: 'Cause we just want to hear the truth.

H.I.: Well, then I guess I am telling you what you want to hear.

Parole Board chairman: Boy, didn't we just tell you not to do that?

company becomes too risk-averse, it doesn't take chances on new things or create anything truly original, and that can kill a company, too. Steve Jobs was well known for taking leaps with new things such as iTunes, Pixar Animation, and the iPhone, and ignoring warnings that all of these things would fail. And in *Shawshank Redemption*, when Red finally dared to tell the parole board things they were not accustomed to hearing, and made it clear that he was not tailoring his message for them ("Rehabilitated? It's just a bulls**t word. So you go on and stamp your forms, sonny, and stop wasting my time, because to tell you the truth, I don't give a s**t"), *that's* when they finally did release him, because they finally recognized that he was telling the truth.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://open.lib.umn.edu/commpractice/?p=289#oembed-2

In other words, sometimes too much audience research can be a bad thing, and there is something to be said for flying blind.

CHAPTER 6: PERSUASION

6.1 HOW TO GET PEOPLE TO BEHAVE: THE THREE P'S

I have a great idea.

This idea can save virtually everyone money on an individual level, improve the overall economy, and save lives. It will also reduce pollution, help save the planet, and reduce American entanglement in wars on the other side of the planet.

Here's the idea: **"Convince people to drive the speed limit."** I'm not talking about changing speed limits; I'm just suggesting that people drive the speed limit that's already posted. No new signs will be required. I'm also not talking about strict enforcement of speed limit laws — note the word "convince." I just want to plant the idea in people's heads that if the sign says "60 MPH," then they should actually drive 60 miles per hour… or less.

Why? Because, according to the U.S. Department of Energy, when you drive a gas vehicle faster than 50 mph, your gas mileage decreases rapidly. In fact, "you can assume that each 5 miles per hour you drive over 50 is like paying an additional $0.25 per gallon for gas."

I don't have equivalent figures for electric vehicles, but the principle that the faster you go, the more energy you use must be the same, so going slower would decrease charging time and increase vehicle range.

Considering how many people are shelling out big bucks for efficient vehicles, and how they react when the price of a gallon of gas shoots up 25 cents, you'd think they would be interested in something that drops the price that much. Additionally, less demand for gas will lower gas prices overall, benefiting many members of the population. Better fuel efficiency means less pollution. It's a win-win-win-win-win.

None of this is a secret, so why is almost nobody doing it? Why do websites that talk about it (such as https://www.fueleconomy.gov) get so little attention? Why does almost everybody instead do something that costs them money, and that they know is illegal and dangerous: speeding?

Texting while driving is also illegal and dangerous, leading to unnecessary deaths. Even taking dangerous selfies is on the list of things that are needlessly killing people.

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Tourist Falls 170 Feet Off a Cliff to Her Death While Taking Selfie

APR 10, 2024 PESALA BANDARA

39-year-old Inessa Polenko (above) died while attempting to take a selfie on a cliff.

What can we do? I can think of three general ways to stop people from doing things they shouldn't be doing:

1. **Physical barriers**. Make it physically difficult or impossible for people to do dangerous things — erect barriers around dangerous areas, for example, or, in the case of speeding, install electronic devices in cars that prevent you from speeding.
2. **Punishment**. Make something against the law, hire people to catch those who violate that law, and fine and/or imprison people who are caught.
3. **Persuasion**. Convince people that doing that thing is a bad idea, so they voluntarily decide to behave more wisely.

In general, which option works best? Physical barriers can be effective, although determined people always seem to find a way around them. And good luck to the first politician or car company that tries to install speeding prevention software; there will be massive public outcry. Punishment is the most common method for reducing speeding, but we all know the limitations: few people get caught, and some people don't mind paying fines. It takes a lot of money to hire enough people to do the enforcement, and they may feel like their efforts are futile. So persuasion, if it can be accomplished, seems like the best of the three options: it doesn't depend on foolproof technology, doesn't require hiring a lot of enforcers, and doesn't leave people frustrated and upset. If people are truly persuaded to voluntarily follow guidelines, then physical barriers and punishment are not needed.

6.2 WHAT IS PERSUASION?

Persuasion implies getting someone to do something you want them to do. There is a problem with this definition, though, starting with the two alternatives suggested above: physical prevention and punishment. There are methods for forcing someone to behave in a certain way, but they don't qualify as persuasion because they don't have the element of "**buy in**." Your boss can force you to follow cumbersome work procedures by threatening to fire you, and most employees have had the experience of doing something they didn't think was fair or wise — that's just what you have to accept if you want to keep the job. The problem with forcing people to do things, though, is that the minute you remove the threat, people stop doing them. If the employee thinks the work procedures are pointless, they will only do them if someone is watching (or worse, they will film themselves violating procedures and post it online). Buy-in suggests that the employees believe in those procedures, and will do them whether anyone is watching or not.

This is why communication scholar Herb Simons says "All persuasion is self-persuasion."[1] There's a tendency to think of persuasion as being about the message: when Person A talks to Person B, it's the words that persuade, so the actual persuasion occurs in the air between the two. Simons stresses, however, that what ultimately matters is not what Person A says to Person B, but what Person B says to him/herself. If they hear a message and think "That makes sense; I agree with it," persuasion has occurred; if they think "No, I'm not buying that," no persuasion has taken place, even though Person A may have said and done all the right things. A driver who is stopped by the police may be baffled as to why their weak persuasive attempt actually worked, or why a strong one failed, and the answer lies in the one factor they can't see or control: what was going on in the officer's head?

The working definition we will use for this chapter is: **"Persuasion is communication intended to change other people's attitudes and/or behavior."**

Does this definition work perfectly? You may already be thinking "Can't *any* communication (verbal or nonverbal) potentially change other people's attitudes or behavior?" If you walk through a student lounge and see someone asleep on a couch, you might think "Yeah, I need some sleep; I'll go take a nap." Has the sleeping person persuaded you? If persuasion is something you can do while you're asleep, what *doesn't* count as persuasion? Our definition, however, includes the word "intended," so it doesn't include unintentional persuasion. On the other hand, it *does* include failed attempts, since they have that intention component even though the result may not be what the persuader had in mind. Remember that persuasion attempts backfire all the time, so any effort to persuade is a gamble.

1. Simons, H.W. (1976). *Persuasion: Understanding, Practice and Analysis*. Addison-Wesley Publishing.

Some people might want to include "effectiveness" in the definition, saying that if an attempt doesn't succeed, we shouldn't call it "persuasion." If a customer doesn't buy a car, should we say that the salesperson persuaded them? In the past tense, "persuaded" (and its synonym "convinced") implies that it worked: "I was persuaded to buy the car." But not all persuasion is about selling. Sometimes, as with a PR campaign, it's about changing attitudes, and there's nothing immediate or visible that lets you know if you've succeeded. Persuasion is often a gradual process, and it's hard to know when to give up and declare it a failure. (I've been known to walk out of a store empty-handed, which might make the salesperson think they failed, but I just want time to think, and two weeks later I come back and make the purchase).

It's also hard to judge persuasion in terms of success because **persuasion usually occurs in competitive environments**. Success is not always about how well the persuader performs; it also depends on what the competition does. An impressive job candidate may not get the job because there was an even more impressive candidate in the job pool, a lawyer might win a case because the opposing lawyer is incompetent, and many politicians get elected not because they won over the hearts and minds of voters but because people hated the opposing candidates and there was no "none of the above" option on the ballot.

One more issue with effectiveness is that it's not always determined by the persuader's skill: there are always **factors at play beyond the persuader's control** that affect the outcome. (Aristotle called these "inartistic proofs," to distinguish them from "artistic proofs" that depend on the artistry of the speaker). People who say "If you're in legal trouble, hire the best lawyer there is and you'll win" are assuming that the lawyer's skill outweighs factors like the physical evidence. Some people have natural advantages like an attractive face or strong voice, famous parents, or being in the right place at the right time by sheer dumb luck. The best salesperson in the world might have bad sales figures if the product they're selling is flawed or their store is in a bad location.

BOX 6.2: WHY FACTS AREN'T (AUTOMATICALLY) PERSUASIVE

If you ask people why they made a particular decision about something, they typically mention facts that led them to that decision ("I bought this car because I researched the gas mileage and repair rates"), which implies that facts are inherently persuasive. The expression "the facts speak for themselves" can be slightly altered to say "the facts persuade all by themselves." Yet one of the things that's most frustrating about trying to persuade people is how often the facts don't seem to make a difference. The counterpart to the expression "The facts speak for themselves" is the expression "People believe what they want to believe." Which view is more accurate?

One way to find an answer is to ask people who study jury decision-making, and I'm in that category: in addition to teaching communication courses, I was a trial consultant, conducting trial simulations (mock trials) to find out how people respond to legal cases, where I saw hundreds of juries of 6–10 people reach verdicts.

These thousands of jurors can be sorted into different categories. There are, for example, people who are "**evidence-driven**" (who look at the facts of a case and let those facts dictate what their vote should be) and those who are "**outcome-driven**" (they start off with a particular verdict they want to reach, for whatever reason, and then figure out a way to get to that verdict).

I can't offer any statistics about how many people fit into each camp, but it is encouraging to see people who really do set their feelings and goals aside and make their decisions based on the evidence. But even the evidence-driven jurors are not perfect information processing machines, and factors get in the way of them making their decision solely on the facts. Chapter 2.4 discusses three issues: selective perception, vividness effect, and confirmation bias. Some jurors, after a verdict is reached, say they voted a certain way due to the "mountain of evidence" supporting their side, but this raises the question: was there another mountain supporting the other side, and what did you think about that mountain?

If you haven't been a juror, think of a political candidate you like and one you dislike: you can probably easily bring to mind reasons why your favorite candidate is great and the other one is so flawed that they shouldn't hold political office — but are you also ignoring your candidate's flaws, and downplaying the accomplishments of the other candidate?

Once a juror (or voter) has made up their mind, it's easy to subconsciously "cherry pick" evidence in favor of that decision, especially if it is vivid evidence, and ignore information to the contrary. In other words, the facts may "speak for themselves," but there are understandable reasons why listeners don't hear them all equally. And if these listeners are motivated to reach a certain desired outcome, they might not listen to any facts at all.

6.3 THE ELEPHANT-RIDER-PATH MODEL

In their 2010 book *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*, brothers Chip and Dan Heath identify three key variables that are necessary to get people to change their behavior: emotion, rationality, and circumstance. The visual image they use to represent this is a human riding an elephant along a path: the elephant represents our emotional drive, the rider represents our intellect, and the circumstance is represented by the path. These three factors do not always work in harmony with each other: in fact, the head (rider) and the heart (elephant) are often in direct conflict. And even when they are working together, stumbling blocks in the path might make progress difficult. But if they are all working in harmony, great progress can be made. If you think about it, it's astonishing that elephants let a puny human guide them, and I'm sure that the two creatures don't always get along, but this relationship has been working for thousands of years.

Photo from Unsplash

The **rider** is your rational side, the part that thinks things through, wants arguments to make sense, and formulates long-term plans. The strength of this rational side is that it can be persuaded by logic and facts (see Chapter 7 for more discussion of logic), and carries with it all the positive connotations that come with the word "rational." The weakness of this side, however, is that it can get caught up in overanalyzing, overthinking, and decision paralysis. You can spend forever spinning your wheels, because as soon as you think of one course of action, you think of an opposing view that makes you question what the smartest choice is.

Another big problem is obvious: if rider and elephant disagree, the elephant is much more powerful. Many people's carefully considered plans and resolutions have been derailed by emotional desires and drives. Yes, you know you *ought* to eat raw vegetables for your snack, but you *feel* like having ice cream instead, and guess who wins?

In the speed limit example that began this chapter, the four arguments (save you money, help the economy, reduce emissions, reduce dependence on foreign oil) all fit solidly within the rider component of the model: they make logical sense, and reflect long-term thinking. Although you could conceivably have emotional reactions to these arguments, they are primarily intellectual.

The **elephant** in this model is what actually moves you down the path: your motivation and drive. Brain researchers have noted that human beings are not thinking creatures who feel, but rather feeling creatures who think (see the opening quote in Chapter 8): the emotional parts of our brain are much older than the cognitive parts. Even rational processes often end with making a decision based on "what feels right," and gut-level instincts should not be ignored.

The strength of the elephant side of us is that it stirs us to action and motivates us to keep going. The weakness is that it can cave in to unhelpful desires, is often focused on short-term gratification instead of long-term planning, and can be inconsistent and driven by whims (e.g., you're just "not in the mood.") (See Chapter 8 for more about emotions and how they work).

One elephant factor the Heath brothers discuss is the ineffectiveness of the message "You're doing everything wrong"; nobody likes hearing that, and it easily creates discouragement and resignation (an elephant that is smacked hard may just stop dead in its tracks). Instead of scolding people and telling them they need to completely change everything, the Heath brothers promote the value of a "do more of that" approach: identify things that people are doing right, and encourage them to take those steps further.

The elephant component reveals what's wrong with the speed limit argument: it goes against common emotions. Driving fast is more exciting than driving slowly, drivers are often in a state of anxiety because they're worried they'll be late for something, and if other drivers honk at them for driving too slowly, they feel embarrassment or anger. It would be difficult to come up with motivations strong enough to overcome those feelings, so in this case the elephant side of things works against the idea, not for it, which is why I'm afraid my bright idea is dead in the water.

The **path** in this model refers to "changes to the environment that make the right behaviors a little bit easier and the wrong behaviors a little bit harder." It's about little things like not keeping snacks right next to your computer, so you don't mindlessly keep eating. When the COVID vaccines became available in 2021, some people didn't get vaccinated not because they didn't believe in it (rider) or were afraid of it (elephant), but because they didn't have transportation or the time to go to a vaccination site. And in another example, many nonprofits have discovered that if they put a “DONATE NOW” link on their home page, they get more donations than if a visitor has to click six times to get to the donation page.

What my wife did with the leftover Christmas cookies: put them under the fruit, to encourage me to make better choices.

Put together, the elephant-rider-path model says that you can successfully persuade people to change when:

1. You provide reasons for the change that make logical sense to them (Chapter. 7);
2. You motivate them by appealing to the right emotions (Chapter 8); and
3. You clear obstacles from the path, making the change easy, and give them a little nudge.

Nudging

The path component in this model overlaps with the main principle of Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein’s 2008 book, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth and Happiness*: that the way a choice is presented affects the way people respond to it. Thaler and Sunstein’s view is that people resist forced efforts to promote dramatic change, but are open to small nudges that subtly encourage certain behaviors without restricting their freedom. This builds on other established principles from social psychology, such as Brehm’s concept of “**reactance**”: the idea that blatant persuasion attempts threaten people’s feeling of freedom, so people resist in order to preserve their feeling of being able to make their own choices. It also confirms Sherif’s model of **Social Judgement Theory**, which looks at persuasion as a process in which a persuader tries to move a listener's "anchor" beliefs by means of a persuasive message. How successful the persuader will be, the model says, depends on how far apart the persuasive message is from the anchor belief — a gap Sherif calls the "message discrepancy". The wider the message discrepancy, the less likely that any attitude change occurs — you'll never talk your diehard liberal friend into registering as a Republican, so it's futile to try. This is another way of saying that successful persuasion occurs in small increments; it's about inches, not miles. All of these models reinforce the idea that gentle nudges work better than heavy-handed coercion.

6.4 THE YALE 5-STEP MODEL

Identifying the role of intellect, emotions, and circumstances, however, doesn't quite tell you what you need to do in order to persuade. To get a more concrete idea of the steps needed to persuade someone, let's go back to World War II, a time when people felt an urgent need to better understand the persuasion process.

The Allies (Great Britain, the U.S., and other countries) recognized that if they were going to win the war, it wasn't enough to have planes and tanks and soldiers. Winning would also require beating Hitler at his specialty: propaganda. Hitler had been so successful at persuading a previously reasonable country to do something insane — systematically murder millions of civilians — that the Allies were strongly motivated to learn what Hitler knew about persuading the masses. This led to the recruitment of three psychologists from Yale University (Carl Hovland, Irving Janis, and Harold Kelley) to learn as much about the persuasion process as possible. Out of this came a model of persuasion that has gone by different names, including the "Single Shot" studies (since they were focused on how to persuade an audience if you only had one opportunity to do so) and the Yale Attitude Change Model.[1]

The psychologists originally identified three steps in response to hearing a persuasive message: attention, comprehension, and acceptance. Later, they recognized the importance of two additional steps: retention and action. Retention is another word of "remembering," which matters when there's a lag between hearing the message and acting on it. They must also be driven to act: to go to the store to buy something, get off the couch and go vote, or convince someone else to join their cause. Based on those additions, Charles Larson reframed Hovland, Janis, and Kelley's model as a five-step process:[2]

1. **Attention:** the audience must notice the message
2. **Comprehension:** the audience must understand the message
3. **Acceptance:** the audience must accept the message
4. **Retention:** the audience must remember the message
5. **Action:** the audience must act on the message

Are all five steps necessary? You could argue that it's *possible* to persuade people even if they don't understand your message (comprehension), and that not all persuasion requires action (such as PR campaigns designed

1. Hovland, C. I., Janis, I. L., & Kelley, H. H. (1953). *Communication and Persuasion: Psychological Studies of Opinion Change*. Yale UP.
2. Larson, C. U. (2012). *Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility (13th edition)*. Wadsworth Publishing.

just to change minds or reinforce existing attitudes), but in most circumstances this is a good formula for tracking what you need to do in order to persuade someone.

These steps may sound simple and easy, but they're not: all are easier said than done, and there are whole fields of research devoted to understanding how each of these separate processes work.

Let's examine them in detail by looking at an example: Jonah and his friends have formed a band, Kangazoo, whose unique angle is hip hop music performed on traditional Jewish klezmer instruments (violins, clarinets, woodwinds, cymbals). Jonah's broad goal is to achieve popularity and success, but his immediate goal is to persuade people to show up to a Kangazoo nightclub gig in three weeks. What does Jonah need to think through?

Attention. When those Yale psychologists first devised their model in 1953, the fight for attention was nothing like it is today. But while that fight has grown exponentially more intense, the issue remains the same: **attention is a finite resource**. The individual audience member only has so much attention, and turning it toward one thing inevitably means turning it away from something else. Yes, some people pride themselves on being multi-taskers, but neurological research proves that this is a myth: you just can't fully devote your attention to more than one thing at a time. Combine that with the erosion of gatekeepers and the arrival of new opportunities for everyone to enter the fray (SEE Chapter 18), and more and more people are fighting for the attention of potential audience members.

In the case of Jonah and his band members, the good news is that they don't have to get signed by a record label, as they would have had to do decades earlier. They can create their own website, set up an Instagram account, post videos of a few songs on YouTube and audio versions of the same songs on Soundcloud, and set up a Tik Tok page. Now the first challenge: how to draw attention to those social media outlets. They can hire someone to help with search engine optimization, but they're discouraged to hear that their YouTube channel is one of 38 million active channels, and that their music videos are competing against the 450,000,000 hours of video uploaded to YouTube every single hour.

Instead of worrying about the global potential, Jonah decides to focus on the local audience, and lets all of his friends know about the upcoming gig. The trouble is, he doesn't have that many friends, and some are going out of town to a music festival in Tennessee that weekend. Since he attends a large university, at least there are opportunities like on-campus kiosks, and Jonah makes up a lot of brightly colored posters and plaster the kiosks with them:

Photo taken by the author of a kiosk on the University of Minnesota campus, although not for the fictional Kangazoo klezmer hip hop band.

This succeeds in getting the attention of a few dozen students who walk past, but by the end of the day another band has put posters on top of Jonah's. That's the other thing about attention: you may come up with techniques to break through the clutter and get the attention of a wider audience, but other competitors can use the same techniques, and then you're all back to square one. Meanwhile, the potential audience is tired of being bombarded, and gets steadily better at tuning out all the constant demands for their attention.

Comprehension. This isn't as big a challenge for Kangazoo as it would be for a lawyer presenting a complex case to a jury, or a scientist attempting to explain to politicians why they need to pass climate legislation. In those situations, the challenge is how to simplify the message without distorting it or "dumbing it down" to the point that it's inaccurate. As discussed in Chapter 4, audiences that can't understand what you're saying tend to stop listening, so comprehension and attention are tied together. Politicians have learned the importance of simple messaging, but that often results in slogans that are so short and simple that they don't really say anything (the same happens with corporate slogans like American Eagle Outfitters' "Live Your Life" or UnderArmour's "I Will").

In Jonah's case, he ponders whether it's worth the trouble to try to explain what klezmer music is and how a klezmer/hiphop combination would sound, and worries that people will think the name Kangazoo sounds like a children's band or one that plays aboriginal Australian music, but in the end he decides that if people really want to understand, they'll just have to show up to the gig.

Acceptance. This is in some ways the heart of the matter — if the audience has accepted the message, doesn't that mean that the persuasion was successful? It leaves open the question of *why* an audience would accept or reject a message. Is it because of the logic of the message [Chapter 7], emotional appeals [Chapter 8], the credibility of the speaker [Chapter 9], skillful language use [Chapter 10], appealing stories [Chapter 11], artful use of nonverbals [Chapter 12], or effective use of media [Chapter 19]?

At least Jonah knows enough to put careful thought into his advertising: wording, imagery, design, and music. Still, he worries about the attention step so much that he is tempted to start using extreme attention-getting measures that might undermine the acceptance step. He notices, for example, that some musicians draw traffic to their videos by wearing provocative clothes. He can't think of anything he could wear that would have that effect, but even if he was sexy enough to pull it off, he worries that people wouldn't take his music seriously as a result. He recalls too many examples of hopeful social media stars who would seemingly do anything for attention: licking toilets, putting gorilla glue in your hair, or animal cruelty. While all of those people did succeed in "going viral" and getting short-term attention, it is unlikely that their actions led to long-term success as a social media figure. In other words, it is worth thinking hard about **how to gain attention without sacrificing acceptance in the process.**

The clash between attention and acceptance bleeds into many other domains as well. Politicians know that they won't get quoted for saying calm, reasonable things, so some make deliberately ridiculous statements just to get in the news every day. Car dealerships run commercials full of shouting and wacky promotions, online ads feature strobe lights and intrusive music that you can't turn off, promotional emails tout "amazing" deals that aren't amazing, and "clickbait" websites make sensational promises that are rarely fulfilled ("Stunning pictures of celebrities without makeup; you will gasp at #7"). What all of these have in common is that the word "gimmick" applies, and gimmicks are are not a good long-term strategy. Once people catch on to the gimmick and realize that it wasn't worth the excitement, they learn not to pay attention.

As another example, protesters know that a protest that doesn't receive any media coverage is a waste of time, so they have to make choices about the best way to get that attention: Wear silly costumes? Take off your clothes? Disrupt the lives of people going to work? Set something on fire? All of these techniques run the risk of turning people against you, but the protesters may decide that that's better than being ignored.

The challenge of figuring out how to gain attention without sacrificing acceptance has no easy answers, but is a conundrum that all persuaders should think about carefully.

Retention. Many scientists have devoted their careers to understanding human memory and how it works.

A persuasive message doesn't do any good if it is immediately forgotten, and advertisers frequently worry that consumers will remember their ad, but not what brand it's for. Pepsi may invest a lot of time and energy into creating an original and memorable commercial, for example, but despite their best efforts, some people will remember it as a Coke ad instead. This is why so many commercials devote so much energy to one simple goal — getting people to remember the name of the product — that they barely say anything else. They use all manner of memory-assisting techniques, from catchy "jingle" songs to celebrity cameos to humor to rhyming slogans, to help the viewer remember the brand name (or the phone number, or the location of the store).

Jonah knows that part of his task will be to get people to put the gig on their calendars. If they show up at the wrong time or place, it won't do his band any good. He also reminds himself to repeat the band name frequently during the gig itself; he's seen too many bands that played for an hour, but after the hour was over he still didn't know what they were called.

Action. Jonah's biggest challenge is to get people to leave the comfort of their homes and come to the show. As Woody Allen put it, "90% of success in life is just showing up". Many people don't show up to things, despite their good intentions. Turnout rates in American national elections have hovered between 50% and 65% for nearly a century, which means that at least a third of the American population forms opinions about who they would like as their next president but still doesn't cast a vote. No wonder politicians put so much effort into "mobilizing the base" and figuring out what gets people to show up at the polls.

Some people think that raising awareness is itself enough to solve problems, which in this model is equivalent to saying that attention (step 1) *is* action (step 5). Although it is certainly true that awareness is essential, thinking that it's the *only* thing necessary to solve a problem seems like pure optimism to me.

Take, for example, a 30-minute video by Jason Russell entitled *Kony 2012*, about a war criminal named Joseph Kony who was using child soldiers to fight his cause in Uganda. The stated purpose of the video was to increase awareness of Kony's atrocities and have him arrested by the end of 2012. It certainly did raise awareness: it received over 100 million views on YouTube, and was called "the most viral video of all time" by *Time* magazine in 2013. What were those millions of viewers called on to do? The main action called for was to share the video with others, which many people did.

Screenshot from Kony 2012

Was Kony arrested by the end of 2012? No, he wasn't, and by 2017 both the U.S. and Uganda had given up the hunt for him; as of this writing, he is still at large. The film has since been labeled as a classic example of "**slacktivism**," a form of protest in which supporters of a cause do low-effort things such as liking or sharing a video instead of anything effortful or tangible.

What can Jonah do to get people to show up at the gig? He's read about techniques used by political volunteers to get voters to show up at the polls — sending reminders shortly before the election, asking explicitly for commitments, and removing "path" barriers by providing transportation — and wonders if those would work for his audience. In the end, it all seems like a lot of work, and Jonah longs for the day when he and his band members don't have to do any of that, and can just concentrate on playing the music. But if you have a similar persuasive goal (getting social media followers, protesting about a political crisis, or getting a university official to waive a requirement), thinking about attention, comprehension, acceptance, retention and action may help.

6.5 DUAL PROCESSING MODELS

The last model commonly used in Persuasion courses is not a single model, but rather three closely related ones: Petty and Caccioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model, Chaiken's Heuristic-Systematic Model, and Kahneman's System 1 vs. System 2 Thinking Model. The scholars themselves would explain how these models differ, but to many audiences, they all seem to drive at the same idea: when a listener hears or sees a persuasive pitch, they can respond in two distinctly different ways — sometimes giving the pitch a lot of careful thought, and other times responding in very simple ways or making quick decisions.

Authors	**Simple**	**Complex**
Petty & Caccioppo	**Peripheral** processing route	**Central** processing route
Chaiken	**Heuristic**: Take shortcuts, rely on simple logic	**Systematic**: think things through, gather evidence
Kahneman	**System 1**: fast, subconscious, emotional, intuitive	**System 2**: slow, effortful, logical, conscious

Petty and Cacciopo's model is called the **Elaboration Likelihood Model** (ELM) because one mode involves the listener elaborating on the model, referred to as "central processing" (picture the cerebral cortex responding to the message by kicking into gear and processing the message thoroughly). They call the other mode "peripheral processing" because the listener's decisions are based on less important factors, such as how something looks.

Chaiken's **Heuristic-Systematic Model of Information Processing** uses similar terms, calling the first mode systematic processing of the message, while the alternative is to rely on shortcuts (known as "heuristics" or simple rules of thumb) that bypass the need for deep thinking.

Daniel Kahneman's model was introduced in a 2011 book called *Thinking Fast And Slow*, which emphasizes the relative speed of these two modes of thought: System 1 is fast, instinctive, and emotional; System 2 is deliberate, slow, and logic-driven.

In the table above, the elements in the "Complex" column are explored in Chapter 7, the chapter about reasoning and logic; here we'll focus on elements in the "Simple" column.

In the 2007 film *No Country For Old Men*, Llewelyn Moss (played by Josh Brolin) needs to cross the border from Mexico into the U.S., and the border guard has reason to be suspicious: Llewelyn has no identification and is wearing only a hospital gown. The guard makes it clear that he alone has the decision-making power, and his tough talk suggests that he is going to base his decision on careful thought: "How do I decide [who enters the country]? I ask questions, and if I get sensible answers, then they get to go to America, and if I don't get sensible answers, they don't."

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://open.lib.umn.edu/commpractice/?p=320#oembed-1

If the guard knew the reality of the situation — that Llewelyn has stolen a suitcase full of drug money, and is being chased by a hit man — he would not let him in, so the guard would presumably want to know a lot about his situation, citizenship status, and why he doesn't have identification. But after asking just one question ("How did you come to be out here with no clothes?"), he switches to a different line of questioning: "Are you in the [military] service?" Llewelyn reports that he served in Vietnam in the 12th Infantry Battalion, and the guard is satisfied and lets him in. What level of thinking is that?

The guard's decision seems to be primarily based on one thing: Llewelyn is a veteran, so he must be a law-abiding, honest citizen (he isn't). The guard makes his decision in less than 30 seconds, which definitely qualifies as "thinking fast," he is relying on a heuristic (military means honest), and he spends no time elaborating on the message he hears. Assessments about credibility [Chapter 9] are often made on the basis of appearances, associations, or assumptions — and shouldn't be.

Heuristics / Peripheral Cues. People in peripheral processing mode employ "mindless reliance on nonessential cues."[1] What counts as nonessential or mindless? For this discussion, we can narrow it down to three things:

1. Simple associations
2. Visual appearance
3. "Following the herd" (sometimes called "social proof": looking to other people as guides for behavior, and assuming that if a lot of people are doing it, it must be the right thing to do).

Beginning with simple associations, let's think about Russian researcher Ivan Pavlov, and his famous experiment with dogs. He started with the observation that when dogs see food, they start to salivate — a natural ("unconditioned") response to help them swallow the food. He also recognized that there is no natural

1. Petty, R. E., Rucker, D., Bizer, G., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2004). The elaboration likelihood model of persuasion. In J. S. Seiter & R. H. Gass (Eds.), *Readings in persuasion, social influence, and compliance gaining* (pp. 65–89). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

reason why a dog should have a physiological reaction to a bell; it's a sound that on its own means nothing to a dog. When Pavlov put food in front of his dogs, he also rang a bell, getting them to associate that sound with food. After doing this enough times to fix the association in each dog's mind, he took the food away and the dogs salivated at the sound of the bell alone — an unnatural, "conditioned" response.

Two key points about this kind of association: it's easy to form, and it doesn't require any logical or natural basis for the association. A century later, this simple idea has become the basis of a large percentage of advertising. You may think the purpose of advertising is to tout the benefits of a product, but if you look closely at a lot of ads, you'll see that they don't actually say anything about the product: their whole purpose is simply to make an association between the product and a lifestyle or a feeling.

If you're selling a perfume or cologne, for example, people might want to know how it smells, how much it costs, and perhaps how it's made — but I dare you to find a perfume/cologne commercial that mentions any of those three factors. Instead, you'll find countless commercials featuring very attractive people living cool lives, with the vague implication that if you buy that same scent, your life will become that cool as well. Similarly, this is why so many banks and financial institutions buy naming rights for sports stadiums: "When you think of your beloved team, think of our bank."

In terms of visual cues, appearance may or may not mean that a computer is a good one, but Steve Jobs was insistent that Apple computers looked and felt cool, knowing that many people would buy those computers (and later, Apple phones) based on those factors. Appearance is especially important for websites: given the statistics about how much time people spend "sizing up" a website (an average of 52 seconds), it is vital that a home page look attractive. And salespeople know that "dressing for success" is important, shelling out for expensive cars and jewelry early in their career, when they can't really afford it, because it conveys the message that they must be good at their job.

As for group factors, although many people see themselves as independent thinkers who aren't influenced by their group, research proves that people imitate those around them much more than they realize.[2] Think about voting maps such as this one, which shows geographic voting patterns:

2. Cialdini, R. (2001). Influence: Science and Practice (4th edition). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

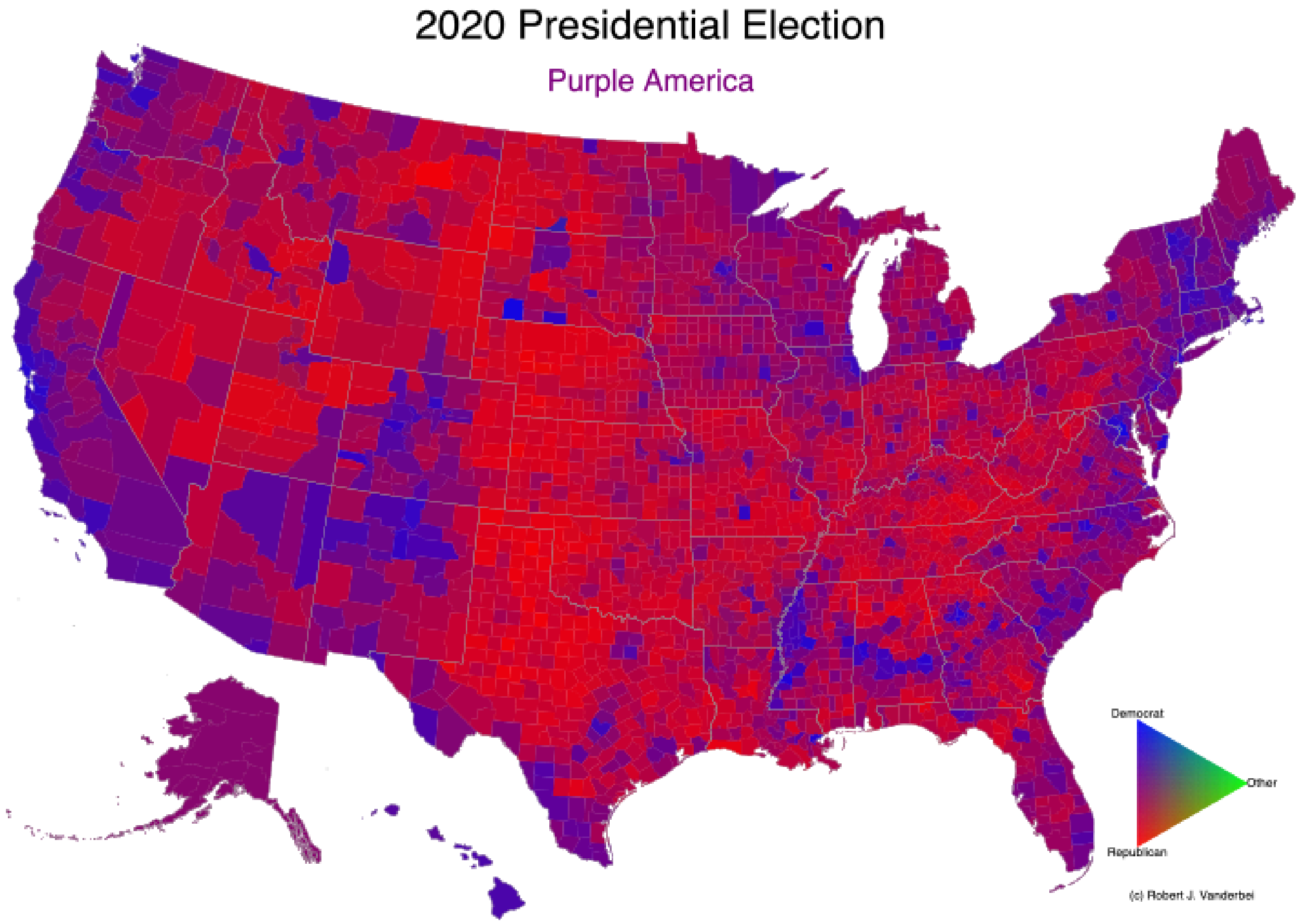


Image source

If people made up their minds individually about who to vote for, why would there be any geographic patterns at all? Or think of one specific form of political persuasion: yard signs. They rarely contain information beyond the candidate's name, so how can they have much persuasive power? Even without any details, they do seem to perform two vital functions: they increase name recognition (contributing to the attention phase discussed earlier), and they tell people who their neighbors are going to vote for. Do people really look around and find out what the neighbors are doing before they make up their own minds? So it would seem.

If there are two distinct mental processes that people can use when they are exposed to a persuasive message, why go one way or the other? The choice seems to boil down to three main factors: motivation, ability, and personality.

Imagine a friend who launches into a lengthy argument about why Major League Baseball should institute a hard salary cap. If you care deeply about the topic, your **motivation** has probably already led you to spend a lot of time thinking about it, and you won't be swayed to change your mind by simple arguments. But if you're a casual baseball fan and your friend seems to be making even a small amount of sense, that will probably be enough to get you to agree with them. Is it worth it to you to look up a lot of articles, read them, and take the time to think them through? No; five minutes is about as much time as you want to spend on that topic.

Ability is another factor: if you have a good grasp of the economics of baseball and can track a long discussion about the relative merits of the Competitive Balance Tax vs. a hard salary cap, you'll stay on it. But if you can't follow what your friend is talking about, you'll slip into peripheral processing mode and just think "My friend seems passionate about it, so they're probably right."

Finally, some people have the type of **personality** that is drawn to complex thought, and perk up their ears when someone says "Actually, it's more complicated than that…". (In psychology terms, they have a "high need for cognition"). Other people get a headache when things get too complicated, and are more comfortable looking at the world in black-and-white terms.

This mental processing takes place inside the mind of the receiver, of course, so the persuader doesn't have ultimate control over how the audience responds to the message. However, you can easily recognize when the persuader is *encouraging* central processing (by posing thought-provoking questions, providing a lot of information, or giving the audience means to do further research, such as including hyperlinks to articles), and when they want the audience to be in peripheral processing mode instead (prioritizing imagery over words, relying on Pavlov-style associations, and keeping things very simple). Since central processing / systematic thinking means that the receiver ultimately makes up their own mind, and since it can take a long time, it's easy to recognize why most advertisers prefer their audience to be in peripheral / heuristic mode. This is why perfume/cologne commercials don't tell you anything about the product; it would put the audience in the wrong mindset.

If you are reading this book, that might mean that you have a high need for cognition, just like me (and most college teachers and students). And if you turn on the television and see a lot of commercials that are mindless and simplistic, instead of shaking your head and thinking "Why do they make ads so stupid?," you can just recognize that you are not in the target audience. (See Chapter 5).

BOX 6.5: HOW TO SELL YOUR OLD CAR

If you haven't read the chapter about ethical communication (Chapter 3), please do so now. Some persuasion techniques skirt the boundaries of ethical communication, or could be characterized as manipulation or gimmicks. That said, here are six tried-and-true persuasion techniques you could use if you want to sell your car:

Low-Balling: Start off with a low price, and once the customer has expressed interest, you can begin adding extra fees. If you've bought tickets to a sporting event or concert, you've seen this in action: "convenience fees" or "booking fees" or taxes that in some cases double the originally advertised price. Some people will cancel the sale, but people who have their heart set on getting that car will put up with the annoyance of the extra fees.

High-Balling: Curiously, you can also go the other way — ask for a sky-high initial price, but be willing to accept much less. The idea is that if you start off quoting an unreasonably high price and the customer refuses, you look reasonable by lowering the price (or the customer might feel guilty about saying no). The trick here is that you never expect to get that high price. If you live in a culture where haggling is common, you know all about this technique.

Sweetening the Deal: Give the customer something "free" in addition to the car: "I'll throw in a free set of jumper cables and a food cooler." I put "free" in quotes because you already factored that into the selling price, so it's not really free — but to the buyer, it feels like a bonus. To do this well, timing is important: in the old infomercials, they would first convince you that the basic product is worth the selling price *before* they start the "But wait, there's more!" game. If you're the customer, just keep in mind: the seller has decided on the price, so they are not actually giving anything away for free.

Answering a Question with a Question: If a customer responds to your notification, you can assume they have an interest in buying your car — but you can also assume they have some reservations about it, since that's normal. The difference between a good salesperson and a great salesperson, they say, is that the great one is skilled at figuring out what those reservations are and getting beyond them. This requires you to find out what the customer is thinking, and the best way is to ask questions like "What features were you looking for?" or "What are your hesitations?" If the customer asks "How good is the mileage?" it's obnoxious to completely ignore their question, but taking it as an opportunity to fire a question back at them ("How much driving do you expect to do every week?") can lead to valuable insights or suggest persuasive responses. For example: "If you only drive 60 miles a week, a car that gets 5 miles more per gallon will only save you about $200, but you'll pay way more than that to find a more fuel-efficient car."

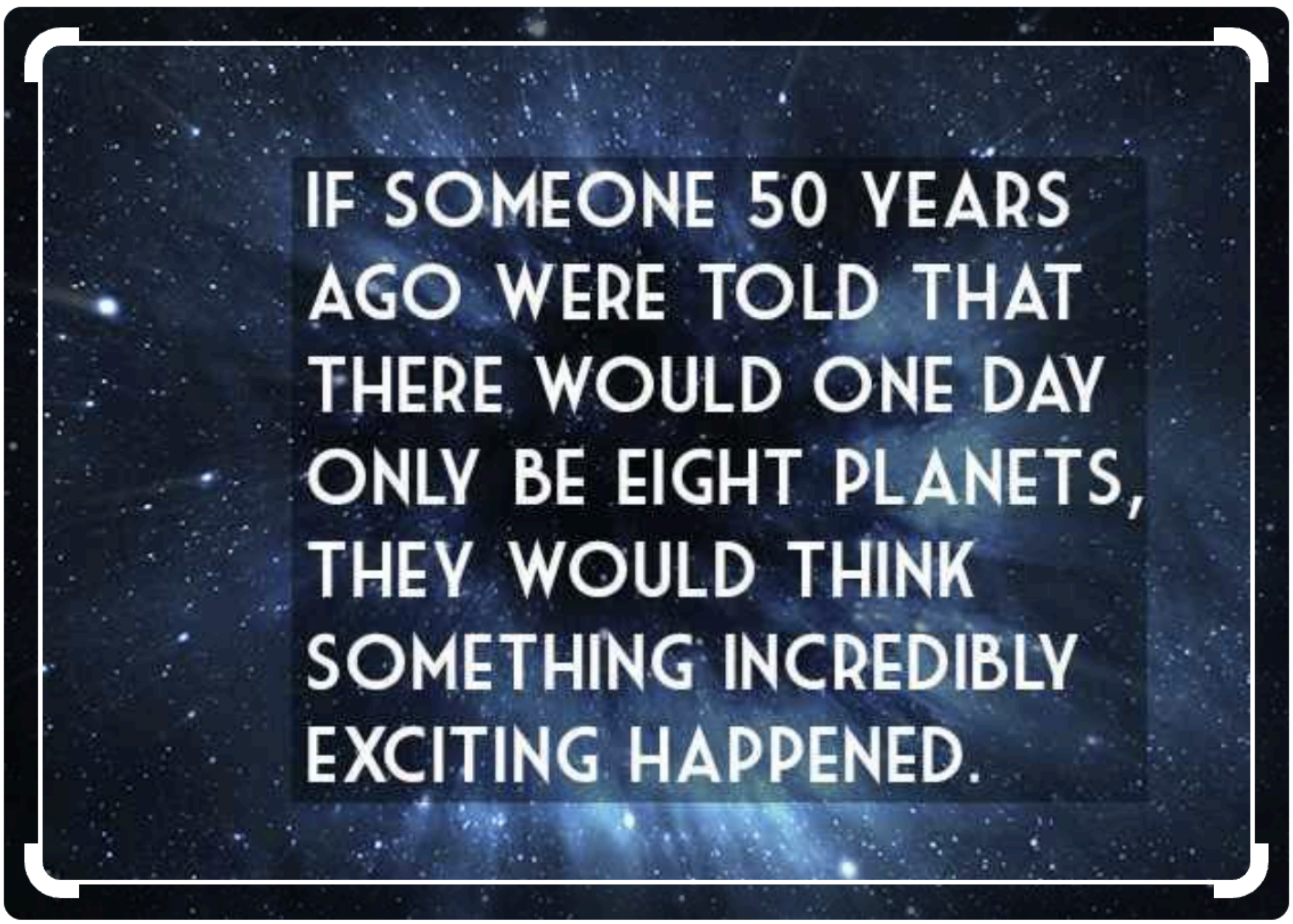
The Scarcity Technique. If you've ever watched a shopping channel, you may have noticed that their inventory always seems to be getting low: "There's only four more in stock!" This is connected to the action step in the 5-step model: when people feel like something is plentifully available and always will be, there is no immediate motivation to act now. If, on the other hand, it feels like the window of opportunity is closing fast, people will be motivated to act quickly. You have only one car to sell, so you can't play the "only four more in stock" game, but you can hint that there are other interested customers who may snatch that car any minute now.

Us vs. Them: Have you heard the phrase "good cop, bad cop"? It refers to a technique used when a suspect is arrested and interviewed by two police officers. One officer is aggressive and threatening, and the other one intercedes on the suspect's behalf, making the suspect feel like the friendlier cop is on their side. It's an illusion, of course: neither cop is on the suspect's side, but creating a common enemy can make the suspect feel gratitude toward the nicer one. At a car dealership, a salesperson may claim that they want to cut the customer a great deal but that their manager won't let them, leaving the customer more open to whatever the salesperson charges. If you're trying to sell your own car, you might have your romantic partner or roommate play "bad cop" and scowl at you for not asking enough for the car, then shrug your shoulders at the customer and say, "What can I do? I'm trying to help you."

CHAPTER 7: LOGIC & REASONING

7.1 SOMETHING INCREDIBLY EXCITING HAPPENED

Is Pluto a planet? The "official" answer, of course, is no, but if you were born before August 2006, it *was* a planet when you were a child, so what happened? A writer on Pinterest posted "If someone 50 years ago were told that there would one day only be eight planets, they would think something incredibly exciting happened."



Pluto didn't explode or leave its orbit, but something did happen: the International Astronomical Union (IAU) reclassified Pluto because it did not meet their requirements for being defined as a planet. That decision might not qualify as "incredibly exciting," but it certainly caused a stir. The IAU, for example, received many letters from children, including a young girl who tried to convince them to change its status back, writing "Do people live on Pluto? If there are people who live there, then they won't exist. Some people like Pluto. If it doesn't exist then they don't have a favorite planet."

Two years later, many astronomers gathered at Johns Hopkins University for "The Great Planet Debate," but they couldn't reach a consensus, so the IAU standard ruled the day and textbooks everywhere were changed. In other words, some scientists argued *for* changing Pluto's status, others argued *against* the change, and the first group won.

- In a similar vein, you could pose many questions about why American society is the way it is, such as:
- Why does the U.S. have a president, not a king?
- Why is there a drinking age, instead of letting children of any age have alcohol?
- Why do movies get an R-rating if they contain scenes of smoking?
- Why does the Upper Peninsula belong to Michigan instead of Wisconsin?
- Why do you need a license to drive a motorcycle but not an electric bicycle?
- Why is New Year's Day a national holiday?

(Similar questions could be raised about any country on earth)

One answer to all of these questions is: because someone argued successfully that things should be that way, and the people who argued against them were unsuccessful. To a large degree, the world is the way it is because of who won arguments and who lost. How do you win an argument? As the previous chapter showed, there can be many factors involved, but this chapter will explore logic and reasoning: formulating arguments that "make sense" to an audience.

7.2 THE PARTS OF AN ARGUMENT

Children tend to have arguments that follow a very simple structure: one child says "Hockey is the best sport," and another responds, "No it isn't." This might go back and forth for a few rounds, but neither is convinced by the other's arguments. A famous Monty Python sketch from 1972 has a similar structure, with a customer of the "Argument Clinic" (played by Michael Palin) asking the Arguer (John Cleese) if he's in the right room and the Arguer responding "I told you once." This is followed by a long string of "No you didn't" / "Yes I did!" until the customer complains that it isn't even an argument, it's just contradiction. When the customer explains "Argument is an intellectual process; contradiction is just the automatic gainsaying of anything the other person says," the Arguer responds "No it isn't" and the pointless volleys resume.

The customer in this sketch was hoping for the kind of conversation in which ideas are promoted and explored, an opponent offers counterarguments, and perhaps a resolution is reached. Since conversations are inherently complex, this isn't the meaning of "argument" I'll examine in this chapter. Here, "argument" will mean **reasoning put forward by one person**. I'll look only at the content and logic of statements (the "M" in the Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver model), not the conversational process, with all its twists and turns.

Claim and Support

Does "hockey is the best sport" qualify as an argument? No, because it's missing a necessary component. By itself, it's just a **claim**: an assertion that the speaker wants to prove. To meet the minimum standard of an argument, it also has to have some form of **support**: "Hockey is the best sport *because it's so fast-paced*." What's in that "because clause" can have many names, including:

- Evidence
- Proof
- Reasons
- Grounds
- Backing
- Support

Why is support so important? As Hitchens's razor states, "What can be asserted without evidence can also be dismissed without evidence."[1] Picture a field with a sign in front that reads "No trespassing." Contrast it with a sign that reads "No trespassing: Field is infested with scorpions." Better yet, envision scorpion tails in the dirt behind the sign. It's usually the evidence that convinces people, not the claim.

The distinction between claim and evidence, however, isn't always so clear. In the hockey argument, "it's so fast-paced" is also a claim that requires its own support. The same phrase can thus be either a claim or a form of evidence, depending on what function it's performing. In other words, the difference between claim and evidence is one of function, not of form or content.

There are also differences between the terms in that second component: "evidence" implies something tangible and verifiable, perhaps represented as numbers, but "reasons" imply something that just "makes sense." The child's question "Do people live on Pluto?" can be answered using scientific evidence (e.g., not unless they can breathe methane and enjoy a cool -387 degrees Fahrenheit). But when she goes on to ask "If there are people who live there, then they won't exist," you can answer her without scientific evidence: the IAU didn't destroy Pluto, but just renamed it, so no Plutoans were harmed. Making an argument based on reason, in other words, is different from finding evidence — although you could call both of them "support."

Warrant

To make a statement an argument, what other components are needed besides a claim and support? For the argument to work, those two elements need to be connected. It doesn't work, for example, to say "Hockey is the best sport. Oranges are in season right now." Unless you don't want to get asked "What on earth are you talking about?," you must have a thread between the two sentences — even if that thread is invisible.

Philosopher Stephen Toulmin calls this thread the "**warrant**." It can be described in various ways, but they all involve connecting the support (which he calls the "**grounds**") to the claim. The warrant is what authorizes the inferential leap from the grounds to the claim — the underlying assumptions that allow you to say "these grounds support the claim." Another way to put it is that warrants are the assumptions or values that drive the reasoning.

In the hockey example, the assumption is that "fast-paced" is a good quality in a sport. Not everyone will agree, but for the people who do, the argument "Hockey is a great sport because it's fast-paced" makes sense. This taps into a concept that Toulmin stressed: effective arguments are based on assumptions that the audience accepts.

One tricky thing about warrants is that they're almost never stated out loud, so it takes some digging to find them. Imagine a home builder who wants to have the modern amenities: water, electricity, sewer, perhaps natural gas. Unless they want to live completely "off the grid," they will need to get those utilities

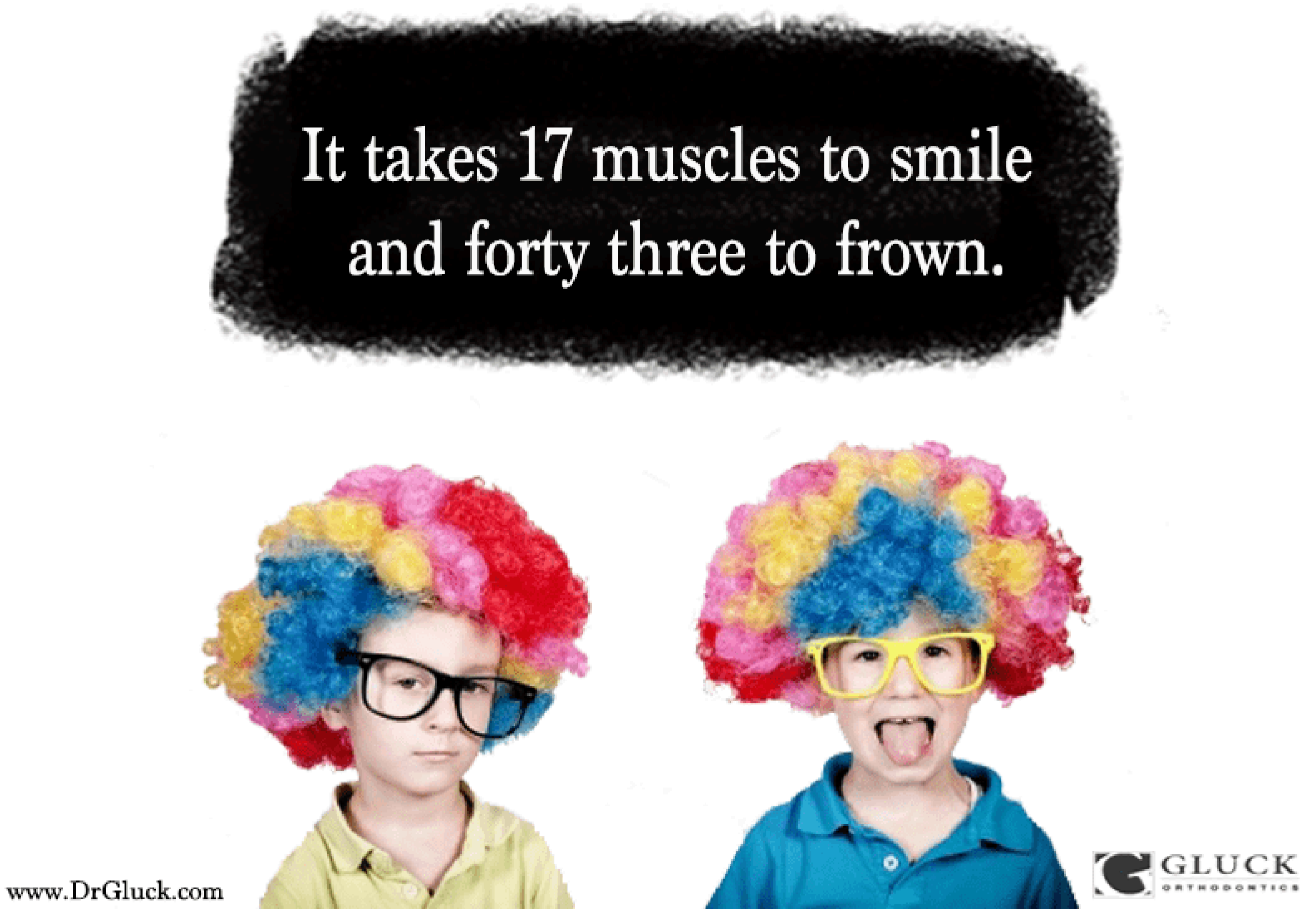
1. Hitchens, C. (2007). God Is Not Great: How religion poisons everything. Twelve Books. p. 150.

from the neighboring community (the city), and most of the connections will be invisible because they are underground. Likewise, the connection between the claim and the grounds is also usually invisible, but can be inferred.[2] It doesn't take a lot of detective work to figure out that "fast-paced is a good quality for a sport" is part of the hockey argument, even though it wasn't stated out loud.

Why not always state the warrant out loud? It's unnecessary, and slows down the conversation. The Ancient Greeks used the word "**syllogism**" for a classic three-part argument where everything is stated explicitly: "Being fast-paced is a good quality in a sport. Hockey is a fast-paced sport. Therefore hockey is a good sport." But aside from Socrates, who talks that way?

Those Ancient Greeks recognized that arguments in which not everything is stated directly are actually more effective than syllogisms, and they had a word for these as well: "**enthymemes**" (EN-thu-meems). Why are arguments with unstated parts better than fully explicit ones? It's not just about saving time, it's about who fills in the missing parts. If it's the audience, they are less likely to question the argument. This is why advertisers are so fond of vague slogans. Since 1944, Hallmark greeting cards have used the slogan, "When you care enough to send the very best… Hallmark." If they just said "Hallmark *is* the very best," it would be greeted with skepticism, objections, and possibly lawsuits, so they don't spell out this assumption; instead, it's in the three little dots (known as "ellipsis," another Greek word). Three little dots won't get you in trouble, but they are the heart of the argument.

2. I'm indebted to colleague Simon Calder for this metaphor.



GET A BETTER PICTURE THAT'S NOT AN ADVERTISEMENT

Because warrants are usually invisible, learning to identify them is a key skill in being able to analyze or formulate arguments. You may have heard the expression "It takes 43 muscles to frown and 17 muscles to smile." Here, even the claim (that you should smile more often than you frown) is unstated, but there are many other layers of unstated warrants buried underneath:

1. The assumption that both smiles and frowns are singular expressions that always take exactly the same number of muscles. Aren't there many different kinds of smiles and frowns, and don't they all use different muscles?
2. The assumption that using muscles is a bad thing that you should avoid if possible.
3. The assumption that your choice of facial expression should be based primarily on the number of muscles used, not on how you feel.
4. Finally, logic dictates that if it's better to smile than to frown because you use fewer muscles, then having no expression at all is even better, and you should spend as much time as possible with a completely

blank face.

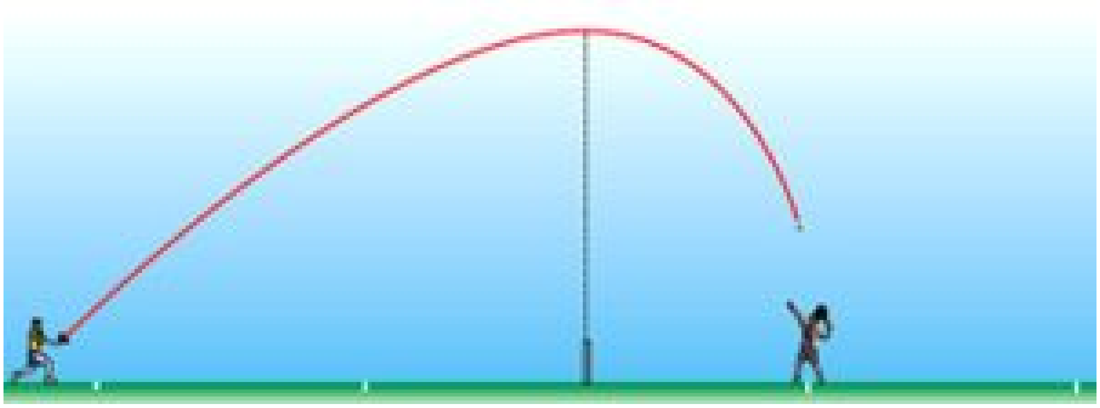
If you think any of these assumptions is shaky, the argument falls apart. But instead, people just treat this as a cute expression and embroider it on pillows. (By the way, the numbers are wrong: there are only 43 muscles in the entire human face, and no expression uses all of them. Also, depending on the type of smile or frown, smiles often use *more* muscles than frowns, as is clear in the picture above.)

Toulmin vs. LOBs

Warrants, along with claims and grounds, form key parts of a model of argumentation known as the **Toulmin Model**. They are not the only components, however. Because audiences and opponents can often think of counterarguments against your claim, you are in a stronger position if you anticipate those arguments. In some circumstances, you have an opponent who will jump in with those responses as soon as you've made your case; in others, you have an audience rather than an opponent, and they will think of the responses on their own.

- Consider this claim: "You should give up your car, and ride a bicycle everywhere instead." To make it an argument, you can add a list of reasons:
- Bicycling will save you money on gasoline, parking, and repairs
- You will not contribute to greenhouse gas emissions
- You will get exercise and fresh air
- You can go places that cars can't go
- You are likely to see more wildlife and smell more pleasant aromas
- You are more likely to have conversations with other bikers

Is this a strong argument? Actually, it's a weak one — one you could call a "**LOB**," short for a **"List of Benefits"**: a straightforward list of things that support your main point. Why is that weak? The answer lies in the other meaning of "lob": it's a tennis term that refers to a shot with a high arc.



If you're a beginning tennis player, you may be proud of hitting a ball so high in the air, but you'll quickly discover why that's a bad thing: it is far too easy for the opponent to hit it right back. Getting the ball over the net doesn't accomplish much if it's back in your court in two seconds.

While you were reading the list of benefits of riding your bicycle everywhere, what were you thinking? Perhaps questions such as:

- Yeah, but what about bad weather?
- Yeah, but doesn't it take longer to get there?
- Yeah, but don't you get tired and sweaty?
- Yeah, but isn't it dangerous?
- Yeah, but what about passengers?
- Yeah, but what if you need to transport things?

If you didn't anticipate any of those "yeah, but" counterarguments, you'll lose the debate quickly. In fact, it would be most effective to head off these points in advance instead of waiting for your opponent to bring them up or an audience member to wonder about them. This is why Toulmin says a strong argument requires a fourth element: the **rebuttal** (the response to counterarguments). I'll discuss techniques for how to rebut[3] an argument below.

Another option is to add **qualifiers** to your claim. These are adjectives and adverbs, often just small words that may go unnoticed but make a big difference. Their purpose is to back off from the certainty of what you're saying, and qualify your claim. An unqualified claim is one that you're asserting is 100% true in all possible circumstances; a qualified claim, in contrast, acknowledges exceptions and uncertainty through phrases such as "may be," "possibly," "in these situations," or "often."

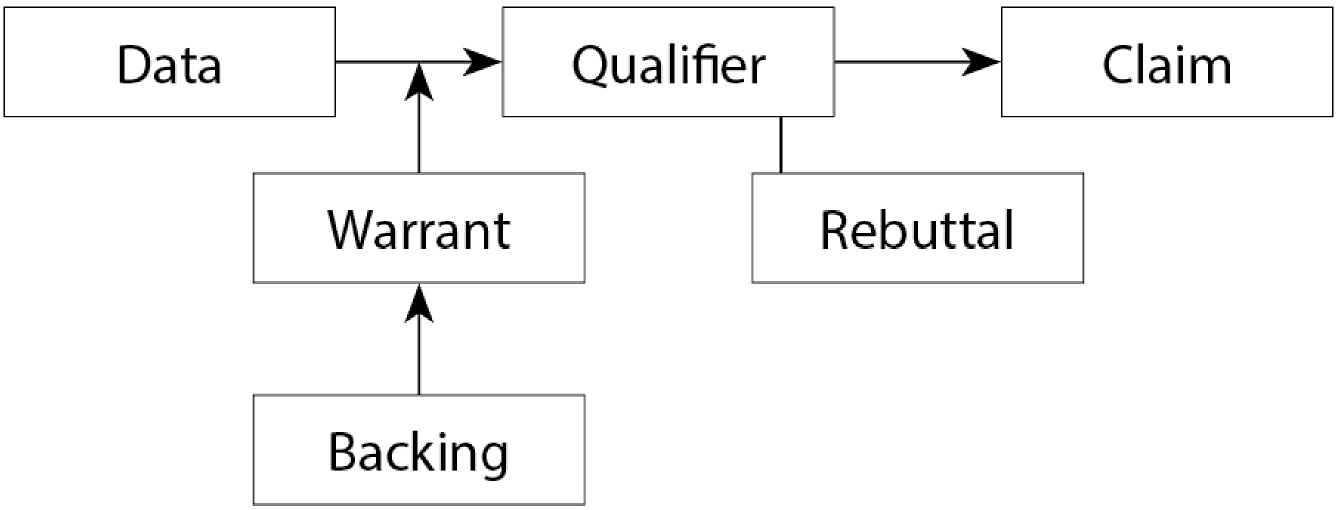
You may think that adding qualifiers makes your argument weaker, not stronger, but the opposite is true. If you assert something as true without qualifications, it doesn't take much to prove the claim wrong. Take the unqualified claim "Everyone hates algebra." What would it take to disprove that claim? Just one math lover. Now back off from the certainty and see what happens: "Most Americans dislike algebra." You toned the emotion down from "hate" to "dislike," you narrowed the geographic scope from the entire planet to one country, and, most importantly, you added the small qualifier "most." Finding one math lover doesn't disprove the claim; indeed, finding millions of math lovers still doesn't disprove it. If you tone it down even further to "many Americans," even finding 300,000,000 algebra fans won't make it a false claim.

Qualifiers make your job easier by giving you less to prove, which in turn makes it easier for a skeptical audience to accept your claim. In the hockey argument, do you need to prove that it is the greatest sport *in the world*, or is it enough to show that it's "a great sport"? If you take the second approach, your job will be

3. Yes, "rebut" is a valid verb. If it doesn't sound right to your ears, you can use "refute" instead.

much easier. In the "give up your car" argument, notice how many problems you'll solve if you add qualifiers: "If you're not traveling too far and the weather is good."

Finally, sometimes a warrant itself needs some support. Toulmin called the elements that support the warrant the **backing**. The distinction between the grounds (that support the claim) and the backing (that support the warrant) may be a subtle one, and if the audience already accepts the warrants, backing isn't necessary. In other situations, however, backing is needed to create a strong argument. Is it worth taking the time, for example, to establish that "fast-paced" is a good quality in a sport? If so, think of other examples of fast-paced sports to support that warrant.



What can you do with a diagram like this? If you want to analyze other people's arguments in depth, it's a good tool to guide you. If you want to make your own argument, it's a reminder of the pieces that can help you strengthen it.

BOX 7.2: BY YOUR LOGIC, I HAVE TO TAKE MY SHIRT OFF

One reason it's valuable to be able to identify warrants is because sometimes you can beat your opponent over the head with their own warrant. This was the case with a woman who posted on a biking forum in 2007 under the name ReachHigher. She biked to a Walmart four miles from home. When she got there, she found that there were no bike racks, so she brought her bike into the store. After being told by a greeter that she wasn't allowed to do this, she got into an argument about it with the store manager. The manager told her she couldn't bring the bike in because they sold bikes in the store — even though the shopper pointed out that her bike looked nothing like the ones they sold and was clearly not new. In the blogger's words:

> I was starting to get really frustrated since I had ridden all the way there seemingly for no reason, so I asked her if they also sold shirts in the store. She said yes so I took off my jersey and said "Well then I'd better not bring this in either." She got kind of flustered and said that it was a different situation but couldn't explain why. So I said that if they also sold shorts in the store that I'd better not wear those in either and I took off my shorts. Same goes for the shoes and sunglasses. Now I'm standing there in my spandex and a sports bra and I ask her if I can leave my things behind the customer service counter where they will be safe until I finish making my purchases and she said that I couldn't come into the store without shoes on, to which I responded "but I certainly can't wear shoes into the store because you sell those here and someone might think I've stolen them."

The biker ends the tale with "I was pretty tempted to take off the spandex too but I wasn't sure what constitutes indecent exposure in Virginia so I figured I'd err on the side of caution." Whether she won the argument depends on your point of view (she turned around and left the store), but she certainly succeeded in building an argument to which the manager couldn't think of a response. Her best weapon was taking the manager's warrant, "You can't bring things into a store that the store sells," and showing how untenable that position was.

7.3 LOGIC

What is Logic?

Does the word "logic" thrill you? Do you enjoy doing logic puzzles? If so, you're probably in the minority. Do you like pointing out the logical flaws in popular movies? (e.g., in *A Quiet Place*, why doesn't the family move to the waterfall so the monsters can't hear them?) Your friends might not enjoy watching movies with you, and might suggest that you shut off your logical brain and just enjoy the story. But making logical sense is an important skill for anyone, and even if logic puzzles give you headaches, having a grasp of logic is an advantage in life. The good news: while the study of logic can get abstract and baffling, logic's basic principle is simple: **Logic is the process of combining assertions to reach a conclusion**.

Earlier, I mentioned syllogisms, the classical form of deductive logic. If you start with the assertion that "All dogs are cute," and combine it with the observation that "Scooter is a dog," you're led to the logical conclusion that "Scooter is cute." True? Judge for yourself:

Scooter, the 2023 winner of the World's Ugliest Dog Competition

Perhaps the assertion "All dogs are cute" needs a qualifier, but the logic of the syllogism does hold up. On the other hand, "All dogs are cute; Wall-E is cute; therefore Wall-E is a dog" is not logically valid (there are other cute things besides dogs).

If you want to learn about the rules of logic, Brittanica's Laws of Thought page will give you plenty to chew on. For the rest of you, here are six different forms that logic can take:

1. **Deductive logic**: starting with a generalization, and applying it to a specific instance.
2. **Inductive logic:** using specific instances to form a generalization or find a pattern.
3. **Analogies**: Thing A is like Thing B, and we can carry over lessons from A to B (e.g.,, "Life is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you're going to get"). One form of analogy is a **precedent argument**: if something happened in a previous time and place, it will probably happen again ("In Germany, the Autobahn highway has no speed limits in most areas, and it has worked out fine, so we can lift the speed limit on American highways, too.").
4. **Hypothetical reasoning**: reasoning based on the phrases "if only" and "even if," which tend to lead in opposite directions. "If only" arguments generally point to a need for change, as in "If only we made the possession of assault rifles illegal, the deaths from mass shootings would go down — therefore we need to ban those guns." "Even if" arguments suggest that change would be ineffective, as in "Even if we make assault rifles illegal, people will still get their hands on them, so it won't make any difference."
5. **Criteria matching**: this kind of reasoning is especially useful in definitional arguments and evaluation arguments (arguing whether a thing is good or bad, right or wrong). **Criteria** are required features, standards, or qualities, often expressed as "must haves." If you're in a definitional argument about whether bowling is a sport, for example, you might come up with criteria for defining a sport: involves athletic skill, is competitive, involves risk of injury, has organized leagues, and requires special shoes. Someone making the evaluation argument that the final season of *Game of Thrones* was terrible might call it repetitive, contradictory, and sexist — criteria for a bad television show.
6. **Sign reasoning**: reaching a conclusion about the state of things based on observable signs, as in "You can tell someone is lying if their hands get fidgety" [See the "Spotting Liars" section of Chapter 12].

When someone calls an argument "logical," they are essentially saying "I accept the truth of the assertions in the argument, and the way those assertions are put together seems to work." In contrast, calling something "illogical" is another way of saying that some of the assertions in the argument are not true, or there is something wrong with the way they are combined. Figuring out exactly what is wrong can be challenging, but at least there is a shortcut to spotting flawed arguments: knowing the logical fallacies.

Logical Fallacies

It's valuable to know about fallacies because they are not just flawed arguments; they are flawed arguments that *sound logical* to some people. In fact, many people have built lucrative careers off of fallacies, but there are two reasons you shouldn't be one of those people:

1. It's unethical (see Chapter 3)
2. People who know about fallacies can call you out on them

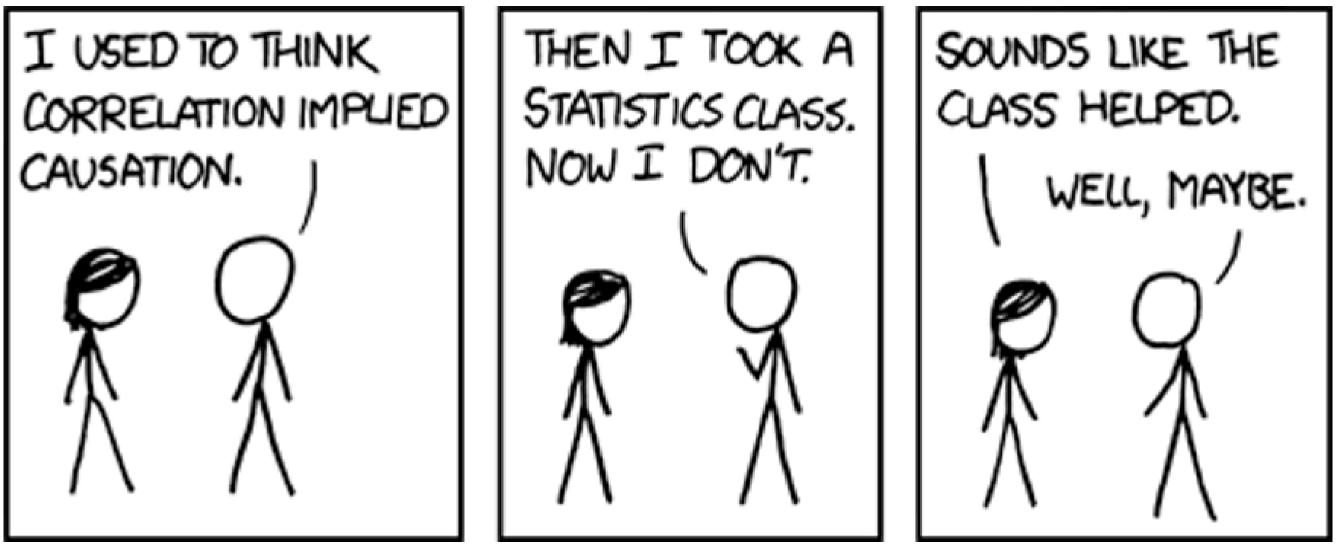
This section is a "spoiler": by reading it, you'll learn arguments that you can't ethically use anymore. Well, except for one thing: that implies that fallacies are categorically easy to identify — either an argument is a fallacy or it isn't. If you study them closely, however, you'll discover that they don't work that way, and there is no clear dividing line between a valid argument and a fallacious one. That doesn't mean you can't distinguish between good logic and fallacies (that would be an example of the "Fallacy of the Beard", #12 below); it just means that you have to deal with some ambiguity. Think about the discussion of fences vs. cores in Chapter 3: the core approach says that these fallacies are further away from the core than good logical arguments, even if you can't pinpoint the exact location of the fence.

Students of logical fallacies may notice an interesting linguistic feature: many of these fallacies go by Latin names. This is because the Ancient Romans were fascinated by them, and made long lists of them. The more recent tendency is to use English names, but I'll include the Latin names in case you like showing off, or run across someone else using one. Here are a dozen common fallacies, with some variants:

- **Bandwagon Fallacy** ("Ad Populum"): if it's popular, then it must be good. When ads brag that a movie is "the #1 film in America," they imply that it's a good movie, but they're blurring popularity with quality or morality. **The Futility Fallacy**, a variation of this, says that there's no point in having a law against something if people keep doing it anyway (such as pirating movies). It's a variation of the Bandwagon Fallacy because it's essentially saying "If it's popular, then it should be legal."
- **Either-Or Fallacy** (also known as "False Dichotomy"): when you sort the world into two categories, and argue that everyone who isn't in Category A must be in Category B. Example: "Are you with us or against us? If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem." Logical flaw: it ignores the middle ground, or other options besides A and B.
- **Ad Hominem** (attack the person): if you can't refute the argument, attack the credibility of the person making it. Sometimes it's legitimate to question someone's credibility, but this becomes a fallacy when it's intended to divert attention away from the topic or shut down debate. This is an example of a **Genetic Fallacy**, which says that an idea should be evaluated based on where it comes from or who thought of it (its genesis), rather than evaluated on its own terms. There's even a positive variant on this: if a brilliant person thought of it, it must be a brilliant idea. (Sorry to say, even brilliant people have dumb ideas, and vice versa).
- **Part for the Whole** (also known as the **Fallacy of Composition**): assuming that what is true for one part of an entity is true for the whole thing. "Portland, Oregon is a liberal city, therefore the whole state

of Oregon is liberal."

- **Whole for the Part** (also known as the **Fallacy of Division**): assuming that what is true for a greater entity is true for every part of that entity. "Oklahoma is a conservative state, therefore Alison, who lives in Oklahoma, is conservative."
- **Faulty Causality** (still sometimes known by the Latin phrase "Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc" — sometimes shortened to "Post Hoc" — which means "After this, therefore because of this"): Assuming that because Event B came after Event A, A must have caused B to happen. You blew on a pair of dice right before you won at the craps table, so blowing on the dice is what made you win. Superstitions are obvious examples, but even careful scientific studies can fall prey to assuming that an effect was caused by something that happened before it. This is why scientists are reluctant to use the word "caused."



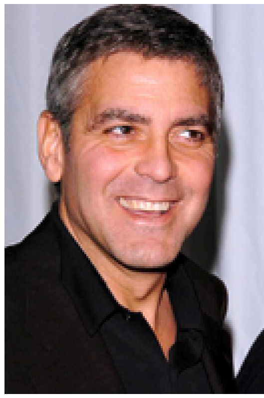
Source: xkcd. Used with CC-BY-NC license.

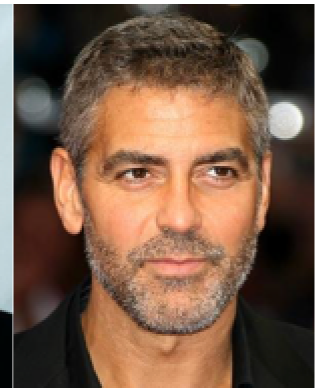
- **Appeal to Ignorance** ("Ad ignorantium"): This may sound like the arguer is counting on the audience being poorly informed, but instead it's an abuse of the principle of **burden of proof**. You may have heard about burden of proof in the context of criminal trials (where the prosecution has to prove that the defendant is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt), but it applies to non-legal contexts as well: if your roommate accuses you of leaving dirty dishes in the sink and you say "Name one time I did that," you are putting the burden on them to prove it instead of you proving it never happens.

  The Appeal to Ignorance fallacy is about situations where the person shifts the burden onto another person, but takes it a step further: if they don't prove that you are wrong, you count that as proof that you are right. As the previous fallacy suggests, proving anything is difficult, so "absence of proof" is not the same as "proof of absence." It also overlaps with the Either/Or Fallacy, since it ignores the middle ground possibility that nothing is proven either way. If your friend asserts that birds aren't real and tries to get you to prove that they are, don't fall for it: if you can't figure out how to prove something as simple as the existence of birds, they might declare themselves the winner of the debate. Instead, I suggest you respond with, "Wait a minute, you're the one with the loopy idea — it's your job to prove it's true." But if you're trying to avoid the Appeal to Ignorance fallacy, don't pounce on them if they fumble the answer; just take it as a sign of how hard it is to prove anything.

- **Slippery Slope:** assuming that if you take one policy step in a certain direction, it will inevitably lead to disaster. Initiatives to legalize gay marriage, for example, have long been met with predictions that it will eventually mean people will be able to marry their dog. While it's true that actions do have consequences and that the American legal system is based on part on precedent (if you made legal ruling X before, it means you must make ruling Y now), the word "slippery" implies that there's nothing that can be done to stop the catastrophic outcome once that first step is taken. This is one particular fallacy where the dividing line between legitimate argument and logical fallacy is so blurry that the radio show *Freakonomics* devoted an entire 49-minute episode to trying to untangle it.
- **Straw Man**: deliberately oversimplifying or mischaracterizing your opponent's position so you can make it look foolish or extreme, like knocking down a person made out of straw. There's a simple test for Straw Man: if your opponent is listening and they object to how you represented their view ("Hey wait a minute, you're putting words in my mouth!"), you've committed the Straw Man fallacy; if they say, "Actually yes, that *is* my position," you haven't. What if the opponent doesn't get a chance to respond? One way to prevent the problem is to find quotes of things they actually said or wrote (not taken out of context) instead of making sweeping generalizations on their behalf. But even if you quote directly, you can still commit a variant, known as the **Weak Man** fallacy: look through all the arguments your opposition makes, find the weakest among those arguments, then make it sound like it's their *only* argument. For a discussion of Weak Man, see this Atlantic article.
- **Fallacy of Obversion**: If that word looks unfamiliar (don't confuse it with "observation"), it's because you're not a coin collector, a member of the only group of people who use it regularly. When you think "obverse," think "the other side of the coin." The thing about coins, of course, is that you can't see both sides at the same time: there's a side you can see (the known), and a side you can't (the unknown). The fallacy of obversion is assuming you know what the unknown option looks like based on the option you can see. If you go to a sporting event in a large stadium with many entrances, you might pick the south entrance, but if there's a long line and you say "We picked the wrong line! The north entrance would have been faster," you're making that inference (unless you can actually see that north entrance). Watch for this in political ads against incumbents: "The current governor has done a bad job; vote for Mary Hum, the better choice." Mary Hum is the unknown side of the coin.
- **False Equivalence** (also known as "Moral Equivalence"): if you can refer to two things by the same name, or put them both in the same category, then there is no moral distinction between the two. "My foot was too close to your car when you backed up, and you ran over my foot. That makes you just as bad as a driver who runs over a pedestrian and kills them."

- **The Fallacy of the Beard** (also known as the **Paradox of the Heap**): This one is best illustrated with photographs of George Clooney:






  Does George Clooney have a beard? In photo 1, you might say an unequivocal no; in photo 4, you might say a definite yes. But what about photos 2 and 3, or an infinite number of pictures that could have been taken between the two? When is the exact moment his stubble became a beard? Another way to argue it is: yes he *does* have a beard in photo 1, just a really, really short one, so logically speaking, there's no difference between pictures 1 and 4. The "heap" version of the fallacy goes: is one grain of rice a "heap" of rice? How about two grains? Three? What about 57 or 93 or 248? Or go the other way: take a million grains of rice and start taking them away: If you can't pinpoint the exact number when it becomes a heap or stops being one, there is either no such thing as a "heap" or a single grain is a heap. This is the argument you might make when you are stopped for speeding and you say, "Aw c'mon, I was only doing 38 mph — what's the difference between 35 and 38?" If there's no real difference between 35 and 38, there's no difference between 38 and 41, or 41 and 44, all the way up to 200 mph. The flaw is that it doesn't recognize the importance of arbitrary cutoffs in life.

If a dozen fallacies isn't too much for you, I'll add on two more oddly-named fallacies that have received a lot of attention in recent years:[1] Whaboutism and Sealioning.

1. If you read Box 6.2 in the previous chapter, you might recognize what I just did as "Sweetening the Deal."

- **Whataboutism:** This could be considered a form of Red Herring (where you deliberately shift the topic away from an argument you don't want to deal with), mixed with a little Ad Hominem. The trick is simple: if someone wants to talk about something you feel protective about and you don't have a good way to defend it, shift to a different topic that the other person feels defensive about. In the 1999 film *Office Space*, Joanna (Jennifer Aniston) confronts her boyfriend Peter (Ron Livingston) about his plan to skim profits from his employer, which she calls "wrong." Peter turns it back on her, implying that she too is selling out her soul for an evil corporation. There wouldn't be anything wrong with wanting to talk about her employer, except that his goal is to deflect the topic away from himself.

VIDEO: To hear John Oliver discuss whataboutism and the connection to Moral Equivalence (Fallacy #11), watch this:

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- The name **Sealioning** might be difficult to decipher unless you knew about this cartoon:

This refers to a technique that is all too easy to do in social media: keep asking questions, in the name of exploring a topic, until your respondent is exhausted and tells you to buzz off. This makes the "sea lion" look reasonable and the other people look closed-minded and uninterested in looking at the evidence — until you realize that that stated goal was always a pretext. You may see a connection to the Appeal to Ignorance Fallacy (#7). Bailey Poland calls it an "incessant, bad-faith invitation to engage in debate."[2]

VIDEO: If you want to see a video rundown of some of these fallacies, and dozens more, check out "31 logical fallacies in 8 minutes" by Jill Bearup:

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://open.lib.umn.edu/commpractice/?p=349#oembed-2

2. Poland, B. (2016). Haters: Harassment, Abuse and Violence Online. University of Nebraska Press – as cited in Sullivan, E., Sondag, M., Rutter, I. Meulemans, W., Cunningham, S. Speckmann, B. & Alfano, M. (2019). Can real social epistemic networks deliver the wisdom of crowds? In *Oxford Studies in Experimental Philosophy* (Vol 3). Eds. Lombrozo, T., Knobe, J. & Nichols, S. Oxford University Press.

7.4 REBUTTAL: HOW TO RESPOND TO OPPOSING ARGUMENTS

*"Everything that guy just said is bull**t! Thank you."*

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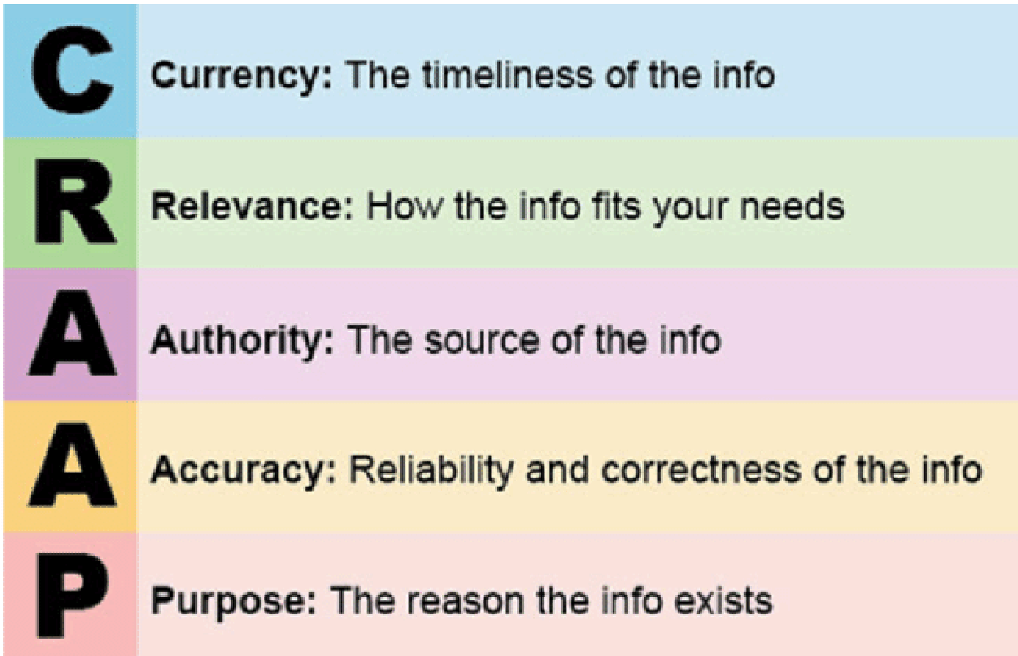
That was the entire opening statement of new lawyer Vinny Gambini (Joe Pesci) in the 1992 movie *My Cousin Vinny*. The trouble is, it's supposed to be an opening *statement*, not an opening *argument* (in the courtroom, you're told to save the arguing for the closing *argument*), so the opposition objected and the judge ordered the argumentative parts stricken from the record. That means Vinny's first ever opening statement officially consisted of just the words "Thank you." Even if the first seven words had not been stricken, they hardly qualify as an effective rebuttal. How should one rebut instead? Odds are, you've been trying to figure that out ever since another child insulted you on the playground and you couldn't come up with a snappy retort (or it came to you too late, which is called "*treppenwitz*" in German: a reply you only thought up on the staircase after leaving the room).

The earlier sections of this chapter provide clues about different ways you can respond to an argument, starting with the Toulmin concepts of grounds and warrants. As the Hitchens razor (cited earlier) indicates, some claims have no grounds to back them up (or you could say that the grounds are "because I said so" and the warrant is "I am a credible person"). In that case, the first response can just be asking "What's your evidence?" or "How do you know?" Even if the other person has evidence, that doesn't mean it's strong, and you might take the opportunity to pick it apart.

Questioning the Evidence: Evidence can take many forms, from hard statistical proof to "I just feel it in my gut," and there are so many potential questions you could ask about evidence that the difficult part is thinking of all of them. Librarian Sarah Blakeslee came up with a handy — if somewhat rude — acronym to help you think of those questions: CRAAP.



CRAAP test by Sarah Blakeslee at the Meriam Library California State Universiy, Chico, shared with CC-BY 4.0 license

Currency asks if the information is dated or current, and although some information we learned a long time ago is still accurate (water still consists of two hydrogen atoms and an oxygen atom), other information is obsolete or has been disproven since it was first introduced.

Relevance relates to the need to connect grounds to the claim. Sometimes the connection is weak or nonexistent. In arguments against banning certain types of weapons, for example, sometimes people cite stories of homeowners who defended themselves against an intruder…but with a different kind of gun than the argument is actually about. Some evidence isn't at the right level — it works for an audience of middle school children, for example, but wouldn't "fly" in a courtroom.

Authority is about where the information came from, which is sometimes difficult or impossible to track down. Can you pinpoint where the information originated, and if so, what are the credentials or organizational affiliations of the source? Is the source stepping beyond the bounds of their expertise, or are they a credible authority on that particular subject?

Accuracy is about the reliability and truthfulness of the information: what kind of evidence is it based on? (Remember, the distinction between "claim" and "evidence" is contextual, so "what's the evidence for that evidence?" is a legitimate question). Did it appear in a source that is reviewed or refereed, such as an academic journal (where peers scrutinize an article before it is published), as opposed to a vlog where anyone can say what they want without having to verify it? Sometimes clues like spelling and grammar can tell you how meticulous vs. sloppy the source is.

Purpose looks at why the information exists in the first place, and if the source has a reason to promote a particular agenda or distort the truth. Does their point of view appear to be objective and neutral, or would you count it as opinion or propaganda?

You can't always come up with definitive answers to all of these questions, but knowing the questions can help you attack questionable evidence. (For great examples of attacking evidence, watch the rest of *My Cousin Vinny*).

Questioning the Warrant is another approach to rebutting, and you can do it without examining the evidence. As the "smile vs. frown" example illustrates, even if it were true that smiling takes fewer muscles than frowning, there are still reasons that argument doesn't make any sense. The first step, of course, is to identify what the underlying warrant is; since warrants usually remain unstated, this might take some skill. But if you can strip away the padding and get to the core argument, sometimes all you have to do is expose it to the light of day to show that it's a weak argument.

If a company is arguing against a life-saving measure because it will hurt their business, for example, just saying "So profits are more important than human life?" can be enough. Another approach is to take the warrant a few steps further than the original person did. Remember the biker in Walmart: "Okay, if that's true, then we should also…." (I remember a student making a rather forceful argument about why fighting in hockey is necessary and good, which made me ask, "So do you also think fights should be a central part of professional baseball and soccer too?"). Finally, you can argue for an opposing warrant. Warrants can sometimes be encapsulated in proverbs or common expressions. The thing about proverbs, though, is that there always seems to be an opposing one: "look before you leap" vs. "he who hesitates is lost," or "many hands make light work" vs. "too many cooks spoil the broth." Other warrants are derived from core values, but there is often an opposing value to consider as well: freedom vs. safety, equality and level playing field for all vs. accommodating special needs and circumstances.

If someone is proposing a particular plan or policy, there are many ways to attack the idea. Let's take the example of Brexit — the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union in 2020. Opponents could ask: Is the plan really necessary, or is this a crisis that may resolve itself? Could the consequences of the proposed action be even worse than the current situation? Is this the right solution to the problem, or is there another way to address your concerns that would work better? What are the practical questions that need to be considered, such as: "What will it cost? Who will be in charge? Will it lead to new rules that can't be enforced?" In the Brexit example, some of these questions don't seem to have been fully considered until it was too late. On the other side, if you are proposing a plan and the opposition is putting up a fight about it, you can respond with: "Yes, my plan isn't perfect but something needs to be done, and inaction is not a good option," "Do you have a better plan?", or "Great ideas are worth the cost."

One last principle to keep in mind when responding to a counterargument is that it's okay to **concede** some points here and there. Do you have to win on *every* point? If you don't, will letting the other side win on a few points actually help your position? Toss them a bone (as long as it's not your main argument). Sometimes you can even turn concessions into advantages. When the opposition wants to use an insulting name, for instance, some people respond by embracing the name (an example is the word "queer," which started as a vicious insult and ended up being a preferred term by the queer community). This might require letting your ego back off a little bit, but ego can be a hindrance instead of a help in many situations.

Finally, my years of consulting with lawyers have taught me three valuable lessons from the courtroom that have carried over into other areas of my life:

1. **If you think the opposing side doesn't have a legitimate case, you're not ready for trial**. I saw it many times: if you spend the night before trial making breezy jokes about how you're going to wipe the floor with the opposition, you're in trouble. Never underestimate the opposition, or play the Straw Man game on yourself (deliberately oversimplifying or misrepresenting their case to make yourself feel better). Finding out what their case is really about is a much wiser choice.
2. **Overstating your case, and being 100% certain that you are right about everything, is weakness, not strength**. Witnesses who are absolutely sure of what they know are not credible witnesses. People respond well to the willingness to at least acknowledge limitations or consider opposing views. (SEE Chapter 9.4).
3. **Your best weapon is a question the other side can't answer**.

Even if you have no plans of becoming a lawyer or ever seeing the inside of a courtroom, these lessons can be helpful when you find yourself stuck in a conversation with a strongly opinionated relative at a holiday meal, shouting at opponents at a rally, or in a heated online discussion.

BOX 7.4: WHAT VIZZINI REALLY TAUGHT US

One of the movies from the 1980s with the most enduring popularity is *The Princess Bride*, featuring the memorable character Vizzini (played by Wallace Shawn). He fancies himself a genius, but his fate reveals otherwise. He and his two henchmen (swordfighter Inigo Montoya and giant Fezzik) have kidnapped the title character and seem to be getting away with spiriting her off to a foreign country when the mysterious Man In Black (Cary Elwes) catches up to them. After defeating both the swordsman and the giant, the Man in Black challenges Vizzini to a "Battle of Wits" involving poisoned wine. The Man in Black shows Vizzini the poison — tasteless and odorless "iocaine" powder — and turns his back to fill two cups, saying *"Alright, where is the poison? The battle of wits has begun. It ends when you decide and we both drink — and find out who is right, and who is dead."*

Vizzini proceeds to show off his "dizzying intellect" by trying to deduce which cup has the poison in it. The trouble is, all he really does is think up a reason why it would be in his own cup, followed by a reason it would be in the other cup. They include syllogisms such as "iocaine comes from Australia. As everyone knows, Australia is entirely peopled with criminals. And criminals are used to having people not trust them, as you are not trusted by me. So, I can clearly not choose the wine in front of you." Vizzini shifts back and forth, with each argument contradicting the previous one instead of building on it and each one riddled with fallacies, until he finally distracts the Man in Black and switches the cups. While he is gleefully declaring himself the victor, Vizzini abruptly keels over dead.

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Logic is the process of combining assertions to reach a conclusion, and the study of logic begins with examining the assumptions that underlie the argument. Vizzini is full of assumptions, some quite far-fetched (only people who study sword fighting know that human beings are mortal?), but at least he puts on a show of examining his own premises. It's not until after he's dead that we find out which assumption he *should have* questioned but didn't: that the poison was only in one cup. The Man in Black, it is revealed, spent years building up an immunity to iocaine, and put it in both cups. Vizzini called other people morons, but what made him a moron is that it never occurred to him to question the rules of the game, or notice that the Man in Black never said only one cup was poisoned (the closest he comes is that phrase "find out who is right, and who is dead"). When I show this movie in class, I freeze it at the frame where Vizzini is toppling over and loudly remind my students, **"It's the assumptions you *don't* question that kill you!"** If you get nothing else out of this chapter, at least remember that lesson.

CHAPTER 8: EMOTIONS

8.1 EMOTIONS--WHO FEELS IT, KNOWS IT

"Most of us think of ourselves as thinking creatures that feel, but we are actually feeling creatures that think."
—— **Jill Bolte Taylor, *My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist's Personal Journey***

How to 'Play' a Piano Without Touching It

When I was growing up, we had an unusual plaything in the garage: an old upright piano that we were allowed to experiment with. My siblings and I routinely took the front panel off so we could see the inner workings, look at how the pedals worked, and hit the strings with different things. Then we made the discovery that you didn't have to hit the strings at all: if you held down the loud (sustain) pedal and sang loudly in front of the piano, it would sing back! The vibrations from our voice created a sympathetic resonance in the piano strings. You can do the same thing with a guitar: sing the right note into a guitar, and if the frequency you produce in the air matches the frequency of the string, the guitar will "sing" that note.

This provides an intriguing model of how emotion and communication work. If you watch an actor perform an emotionally powerful scene, or a singer perform an achingly beautiful solo, why does that make you cry? That actor or singer isn't reaching into your mind and making you feel an emotion, but is just expressing the feeling themselves; when it matches emotions that you already experience, your "heart strings" hum along. Then again, there have been times when I've seen an actor or singer attempt to create this emotional power, and I felt nothing: either it was too obvious that they were trying to pluck at those hearts strings and I resented the manipulation, or I just couldn't relate to the feeling (the frequencies didn't match). It's not just actors and singers, of course: I've had the same responses to ordinary citizens in the news expressing their reactions to an event, or students tearfully asking for a deadline extension, or protest leaders pounding on the podium with an angry fist — sometimes my heart hums along, and sometimes it doesn't.

This is an extension of the Lego model of communication from Chapter 1: the idea that communication is not about putting thoughts (or feelings) into another person, it's about using channels of communication to get them to recreate a construct similar to yours. This time, it's a feeling instead of an intellectual idea.

The thing about emotions is that they are easier to share than thoughts; as the discussion of "abstraction" in Chapter 4 noted, even if someone's experience is different from yours, the underlying emotions can be relatable and form a connection. This is one of the reasons people enjoy art in all its forms: it taps into universal emotions, while perhaps taking you into new realms you haven't experienced before. I've never been a superhero who could fly through the cityscape and defeat villains with super strength, but when Peter Parker realizes he ruined a white shirt by washing it with his Spiderman suit, I can relate. This is why movies about tragedies don't focus only on the tragedy itself; there are always scenes depicting how the characters are experiencing that tragedy, and if the audience relates to the character, they can put themselves in their shoes and feel the same reaction. (Imagine *Titanic* without Rose and Jack — it would just be a story about a ship sinking).

8.2 THE STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES OF EMOTIONAL APPEALS

Strengths

All of this is intended to establish that people connect to each other through emotions, so to the extent that the purpose of communication is to **make connections**, emotional expression does this better than other types of communication. This is why newscasts are not just about what happened: including reaction shots of the people involved makes an event real for an audience (e.g., don't just show the tornado debris, but talk to the homeowners about what it was like to lose everything). Chapter 3 discussed defamation trials (under "Ethical Blogging"), noting that juries have awarded some huge verdicts in recent defamation trials. This wouldn't happen unless those juries understood what it feels like to have your good name ruined.

Emotional communication is not just about connection, however: it's also about **motivation and movement**. In the Elephant-Rider-Path model from Chapter 6, don't forget that it's the elephant who actually does the walking. The word "movement" comes from the Latin *movere*, which turned into the Old French word *emouvoir* ("to stir up"), from which we get the Middle French word *émotion*. Emotions move people. It is no coincidence that we say "that was a moving speech" to refer to one with strong emotional impact.

If you look at the most effective and memorable speakers of the last century — Martin Luther King Jr., Winston Churchill, and, unfortunately, Adolph Hitler — what people remember best is not the intellectual content of their speeches, but how those speeches made them feel. The ideas in the "I Have a Dream" speech are all very simple, and in fact, from an intellectual side, the speech can be criticized for being a jumble of mixed metaphors (manacles of segregation, bad checks, islands of poverty, quicksands of injustice, storms of persecution). An English teacher might say that King should have followed just one such metaphor through the whole speech rather than jumping around from one visual image to another. But it seems unfair to criticize the speech on these grounds, because the logical progression is not what made it so powerful. The reason it is considered one of the greatest speeches of the 20th century is because of how it made people feel: filled with hope, and determined to act.

Since then, many deep thinkers have written detailed analyses of race relations in America, but it's safe to say that none of those pieces has had anywhere near the impact of "I Have a Dream." No matter how brilliant, such analyses don't have much influence on the world unless they *move* people. Eighteenth-century theologian Emanuel Swedenborg said "anything that does not enter the heart dies in the mind." Some scholars think that communication is primarily about the transfer of intellectual ideas, but this chapter's opening quote by brain scientist Jill Bolte Taylor is a reminder that humans are fundamentally emotional beings, not intellectual ones. The subtitle of this chapter, "Who Feels It Knows It," is the title of a song by reggae singer Bob Marley, illustrating the idea that even something as intellectual-sounding as "knowledge" is really about feeling.

People **remember** emotions, too. Writer Maya Angelou said, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." The relationship between emotion and memory is not a straightforward one, because emotions can be fleeting and thus quickly forgotten, or they can be long-remembered (ask anyone who was actually at MLK's speech).

One emotional need that's often forgotten is the need for comfort, especially in times of unrest and anxiety. It helps explain the rise of conspiracy theories: for some people, the thought that a hidden organization controls the world is emotionally comforting. Add to that the emotional satisfaction of feeling like you have secret knowledge unknown to the ignorant masses (a feeling conspiracy theorists share with college students, by the way, since all that tuition money is worth it only if you learn things that people without college degrees don't know), and a cozy sense of belonging with other people who share your views, and you can understand why conspiracy theorists often sound condescending when talking about the "sheeple" who are too naive to look at the truth about how things work. Now imagine how it feels if an outsider (to whom they feel no sense of connection) systematically proves that their theories are false and they are a fool for believing them; where is the comfort now? Redditor PetiPal, discussing why COVID conspiracy theories were so strongly held even by people who were dying of COVID, wrote "The conspiracies were an emotional tool for them, and they will outlive everything else until a more comforting emotional tool comes along." This is not to defend the value of false theories, but rather to point out that mocking people for seeking comfort in the wrong places does not motivate them to change their mind.

Weaknesses

The downsides of emotional appeals, however, are significant. First and foremost, note the phrase "I resented the manipulation" when I described why some emotional expressions backfire for me. Emotional appeals have long been seen as a form of **manipulation and exploitation**, and in the eternal battle between intellect and feeling, "let's think rationally about this" and "be reasonable" sound so much more respectable than "getting emotional about it." Some scholars have hypothesized that there is a gender or cultural bias in the view that intellect is preferable to emotion.[1] In any case, it's a deeply entrenched view for many.

Clearly there are people who appeal to fear in order to control others, so the ethical implications are undeniable. One reason it's possible to control people through fear is because when fear rises to a high enough

1. Pavco-Giaccia, O., Fitch Little, M., Stanley, J. & Dunham, Y. (2019). Rationality is Gendered. Collabra: Psychology 5 (1): 54. doi: https://doi.org/10.1525/collabra.274; Lloyd, G. (1979). The man of reason. *Metaphilosophy*, 10(1), 18-37.

level, the reasoning mind shuts down. The word "panic" incorporates both the emotion of fear and the tendency to make very bad choices.

Even if people aren't in a state of panic or high emotional arousal, however, they can see an emotional appeal as manipulative, and react against it as a result. Blatant sympathy appeals or "guilt trips" often backfire, and the targets may accuse the source of "yanking their chain." Some people like going to "tear-jerker" movies, but to others, that phrase itself depicts the problem — they don't like having someone "jerk" the tears out of their eyes. When someone tells me "This video will make you cry, I guarantee it" or "I dare you not to laugh," it just triggers reactance [see Chapter 6] and guarantees that I won't have any emotional reaction. *Don't tell me what to feel!*

Another weakness of emotional appeals is that emotions are **unpredictable**. Sometimes people think dramatic movies are funny instead of touching, sometimes they sympathize with the villain instead of the hero, and sometimes they panic when you try to calm them down. Characters in scripted movies and TV shows might behave in predictable ways, but real people don't always do that. In the times in my life when I've anxiously anticipated a difficult conversation with a loved one, for example, the conversation has never once turned out the way I thought it would. (This isn't to say that it always turned out better than I dreaded it would; it was just different).

This unpredictability can take several different forms. The examples in the previous paragraph are people reacting with the **wrong emotion**. Other times, a source might succeed in producing the right emotion, but the receiver directs it at the **wrong target**: a different person or thing than the one the source intended. Your dentist might try to get you to start flossing your teeth by putting the fear of tooth decay into you, but instead you just fear the dentist instead. The documentary *Bowling for Columbine* ends with a scene in which director Michael Moore confronts actor Charlton Heston, who was head of the National Rifle Association at the time, asking him tough questions about gun rallies following mass shootings. Moore chose it as the last scene of the film, so he must have thought it succeeded in generating anger toward gun advocates — but instead many viewers got angry at Moore for conducting a "shameful ambush" on an old man.

Another weakness of emotional appeals relates to **duration**: the effect may be short-lived. Yes, the Maya Angelou quote points out that some emotions are long-remembered, but others dissipate quickly. This is why fundraising ads for animal shelters or famine relief programs end with urgent pleas to "CALL NOW! OPERATORS ARE STANDING BY" — because if you don't donate right then, when the emotion is at its peak, you probably won't do it later when your mood has changed. **Compassion fatigue** is a serious problem for charity organizations and medical caregivers. Other kinds of emotions, such as fear and anger, change over time as well; sometimes the feeling just runs out.

In sum: an emotional appeal, like any other form of communication, has its advantages and disadvantages, and understanding them can help you make good choices about when to use such an appeal and when not to. Messages that lack an emotional dimension can be too abstract and esoteric to have much impact; messages that are too emotional can cloud thought and backfire. For me, at least, what works best are ideas that make me feel, and feelings that make me think. The rest of this chapter looks at how emotions work in general, and at how particular emotions differ from each other.

8.3 THE PALETTE PRINCIPLE: HOW EMOTIONAL COMMUNICATION WORKS

If I sounded too admiring of artists at the beginning of this chapter, that may be because my father was a watercolor painter, and I grew up in a household full of paint supplies, including palettes. In case you don't know, painters first squeeze paint onto a palette, then dip into the various colors with their brush as they paint. This is the origin of my model of emotional communication, the Palette Principle. In this model, the colors are emotions in the receiver's mind, and the painter works with those emotions to create the desired effect (which sounds a little manipulative, I know, but can be done ethically in accord with the TARES model from Chapter 3).

My father's actual palette

This model has two parts. The first is based on the principle that **"You can't put emotions into people, you can only draw them out."** The palette inside the receiver's mind includes some colors and not others; the painter can't add new colors to it.

One person who knew about emotional appeals was horror movie director Wes Craven, who you might say was good at "making people afraid." But he didn't put it that way: He said, "Horror films don't create fear, they release it." People walk into the theater already afraid of certain things; a film doesn't create those fears from scratch.

Think about the experience of paying someone a compliment: sometimes the recipient is delighted and flattered, and other times the compliment falls flat. What's the difference between a failed compliment and one that makes the person's whole day? Is it the phrasing of the message? I doubt it; wording can make a small difference, but it isn't the biggest factor. The main factor is how the recipient *already feels* about the thing you're complimenting them on. If they think they have a nice singing voice and you say the same, they'll be overjoyed. If they think they sing like a crow and you compliment their lovely voice, they'll just think you're tone deaf or trying to flatter them for ulterior motives.

If all of this true, and some colors (emotions) aren't already in the receiver's head, it's a lost cause, right? You can't paint with blue if there is no blue on the palette; if you want someone to feel sympathy and they are just not a sympathetic person, good luck to you. Luckily, the Palette Principle has a second part: the **variety of colors**.

If you can't work with blue, work with red instead. If a sympathy ploy fails, appeal to anger instead. That's what the lawyers did in one of the most well-known civil lawsuits of the 20th century: the McDonald's "spilled coffee case" (officially called Liebeck v. McDonald's). In that case, 79-year-old Stella Liebeck sued McDonalds over burns she received while holding coffee in her lap in a drive-thru. Many people mistakenly think that the jury awarded her money because they felt sorry for her, but in fact, the jurors said that their motivation for awarding punitive damages was their anger at McDonald's. (For one thing, a quality control officer for the company testified that he saw no reason for McDonald's to change the policy of serving its coffee much hotter than most restaurants did, despite knowing that 700 other customers had already been burned in similar ways). The problem with sympathy is that it's easy for people to say "I feel sorry for you, but…." By the way, the jurors did think Ms. Liebeck was 20% to blame for her own injuries, suggesting that they weren't entirely sympathetic to her. But they were angry at McDonalds, and angry people are strongly motivated to act.

Fear, guilt, sympathy, anger: what other emotions could be on that palette? One place to find answers is on "emotional color wheels" (I am not the first to equate emotions with colors). Some are detailed and complex:

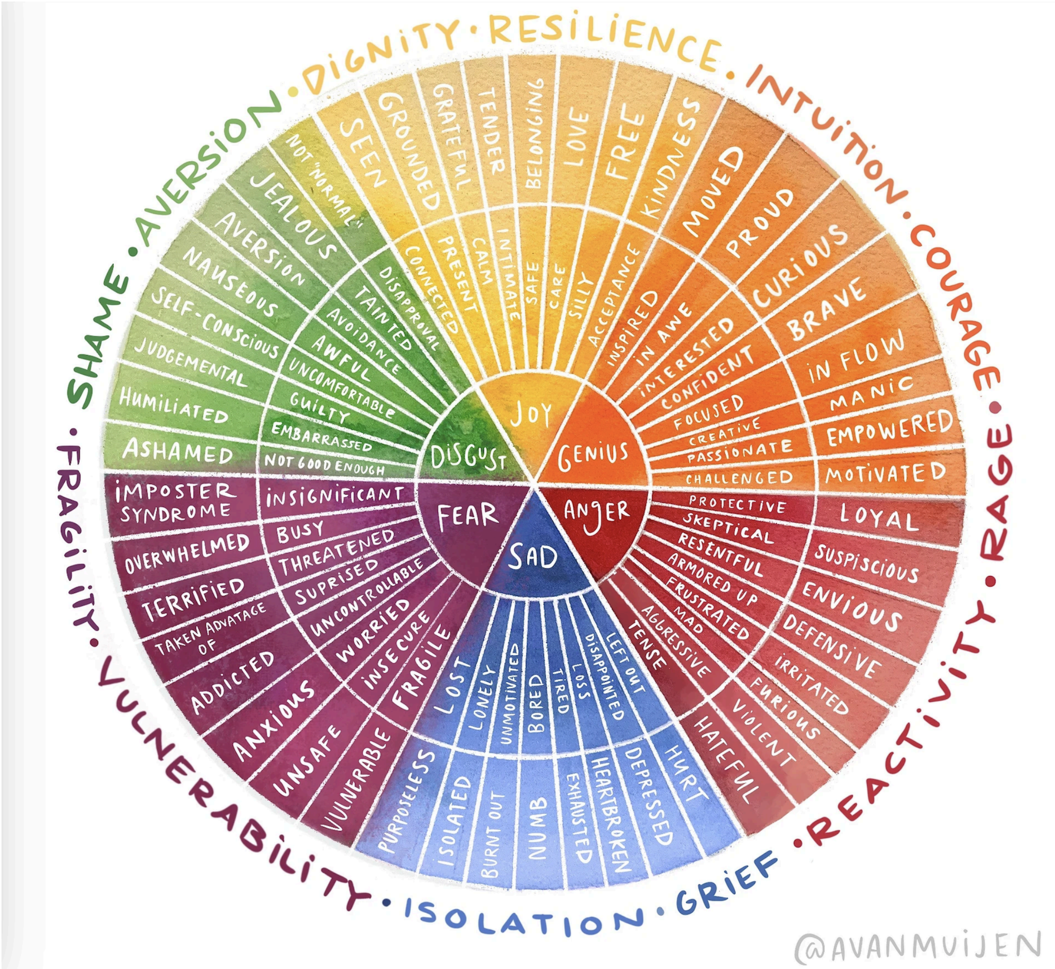


Image source

Some a little simpler:

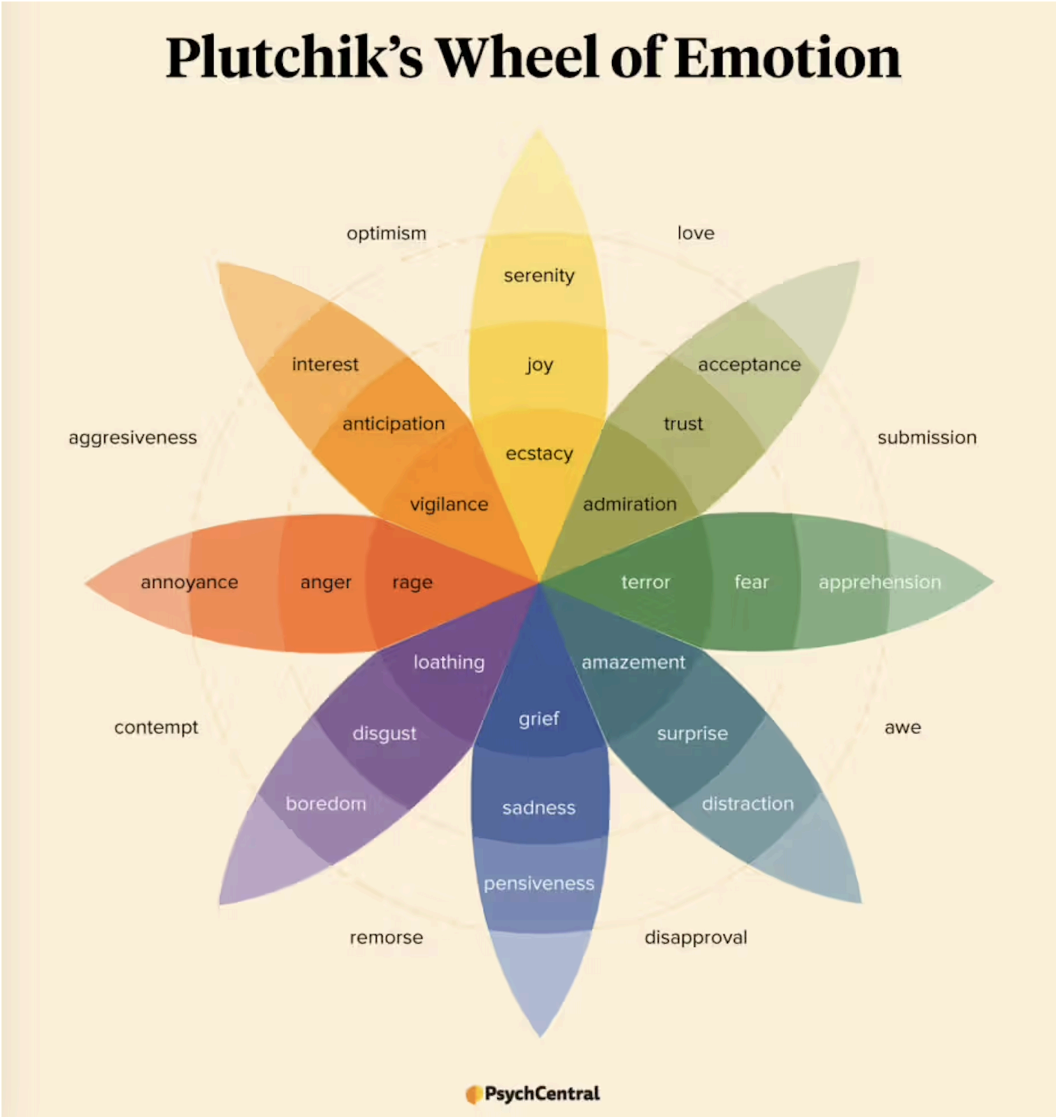


Image source

Some emotions are quite broad, others very specific. You could sort the emotions into "positive" and "negative" kinds, as long as you acknowledge how subjective this is: positive implies that people like feeling that emotion, and negative implies that they don't, but some people do like feeling sad, angry, or afraid (otherwise, two movie genres that have already been mentioned, "tear-jerkers" and horror movies, would not exist). Even given the subjectivity, however, the distinction is useful because it helps you think through whether an audience is likely to embrace an emotion or avoid it. Those animal shelter ads have a problem that "feel good comedies" don't: people don't like looking at a suffering animal, so they switch channels or hit the mute button.

Another basic point about emotions is that they can coexist: people can feel many emotions at once, and a message can shift between emotions. There's something to be said for including an emotional "arc" into a message — sometimes going down, sometimes up, sometimes featuring strong emotions, sometimes backing off and being calmer or more intellectual. Even “nonstop action” movies include quiet interludes, points of despair, and triumphant victories.

8.4 CREATING EMOTIONAL APPEALS

Perhaps this section should be called "Drawing Emotions Out," since Part 1 of the Palette Principle says you can't create an emotion in your audience out of thin air. Still, there are proven techniques for adding emotional impact to a message. One technique — **telling stories** — is covered in Chapter 11, and Chapter 10 discusses the importance of **sensory language** and vividness. Both techniques have the same effect of making things real for the audience and allowing them to imagine what it's like to be in a particular situation. Here are other techniques to consider:

1. **Make associations with something emotional**. Chapter 6 looked at Pavlov's experiment on dogs, and how easy it was to get dogs to salivate at the sound of a bell by associating that sound with food. Another point to make about that is: the dogs must have also felt happy about hearing that bell, because it connected to something they enjoyed. This is why Michelin Tires makes associations to babies in its ads — people may not have emotional reactions to tires, but they care about babies.
2. **Appeal to identity**. Why do Miami residents get excited about the Florida Panthers hockey team, even though not a single player comes from Miami? Because people care about their own city and state, at least if they feel that it's part of their identity. Anything connected to a person's sense of identity tends to create strong emotional reactions. This is why rock stars on a stadium tour always make a point of yelling out the name of the city they're in, and if a talk show host mentions a particular state, anyone in the audience from that state is likely to hoot in response. In addition to geography, a person's identity is often wrapped up in their race, ethnicity, family, gender and sexual orientation, generation, occupation, hobbies, or education. Positive discussions of any of those things are likely to bring up feelings of pride, hope, and excitement, and attacks will likely produce anger, shame, or fear.
3. **Focus on the human scale**. There's an old expression: "One death is a tragedy; a thousand deaths is a statistic." News outlets know this lesson so well that virtually every story about a large-scale earthquake or tornado begins by focusing on one person and what happened to them. Filmmakers likewise know that shows about large-scale events like a zombie apocalypse won't grab viewers if that's all the show is about; make it about a small number of survivors, and *The Walking Dead* is a hit. Why? Because viewers can put themselves in the shoes of the characters, and grow to care about these people as they learn more about them. If you're giving a speech about prison reform, don't make it about the entire penal system: make it about Wayne the inmate, and everyone will want to know what happens to him.
4. **Allow yourself to feel the emotion, and let it come out**. If that emotion is genuine, and listeners have that same "color" on their palette, it will resonate with them (they'll be the piano humming back the note you are singing). If it's a speech in front of a live audience, eye contact is obviously helpful. This

requires vulnerability on your part, but the payoff is worth it; the people in your audience will be moved.

5. **Use your voice**. The human voice is a remarkably expressive instrument, and listeners respond powerfully to the emotion in someone else's voice. One of Martin Luther King Jr.'s best skills was the use of his voice, and if you've ever heard a recording of one of his speeches, you can probably hear his voice in your head right now. [See Chapter 14 for guidelines on how to use your voice effectively in public speaking]. What about written messages? Even on paper, there are ways to "use your voice" (let your unique character show through), which is why I've included so much first person writing in a textbook.

8.5 THE EMOTIONAL PAYOFF ISSUE

The discussion of "paying attention" in Chapter 4 is based on the idea that audiences engage in that economic transaction as long as it's worthwhile to them. In terms of emotion, then, you can think about the **emotional payoff**: what is the positive emotion that makes something worth the time? Horror movies, for instance, aren't *just* about horrible feelings like terror and despair — they're also about the satisfaction of seeing a villain get destroyed, or a survivor escaping danger.

Why do so many people brush their teeth but not floss? Perhaps it's because brushing produces an emotional payoff (a nice fresh feeling in the mouth), but flossing doesn't. One activity has an emotional payoff, the other one is something you're told to do, but that, for most people, doesn't end with a nice feeling. The discussion of conspiracy theories earlier points to the emotional payoffs of comfort, bonding with others "in the know," and a feeling of superiority. For any activity that people like to do, there is an emotional boost that comes along with it.

On the other hand, some messages don't have any emotional payoffs. If someone is told to become more politically aware, they might read a lot about what's going on in the government, but end up feeling depressed about the corruption and powerless to do anything about it. Where's the payoff? That's the challenge of discussions about large-scale problems: how to end on a note other than "there's nothing you can do." "Get involved on a local level" may sound like a big commitment, but if it leads to a feeling of progress, that's better than a hopeless feeling. And the slacktivism mentioned in Chapter 6 may not be the result of laziness: it can be because people feel like there's nothing else they can do about a warlord in Africa besides sharing a video. Raising awareness may not be enough to solve a problem, but at least it's something people can feel good about.

Another category of message without an emotional payoff is software updates: "Please stop what you're doing while a security update is loading, and then … your computer will function exactly the same as it did before." Cybersecurity people may see the threat that was just averted, but the rest of us just experience the annoyance without seeing any benefit. It's the same with flu shots: the soreness in your arm is tangible, but the thought that you *didn't* get the flu is abstract. Even the emotional relief that comes with avoiding a disaster isn't there: unless there's a specific time when you can say "That's when I would have caught the flu but I didn't," there's nothing for a positive feeling to latch onto, unlike swerving to avoid a tree that's fallen on a road, or wearing a bulletproof vest that actually stops a bullet. Perhaps that's why so many vaccination sites give you a lollipop when you finish — at least there's that!

8.6 SPECIFIC EMOTIONS

Fear

Since it has been so powerful in controlling people over the centuries, fear has received the most attention of all the emotions. When a presidential election approaches, you can expect the fundraisers to sound alarm bells about how high the stakes are and everything that could be lost. The parties may differ on what the fears are, but not on the fundamental strategy.

Fear has such a central place in politics that, whenever you hear any politician speaking, ask yourself, "What are they trying to make me afraid of?" and then, "Do I really need to be afraid of that thing?" Fear appeals also show up in health communication and nutrition, transportation and safety, religion, and news.

The basic structure of a fear appeal is simple: "Do (or Don't do) Action X, because Consequence Y is dangerous." How people respond to this message is not so simple, however. Some people see a value in facing danger and conquering their fears, so they'll do the opposite of the recommended action in order to test themselves. Others respond by doubting the legitimacy of the danger, and dismissing the threat as a ploy: "Oh, don't worry about that warning sign — they just want to keep us from having fun." Reactions depend largely on **perceived vulnerability**: does the person think they are in actual danger?[1] This is partly a question of probability, and partly a question of timing. On the probability end, if a person hears "Vaping may cause lung disease," they focus on the word "may" and conclude that it won't happen to them. Perhaps the odds really are low, but even if they're high, people are notoriously bad at understanding probability (see the discussion of shark attacks in Chapter 2), which is why the word "perceived" is crucial. In terms of timing, people might respond to an immediate threat, but it's much harder to make them concerned about a threat that won't show up for 30 years ("Even if there is a risk of lung disease, it won't happen until I'm old, and I'll quit before then").

Here is a very blatant fear message posted in a city after someone's bike got stolen:

1. de Hoog, N., Stroebe, W., & de Wit, J. B. F. (2007). The impact of vulnerability to and severity of a health risk on processing and acceptance of fear-arousing communications: A meta-analysis. *Review of General Psychology*, 11(3), 258-285.

If I was the thief, would that make me worry? Not a bit, because it all hinges on the victim being able to discover who took the bike, which doesn't seem very likely. If the sign actually included the name of the thief, that would be a different matter.

Fear appeals can also go wrong through their recommended action: "If you do Action X, it will make consequence Y go away." This depends on the concept of **efficacy**: is that remedy actually effective?[2] The message might not say enough about what exactly you are supposed to do. "Be careful" is not very helpful if people don't know what specific behavior that translates to. I was once hiking on Bainbridge Island, a lovely woodsy area outside Seattle that didn't seem dangerous until I saw this sign:

2. Witte, K. & Allen, M. (2000). A meta-analysis of fear appeals: Implications for effective public health campaigns. *Health Education and Behavio*r, 27(5):591-615.

I appreciated the warning, but would have also appreciated more advice about what to do if a "very aggressive" barred owl started dive-bombing me.

In contrast, when I was hiking through bear country in Montana, the warning signs did tell me what to do: keep making noise so you don't startle a bear. It felt odd to talk loudly on a mountain trail, and it raised another question in my mind: "Is that really going to protect me?" In other words: does the recommended action actually stop the danger? Some dangers feel inevitable, and the precautions seem pointless. In the 1950s, American school children took part in "duck and cover" drills where they were told to hide under their desks in case of nuclear attack. If a remedy like hiding under your desk seems ineffective, what's the point in doing it?

There's one more way in which fear appeals can go wrong: if a warning involves asking people to do something difficult, heroic, or requiring will-power, some people just don't feel capable of doing it. This is the issue with a lot of motivational posters and pep talks: they risk pushing people to the "I can't do it" point. I remember being cautioned early in the COVID pandemic not to touch my face in public, but as soon as I thought of it, my face would immediately start itching all over until I gave in and scratched.

So, to recap, what happens if people are told about a danger but they:

- Don't know what to do to prevent it,
- Don't believe the remedy actually will prevent it, and/or
- Don't feel capable of doing it?

They get **fatalistic**, and feel like they are doomed no matter what. Fatalistic people stop listening: they don't take health precautions, they don't vote, they don't do anything you want them to do. Despite their power, then, fear appeals have to get a lot of things right, and there are many ways in which they can go wrong.

Anger

You can tell anger is closely related to fear because when you scare someone, they often respond by shouting at you instead of quaking in fear: "You almost ran me over, you idiot!" But not all anger is tied to a personal fear: you can get angry about something happening to someone else, such as a child being emotionally abused in a grocery store or a person spreading lies online. Anger is often related to the concept of justice, and it fills you with a desire to fix an injustice *right now*. Psychologists call it a "high-arousal" emotion, which also translates to the speed dimension — it has an urgency to it. This is both good and bad: it motivates people to action (see the discussion of the Yale 5-step model in Chapter 6, especially the last step), but can also make people do things they later regret because they didn't fully think them through. This is where the "count to ten" advice comes from: letting that arousal die down a little can prevent trouble. Earlier I mentioned two weaknesses of emotional appeals in general — aiming at the wrong target, and the duration question — and both of them apply to anger appeals. Misplaced anger is a common phenomenon, and while some anger stays on a slow boil forever, other times it runs out before anything useful has been done.

Shame & Guilt: "Have you no decency?"

These basic emotions have many variations that are slightly different from each other, but have shared features. For example, although you may feel shame as a burning sensation somewhere in your body (implying that it's a high-arousal emotion), guilt is generally a low-arousal emotion, and therefore works much more slowly than anger. How slowly? Well, in 2011 the news featured a story of a Sears store manager who received an envelope with a $100 bill inside it, sent by a man who admitted to stealing from that store 60 years earlier. If you try to "guilt" someone into doing something, in other words, don't hold your breath: their conscience might bother them for decades before they act on it.

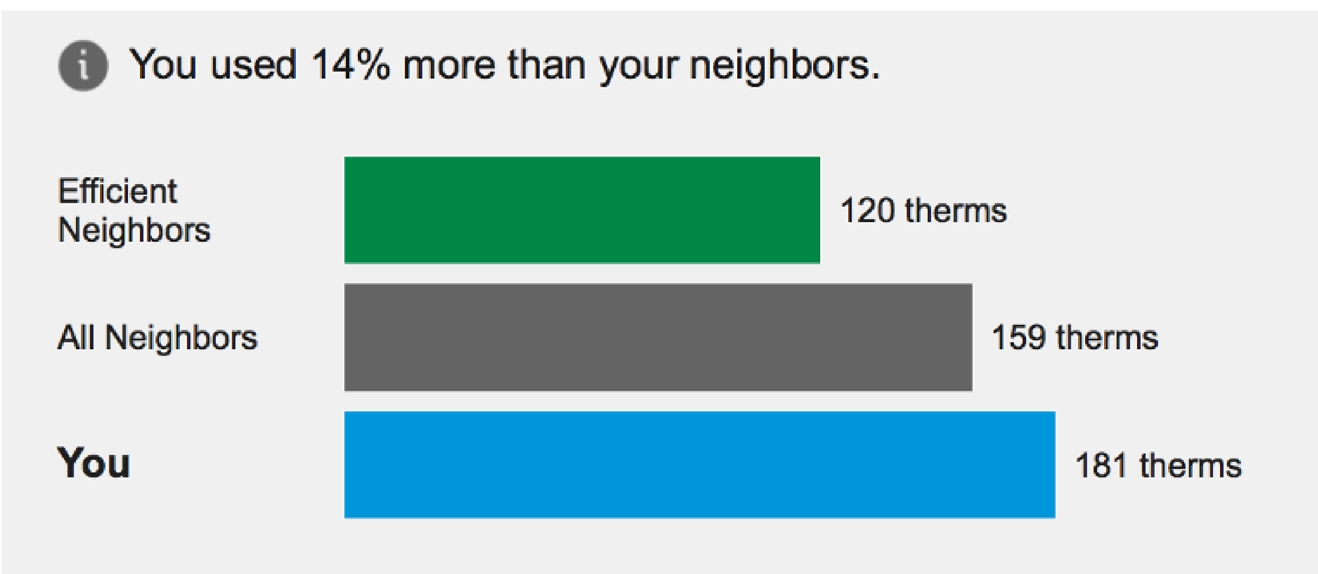
Speaking of conscience, guilt and shame appeals rely on the person having one, which not everyone does: some people really "have no decency." (Embarrassment is slightly different, because you can feel embarrassed by everyone laughing at you, even if you don't think you did anything wrong). They are also unpleasant emotions for most people, which means that a person might go through spectacular mental gymnastics to avoid them. Although it's fairly common for employees to steal from their employer, for instance, they don't seem to have any trouble rationalizing the theft: "It's an evil corporation," "They don't pay me enough," "I'm still a good person — I clean out the coffee pot without being asked," "Everybody does it." On the other end of the extreme, some people don't avoid feeling shame, but dive deeper into it, getting into a "shame spiral" pattern that makes them act even worse.

Insecurity is a variant of shame that has been exploited in many areas of advertising, especially for beauty and hygiene products. The underlying message of many of such ads is "You are an unlovable, disgusting person right now because of your physical flaws [bad breath, unwanted facial hair, yellow teeth], but if you use our product, you'll be lovable again." This raises many ethical questions, and helps explain why so many people have body insecurity issues, but this approach has been undeniably profitable for many industries.

Pride

The other end of the shame scale is pride, which has also been profitable for many industries (such as those selling sports memorabilia and regional symbols like flags), and is a feeling people enjoy, unlike shame. Pride tends to be comparative in nature: it's not just that you feel good about the state you live in, it's that you can gloat about being better than the state next door. This explains why city, state, and country rankings are such a popular kind of content for online articles: everybody wants to see where their region fits in the list, and enjoys seeing their region show up in the top ten. A lot of pride is vicarious: there's no real reason I should be proud of the fact that a popular actor grew up in my city (it's not like I taught them acting classes myself), but I'll take some unearned credit for it anyway. Appeals to identity, discussed above, are a powerful way to generate emotion.

One intriguing form of pride appeal — or it could be viewed as a shame/guilt appeal — is the "comparison to your neighbors" emails I get from my power company:



I can do better!

Sadness

Sadness is the epitome of a low-arousal, low-speed emotion: if anger fills you with energy, sadness leaves you without energy (especially its extreme version, depression), and does a poor job of motivating people to action. Appeals to sadness are thus rare in public discourse, but it's an emotion people feel anyway, and it has its value (as beautifully illustrated in the animated film *Inside Out*). One might situate grief near sadness, as Plutchik did in the second emotion wheel depicted above, but Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's famous model of the stages of grief emphasizes that sadness is just one of the stages, and high-arousal emotions like anger are part of the grief process as well.

Joy & Happiness

Speaking of *Inside Out*, it's nice that Joy is the central character, the leader of the pack of emotions inside Riley's head (if you haven't seen the film, the main characters are five emotions — joy, anger, sadness, disgust and fear — in the mind of an 11-year-old girl). The pursuit of happiness is written into the U.S. Declaration of Independence, an "unalienable" right after life and liberty. So why haven't joy and happiness appeared in many political messages since 1776? If you use another synonym, "contentment," you can spot the problem: contentment implies being satisfied with exactly the way things are now, and not wanting to change anything. Going back to the Elephant-Rider-Path model, an elephant that has found its "happy place" doesn't want to move, so happiness is not a motivator to change. *Striving* for happiness, on the other hand, is a good goal — and it's nice to hear that studies on what makes us happy are one of the most thriving fields of research in the social sciences.

8.7 REDUCING EMOTIONS

Sometimes the goal of the sender is to not get the receiver emotionally worked up: it's instead to calm them down. To quote another Bob Marley lyric, "Don't worry about a thing; every little thing's gonna be alright" (from the song *Three Little Birds*). If you are a pediatrician, for example, a large percentage of your workday must consist of telling parents "Your child is fine; it's just a rash/cold/scrape — that's perfectly normal."

Reassurances are a particularly tricky kind of message to pull off, for a variety of reasons:

To some people, **reassurances backfire and produce concern instead** (there's the old joke about the bored airline pilot who got on the PA system and told the passengers "There is no cause for alarm" just to watch them panic).

Reassurances intended to allay fears sometimes **bring up new fears** that the receiver hadn't thought of before. Imagine a patient who comes in to a doctor due to abdominal pain and fatigue, and the doctor wants to reassure them by ruling out the worst things first. The patient hasn't mentioned cancer, but the doctor wonders if they are worried about that and if so, thinks they can nip that concern in the bud. So the doctor says, "Well, I ruled out pancreatic cancer, so that's one less thing to worry about." Meanwhile, the patient just thought it might be an ulcer and cancer hadn't crossed his mind — but now he can't stop worrying about cancer, and wondering if the doctor checked for other kinds besides pancreatic. Instead of nipping a worry in the bud, the doctor introduced new worries for the patient to deal with.

It can be a trick: sometimes, a reassurance is a **ruse to coax you into letting your guard down**. Soldiers realize this, and know better than to relax too much when an enemy lays down their guns or raises their hands in surrender. And the reason some people don't trust the government is because they know about the history of government agencies endangering citizens while also reassuring them. For example, some of the cruelest experiments ever conducted on others, including the Tuskegee Syphilis Study and Project MKUltra (where people were given high doses of LSD without their knowledge), must have involved telling the subjects that they would be okay. People near the 1945 Trinity Test of the first atom bomb were told that it was just an explosion at the nearby dump and "No one worry about anything; everything is fine," although many of them later died of cancer.

Even without bad intentions or ulterior motives, **sometimes the people doing the reassuring are just wrong**. Doctors miss warning signs, and those "perfectly normal" diagnoses may be totally inaccurate. When a person says "Everything's going to be fine," the other person might legitimately wonder, "How do they know? Can they see into the future?"

What do communication scholars know about how to effectively reassure people? Unfortunately, not much; there is far more research about fear appeals than about calming people down. What little research there is has been in the medical field[1] (which is why so many examples above are about doctors), and it suggests that the amount of information in the reassurance is a key variable. There's a big difference between "Don't worry, you're fine" and "Blood test results show that your creatinine level is 0.9, which is within normal parameters." Trusting the source is, of course, the most important factor, which the next chapter addresses. Finally, despite the four complications raised above, reassurances have one advantage over fear appeals: calmness is a more enjoyable emotion than fear, and people *like* to hear the message "Everything little thing's gonna be alright" (even if it's not sung by Bob Marley).

1. Akyirem, S., Salifu, Y., Bayuo, J., Duodu, P.A., Bossman, I.F., & Abboah-Offei, M. (2022). An integrative review of the use of the concept of reassurance in clinical practice. Nursing Open, 9(3):1515-1535. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/nop2.1102

CHAPTER 9: CREDIBILITY

9.1 WHAT DOES IT MATTER WHO IS SPEAKING?

The Dilemma of Deciding Who To Believe

I was on vacation in Canada when the hearing in my left ear suddenly quit. I could tell it wasn't nerve damage because I could still hear myself chew, so I figured my ear must be just plugged up. I found a store that sold a foam promising to dissolve any ear wax, but it did nothing; one of my friends tried "ear candling" (placing a candle in your ear, wick side out, and letting it burn), but they didn't know what they were doing and it ended badly. So I just had to wait until I got home, and the first chance I got, I went in to urgent care to see what they could do. Using a stream of water, the nurse succeeded in getting the wax out, and my hearing was restored. After thanking her, I asked: how could I prevent that from happening again? She wasn't sure of the best prevention technique, but she was sure of one thing: "Whatever you do, never put a cotton swab in your ear!" Then she told me to wait for the doctor and left the room. When he came in, there wasn't much to talk about, so I asked him that same question. His response? "I recommend you use a cotton swab in your ear a couple of times a week."

I left the office shaking my head about those two totally contradictory messages and wondering which person I should put my faith in: the doctor, who has a more advanced medical degree, or the nurse, who probably has more hands-on experience? I had seen a few articles suggesting that the nurse was right and you shouldn't put a swab in your ear, but who wrote them? What does it say on the box of Q-Tips swabs? *"Do not insert swab into ear canal. Entering the ear canal could cause injury."* Maybe that was written by lawyers, and I didn't have to pay attention to it as long as I was careful. Don't most people use swabs to clean their ears? Why did the doctor recommend it? Maybe he doesn't know much about ears, or maybe he knows more than others. Instead of swabs, maybe I should go back to ear candling, this time with someone who's better at it. Most official medical websites say it doesn't work, but there are plenty of "alternative healing" sites that swear by it. Who should I believe?

If you delve into the fields of nutrition and health, the "who to believe" question gets much worse. Investigative journalist A.J. Jacobs, in his 2012 book *Drop Dead Healthy*, spent a year trying to sort out what is healthy and what isn't. After reading up on the thousands of new diets that come out each year, he jokingly announced his new health plan: consume lots of chocolate, wine, and coffee…all of which have been "proven" to be good for you. He also tried to figure out the correct answer to dilemmas like whether or not it's a good idea to wash your hands, and whether you should run with high-tech cushioned running shoes or barefoot, and usually came away with the ambiguous conclusion that there are "two schools of thought." In the more serious book *Wrong: Why Experts Keep Failing Us — And How to Know When Not to Trust Them*, David Freedman reveals the complete lack of agreement among medical professionals about what to do if someone's heart stops: artificial breathing, chest compressions, abdominal compressions, or AED (automated external defibrillators)? After circling through the different organizations and individuals with contradictory views, Freedman ends with a sarcastic "Glad I was able to clear that up."[1]

Even when the scientific community is united on one side of a controversy, it doesn't seem to have much impact on the people on the other side; there are always reasons to doubt authority figures. Doctors get frustrated with patients who do a little googling and self-diagnose before coming to the clinic; everybody thinks they're an expert now, just because they spent 20 minutes reading questionable websites. Yet the presumption that doctors are always right is obviously not true. They make mistakes frequently: 20,000 medical malpractice lawsuits are filed in the U.S. each year, and even Johns Hopkins University concluded that 250,000 Americans die annually from medical errors. So when I see memes like this, I can understand both sides of the equation:

These examples are just part of a much larger battle between official institutions and the common people, and the institutions are losing. The credibility of government, big business, news organizations, banks, schools,

1. Freedman, D.H. (2010). *Wrong: Why Experts Keep Failing Us — And How to Know When Not to Trust Them*. Little, Brown and Company, p. 15.

the medical system, and the police are all steadily declining. Virtually all world leaders are facing enormous credibility issues. Regardless of whether the approval numbers and survey results go up or down, this points to the dilemma that everyone faces every single day: deciding who to believe.

From my point of view as the receiver, it's a decision that determines not just how I clean my ears or decide what to eat for breakfast, but what I do in every other aspect of life: Should I give that beggar money? What type of water filter should I buy? What source of news do I trust? Does my romantic partner truly love me? Different people use different methods to make decisions, but they can't escape having to ask the question: ***Who should I believe?*** Some people lean toward the naive end of the scale, believing things they really shouldn't and falling for scams (see the discussion of Reasoned Skepticism in Chapter 3). Others are cynical, automatically disbelieving and doubting everything, but taking that too far causes trouble and doesn't make you many friends. If neither extreme is a workable philosophy of life, we're stuck in the middle, having to make decisions about who to believe on a daily basis.

As a source, you have to be concerned with whether people believe you, and why. What is the point of saying something if people don't believe it? It's fascinating to me that credibility is a universal concern: the most powerful dictators in the world have to worry about their credibility just as much as a child denying that they ate a donut, even if the child is too young to speak. No one is immune from credibility concerns: business leaders, homeless people, coaches, teachers, military commanders, parents, social media influencers, and sales people rely on people believing them and taking them seriously. If you're a college student, you're on that list too — not just trying to convince your teachers that you're a good student or that you really did miss that test because of food poisoning, but also convincing potential employers that you are hirable. After all, isn't that the reason you're in college in the first place: to show the world you know a thing or two?

9.2 THE DIMENSIONS OF CREDIBILITY

Credibility is not a simple concept: it was Aristotle who first proposed that it has two distinct and independent dimensions.[1] One dimension is **knowledge or expertise**, which revolves around the question "Does the source know what they are talking about?" This can mean someone who has become an expert in a field (i.e., a doctor), but it needn't be as broad as that. An eyewitness who saw a car crash has expertise about what happened in that particular situation, even if they are not highly educated or have no history of studying collisions. Knowledge can come from education, experience, or both; some people become experts in a subject even without going to school for it. The meme in the previous section illustrates two types of knowledge: the doctor went to six years of medical school, but the patient knows their own body because they live in it.

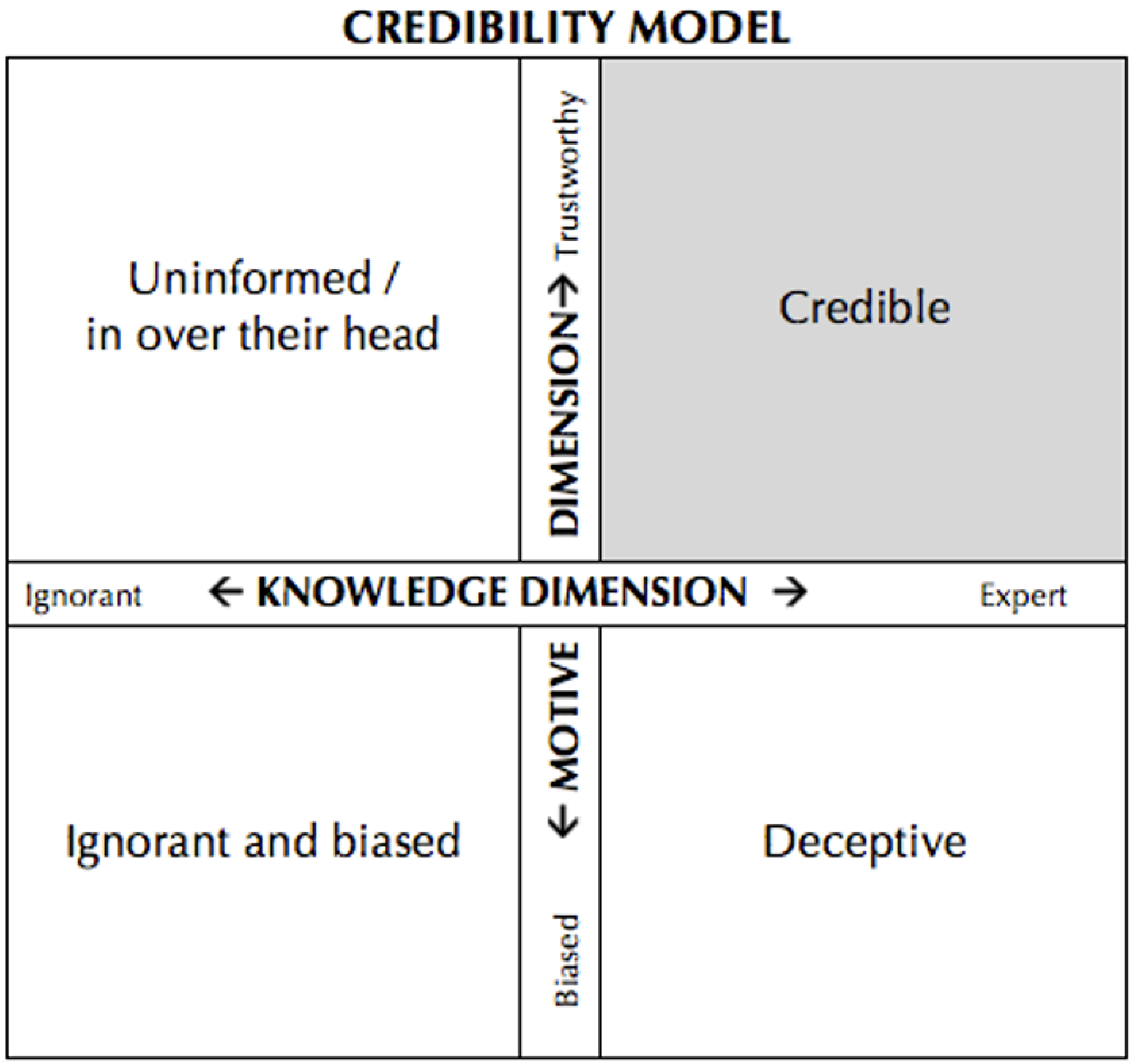
The other dimension is **trustworthiness or motive**, which is all about why a person says something, and whether they can be trusted to be honest. Framed in the negative, the key question is, "Do they have a reason to lie to me?" This has to do with general factors like what kind of person they are — their moral character, history of behavior, and reputation — as well as specific questions about motive in a particular context. Even if they are generally an honest person, could they be lying now? (Think of how many murder mysteries involve a generally honest person being driven to cover up a crime out of desperation). One of the basic issues with trustworthiness is bias: either consciously or unconsciously, the person has a reason to want certain goals.

How independent are these dimensions? Think of when your car breaks down and you need to find someone to repair it. There are two basic questions you should ask about any mechanic:

1. Do they know what they're doing? If you have an electric vehicle, for instance, have they worked on them before?
2. Are they trying to rip you off? Will they overcharge you or "fix" things that aren't actually broken?

They could be an honest mechanic but incompetent (trustworthy but not knowledgeable), they could know everything there is to know about cars but still be out to rip you off (knowledgeable but not trustworthy), they could be incompetent and dishonest (neither dimension), or they could have both dimensions going for them.

1. Technically, Aristotle identified three dimensions: expertise, trustworthiness, and good will, but most scholars (including myself) find that it works to combine trustworthiness and good will together. For a discussion of someone who disagrees with me and thinks goodwill should be considered a separate dimension, see McCroskey, J. C., & Teven, J. J. (1999). Goodwill: A reexamination of the construct and its measurement. *Communication Monographs*, 66(1), 90–103.



Because either dimension can be trouble, calling someone "credible" means they must be in the gray cell in the upper right corner: the only kind of mechanic I would want working on my car.

But wait, there's more! In the S-M-C-R model from Chapter 1, credibility can be a facet of the source (S) or of the message (M). **Source credibility** refers to all the things that make an audience believe a person: their educational background, work experience, position in the world, prior reputation, or endorsement by someone else (more on this below). When a police informant testifies in a trial, for example, there will naturally be a lot of questions about what kind of person they are and their motives for testifying. If the opposing lawyer succeeds in tearing apart the credibility of the witness, the judge or jury won't believe what the witness says about what happened. To put it simply: if they don't believe the person, they won't believe the message.

On the other hand, sometimes the issue is what a person is saying, regardless of who they are, which is called **message credibility**. Perhaps you know someone you would describe as smart, but who also believes a conspiracy theory that you just don't buy: you don't have to change your mind about the person overall to conclude that they're just wrong about that one thing. There are also situations where a person with generally low credibility says something that you do find believable, because the message itself makes sense.

To this point, the discussion has presumed that you know who the source of the message is, so your views of the person color your reactions to their message. What if you have no idea who the source is? If you start looking carefully at how many messages you hear or read in a day, you might notice that a large percentage are from unknown sources: a poster with no author's name; an article you read without paying attention to the byline; a message posted online from someone with a cryptic username; a message that has a name attached, but it's not a person you know anything about (think of the meme above from Kayla Fioravanti — did you look up who she is?). Aristotle probably didn't spend much time talking to strangers, and he definitely didn't read Reddit discussion threads, but strangers might account for 90% of the communication you receive every day. Without knowing the source, all you can do is look at the message itself and decide whether it's believable.

To add to the confusion, let's talk about the **sleeper effect,** the name given to situations in which people originally know where a message came from, but then forget. Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (the people who developed the five-step model of persuasion described in Chapter 6) researched this phenomenon, assuming that if people originally disbelieve a message because it came from a questionable source, they will never believe the message.

For example, your grandfather with dementia tells you he's descended from Abyssinian royalty, right after telling you he was an opera singer and invented toothpaste, so you figure it's the dementia talking and dismiss it. But then a funny thing happens: you remember the information, but forget where you heard it, so it becomes a free-floating tidbit in your head with no source attached. My head is full of such tidbits: I remember the message but forget the source. It can happen remarkably quickly; a student will say something smart in class, and five minutes later I'll refer to the great point they raised but I've already forgotten who said it. Once the message gets disconnected from its source, a non-credible message that you *didn't* used to believe because of where it came from now becomes a message you *do* believe because you "heard it somewhere." So you end up telling someone you are descended from Abyssinian royalty because you forgot that it was an Alzheimer's patient who told you that.

This is a huge problem in jury trials, where judges tell jurors they must base their decision only on the evidence heard on the witness stand. They try to keep people off the jury who've read a lot about the case in advance, but sometimes that's impossible because there was too much publicity about the case and they don't want the jury to consist entirely of people who have been "living under a rock" for the last two years. The judge may admonish a juror to forget what they heard or read before the trial begins and base their decision only on the testimony they hear in court … but this depends on the juror being able to remember where they heard each bit of information, and sorting out what a witness said from a rumor they heard from a neighbor.

This is also a growing problem on the internet, where things get spread around without attribution, or people put their name on something they're reposting from somewhere else, and no one could possibly trace it back to its true origin. (For an investigative exercise, try this: Google the phrase "What happens to your body when you drink a coke." You'll probably run into an article that has been circulating on the internet for nearly 20 years, but good luck figuring out who the original author was).

Now we have four dimensions of credibility to consider: knowledge, trustworthiness, source, and message. But wait…there's also the fact that **organizational credibility** can be as big a factor as **individual credibility.** Companies have credibility (or lack it), and whole industries also have or don't have credibility (I already mentioned the surveys showing that the credibility of institutions like "the banking system" or "news organizations" is declining). All three levels — individual, company, and industry — borrow from each other, or hurt each other. For instance, if you, an individual college student, get admitted into Harvard University, people will make lots of assumptions about what kind of person you are based on the school you attend. (Or, if you got rejected from all the big-name schools you applied to and ended up at a "safety school," that might hurt your credibility). Going the other way, if you achieve great success, you can bet that your school will brag about the fact that you went there. No wonder a high school in northern Minnesota changed their sign when their alumnus Bob Zimmerman (more commonly known as folk singer Bob Dylan) won a Nobel prize.

This "vicarious bragging" can extend to states and whole countries as well. Argentina, for example, is naturally going to bask in the glory of being the home of one of the greatest soccer players of all time (Lionel Messi), and his reputation helps the credibility of any other soccer player from Argentina. On the flip side, a region might try to live down the reputational harm from being the home of a serial killer or terrorist, or an individual might be embarrassed about coming from an area with a bad reputation.

All of this illustrates that **credibility can be transferred** from one party to another. If a person vouches for someone else, the first person is "lending" their credibility to the second person. This is what recommendation letters are all about: a person without much credibility on their own (a student) might get a person with credibility (a well-known professor) to write a letter saying how smart, motivated, and industrious they are. It's also what political endorsements are all about: an organization such as a firefighters' union or an individual such as the president might say "We back this candidate."

9.3 THE PARADOXES OF CREDIBILITY

Credibility is power: imagine being so credible that if you say it, people know it's true. If you're a detective, for example, and you identify a murder suspect, the police will put them in handcuffs based on your word alone. Picture being Sherlock Holmes; your reputation is so solid that everyone knows how brilliant you are, trusts you, and gives you free reign to do what you want. Who doesn't want that kind of power?

Well, for one: Lieutenant Columbo.

Image from wikimedia

The Columbo Effect. Columbo is a fictional television detective played by Peter Falk in 69 episodes of *Columbo* from the 1970s to the early 2000s. In manner and communication style, he's the complete opposite of Sherlock Holmes, who constantly tells everyone he's smarter than they are. Columbo is always scratching his head and asking people to help him figure out things he can't figure out on his own. In episode after episode, the murder suspect is lulled into complacency by thinking that the detective on the case is a fumbling idiot, usually realizing they're wrong only at the end of the show, when Columbo pins them down with irrefutable proof. The last thing Columbo wants is for people to think of him as a genius.

Why? He can see the advantages of people letting their guard down, which probably nobody does around Sherlock Holmes. Low expectations bring a lot less pressure than high ones (it must be tough to be Lionel Messi or Simone Biles, hearing people call you the GOAT[1] all day long). And both Sherlock Holmes and Columbo are fictional detectives who always solve the case, but imagine if it were the real world and they failed sometimes. "SHERLOCK HOLMES WAS WRONG" would be a front page headline, but "A person who everybody thought wasn't very good at their job turned out to be not very good at their job" isn't a headline at all. Isn't it much nicer to have people say "Huh, they're smarter than they look" than to say "I guess I overestimated them"?

That's why real-life radio hosts Ray and Tom Magliozzi (also known as "Click and Clack, the Tappet Brothers") were so fond of **self-deprecating humor** on their show *Car Talk*, which ran from 1977 to 2012. They were constantly telling everyone how stupid they were and finishing their show with the line "Well, you wasted another perfectly good hour listening to us."

Do you know anyone who constantly relies on self-deprecating humor? On the surface it sounds like they're attacking their own credibility, but they're really building *up* that credibility. The Magliozzi brothers were actually the most highly paid performers on public radio for a while, and people trusted their expertise — probably more than they would have if the brothers bragged about being the world's greatest car experts. You can compare it to a weather forecaster who errs on the side of pessimism: if you predict rain and it does rain, you're safe; if you predict rain and it turns out to be a beautiful sunny day, people don't mind so much. Likewise, if you go around telling people you're wrong and you *are* wrong, at least you called it accurately, but if you turn out to be right, everyone's pleasantly surprised. There is a growing body of academic research on "reverse credibility" that explores this topic in more depth.[2]

Of course, if you're going to use a lot of self-deprecating humor, you have to accompany it with actual results; it's important that Columbo solved his cases, and that the Magliozzi brothers gave good car advice. If you go around making jokes about how stupid you are and people nod in agreement, you're in big trouble.

That is just one paradox related to credibility. Others have to do with the relationship between the core

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1. If you're not familiar with it, that acronym stands for "Greatest Of All Time."

2. Examples of academic articles on reverse credibility include: ● Bohner, G., Ruder, M., & Erb, H.P. (2002). When expertise backfires: Contrast and assimilation effects in persuasion. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 41, 495-519. ● Ballman, Tara & Kanady, Ken. (2006). Reverse Credibility. Jawbone Publishing. ● Tormala, Z.L., Brinol, P. & Petty, R.E. (2006). When credibility attacks: The reverse impact of source credibility on persuasion. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

dimensions of expertise and trustworthiness. In ideal situations, the two dimensions work together: when I go to a doctor, I want to know that they are knowledgeable and that I can trust them. As noted, sometimes one dimension is lacking, but if both are present, it all works out well, doesn't it?

Not necessarily. There are reasons why **the dimensions clash with each other**, and being high on one dimension actually makes it harder to be high on the other one. How can this happen?

Let's start by looking at the question of how you develop expertise. It usually comes from spending years and years studying a subject. Take someone who knows everything there is to know about dolls: they can recite the details of every doll manufacturer going back two centuries, they know what materials were used to make the skin and hair, they know what kind of dolls were popular at different times and how much they cost. But there's one question that no one ever stops to ask of such an expert: "Do you *like* dolls?" Of course they do! Since they devoted so much of their lives to the subject, we can safely assume that they are "passionate" about it.

But there's a problem with the word "passionate." It implies strong feelings, strong opinions, and strong motivations, and there's another word we can use for that: bias. This raises the question: does that doll expert have any biases that get in the way? And where does the word "biased" appear in the two-dimensional chart? At the bottom of the trustworthiness dimension, i.e., "lacking credibility." I call this the **Paradox of Passion**: the more knowledgeable you are on a subject, the higher the risk that you will be perceived as biased.

If the doll example seems abstract, consider other real life examples:

- After the President of the United States gives a State of the Union speech, the tradition is for other politicians to follow it up with commentary speeches. It makes sense for politicians to comment, because they know politics as well as the president does. But is anyone surprised that the commenter who belongs to the same political party as the president always thinks the president did a great job with the speech, and the person who belongs to the opposing party thinks the speech was terrible? The bias is so strong and obvious that many people consider those follow-up speeches a waste of breath. But how can you find an expert on politics who isn't biased?
- In 2008–2009, the United States faced an economic crisis that was caused in large part by the financial industry. It was clear that the government needed to step in to avert an even worse disaster, and that required them to appoint specialists to "clean up the problem." But who could they appoint? In the end, they appointed a lot of the same people who caused the problem in the first place, because they were the only ones who understood the complex financial systems that needed fixing. There weren't enough people who had the necessary expertise but who weren't directly involved.
- Earlier I mentioned the credibility of informants, who are often people with trustworthiness problems. As one example, in the 1990s in Italy there was a series of trials against the Sicilian mafia, and they rested heavily on key witnesses known as "pentiti" who described what goes on in the mafia. The problem? They were all former mafia members themselves, so while their expertise wasn't questioned, their

motives were. How can you trust a "rat"? But who else could testify?

- In the American justice system, a spouse cannot be compelled to testify against their partner, even though they know the partner, their character, and their goings on better than anyone. Let's say a woman is accused of murder and her spouse could provide the alibi: "She spent the night at home with me." Even if the partner did testify, would anyone believe them? They have crucial knowledge, but they're married to the defendant, which means they have a motive to either protect them or get rid of them. The same applies to civil trials. A son suffers brain damage from a collision, and needs witnesses to testify about his cognitive abilities before the injury. The mother knows her son better than anyone, but is not a credible witness because of the family relationship.

What is the solution to the Paradox of Passion? How do you find someone with knowledge but without bias? The solution that many people yearn for is someone who is neutral — an expert with no "skin in the game." Yet **neutrality** is a difficult thing to pull off: no matter how careful and even-handed a person is, someone is going to accuse them of bias. Fact-checking websites like Factcheck.org or Politifact.com devote themselves to evaluating, without political bias, the truth of statements made by public figures, yet the sites are constantly accused of having a slant one way or the other. Judges, mediators and arbitrators, news reporters, auditors, inspectors: there are many people whose job requires them to be impartial and neutral, and society depends on them, but it's an ideal to strive for, and even these people themselves recognize that they can never perfectly achieve it.

The clash between credibility dimensions also presents itself in another way, which I call the **Similarity vs. Superiority Paradox**. It's really about comfort and trust, and the differences between people in where those feelings come from. For some people, the feeling of trust comes from knowing that someone else is better than they are at something, probably because of higher education. When I go to the doctor, I'm glad they studied medicine for years and know a lot more about medicine than I ever will. If they tell me something that goes against my preconceived notions, my tendency is to follow what they say because their knowledge is superior to mine. I suspect that this is a universal impulse; in order to hold the opposite attitude, I would have to believe that I know everything about everything, which takes an awful lot of confidence.

Yet there is a counterbalancing force, and I suspect that it's equally universal: the tendency to trust people who are like you. If you look like me, talk like me, and share my attitudes, of course I'm inclined to feel an affinity with you. People have recognized the downsides of this: it's a form of xenophobia that leads to racism and prejudice and faulty assumptions about who you can trust and who you can't (see the discussion of the border crossing scene from *No Country For Old Men* in Chapter 6). For that reason, educators have recognized that it takes effort to achieve the ideal of equity, diversity, and inclusion — but have also recognized that trusting others who are like us is the default starting point.

Which impulse is stronger? If comfort from the knowledge that others are smarter than you is the stronger force, you'll be inclined to trust experts. If trust in others who are like you is the stronger force, you might come to mistrust experts because they aren't "like us": they're snooty, egg-headed, ivory tower elites you can't relate to.

One curious survey question that pollsters asked during the 2000 U.S. election season, when Al Gore ran against George W. Bush, was dubbed "the beer question": "Who would you rather have a beer with?"[3] The assumption was that voters wanted a president they could imagine hanging out with — that voting was based partly on "relatability." The fact that Gore didn't score very well on that question and that his successor John Kerry scored even lower may help explain why Bush was president for eight years. Or at least, it explains why presidential candidates ever since seem to love having their picture taken without a tie, eating fast food; you don't get elected sending the message "I'm far superior to you." Megan Garber, however, examines the other end of the scale: "The beer question, after all, is the wrong question to ask. Do we really want a leader who is on our level — or is it better, actually, to have a leader who is demonstrably above us? My money's on the latter."

This paradox also shows up in other situations, such as the classroom. Many pedagogical sources tout the value of discussion classes, and argue that they are much better than the old model of a "sage on the stage" professor just delivering a lecture. (These sources might also discourage teachers from using words like "pedagogical" and "tout" when talking to students, since it sounds like showing off their fancy vocabulary). Not often acknowledged, however, is that discussion-based classes deny students the opportunity to hear what the teacher — *presumably the most informed person in the room* — has to say. A colleague of mine was looking forward to taking a seminar from a well-known professor, but was disappointed with the result: "The professor barely said a word, and instead I spent most class time just listening to my classmates spread their ignorance around — what a waste!"

Also consider the question of movie reviews: which opinion would you rather hear — that of a professional critic with a degree in film studies, or a review from an ordinary movie viewer like you? In some cases, there is a wide gap between the opinions of both camps, so which one matters more to you? I put more weight on the critics, perhaps because I'm an academic myself, but my children just read customer reviews instead. This seems to coincide with a general trend toward preferring amateurs over professionals in fields such as news (where you might prefer getting your news from a blogger instead of a large news organization), hospitality (where you'd rather stay at the home of a stranger renting their place out than at a hotel), and wedding officiating (get your friends to do it rather than hiring a minister or justice of the peace). There are obviously many factors involved in such trends, especially cost, but one of them is the fun of skipping all the strings that come along with professional affiliation and finding someone who is just doing it from the heart.

3. Seifert, Erica J. (2014). The Politics of Authenticity in Presidential Campaigns, 1976–2008. United States: McFarland Publishing. ISBN 9780786491094.

9.4 "TRUST ME, I KNOW WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT": HOW TO INCREASE YOUR CREDIBILITY

With all of this talk about credibility as power, you may have been wondering how to increase your own credibility. It's easy to find lists of ways to enhance credibility, but they often make it look too easy, as though all you have to do is follow six or seven steps and everyone will believe everything you say. Clearly that is not in line with the spirit of this chapter, and implies that a few simple tricks are all that is needed: dress nice, use the right gestures, bingo! While it's true that credibility is often assessed based on peripheral cues (Chapter 6.5) such as appearance, that's a fleeting form of credibility. True credibility is hard to gain, easy to lose, and works best when it is established over time. With that said, you can take the factors discussed already and turn them into techniques to build credibility.

1. Demonstrate your knowledge: "I know my stuff"

There are many ways you can signal to your audience that you are knowledgeable on a topic, and they can be divided into subpoints. Think of what a truly knowledgeable person sounds like, and follow their lead:

1a. Show, don't tell. Depending on the context and the subject matter, you may be able to demonstrate directly that you have expertise in an area by actually doing the thing you claim to be good at doing (i.e., don't just tell people you can speak Swahili, start speaking it; if you're in a kitchen, you don't have to boast about being a good cook if you can make a perfect souffle on the spot). The rest of this advice is about situations where you can't show, and have to rely on telling instead.

1b. Use the proper terminology. Although this can easily slip into the use of jargon (See Chapter 10.3)or risk alienating your audience by being incomprehensible, using the right terms goes a long way toward telling people you know your subject matter. You can blow it by mispronouncing or misspelling those terms, so you have to be careful, but language may be the best tool to show expertise.

1c. Recite history. If you want to convince people you are a good jazz guitarist but there's no guitar handy for you to play, start talking about Django Reinhardt and Wes Montgomery and how bebop arose out of swing bands in Kansas City. In contrast, someone who claims to be a jazz guitar maestro but who says "Django who?" is going to lose credibility.

1d. Speak effortlessly. One of the clues that someone knows a topic well is how easily and rapidly they can talk about it. This is not something you can fake, so it certainly doesn't belong in the category of simple tricks, but if you truly are knowledgeable about something and just don't know how to show it, learning to relax and "let it flow" when talking about it goes a long way. This is why the delivery modes described in Chapter 14 are connected to credibility: if you can speak about a topic without relying on notes, the audience can see that you know it.

2. Admit your limitations: "But I don't know everything"

This may seem to contradict the first point, and might go against your instinct to protect your credibility by concealing the limits of your knowledge. But here's the thing: people who claim to know everything are certainly exaggerating, and true experts don't make this claim; they are aware of the limits of their knowledge. You hear this all the time when a pundit is invited to talk about something on a TV show and the host asks them to expound on something beyond their expertise: a true expert won't bite, and will "stay in their lane" instead: "No, I'm an expert on Middle Eastern conflicts and you're asking about the war in Ukraine — I can't comment about that." Showing people that you know where the edge of your "box of knowledge" is sends the message that you really know what's inside that box.

Moving on to the trustworthiness dimension, the techniques are a little different:

3. Signal your trustworthiness: "Do I look like a liar to you?"

I can't use the phrase "demonstrate your trustworthiness" in the same way "demonstrate your knowledge," since trust takes time to build. The best thing you can do is to **point to your track record of actions**, but what if you don't have a long track record to point to, or that record has not been spotless? Keep in mind the points that have already been made about who people trust, and the other names for this dimension: motives and bias.

3a. Connect with your audience. As discussed, people tend to trust others with whom they feel a sense of connection or similarity, which is why the border guard lets Llewellyn across in *No Country For Old Men* (See Chapter 6.5). The guard is the one to ask Llewellyn if he was in the military, but Llewellyn could have gotten a jump on it by being the first to point out that connection. Good sales people are always looking for ways to connect with customers ("I see you're wearing a Maroon 5 T-shirt: I love that band!"), and politicians emphasize any similarity they can find with their audience ("I grew up poor myself").

3b. Address motive issues. Sometimes audiences will suspect that someone has an ulterior motive or hidden agenda, such as a salesperson who tries to sell them a more expensive car because they'll get a bigger commission. What should you do if someone suspects you in this way? You could try to dismiss their concern, but it seems wiser to tackle it head on, either by explaining why it's not an issue ("I get paid a flat salary, not a commission") or acknowledging it up front and moving on to other reasons the more expensive car is better. The thing I wouldn't recommend is letting the audience wonder about it on their own without addressing it.

3c. Acknowledge other points of view. This is a particular philosophy that others may disagree with, but it grows out of the Paradox of Passion and the difficulty of maintaining neutrality. The problem with the Paradox of Passion is not just that the expert has strong feelings; it's that those strong feelings blind them to other points of view. To counteract this, even small acknowledgements of the validity of other points of view can have a powerful effect. I ended the discussion of the paradox with four scenarios where it can be an issue, including a politician responding to a State of the Union speech and a married partner testifying on behalf of their spouse. Imagine how much difference it would make if the opposing politician mixed in a few acknowledgements of good points the president made among all the criticisms, or the spouse admitted that their partner is not a saint. Is doing so a sign of weakness or uncertainty, or a sign of strength and open-mindedness? Experts may disagree, but I'm in the second camp.

Other guidelines for increasing your credibility can be derived from the concept that credibility can transfer from one party to another:

4. Cite Your Source: "This isn't about me"

One lesson from the transfer concept is that you have a choice about how much your own credibility is an issue: you can do things that make it a central one, or you can lighten the load on you by citing other sources. This is why teachers require bibliographies and citations in term papers: you don't want to imply "I (an undergraduate student) know everything about spun glass air filters," but want to say "Here's what the experts on spun glass air filters say." It's also about giving credit where credit is due, which is a good ethical habit. Outside the academic realm, hyperlinks serve the same purpose: they tell the world "It's not just me who is making this claim."

5. Outsource Your Bragging

One general hazard of credibility is boasting: explicitly telling people you are an amazing person, which puts many people off and sets the expectations high. Yet there are times when you need to tell people about your accomplishments: in order to get promoted at work, you will probably have to convince your bosses you've done a good job; a restaurant will get more customers if the public knows it's the best sushi place in town; and if you're on the dating circuit you need to get the word out that you're a "catch." The solution is obvious: get others to "talk you up," either in spoken or written form. It works best when they **use stories and nouns, not adjectives**: i.e., if they tell stories about your actual accomplishments and deeds instead of just describing in general terms what a great person you are. This technique can backfire if it's too obvious, and there may be questions about solicitation (did you get those people to say those nice things by offering an incentive or trading favors?), but in general it's one of the most tried and true methods to increase credibility.

6. Message credibility: "I told you once i told you a milion times don't exagerate"

This phrase is meant to illustrate that when it comes to making the message itself credible, one important principle is to avoid pitfalls. Those include:

Spelling mistakes, poor grammar, punctuation errors, and missing words. With the increase of hasty writing in discussion boards, these small errors seem to be becoming more common and therefore more accepted, but they still send the underlying message that the author couldn't be bothered to take a minute to check their message before posting it. Sloppiness in writing can be a signal of sloppiness in factual accuracy, which is why a single typo in a resume can be fatal. And on a basic courtesy level, it takes the challenge of achieving mutual understanding (see the Lego model discussion in Chapter 1) and pushes work from the author to the reader. This is especially true for missing words where the has to figure out word is missing from the.

Exaggeration, overstatement, and overconfidence. Speaking as an audience member, the quickest way to get me to discount your message is to guarantee with 100% confidence that it is always true, your medicine cures everything, and your political plans will fix all problems overnight. See the discussion of the Toulmin model in Chapter 7, particularly the importance of qualifiers.

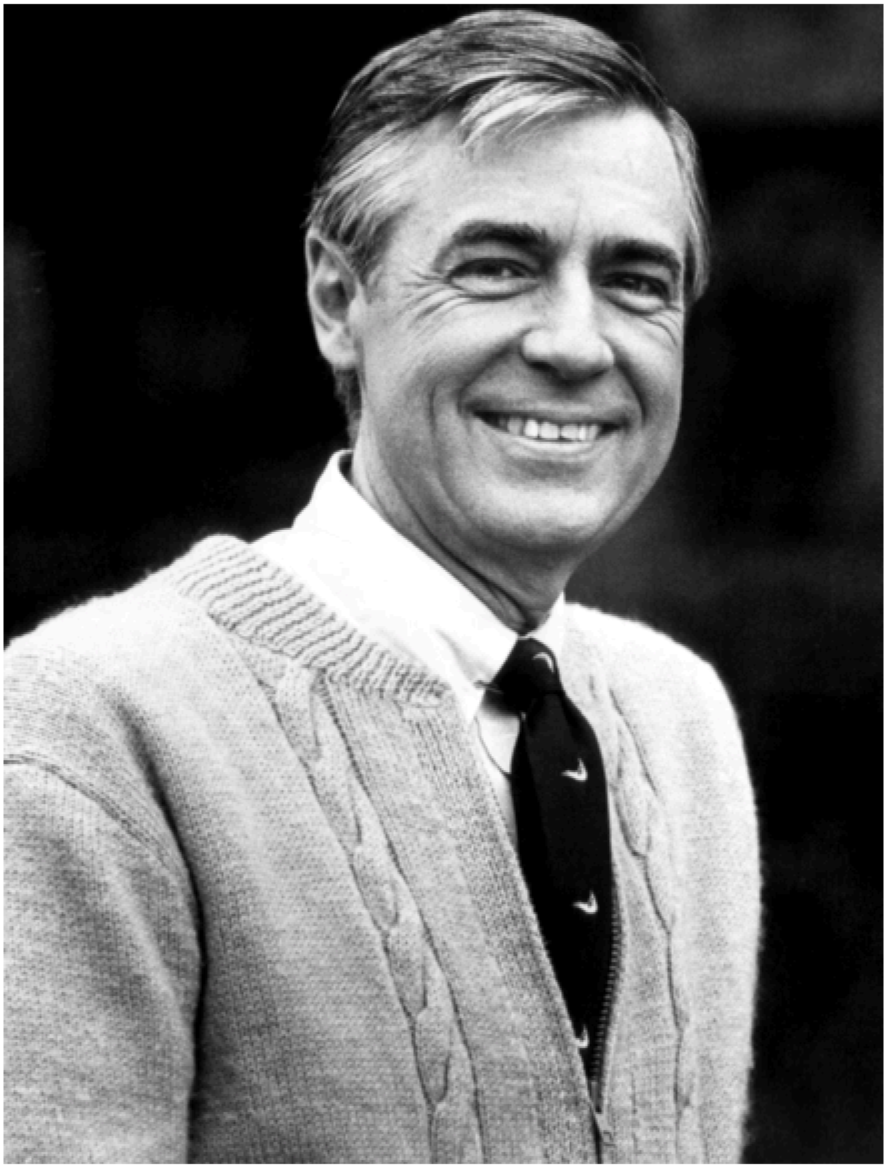
Inappropriate style. One of the intended take-aways from Chapter 10 is that matching your language style to the audience and situation is a key to good communication. Swearing and using a lot of slang among your friends is fine, but don't do it in a job interview. On the other hand, it's probably off-putting to use language that's too proper and formal when you're skateboarding with friends.

Poor organization. People may not notice if your message is well-organized and flows logically, but they will definitely notice the opposite: a message that is disorganized and "all over the place" will undermine your credibility.

Will following all of this advice guarantee that people take you seriously and believe what you say? Consider this exercise: before I give a lecture on credibility, I sometimes ask my students to come to class with the name of a **highly credible public figure**. I give them a week to think about it. Many come back with the name of someone who is long dead (Gandhi, Rosa Parks, Albert Einstein) or someone in their personal life who doesn't qualify as a "public figure," or they just draw a blank. Some name a celebrity or politician that they personally admire, but the phrase "highly credible" implies that everyone admires the person in the same way and there aren't a lot of people who attack or question their credibility. Some name a minor celebrity who no one else in the room has heard of.

Why is this such a difficult assignment? Perhaps because we have learned more about tearing down credibility than building it up, perhaps because we live in the information age where there is always some "dirt" somewhere that a motivated person can discover and exploit, or perhaps it's because the public sphere has become so divided that one community's hero is automatically another community's villain. At any rate, the lesson about credibility is that there is no magic wand that will make everyone believe everything you say. The most important thing is to actually *be* knowledgeable, trustworthy, and unbiased, but you still have to let the world know that you are those things. Credibility, then is something that must be communicated to others *somehow*.

My answer to the assignment, by the way, is Fred Rogers. He was the host of the PBS children's show *Mr. Rogers*, and his testimony to Congress in 1969 has been called one of the most effective speeches ever given (see Chapter 13). He's been dead since 2003, so he doesn't really qualify as a public figure anymore, some people found him a bit creepy, and there have always been wild rumors floating around about him... but in the two decades since his passing, no one has been able to find any credible evidence that he was not "the real deal."



BOX 9.4: CREDIBLE APOLOGIES

One type of message where credibility matters a great deal is an apology, because the thing audiences are most interested in is generally not what words the apologizer uses, but whether the person is really sincere. How can an audience know if someone is sincere other than by how they express themselves? Every few weeks a celebrity apologizes for something or other, but many of those apologies are disastrous and make things worse, so such apologies are usually not a good model. Assuming that you will need to apologize for things from time to time and want to do it right, what is the best way to say sorry?

First, understand the three component parts that an apology should have:

- **Admission:** the statement of what you did wrong (which can vary widely in terms of specificity and detail)
- **Regret:** the statement of how you feel about it (also known as "remorse")
- **Restoration:** the promise of what you will do about it going forward, ranging from a simple Non-Repeat Promise ("I'll never do that again") to a Full Restoration ("I have a plan to fix the situation and repay the people I've wronged")

You could also call these *past* (what I did then), *present* (how I feel now) and *future* (what I'll do next). What happens if one of those three elements is missing? You've just given a **pseudo-apology**, which can take several forms:

- If the admission is missing (possibly for legal reasons), it sounds like "I'm sorry you feel that way," which is really blaming the victim. It's saying "The problem is your negative reaction, not my action, so the solution is for you to get over being offended." In the TV series *Scrubs*, the character Carla apologizes with the phrase "I didn't mean to upset you even though everything I said was true and you know it." If everything Carla said is true, she must think the other person is simply unreasonable.
- Another option is to admit that the action was wrong, but it's not your fault, which can either be expressed using passive voice ("Mistakes were made"…but not by me) or as an excuse (see below).
- If the regret is missing, it's clear that you were forced by someone else to make the apology or are apologizing because of the consequences (e.g., you lost a lot of social media followers), not because you actually feel bad.
- If the restoration is missing, it sends the message that you don't actually care about the consequences and just want to move on and forget about it. The phrase "I take full responsibility" means nothing if it doesn't lead to action or change.

Emotional expression is a big factor: how exactly do you express your regret? This is one situation where nonverbal factors (LINK TO Ch. 12) matter more than words, especially tone of voice, eye contact, and facial expression. Unlike in most normal contexts, having good eye contact may not help, and having downcast eyes might better convey regret.

Another factor is **length**: there's a big difference between a quick "Oops! Sorry," and "I apologize unreservedly. I offer a complete and utter retraction. The imputation was totally without basis in fact, and was in no way a fair comment, and was motivated purely by malice, and I deeply regret any distress that my comments may have caused you or your family, and I hereby undertake not to repeat any such slander at any time in the future." (This was the apology uttered by lawyer Archie Leach in the 1988 film *A Fish Called Wanda* after he called someone "stupid"). Presumably, the length of the apology should be proportional to the seriousness of the offense, but even if the infraction was extremely bad, repeating the apology over the course of months or years might just make things worse.

The divided self: from a psychological point of view, apologies often involve a little mental gymnastics in which the apologizer splits themselves into two separate beings: the bad one who committed the act (the sinner) and the good one who is now sorry and wants to punish their past self (the flogger). Many times they will insist that the flogger is the "real" them and the sinner "wasn't me," or at least, wasn't acting according to the values that the real them holds dear. Curiously, few people choose to say "I have a bad side and a good side, and the bad side took over temporarily," which seems more believable than a complete denial that the bad side is a part of who they are.

Excuses: One crucial decision an apologizer must make is whether to also include an excuse or justification, or not try to deflect blame that way. From the receiver's point of view, an apology without deflection ("There's no excuse for what I did") seems to have more impact. Some apology experts recommend completely avoiding "ifs or buts" that imply it was someone else's fault ("but you drove me to it") or it had to be done ("there was nothing I could do"), but this may take a lot of willpower. To see how excuses can completely undermine an apology, watch how Jake (John Belushi) "apologizes" to Carrie Fisher in *The Blues Brothers*:

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The Meaningless Institutional Apology: If you've ever read a printed sign that read "We apologize for the inconvenience" or heard the recorded message "We're sorry, but your call cannot be completed," you've encountered an MIA (Meaningless Institutional Apology), in which all three components of a true apology are MIA (missing in action). This must be the emptiest possible use of the word "sorry."

CHAPTER 10: LANGUAGE

10.1 THE POWER OF WORDS

Words As Tools

When my son was around a year old, he didn't enjoy sitting in his high chair. After spending a little time eating, he would squirm until we asked "All done?" In his pre-verbal phase, he would try to convey with gestures that he wanted to get out of that chair. And then came the magical day when he said his first word — actually, a phrase: "Ah duh." When we realized that "ah duh" meant "all done," we lifted him out of the chair.

That was the moment he discovered the power of words: all he had to do was make certain sounds with his mouth, and he got what he wanted! As he grew, he made more and more discoveries about how much power words have: if someone was angry at him for something he did, uttering the word "sorry" might change their mood entirely. He was learning what John Austin stated simply in his 1962 book *How to Do Things With Words*: words don't only describe things, they accomplish things. Words avoid fights (or start them), provoke emotional reactions (or reduce them), words begin relationships (and end them), and words are the building blocks of rules and laws. If you get a job you enjoy, hope that your boss never utters the words "You're fired," because that utterance means your job is over.

As noted in Chapter 1, animals have many channels of communication available to them, but with the exception of parrots and gorillas who have learned sign language, they do not have words. Animals know that the right growl can avoid a fight and the right call can attract a mate, but they don't have a vocabulary of tens of thousands of words. How many words are at your disposal? If you're a typical American English speaker, you probably know between 20,000 and 50,000 words.[1]

Even by age three, the average child knows over 3,000 words. If you do the math, that means that even before they begin school, children are learning at least three new words a day, every single day. And a "word" is not a perfect measure of vocabulary size, since so many words have multiple meanings (the word "run," for example, has 645 different meanings). The good news is, most languages provide a wide variety of ways to express the same thing. This gives rise to the concept of "style," which here means all of the choices one can make about how to express a single idea.

Imagine this scenario: you walk onto a crowded bus, and all of the seats are taken except one seat with two bags on it, clearly belonging to the woman in the adjacent seat. You would like to sit down, so your goal is to get that woman to move the bags so you can take that seat. What words to you use? You might try "Excuse me,

1. Brysbaert, M., Stevens, M., Mandera, P. & Keuleers, E. (2016) How Many Words Do We Know? Practical Estimates of Vocabulary Size Dependent on Word Definition, the Degree of Language Input and the Participant's Age. *Frontiers in Psychology* 7:1116. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01116

madam — so sorry to bother you, but I've had a long day and my legs are hurting so I would really appreciate it if you could possibly move your crap." Would it work? While you were speaking, the woman looked like she was ready to start picking up the bags — until, that is, you got to the last word. As soon as she heard "crap," she glared at you and put her hands back on her lap.

Another option would be: "Hey lady, could you quit hogging the seats and move your stuff?" The judicious replacement of "crap" with "stuff" may help, but the terms "lady" and "hogging" do too much damage before you even get to the end of the sentence. You might instead try a simple "Are those your bags?" or dozens of other ways to phrase the request, each with a different chance of success.

Decades ago, a scholar named Richard Weaver noted that some words are particularly powerful, and he used the words **"god terms"** and **"devil terms"** to refer to them.[2] This religious-sounding terminology doesn't imply any connection to actual theology, but does represent how people react to these words. If a god spoke to you, how would you respond? Would you argue, analyze, and debate, or would you blindly obey? Weaver's point is that certain words provoke a similar response: people don't argue about them, analyze them, or debate their meaning; they simply respond with automatic obedience.

There are, for example, many dating websites out there, but note how eHarmony distinguishes itself from the competition: by emphasizing that their model is based on "scientific research." The way they use the word "scientific" indicates that they see it as a god term. What exactly does "scientific" mean here, and what do their scientific methods look like? Few people will ask those questions; most will just think "Okay, scientific: that means it must work." Since the Federal Trade Commission, the body that regulates advertising in the United States, has no formal definition of "scientific," there's no risk of getting in trouble for using the word, and the company can benefit from the assumptions people make about it.

On the other hand, people will automatically respond with revulsion and fear to devil terms such as "censorship." Does software that prevents children from inadvertently seeing objectionable websites count as censorship? That's a point reasonable minds could disagree on, but McAfee knows better than to wade into the debate by using the word "censor." Instead, they feature the word "safe" (such as in an advertisement for their Internet Monitoring Software, where the word "safe" appears no less than six times on one page).

2. Weaver, R. (1953). *The Ethics of Rhetoric*. Regnery.

In another example, although you can argue about who is a "freedom fighter" and who is a "terrorist," there isn't much debate about whether a "terrorist" is a good thing. If you're called one, the only appropriate response is to dispute it.

Another way you can recognize a devil term, by the way, is if people are so scared of it that they only use its first initial, as in "the N word" or "the C word" (harking back to the myth that if you say the devil's name, he will appear, and similar to the fear of saying Voldemort's name in the Harry Potter universe).

When he introduced this concept in 1953, Weaver had thoughts about what counted as a god term or a devil term, but that was long ago and just one person's opinion. Today, advertisers and politicians do a great deal of research on people's reactions to words, and emphasize the god terms heavily while avoiding the devil terms. Someone must have decided that the word "soap" was a devil term at one point, because grocery aisles were full of dozens of varieties of "cleansing bars" and "body wash" without the word "soap" appearing anywhere.

But one company that was not afraid to call it soap — J.R Watkins — also relied heavily on a new god term: "plant-based," using it three times on the front of their bottle.

(With the rise in questions about the potential harms of vaping, some jokesters have wondered if there is a "plant-based" alternative to vapes — like, for instance, cigarettes?).

What is a god term and what is a devil term is also dependent on the audience; you should not assume that everyone responds to words the same way. Beginning with the Black Lives Matter movement in the mid-2010s, the political left considered the term "woke" a god term, representing awareness of systemic discrimination. To the political right, however, it became a devil term, denoting "overrighteous liberalism." To an elderly audience, "traditional" may be a good thing, while a younger audience might considers it the opposite … unless you call it "old school" or "retro" instead.

10.2 WORDS AS TOYS

Another wonderful aspect of words is that they are toys that can be played with. Going to school for too long and being taught the "proper" words for things may blind you to the fact that language has always been fluid, creative, and personal. Perhaps your family has come up with special words or phrases, or your friend group has "inside jokes" that are encapsulated with a phrase that makes you laugh but that others don't understand. In the television series *Reservation Dogs*, for example, a group of teens uses the words "stoodis" and "skoden" as shortenings of "Let's do this" and "Let's go then." Puns, and the habit of responding to a bad pun by groaning, date back to ancient Rome. You may not be aware that serious scholars have devoted time and energy to dissecting the pun "Time flies like an arrow, but fruit flies like a banana" (a phrase with its own Wikipedia page).

Although it may annoy language purists, there is a long history of people turning verbs into nouns (such as "That's a big ask") and nouns into verbs ("This will impact your decision"). William Shakespeare contributed 1,700 words to the English language (or was at least the first person to record them). Another copious contributor was Cab Calloway, who in 1938 compiled the terms he heard from Harlem musicians into the *Hepster's Dictionary*. Some of the terms now sound outdated ("cogs" for sunglasses or "mash me a fin," meaning "lend me $5"), but many survived ("stache" = to hide away; "corny" = old-fashioned or stale; "beat" = tired). Since then, the stream of slang words joining the language has not stopped, with some experiencing brief popularity before they become dated, and others achieving formal recognition (such as "rizz," which was named the 2023 Oxford Word of the Year).

Some brand names have become generic. If someone asks for a band-aid, most people don't reply "Sorry, I only have *Curad* brand bandages, not *Band-Aid* brand." Other words began as initials (acronyms): did you know, for instance, that "scuba" stands for "Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus"? When a new disease swept the planet in 2020, the World Health Organization had no trouble coming up with an easily-pronounceable two syllable word for it, COVID, which many people didn't realize is just an abbreviation of "COrona VIrus Disease." If that was so easy, why are so many other disease names so difficult?

Given the ease with which many new words join the English language, it's curious that other words struggle to gain that status. The most notable example is the lack of a gender neutral singular pronoun in English, to get around having to specify "he" and "she" or use the inhuman "it." A new word would make life easier, averting the need to use constructions such as "he or she" (or in writing, "s/he") or the plural "they," which is potentially confusing. Yet none of the proposed new gender neutral terms — including "tey" (Miller & Swift, 1971), "xe" (Rickter, 1973), "per" (Piercy, 1979), "ze" (Creel, 1997), "sey" (Rogerson, 2013), and "eh" (Steinback, 2018) — have caught on widely. Scholars can speculate as to why, but it seems to have something to do with how politically charged gender and identity are, and the fact that some words have become battlegrounds.

BOX 10.2A: We Don't Have A Word For That

It's intriguing to learn about the differences between languages and what they have words for. Sometimes English speakers become so fond of words from other cultures that we borrow them untouched, such as "schadenfreude" (the wicked joy you feel from other people's sadness or misfortune) or "apartheid" (a policy of separating races). Given how much English has taken from languages around the world, and how big the English vocabulary is (the current edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* is 21,728 pages long), it can be surprising to realize how many things lack an English word.

Relationship terms: If you have ever tried to decipher what "third cousin once removed" means, you may get the impression that English must have words for all relationships. But you may also discover that many relationships have no name, or at least require a lot of hyphens. For example, imagine a married couple, Leslie and Pat. Leslie's mother is Louise, who Pat can refer to as "my mother-in-law." Pat's mother is Jo, so Leslie calls her "mother-in-law." But what is the term for the relationship between Louise and Jo? They will probably see each other repeatedly over the years, and may develop a strong relationship, but if we had to give it a name, it would be "my daughter-in-law's mother." Other relationship terms, like "friend" or "partner," are used to represent a wide variety of different kinds of relationships, sometimes leading to confusion. In the film *American Beauty*, a gay couple introduces themselves to a neighbor using the phrase "And this is my partner, Jim," to which the neighbor replies, "You said you're partners, so, uh, what's your business?" In the 1970s, the U.S. Census Bureau needed a term for romantic partners who are living together but not married, and devised "POSSLQ": Person of Opposite Sex Sharing Living Quarters.

Someone who has lost a child: Author Jay Neugeboren, in his 1976 book *An Orphan's Tale*, pointed out a deficiency in the English language and suggested a reason why: *"A wife who loses a husband is called a widow. A husband who loses a wife is called a widower. A child who loses his parents is called an orphan. There is no word for a parent who loses a child. That's how awful the loss is."* Is awfulness a valid reason not to name something? It doesn't seem so, since we have names for so many awful things like killing your own mother ("matricide"), so that hole in the lexicon is puzzling.

Giving someone something to drink: If someone needs food, they feel hungry, so you feed them. If someone needs liquid, they feel thirsty, so you _____(?) them. If they are a horse, you can "water" them, but for humans, why don't we have a liquid equivalent for "feed"?

Poignant emotions: English has many words for emotions, but as author John Koenig proved in *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* (2021), there are many more without names, and he offers names for hundreds of them. Examples include "Foreclearing: the act of deliberately refusing to learn the scientific explanations of things out of fear that it'll ruin the magic," and "Bye-Over: the sheepish casual vibe between two people who've shared an emotional farewell but then unexpectedly have a little extra time together, wordlessly agreeing to pretend that they've already moved on."

BOX 10.2B: We DO Have a Word For That

In contrast to the vocabulary gaps in Box 10.1, word nerds can delight in hidden gems that we *do* have a word for in English, such as:

Defenestrate *(dee-FEN-uh-strate)*: to throw someone out of a window. Did this happen so often that someone decided we needed a name for it?

Antepenultimate *(an-tee-pen-UL-ti-mut):* third-to-last. December 29 is the antepenultimate day of the year.

Akimbo *(ah-KIM-bo)*: holding your arms like this:

To "bat" your eyes: to flutter your eyelashes up and down in a flirtatious manner.

Psithurism *(SITH-yuh-rizz-um)*: the sound of wind rustling through leaves.

Callipygian *(kal-i-PIJ-ee-an):* having beautifully shaped buttocks.

Sesquipedalian *(ses–kwee-pe-DAY-lee-an):* with origins in "sesqui" (one and a half) and "ped" (foot), and referring to things that are a foot-and-a-half long, the word then came to mean words that are really long. In other words, "sesquipedalian" is a sesquipedalian word.

As you might be able to guess, I've been collecting words like this for most of my life. The challenge is figuring out how to use them without getting myself defenestrated for sounding too sesquipedalian. Fancy vocabularies don't make you too many friends.

10.3 WORDS AS WEAPONS

Have you ever received a "Shibboleth" warning on your computer? If you wondered where that unusual word came from, it's from the Bible: specifically, a story in Judges about the aftermath of a battle, and the difficulty of one tribe (the Gileadites) trying to identify enemies (Ephraimites) who are escaping. When people, some of whom might be neutral passersby, try to cross a bridge, the Gileadites have a simple test, "Say the word Shibboleth." The Ephraimites do not have the "sh" sound in their language, so they pronounce it "Sibboleth" instead, and they are promptly killed. This trick has since been used by many others (1302, at the Battle of the Golden Spurs, in which people were killed if they couldn't pronounce "schild en vriend" properly; and 1937, in the Dominican Republic, where at least 20,000 Haitians were murdered for not being able to say "perejil," the Spanish word for parsley), right up until the present day, when the word "palianytsia," a Ukrainian word for bread, is used by Ukrainians to spot Russians.

Even if no one is killed, words have long been used to sort insiders from outsiders, usually to the detriment of outsiders. Has anyone made fun of you for using the wrong term ("pop" or "soda" or "coke") for carbonated soft drinks? Do certain regional accents sound less intelligent to you than others? People who can't speak "properly" have always been disparaged, denied jobs and housing, and mocked. The definition of "proper" is usually affiliated with the ruling class, the highly educated, or both, and if you can't speak the way they do, you're excluded from the benefits they enjoy. If you were raised hearing "Ain't isn't a word," or corrected for pronouncing "ask" as "aks," you have encountered this. These different approaches to language reflect the difference between two language-focused academic disciplines: English and linguistics. English tends to look to authorities to find the "correct" usage of language; if a word doesn't appear in a dictionary, you shouldn't use it. Linguistics is more value-neutral, and may say "Of course 'ain't' is a word! It is used by millions of people every day!"

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As an example, before the 1970s, it was widely believed that African American communities spoke an impoverished version of language, and that phrases like "It be raining" reflected ignorance or the inability to learn "proper" English. Linguist William Labov was the first scholar to start to examine African American speech patterns in a more open-minded way, and recognized African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a legitimate dialect with its own grammatical rules. In books such as *Language in the Inner City: Studies in*

Black English Vernacular (1972), Labov proved that AAVE (also known as **Ebonics**) was as legitimate as any other dialect. Whether that proof has helped an Ebonics speaker get a job rather than the speaker of a more "respected" dialectic is another question. Scholars saying that we should treat all dialects equally is not enough to get the general public to respond the same way.

Some forms of bias and discrimination were hard-baked into the language, and have reinforced stereotypes and values that are only recently being eradicated. For instance, if you think someone is acting "hysterically" (meaning "emotionally unhinged," not "hilariously funny"), you are tapping into an old belief that people with a womb ("hystera") cannot control their emotions. Or think of the difference between the gendered words for similar things: to "mother" a baby carries connotations of nurturing and affection, but to "father" a baby just means to make someone pregnant. A "master" has come to mean someone who is very good at something (as in, someone with a "Master of the Arts" degree), but the equivalent "mistress" conjures images of a woman who consorts with a married man. Then there is the habit of attaching a gendered suffix to some words, which can make the version with the suffix sound less important. If a "waiter" is a *person* who waits on tables, why do we need a separate word for a *woman* who does that job ("waitress")? Likewise, "actress" and "comedienne"? We have no equivalent for traditionally female jobs ("teacheress," "secretaryess"), but sometimes feel compelled to add a gender marker ("male nurse"; "woman surgeon"). Society has made great strides in replacing those kinds of terms with gender-neutral ones ("server"; "mail carrier"; "firefighter"), but there is always further progress to be made. (For further reading, see this chapter.)

Jargon is another example of language-based exclusion. Is it an overgeneralization to say that every industry, every organization, and every workplace has some form of jargon or specialized terms? Perhaps, but many workplaces are heavily jargon-prone. If you ask the people there why they use jargon, the first answer is obvious: simplicity and time-saving. If you spend much of your workday talking about "return on investment" or analyzing "strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats," it's only natural to call them ROI and SWOTs. Saying "HBCU" instead of the full "Historically Black Colleges and Universities" will save you eleven syllables! If you are in a specialized field, jargon also captures more precision: the common term "heart attack," for instance, doesn't distinguish between a non-ST elevation myocardial infarction (NSTEMI) and ventricular fibrillation (V-Fib).

Efficiency and precision are all well and good, but jargon has a third function: to separate insiders from outsiders. A recently graduated student forwarded me an internal memo she received on the job; it was littered with acronyms and jargon in every sentence. The student added, "I've been here 6 months and still have NO idea what 90% of these acronyms mean." Jargon can make a new employee feel like they don't belong, but what if the audience is not an employee? Some professions — trial law, medicine and dentistry, even car repair — require both extensive training and a lot of interaction with the public. People in those professions can easily forget that the members of the public they are talking to (jurors, patients, customers) can't follow what they are saying. Lawyers and doctors go to school for a long time and work hard to learn a lot of (often Latin) terminology, so they naturally slip into using that language instead of a simpler plain English term — or worse, they think there is no plain English term they could use. During the jury selection process, for example, a juror sometimes brings up a sensitive topic that they would rather not discuss in open court. If the lawyer says, "Would you prefer to continue this conversation *in camera*?" the juror might get alarmed, not realizing that "in camera" means "in the judge's chambers." The remedies here are to either teach the lay person (the juror or patient) the right terminology, or translate those esoteric terms into plain language. The second option is better, but requires a vigilant attitude and continual effort not to slip back into the jargon the professionals are used to using.

10.4 LEVELS OF MEANING

Another generalization we can make about language is that it is multi-layered. Imagine this: you are working a job that allows you a lunch break from 12:00 to 12:30 pm. One day you meet up with a friend during your break, and you don't pay careful enough attention to the time. By the time you return to the workplace, your boss is glaring and pointing at the clock, saying *"It's one o'clock!"* You have to decide how to respond:

- "Huh, look at that. Yes, you're right, it is 1:00. Thanks for the information."
- "I'm SO sorry — our lunch order was delayed and I completely lost track of time. It will never happen again!"
- "Yeah, but you got back from your lunch break at 2:00 yesterday! It's totally unfair for you to yell at me for that when you're even worse."

The consequences might be drastically different in each case, but they illustrate something about the nature of language: that even a three-word sentence can contain layers of meaning: the denotative level, the connotative level, and the relational level.[1]

The **denotative level** of meaning is the literal level: what you would discern if you just examined the vocabulary and syntax. Grammatically speaking, "It's one o'clock" is a declarative sentence informing the listener of the time. Its meaning is unambiguous and hard to misinterpret. Response #1 would be an example of only taking the sentence at face value, and responding on the same level. If you do that, however, you risk getting fired, because you're missing what's going on under the surface.

The **connotative level** refers to the implied meaning, and it connects to factors such as the context in which a statement was spoken, the tone of voice, and what you identify as the statement's purpose. Most employees would be smart enough to realize that "It's one o'clock" is another way of saying "You're in trouble," and would respond with a version of response #2. But notice that the sentence "It's one o'clock" doesn't actually mention anything about being in trouble, or the rules, so that meaning is not represented on the denotative level. If a person were going for a walk with a friend and asked them what time it was, and the other person calmly replied "It's one o'clock," it would be very strange to respond "I'm so sorry — it will never happen again!"

The **relational level** is about the relationship between the participants in the conversation. All utterances

1. Watzlawick, P., Bavelas, J.B., & Jackson, D. D. (1967). Pragmatics of Human Communication: A study of interactional patterns, pathologies, and paradoxes. Norton.

between people, regardless of context, can be seen as saying something about what type of relationship the people have with each other. Even mundane statements establish, reinforce, or question the rules and rights of the speakers relative to each other. An employee would only use response #3 if they did not perceive there to be a power relationship between boss and employee (or, for some reason, if the employee has more power than the boss). When someone says "How dare you talk to me that way!," they are commenting on a breach in the implied relationship: "you are violating your rights."

In this model, all statements of any kind contain all three levels. That doesn't mean that the participants are paying equal attention to all three levels, or agreeing on "where the action is": one person can be focused on the denotative level of what they're talking about, and the other can be reacting to the connotations or wanting to re-examine the relationship rules. For example, if a father talking to his teenage daughter says "That boy I saw you with yesterday seems nice," the daughter can focus on the denotative level and they can discuss what kind of boy he is. If the daughter focuses on the connotative level, she may respond to the implication that her father is wondering if there's a spark between them, and respond by clarifying "Oh, I'm not interested in him; we were only talking." If the daughter says "Dad! I'm seventeen years old. Butt out of my relationships!," she is responding to the relational level, and seeing this as an opportunity to discuss the privacy rights or autonomy of a 17-year-old. (Parents usually know how old their children are, so when a child cites their age, it's a clue that they want to renegotiate the parent-child relationship.)

This explains why so many arguments can be frustrating and unproductive: because one participant can be focused on a different level than the other, or because they keep shifting back and forth between levels without resolving anything. An example appears in the 2017 film *Lady Bird*, in a scene where a mother takes her daughter dress shopping in anticipation of a high school dance.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://open.lib.umn.edu/commpractice/?p=440#oembed-1

Daughter *(coming out of the dressing room with a big smile on her face)*: I love it!
Mother *(scowling)*:Is it too pink?
Daughter looks defeated, and goes back into the dressing room
Mother:What?
Daughter: Why can't you say I look nice?
Mother:I thought you didn't even care what I think.
Daughter: I still want you to think I look good.
Mother:Okay, I'm sorry. I was telling you the truth. You want me to lie?

Notice the shifting between levels: first they are talking about a dress, then about their own communication patterns ("Why can't you say I look nice?"), then about their relationship. When the daughter asks why her mother can't say nice things, the mother doesn't respond by talking about whether she is supportive or not, but frames it in terms of honesty vs. lying. They have issues to work out!

Later in the same scene, the daughter wants to explicitly discuss their relationship:

> Daughter:I wish that you liked me.
> Mother:Of course I love you.
> Daughter:But do you like me?
> *(7–second pause)*
> Mother: I want you to be the very best version of yourself that you can be.

What are the connotations of "like" vs. "love"? Or of that pause? (Go ahead and time it; if you ask someone if they like you, and it takes them seven seconds to reply, it feels like forever). The daughter would be justified in interpreting "I want you to be the very best version of yourself that you can be" as "No, I don't like you."

The next time you are in a difficult conversation, or frustrated that a discussion is going nowhere, a focus on these three levels may help you understand what is going on.

The names you give to things can also have big consequences, and this also relates to levels of meaning. For example, if after college you decide you would like to open up a drinking establishment and name it after yourself, it's worth thinking carefully about the connotations of different names. Think about the images that come up with each, what associations they connote, and what kind of customers are likely to show up:

- **James's Tavern**: Is this the kind of place you would take your parents to? What kind of beverages are likely to be on the menu? Do they have live music, and if so, what kind?
- **Jimmy's Pub**: Will they serve green beer on St. Patrick's Day? Is it okay to strike up conversations with other patrons, or does everyone stick to themselves?
- **The James Lounge**: How noisy is it? What kind of drinks do they serve? Do you have to dress up nicely? Could your punk band get a gig there?
- **Jimmy's Saloon**: How many kinds of whiskey do they serve?
- **Jimmy's Dive**: do they have bouncers? Are the floors sticky?

On a denotative level, the names all say the same thing. The connotations, however, can be quite different. If you call it Jimmy's Saloon but don't serve any whiskey (only appletinis) and the live music is a harpist, the business may never get off the ground.

In legal situations, careful thought about connotations is worth the time. On the denotative level, for instance, the word "alleged" means "claimed but not proven," and it's the proper term to use until the jury has reached a verdict. But on the connotative level, "alleged" sounds to many people like "guilty but you're not allowed to say that yet." For that reason, if you are a criminal defense attorney, never refer to your client as an "alleged kidnapper"; to many jurors, that says "I think my client is guilty." On the civil side, a plaintiff attorney who represents someone who was injured in a collision and is suing the other driver should be careful how they refer to that incident. Calling it a car accident may be the most common approach, but don't forget that the word "accident" implies that it's no one's fault, so what is there to sue about? Use the word "crash" instead.

Connotations can be so powerful, and so hard to disassociate from a phrase, that sometimes you just have to abandon a phrase and come up with a new one. For this reason, the names for some things change fairly regularly, and people may be confused or anxious about getting things wrong. In the old days, for example, countries that were not as rich and technologically advanced as others were called "backward," which is inherently insulting, so they became "third world" countries (but few could explain what the first and second worlds were), and then "undeveloped" countries, and then "developing" countries. A woman who was not employed outside the home used to be a "housewife," which turned into "homemaker" or "stay-at-home mom," and the related school courses shifted from "home ec" (short for "economics") to "domestic science" to "FACS: family and consumer sciences." Someone who couldn't walk might be called a "crippled" or "lame," which also sound like insults, so they were replaced with "handicapped" and "disabled," and then "differently abled," but then you run across articles called "Why You Shouldn't Use 'Differently-Abled' Anymore." It's good to strive to find the best terminology, but also be forgiving of people who aren't sure if "midget" or "deaf" or "people of color" are the right words to use.

10.5 ADAPTING TO YOUR AUDIENCE

One of the themes of this chapter is that it's important to be sensitized to the power of words, good and bad — the power to persuade and heal, as well as the power to attack and harm. It is useful to think of the effects that words have on audiences, and how those words make people feel. At the same time, there is such a thing as being over-sensitized, and falling for the trap of thinking that changing language is enough to solve fundamental societal problems.

It's also good to adapt your language to your audience, which sometimes requires being "multi-dialectical." You might not be multilingual — able to speak and switch between languages — but you're probably able to switch from slang to formal language when it's called for, or when jargon is helpful rather than being exclusionary and alienating. **Code-switching** is the ability to alternate between dialects or speech styles, an ability that benefits everyone.

Knowing different dialects and styles has the advantage of giving you more choices about how to express yourself. For example, you know a good set of swear words to use in the company of some people, but also how to avoid saying anything offensive to a different set of people. I'll call this the vividness scale.

The Vividness Scale: Swearing

Sometimes speakers want to provoke a strong reaction from their audience, and the most obvious way to do that is to swear. An indication of the power of swear words can be found in the MPAA movie rating system, which suggests that some words are so powerful that children should never hear them (some words are okay for a 13-year-old to hear; other words are not appropriate for children younger than 17). If R-rated movies are shown on certain television channels, those words are "bleeped out" or replaced with other words. There are two relevant questions to ponder:

What is a swear word? The definition obviously varies widely from one culture to another, but has also shifted dramatically over time. Another categorical term for swear words is "profanity," but that only refers to a certain type: religious words that profane what is holy, such as "hell" or "damn" (which means "condemn to hell"). Note that these words won't get a movie slapped with an R rating, suggesting that not everyone considers these to be swear words anymore. And even the words "swearing" and "cursing" hark back to these roots: to "swear" means "to make a solemn promise or take an oath," and the meaning of "curse" is similar to "damn" — i.e., the opposite of "bless."

Nowadays, when people talk about someone swearing, it usually has little to do with religion or promises, and more with sex or bodily functions. In *The Stuff of Thought* (2007), Steven Pinker found an interesting pattern when it comes to sex: intransitive words that require a preposition (such as "make love to" or "have sex with") are okay, but transitive words that don't require a preposition (in the form "John verbed Mary") are considered vulgar. Why certain words for sexual and bodily topics are unacceptable in polite society could turn into a long philosophical debate, but it's easy to recognize that it has to do with what people are squeamish about discussing in a particular society (more on this in the Euphemisms section below).

Recently, it seems that even those words related to sex and bodily functions are losing some of their potency — perhaps from overuse — and a new category of "swear words" is arising: words that demean categories of people. This includes gender-specific insults, derogatory names for races, and hurtful terms for disabilities. These are sometimes called "slurs," and for some people a slur is worse than a swear word.

Do they help? People use swear words to increase the impact of their message, but the words don't always have this effect. Sometimes they can make people stop listening to your message, or hurt your credibility. Academic studies of swearing tend to find that swearing usually hurts the effectiveness of your message more than it helps. However, much of that research is quite old (dating back to the 1970s and 1980s),[1] and some more recent studies suggest that the tide may be turning.[2]

When considering whether to swear or not, consider these factors:

- **Context**: Who is doing the swearing, who they are talking to, and where they are all make an enormous difference. It is not well-advised to swear during job interviews, testimony to Congress, press conferences, or conversations with the elderly (depending on who they are). But a well-timed curse word dropped into the right conversation can be a very effective attention-getter, and a good way to express strong emotions.
- **Overuse**: One more reason not to rely too heavily on swear words is because there are only so many of them, and using the same words over and over, regardless of which words they are, is generally not a good use of language. The 2013 film *The Wolf of Wall Street* used "the F word" 569 times — a mind-numbing amount which shows a lack of imagination on the screenwriter's part. Steven Pinker said it well: "If an overuse of taboo words, whether by design or laziness, blunts their emotional edge, it will have deprived us of a linguistic instrument that we sometimes sorely need" (*The Stuff of Thought*, p. 370).

1. Examples of old research on swearing that are still cited in textbooks: Bostrom, R. N., Baseheart, J. R., & Rossiter, C. M. (1973). The effects of three types of profane language in persuasive messages. *Journal of Communication*, 23, 461–475, and Powell, L., Callahan, K., Comans, C., McDonald, L., Mansell, J., Trotter, M. D., & Williams, V. (1984). Offensive language and impressions during an interview. *Psychological Reports*, 55, 617–618.

2. Scherer, C. R., & Sagarin, B. J. (2006). Indecent influence: The positive effects of obscenity on persuasion. Social Influence, 1, 138–146; Rassin, E., & Van Der Heijden, S. (2005). Appearing credible? Swearing helps! *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 11(2), 177–182.

The Vividness Scale: Adjectives

Short of using swear words, how else can language be made vivid? One simple technique is to use **sensory language** that will get the listener more in touch with bodily senses. Rather than describing something using generic adjectives, as in "the house was scary," getting into the details of how something looked, sounded, and smelled will make it more vivid: "the floorboards creaked, the only light was from a shaft of moonlight coming through the attic window, and the smell had a sharpness like that of rotting onions".

On the topic of adjectives, let's look at a problem with their use: **adjective inflation**. Inflation doesn't just refer to the devaluing of money. In academic circles, for instance, some colleges are concerned about "grade inflation." The tendency for grades to compress at the top of the scale can reach a point where a B+ (which originally meant "far exceeds expectations, and is well above the average") comes to be seen as a poor grade. The problem with grade inflation is that if a teacher gives As to most student papers, and then reads one that is significantly better than all of the previous ones, there is no higher grade left to give, and the excellent paper gets exactly the same grade as papers that are far less excellent.

Adjectives, too, can be overextended, and thus lose all meaning. If you use the same word to describe things that are on different qualitative levels, it's the same as giving every student an A+ regardless of how they did in class. British comedian Eddie Izzard has a routine about the word "awesome," which originally meant "inspiring awe," and should be reserved for incredible things that take one's breath away and are hard for mortal minds to comprehend. Now, Izzard notes, "awesome" is used to refer to mundane things like hot dogs, and has come to mean "pretty good." Like a devalued dollar, the "buying power" of the word "awesome" has been diminished, and the word can't regain its original power.

Likewise, the word "ultimate": on a denotative level, it means last in a series; nothing can come after it. It has come to connote something that is exciting and powerful, but not the last possible thing (when BMW refers to their cars as "the ultimate driving machine," that doesn't mean they're going to stop producing new models). Sometimes the problem comes from the friction between two divisions of a company: the marketing division that is always trying to convince the public that this is the greatest product possible, and the research and development division that is busy coming up with something better. When Sufix, a fishing line company, names a product "Ultra Supreme," or a credit card company calls their new card Platinum (better than the silver, gold, or diamond cards), what are they going to call the next upgrade?

The Vividness Scale: Euphemisms

On the opposite end of the vividness scale are euphemisms. These are terms specifically designed *not* to create emotional reactions, and instead to reduce offense or "soften the blow" of things that may shock. In the discussion of swearing, we mentioned the tendency for words describing certain bodily functions to turn into swear words. Consider where you can go to perform those functions: what is the name of the room in which you can urinate and defecate? Here are some possibilities:

- Bathroom
- Restroom
- Washroom
- Men's/women's room
- "The facilities"
- WC (a primarily British term)

Now, consider how ill-fitting these names are. "Bathroom" suggests that there's a bath tub in there, which is not true for bathrooms outside the home (imagine calling it the "Shower Room," though there's no shower in it). "Restroom" sounds like a place where you can lie down (the only "resting" that takes place in there is emptying body cavities, so why isn't it called an "Emptyroom"?). While it's advisable to wash your hands at the end of your visit to the "Washroom," it's probably not the reason you went in there. "The men's room" or "women's room" (or variants like "Ladies") doesn't say anything about what the room is for, only who is allowed to go in it. "Facilities" is hopelessly vague, and "WC" can be called a double euphemism for people who find the phrase "Water Closet" too shocking. Why don't any of these names reflect what people actually do in there? Answer: because no one wants to visualize that.

A rare sign that actually acknowledges what this room is for

This connects to what author George Orwell said about euphemisms: that their purpose is to "name things without calling up mental images of them" (*Politics and the English Language*, 1946). Orwell was talking about all the euphemisms he heard in the context of World War II:

> Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers.*

This brings our attention to other domains in which euphemisms are frequently found.

- **Bodily functions:** "number two," "wetness protection," "that time of the month," "passing gas"
- **Sex**: "sleeping with" someone; "male enhancement," "bikini area." Euphemisms around sex are so common that when someone uses the vaguest phrase possible, "doing it," we assume that they're talking about sex.
- **Death**: "passed away," "remains" (*not* "dead body"), and if it's a dog, "put to sleep"
- **War**: "ethnic cleansing," "friendly fire" (being killed a fellow soldier), "enhanced interrogation techniques" (instead of "torture")
- **Employment**: "downsizing" (not "firing"), "adverse event" (not "disaster"), "underperforming assets" (bad debts)
- **Failure**: "held back" (instead of "failed second grade"), "rapid unscheduled disassembly" (a term used by Space X to refer to rockets that explode)
- **Embarrassment**: "plus-sized," "wardrobe malfunction," "height challenged"

In the film *In Good Company*, a boss says that he will have to "let some people go." An employee responds, "Why do you say 'let them go'? They don't want to go. Why don't you just say 'fire' them?" To which the boss replies, "Because it sounds better." But then the employee reveals the weakness of euphemisms: "Not to the person being fired, it doesn't." Euphemisms may succeed in reducing emotional reactions, but only to a limited degree.

Add to this the possible confusion if the listener doesn't know what "I'm going to see a man about a horse" (urinate) or "in the family way" (pregnant) means — especially non-native speakers. Euphemisms are an example of an **idiom**: defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary* as "A speech form or an expression of a given language that is peculiar to itself grammatically or *cannot be understood from the individual meanings of its elements*." It's perfectly understandable that a child who knows what the word "sleep" means misinterprets what "put to sleep" means in reference to a dog, and asks when the dog is going to wake up. Someone learning English can quickly learn that to "put down" usually means to place an object on a surface, but it takes longer to grasp that when you're talking about a *pet*, "put down" means euthanize (no one ever says "Fluffy was getting old, so we took her to the vet to be killed"), and when you're talking about a *baby*, "put down" means "gently place the baby in a crib for a nap."

Even when you learn the complete vocabulary of a language, you're only halfway there: you also have to learn all those phrases that don't follow grammatical or semantic rules, phrases you just have to memorize — and since they are so "peculiar," the risk of getting them slightly wrong is an ever-present danger. Instead of saying "shoot the breeze" (talk about unimportant things), you say "shoot the wind" and people look at you like you are "two bricks short of a load" (not very intelligent).

BOX 10.3: WHY DO WE CALL IT A "MAGIC" WORD?

In the *Star Trek: The Original Series* episode "I, Mudd," from 1966, an alien who has inhabited the body of a crew member has taken control of the ship, hijacked it, and is now demanding that the crew disembark onto a nearby planet. After four days of not being in control of his own ship, Captain Kirk is annoyed by this and in no mood to comply. The alien (Norman) says, with completely flat intonation and an uninterpretable tone:

> **Norman :** If you do not come with me, your engines will be destroyed and you will remain in orbit here, forever.
> **Capt. Kirk** (sarcastically): I must say that's a gracious invitation.
> **Norman :** There is a word. Among us there is no corresponding meaning, but it seems to mean something to you humans.
> **Capt. Kirk :** And what is that word?
> **Norman :** Please.

(9:30 in the video).

It's a charming moment, the kind that illustrates the value of science fiction in showing us interesting features of our own species. Was Norman the alien "demanding," or "requesting"? The difference rests partly on tone, but Norman isn't capable of conveying tone. At the same time, he knows enough about human language to know that this one mysterious word makes a difference: it shows a respect for the recipient, levels out the power differential, hints that the choice is voluntary, and indicates that the reference to engines being destroyed is perhaps a friendly warning instead of a threat. That's a lot to pack into one word! And his phrase "among us there is no corresponding meaning" suggests that his species doesn't think about things like power differentials and voluntary choices — or, it connotes that Norman could force them go even without their cooperation, but recognizes the value in not doing things that way. These are good reminders for plain ordinary humans who *could* force other humans to do what they want, but want the receivers to know that they will put in a little more effort, uttering one extra word, just to keep things nice. Saying "please" is a way of gaining additional power by acknowledging that the other person has power as well (the power to refuse the request), offering a glimpse into just how paradoxical and complicated social interactions truly are.

CHAPTER 11: STORYTELLING

> "My djinn [genie] told me, when they come together in the realm of Djinn, they tell each other stories. Stories are like breath to them. They make meaning. 'Yes,' I said, 'That's just how it is with us [humans].' Each story we tell is a fragment in an endless shape-shifting mosaic."
>
> Alithea (Tilda Swinton), *Three Thousand Years of Longing* (2022)

Imagine if your life depended on your ability to tell an engaging story. That was the plight of Scheherazade, the teller of the famous 1,001 tales of Persian legend. As the tale goes, king Shahryar had a wife who betrayed him, which made him so mistrustful of women that he married a new wife every night, and then he had her beheaded the next morning. When it was Scheherazade's turn, she knew how to keep herself alive: tell a story with a cliffhanger ending, which was so compelling that Shahryar put off her execution until he heard how the story turned out. As soon as she wrapped up the first tale the next night, she immediately began another one, leaving that one unfinished. She told a thousand stories in a row (including the story of Aladdin and the lamp), and by the time she finally ran out of stories to tell, the king had fallen in love with her and spared her life.

11.1 STORYTELLING CAN SAVE YOUR LIFE

> "My djinn [genie] told me, when they come together in the realm of Djinn, they tell each other stories. Stories are like breath to them. They make meaning. 'Yes,' I said, 'That's just how it is with us [humans].' Each story we tell is a fragment in an endless shape-shifting mosaic."
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11.2 ADVANTAGES OF STORIES

There are no guarantees that skill in storytelling will make someone fall in love with you, especially someone who wants to kill you, but it will reap other benefits. Getting and keeping people's **attention** is an obvious one, and some real-life storytellers have outdone even Scheherazade. The soap opera *Guiding Light* ran for more than 70 years, beginning as a radio drama in 1937, switching to television in 1952, and airing 18,262 episodes before ending in 2009. The public demand for stories is insatiable: American film studios (collectively known as "Hollywood") produce over 400 movies a year, and Indian studios (known as "Bollywood") make even more. Video games, which began as simple graphic games, have evolved into full-scale narratives. Other forms of entertainment that don't appear to be story-based, such as the Olympic games and singing competitions, are now driven by the life stories of the athletes and singers. And while television commercials could simply show off a product's features or create Pavlov's dog-type associations with desirable products, advertisers have learned that the best way to prevent people from hitting the mute button is to tell a 30-second story.

One reason stories keep our attention so well is because they create **emotional engagement**: they get us to care about things that we might not otherwise care about. Journalists know that a report about a hurricane should not contain only facts and figures: if you want to "hook" the reader, begin with the story of one individual or family. The tsunami that struck the Indian Ocean in December 2004 produced an incomprehensible loss of life: 228,000 people died in one day. But that kind of statistic is too abstract to be emotionally gripping. If you want people to be engrossed, there is no better way than to tell the story of one person, such as tsunami survivor Maria Belon (depicted in the 2012 film *The Impossible*, which, like Schehezarade's tales, is not the kind of movie you want to leave unfinished). If you want to frustrate people, don't tell them how a story turns out. Think of 9-1-1 operators, who have a career that everyone knows is stressful. You may not, however, have thought about this challenging aspect of their job: they are continually hearing the beginning of the most dramatic stories in people's lives, but almost never get to hear the ending.

A curious side benefit of emotional engagement is **empathy for the protagonist** — the central character of a story, whether it's a hero we admire or a villain we detest. Usually the villain is a person who is trying to defeat the protagonist, but sometimes the central character is an "anti-hero" with less-than-admirable traits or habits. There is something about seeing the story from their point of view that makes us understand them and instinctively root for them. Consider how many movies there are about contract killers and jewel thieves — they're not normally the kind of people most of us feel sympathy for in the real world, yet in the movies, if they're the central character, we cheer them on. Even if you're not a fan of McDonald's restaurants, the Miracle Mop, or nuclear bombs, you may find yourself rooting for Ray Kroc in the biopic *The Founder*, Joy Mangano in *Joy*, or Robert Oppenheimer in *Oppenheimer*. Experimental studies have shown that reading literary stories enhances empathy,[1] and movie critic [Roger Ebert called the whole genre of film "a machine that generates empathy."]

Stories have the effect of **"making it real"** for the audience: helping people grasp what something is like in a more visceral way than statistics and disembodied descriptions can. Implications and details become more clear when the audience can see how things really work. A film like *The Revenant* shows people what it's like to survive a bear attack and how to prevent yourself from freezing to death; *A Star Is Born* shows the downsides of achieving great success as an entertainer. Stories are instructive, offering guidance on how to handle new situations, which is why Chip and Dan Heath refer to stories as "flight simulators for the brain" in their 2007 book *Made to Stick*.[2] In technical fields such as photocopier repair, "shop talk" (e.g., sharing stories about dealing with a puzzling machine) is a vital way for technicians to learn from each other.

Stories are more **memorable** than other forms of information. Jurors in a patent infringement trial, for instance, are likely to be overwhelmed by the detailed information they hear, from product specifications to dates when an infringing product appeared on the market, and most people will lose track of all those facts and dates. However, if the trial also involves the story of Joe, an employee leaving Company A (which owns a patent) and going to work for Company B (which starts producing a suspiciously similar product soon after Joe arrives), *all* the jurors will remember that story.[3] And unless you are a genius at memorization, your capacity to remember a list of names and places without context would be reached in minutes (perhaps seconds), but fans of the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy can remember nine hours worth of plot and characters.

Stories provide a **framework for interpreting detail**. When new information is presented to an audience in the context of a well-told story, they immediately grasp the meaning and significance of that information — like the camera flash in *Get Out* or the title character being able to put her feet flat on the ground in *Barbie*. This may be a minor point in the movie world, but it has great import in the trial world. In some ways, trials can be seen as competing stories; to prevent jurors from being overwhelmed by all of the detailed evidence presented to them, they need to know from the story framework what each piece of evidence means.

Consider the tragic tale of South African runner Oscar Pistorius. What makes it tragic is not the fact that Pistorius had both feet amputated before his first birthday. Thanks to prosthetic legs, he was able to become a sprinter, first competing in the Paralympic Games and then, in 2012, in the regular Olympic Games (where he was nicknamed "blade runner" because of the shape of his artificial feet). This was enough to make him a superstar in South Africa, and he began dating model Reeva Steenkamp. But things turned tragic in the early morning hours of Valentine's Day, 2013, when Pistorius shot Steenkamp dead.

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1. Kidd, D.C. & Castano, E. (2013). Reading literary fiction improves theory of mind. *Science* 342(6156): 377–80.
2. Heath, C. & Heath, D. (2007). Made to stick: Why some ideas survive and others die. Random House, p. 207-208.
3. For a great example of the importance of stories in jury decision-making and memory, see: Pennington, N. & Hastie, R. (1988). Explanation-based decision making effects of memory structure on judgment, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory & Cognition*, 14:521-533.

What happened? It depends on who you ask. According to Pistorius, he heard a noise coming from the bathroom and thought it was an intruder, so he reached for the pistol under his bed, called for Steenkamp (who he thought was still in bed) to call the police, and shot through the bathroom door four times in self defense. According to the prosecutor, what happened was premeditated murder: Pistorius got in an argument with Steenkamp, who was so afraid for her life that she locked herself into the bathroom, and Pistorius killed her in a rage. Among the evidence gathered were 1,700 text messages between the two, including one Steenkamp sent three weeks before she was killed, reading "I'm scared of you sometimes, of how you snap at me." Is this damning evidence, or the kind of thing that normal people say about occasional harsh comments between them? That depends on how the story of their relationship had been told up to that point. (Pistorius was found guilty of murder).

Finally, stories **overcome resistance** and **leave the listener in freedom** to form their own opinions and learn their own lessons. Chapter 6 discusses how people push back against overtly persuasive messages such as "Humans are destroying the planet by filling it with trash," but those same people will happily sit through a charming story about a little robot named Wall-E who, well, cleans up a planet that was destroyed by filling it with trash. In Ancient Greece, storytellers like Aesop may have been fond of explicitly stating the moral of their stories — such as "Slow and steady wins the race" in the fable "The Tortoise and the Hare" — but there is nothing to stop audiences from taking an entirely different lesson from the same story. In B.J. Novak's short story "The Rematch," he argues that the first race was a fluke and that, and unless it's caught completely off guard, a hare will easily beat a tortoise every single time, so perhaps the moral ought to be "Slow *doesn't* win the race unless your opponent makes a really stupid mistake."

Stories are, by their nature, joint ventures between the teller and the audience, which means that the meaning conveyed depends in part on the individual audience member's state of mind.

Given all of these advantages, it's no wonder that there's been a "storytelling boom" in fields such as politics, medicine, marketing, and social media.[4] Is it really surprising that a young child who asks her parent to read a bedtime story every night grows up to become a lawyer who greets every new client with "Tell me what happened to you," a doctor who listens to dozens of patients' stories every day, a war correspondent who begins their report with "Tonight's top story is...," or a blogger who makes her living telling the world what it's like to live out of a van?

4. Makela, M. & Meretoja, H. (2022). Critical approaches to the storytelling boom. *Poetics Today*, 43(2): 191-218.

11.3 NARRATIVE PARADIGM THEORY

If you tell a story, will everyone accept it at face value? Not at all; in fact, when it comes to storytelling, the phrase "everyone's a critic" is especially true. Like the girl in the previous paragraph, most people are raised on stories of some kind, and continue to absorb dozens of stories a day throughout their lives, whether they be stories they hear at work, news stories, fictional shows and books, or catching up with friends during a social hour. It's no surprise that, after you've heard a few thousand of them, you develop opinions about whether or not a story "works." Think about these stories:

- A commercial featuring a fake-sounding testimonial from a customer.
- A trespasser who is stopped by the police and claims he is lost (leading the officer to reply, "I'm not buying it").
- A fantasy series about wizards that resonates with readers so strongly that they easily picture themselves in that world.
- An entrepreneur's story about her company, Theranos, being able to diagnose a wide range of diseases from a few drops of blood.

The entrepreneur in that last example is Elizabeth Holmes. Before her empire collapsed, Holmes' story was so convincing that investors poured billions of dollars into her company — proving that not everyone is perfect at evaluating stories. She was arrested for fraud, and the jury in her trial found the prosecution's story about her actions more convincing than the story told by her and her defense team. Communication scholar Walter Fisher would say that both the investors and the jury were engaging in the same process: trying to figure out if her story worked.

The list of examples also illustrates a curious thing: although bookstores and movie genres usually sort stories into "fiction" and "non-fiction," the process for evaluating both kinds of stories is the same, and a hiring director listening to a job applicant tell their story is doing the same thing as an audience member watching a film about a talking raccoon in outer space.

What is that process? Fisher's Narrative Paradigm says that people have two fundamental questions about any story:

1. Does it "hang together"? (which Fisher called narrative probability or coherence)
2. Does it "ring true"? (which he called narrative fidelity)

"Hang together" refers to whether all the parts of the story are internally consistent and make sense within the world of the story. In a nonfiction scenario, this is why the officer arresting the trespasser might repeatedly ask them to say what happened: the officer is looking for contradictions. If it's a spouse grilling their partner, the spouse will know when their partner is behaving oddly or doing things they never do, so "consistency" expands beyond just the scope of the immediate story into everything they know about the storyteller. In the realm of fiction, this consistency refers to people behaving "in character" and to whether there are plot holes in the story. For example, in the *Toy Story* movies people have asked: if the character Buzz Lightyear doesn't believe he is a toy, why does he stay motionless when Andy is around? And in the *Harry Potter* universe, Hermione uses a "time turner" to save Buckbeak's life, but later in the series, when the device would be extremely useful, no one seems to remember that it exists.

"Ring true" means that the story matches the audience's image of how the world works (even if the world is imaginary), and how plausible the actions and consequences are. How do people determine what is plausible? It's a blend of life experiences, how well a given story matches up with similar stories you have heard, and how the story fits in with your values system. If your high school friend Jimmy tells you his teacher suddenly declared their undying love for him, the first question you're likely to consider is: "Is that how high school teachers behave?" Your answer depends on your own experiences with teachers and on any stories you've heard about teachers getting into inappropriate relationships with students. These will make the difference between whether you reply with "Yep, that happens" or "You're so full of it, Jimmy!" And the way in which Jimmy's story aligns with your own values underlies the question: is that how you *want* the world to work?

As an example, the scene that struck me the most from the 2018 film *A Star Is Born* is the one in which Jack (Bradley Cooper) invites Ally (Lady Gaga) up on stage and performs a song she sang to him once in a parking lot. As a musician myself, I can immediately spot how unrealistic this scene is (how did Jack remember all the lyrics, how do the guitarists know what chords to play, how does Jack know the phrasing of how Ally will sing the chorus?), so I'm tempted to scoff at it and say "That could never happen." But on the other hand, it's the wildest dream any songwriter could ever hope for, so I have to love it because of the values it represents and the emotions that "ring true" in the performers. It's the same reason that the Cinderella story is so abidingly popular: not because so many young women have seen real-life examples of a Prince Charming carrying a servant girl off to a life of perfect bliss, but because hearing that life works that way, even one out of a million times, gives them hope. It also seems to be the reason that people keep falling for frauds, like Elizabeth Holmes or the romance scams discussed in Chapter 3 — because the stories ring true and fit with how the listeners want to see the world.

The ability to tell a convincing story is a form of power that can serve you well in many contexts. But as stressed in Chapter 3, communicative power can be easily abused, so the TARES test for ethical communication applies to storytelling: is the story True, is the speaker Authentic, do they Respect the audience, is the situation an Equitable "level playing field," and does it show Social responsibility for the common good?

11.4 THE DOWNSIDES OF STORIES

Missing What Lies Beneath

In delving into the dark side of the power of storytelling, it helps to remember that stories have much greater appeal than other forms of communication such as scientific data. It is because stories are so engaging that it can be hard for audience members to recognize problems. Sometimes a story is like a catchy sing-along tune: you might get so caught up in the fun side of it that you don't stop to think about what you're singing.

Let's look at a story that has been repeated in many organizational textbooks: the tale of a brave IBM security guard that first appeared in William Rogers' book *Think*.[1]

> The young woman, Lucille Berger, was obliged to make certain that people entering security areas wore the correct clearance identification. Surrounded by his usual entourage of white-shirted men, [IBM board chairman Thomas] Watson approached the doorway to an area where she was on guard, wearing an orange badge acceptable elsewhere in the plant, but not a green badge, which alone permitted entrance at her door. "I was trembling in my uniform, which was far too big," she recalled. "It hid my shakes but not my voice. 'I'm sorry,' I said to him. I knew who he was all right. 'You cannot enter. Your admittance is not recognized.' That's what we were supposed to say." The men accompanying Watson were stricken; the moment held unpredictable possibilities. "Don't you know who he is?" someone hissed. Watson raised his hand for silence, while one of the party strode off and returned with the appropriate badge.

The reason this story shows up in organizational books is clear: it's a great way to illustrate the theme "Everyone has to play by the rules, even the big wigs." Ms. Berger is the hero, and Mr. Watson becomes a hero for responding in the right way rather than pulling his rank (which would send the opposite theme, that rules are only for "little people"). IBM loves the story because is shows how rules are more important to them than power, and the "little people" should love it because it puts them on the same level as the most powerful people in the organization.

Critical scholar Dennis Mumby, however, looks at the power dynamics hidden in the story. He points out that the badge rule is part of a

> formal system of rules created by the corporate elite (of which Watson is the head) to protect their

1. Rogers, W. (1969). Think. Stein & Day, pp. 153-154.

> own interests [including] to protect corporate secrets.... The corporate rules that the story deals with, then, are in place for the benefit of people like Watson, and not for people like Lucille Berger.[2]

The story's moral could thus be reframed as "low-level employee does risky thing with no benefit to herself." Mumby also notes that the story is only "story worthy" because it's an exception to the much more common rule: big wigs *don't* have to follow rules (represented by that "Don't you know who he is?" comment that someone hissed). In a way, then, it reinforces the more basic lessons that most organizations are *not* egalitarian and rule-bound. The way in which the story is told also emphasizes the "bigger than life" features of Watson as a person: the fact that he just has to raise his hand and underlings jump to fulfill his wishes, whereas Berger is scared to death to follow a company rule.

This is all meant to illustrate the point that many **stories reinforce power structures**. The trouble is, they do so in such a subtle way that people don't realize it's happening.

As an example, during the pandemic lockdown in 2020, there were countless news stories about heroic employees risking their lives to provide vital services to the public: nurses and doctors who were improvising how to save patients without ventilators, grocery workers who worked long hours so people could buy food, delivery drivers who put in an inhuman amount of overtime. While it was great to acknowledge their contributions by calling them "heroes," some people began to realize that "hero" was serving as a code word for "people who weren't provided the basic necessities to do their job." Comedian John Oliver pointed out how irksome it was for Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos to thank his employees for working so hard while also making it impossible for them to maintain social distancing, not giving them adequate protective gear or hand sanitizer, and keeping them on such a tight schedule that they didn't have time to wash their hands.

Driving service Lyft featured a story about a driver who was far along in her pregnancy but decided to put in a shift right before her due date. During the shift, she began to experience labor pains and headed to the hospital, but she received a ride request and stopped to pick up that passenger before delivering her baby a few hours later. Lyft was proud to put that story on their website to show how dedicated their employees are — but Lyft drivers aren't employees, they're independent contractors who don't receive medical benefits.[3] Think of the inspiring stories you hear about people who need an expensive medical procedure and are able to get it through an outpouring of GoFundMe contributions ... which wouldn't be necessary in a society with adequate health insurance.

2. Mumby, D. (1987). The political function of narrative in organizations. *Communication Monographs*, 54(113-127). The quote is from pp. 121-122.
3. Tolentino, J. (2017). The gig economy celebrates working yourself to death. *The New Yorker magazine* (as cited in Mumby, D. K., & Kuhn, T. R. (2018). Organizational communication: A critical introduction (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.).

Truthfulness in Stories

Turning to the truthfulness dimension (the T in the TARES test), many issues arise with stories. It seems impossibly simplistic to ask "Are stories true?" since some are and others aren't. But as noted above, Fisher's Narrative Paradigm theory says that we evaluate fiction and non-fiction stories the same way, and that the word "fiction" not only means a genre of literature but also is a synonym for "lie."

There is an Italian expression, "*Se non è vero, è ben trovato"* which can be translated as "Even if it's not true, it makes a great story." This can be interpreted in different ways,[4] but **the point is not that people don't care whether a story is true or not; it's that they can't always tell**. A pack of lies may benefit from the same advantages as a completely accurate story, especially if the story teller knows how to tell it well.

As Chapter 3 points out, factually inaccurate statements are not the only kind of lie. Also on that list was "**lies by omission**," and there was a brief discussion in that chapter of the famous witness oath: "swear to tell the truth, *the whole truth*, and nothing but the truth." That implies that leaving something out of the story is dishonest. But the problem should be immediately apparent: the act of storytelling is, by its very nature, an exercise in imposing a framework around the continuous stream of life, and leaving out things that don't fit is an inherent part of the process.

Lies of Omission

Another fundamental task for any storyteller is deciding where their story begins and ends, which has an enormous impact on the meaning of the story. Different parties can have wildly different interpretations of where "the beginning" ought to be. Imagine a boy and girl playing in a room with a parent in an adjacent room. The boy starts to cry, so the parent comes in to investigate, asking, "What happened?" The boy says, "She hit me!" — implying that his sister's attack was completely unprovoked, so naturally it's the beginning of the story. The parent asks "What happened before that?," and the girl responds "He stole my toy" — in other words, she has a different starting point for the story, which makes him to blame for the conflict. But he replies, "I had to, she broke my toy." And she says, "Well, he broke my toy last week." And he says, "I broke her toy because she called me a jerkface," and on and on. A wise parent knows how pointless it is to try to trace the story back to "the beginning;" each child wants the story to begin with the other sibling so they are not at fault.[5]

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4. It can also be translated as ""even if it is not true, it is a very good fabrication" or "it is well-conceived." These translations have slightly different implications: the phrase "it makes a great story" implies that the moral is still a good one and the story is worth repeating despite some factual inaccuracies. "It is a very good fabrication" or "it is well-conceived" instead implies "I don't believe a word of it, but I admire the effort to make it sound plausible."

5. In systems theory, this is called "punctuation": defining meaning in terms of arbitrary beginnings and endings, just like the meaning of a sentence

Endings, on the other hand, determine whether the story is a happy one or a sad one, a tragedy or a comedy. A recurrent theme in the 2011 film *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* is "Everything will be all right in the end. If it's not all right, then it's not the end." The opposite view is expressed in this exchange:

> "Tell me a happy story."
> "There's no such thing. All stories have a sad ending."
> "Then tell me a sad story but end it in the middle."

If you want to read an incredibly heroic tale, I recommend the story of Ernest Shackleton's 1914 polar expedition, a survival saga involving a crew of 28 men stranded on the ice off of the coast of Antarctica for months, their ship destroyed by ice. While most of the men stayed behind on a barren rock island, six men set sail in a small lifeboat on an 800-mile journey to reach civilization, followed by an arduous mountain climbing trek. In the end, all 28 men survived and returned home. That was the end of the expedition, at least. When the crew got back to England in 1917, they discovered there was a world war going on, so they never got a heroes' welcome, most were immediately recruited to join the war effort, and two died on the battlefield. Shackleton himself was frustrated that he never reached his goal, so he organized another expedition five years later, but died of a heart attack the night before they were due to depart and the expedition was scrapped. Where would *you* end that story?

Choosing a beginning and ending is not the only way in which lies of omission creep into a story: a storyteller must also decide **which details are relevant and irrelevant**. This raises big questions about how to make those decisions, and makes it easy for a storyteller to leave out anything that doesn't make the hero look heroic or the villain look bad. Autobiographical stories, for instance, are inherently self-serving: if you tell the story of dealing with a horrible bureaucrat at the DMV, you're not going to tell it in such a way that you look just as bad as the clerk behind the counter. There are numerous websites that look at biographical movies and point out the "inconvenient" details that were left out because they would spoil the theme of the movie. Those are just biopics: what if you tried to make a narrative out of something broader than one person's life? Makela and Mitoja say that "While narratives are ideally suited to conveying human experiences, they may simplify and misrepresent — or simply fail to depict — complex social interactions or material processes that have a timescale that goes beyond an individual lifetime, such as climate change."[6] To put it bluntly: stories are too neat and packaged to capture the messiness of life.

The problem with this neat and tidy packaging is perhaps most strongly felt in the world of news coverage, where a reporter or writer deciding what the story is in advance can significantly alter what they see, how they interview people, and what they print. One reason people are losing faith in news organizations overall

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is determined by punctuation. Bavelas, J. & Segal, L. (1982). Family systems theory: Background and implications. *Journal of Communication*, 32, 99-107.

6. Makela & Mitoja, p. 193.

(see Chapter 9) seems to be the perception that this kind of narrative focus leads to confirmation bias: once a reporter has decided that a particular election year is "the year of the woman," they will make that the story regardless of how well it fits the actual data.

Representation

Another issue with stories is that audiences often derive universal life lessons from them, but for a lesson to be universal, the implication is that the story is **representative**. In Makela and Mitoja's words, "universal lessons are being drawn from random experience" (p. 203). A parent of a child with a rare disease might do such a good job testifying about their child's condition that the legislature passes a law to research that disease — ignoring the fact that that condition is so rare that it doesn't merit drawing resources away from more widespread problems. This is an example of the vividness effect discussed in Chapters 2 and 6: a one-time event told in a compelling way can create the inaccurate impression that "This happens all the time," or at least, "When it does happen, it's so bad that we should do whatever we can to prevent it."

On the positive side, a few examples of a great outcome can create the false impression that "it can happen to you": read a story about someone who won the lottery twice in one day, and you might be convinced to blow all your earnings on Powerball tickets. Sometimes the "winning" is in the form of making your fortune as a musician, writer, or TV show creator in the post-gatekeeper world (see Chapter 18). In the old days, if you wanted to achieve success in those fields, you had to get signed on to a record company, publisher, or TV network, but William Deresiewicz complains that the "techno-utopian narrative" in the 21st century implies that "anyone can make it if they try," and everyone promoting that narrative goes back to the same examples over and over, like Chance the Rapper, who won three Grammys without a record deal; Andy Weir, who published his novel *The Martian* on his own website; and Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson, whose show *Broad City* began as a self-produced web series.[7] The issue is that those shining examples are as rare as Powerball winners, and the vast majority of musicians, writers, and would-be TV auteurs never make a decent living at their art.

A related issue with stories is **hindsight bias** — the presumption that people should have been able to foresee the future before it happened. People make books and movies about successes, so this is a universal problem with biopics: *of course* those foolish record executives should have been able to recognize that "a six-minute quasi-operatic dirge comprised of nonsense words" by a weird band called Queen would be a major hit. Naysayers who don't believe in the protagonist's dream automatically become the villain. This completely ignores the cold, hard fact that most artists, inventors, and geniuses don't achieve success no matter how

7. Deresiewicz, W. (2020). The death of the artist: How creators are struggling to survive in the age of billionaires and big tech. Henry Holt and Company. Pp. 27-28.

brilliant they are. Consider as well the tens of thousands of books that have been published about leadership, most written by leaders who achieved success and think you can too if you just follow their formula. These stories are inspirational, but people who follow their model precisely can be disappointed that it doesn't work out the same for them.

Stories and Science

Taken together, these issues show why many people feel that **storytelling and science are natural enemies**. Both strive for the same goal — understanding the world we live in — but scientists argue that storytelling is less reliable and trustworthy, and leads people astray. Just because a story "makes sense" doesn't mean it is true, and one of the roles of science is to show us that common sense ideas are often wrong.

On the other hand, stories have so much more human appeal than scientific data that scientists often feel like they are fighting a losing battle. Take the beliefs about whether vaccines cause autism. The scientific basis for that causal connection has always been extremely weak: an English doctor named Andrew Wakefield published a single study in 1998 in the medical journal *The Lancet*, the article was later found to be based on fraudulent data and fully retracted, and the doctor lost his license. Subsequent studies have consistently shown that there is no link at all between vaccines and autism,[8] yet the idea has stubbornly refused to die. Why? Because the stories of children developing autism shortly after receiving vaccinations — a classic example of the Faulty Causality or *Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc* fallacy discussed in Chapter 7 — continue to "ring true" and "hang together" for many people. And they coexist with the story Wakefield told after losing his license, which could be phrased as "the establishment is trying to stop me from telling you the truth." Meanwhile, the opposing story, "doctor makes up data and is contradicted by all legitimate research," doesn't gain as much traction.

Viewing storytelling and science as enemies unfortunately creates the impression that science *shouldn't* include stories, and thereby shouldn't take advantage of their power. Not all scientists think this way, and there is a growing recognition that science should instead capitalize on the power of stories. Science has many good stories to tell, and people like Lucy Hawking encourage scientists to embrace stories instead of avoiding them. In regard to teaching science, she says, "School science tends to suffer from a failure to generate a sense of anticipation around an unfolding narrative." If her last name sounds familiar, it's because she is the daughter of one of the most famous scientists in recent history, Stephen Hawking. Her TED talk is worth watching:

8. Taylor LE, Swerdfeger AL, Eslick GD (June 2014). Vaccines are not associated with autism: an evidence-based meta-analysis of case-control and cohort studies. *Vaccine*. 32(29): 3623–9. doi:10.1016/j.vaccine.2014.04.085.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://open.lib.umn.edu/commpractice/?p=464#oembed-1

11.5 HOW TO TELL A GOOD STORY

There are many good storytelling guides out there, some for specific purposes and contexts. If you want to try writing fiction or a movie screenplay, for example, Brandon McNulty's 10 Core Elements of Storytelling video is a good starting point. If you're interested in the role of stories in a business setting, try Stephen Denning's *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*.[1] For a more scientific approach (not about using stories to convey science, but about using science to construct a good story), Will Storr's *The Science of Storytelling* contains fascinating details about how particular techniques affect the brain.[2]

One common feature of storytelling guides is a list of **the basic elements of a story**, which generally include:

- **Setting, context, or world** in which the audience can place themselves. This is important for making the story real for the audience. If the context is an unfamiliar one, it may require some explanation of how things work in that world. This is true not just when introducing fantasy worlds, where the storyteller may need to explain, for instance, how people communicate without electricity (owls?), but even for a true story on earth, giving some sense of community norms or local customs.
- **Characters** through whom the audience can see that world. These are often sorted into categories such as "hero," "villain," "comic relief," and "sidekick." Fisher's principle of "hangs together" means that audiences expect to see consistency in how characters behave, but also like to see change and character development.
- **Plot** or sequence of events: first this happens, then something else happens, then something else. The number of plot points necessary to qualify as a "story" is debatable, but there must be at least two. Plot sequences imply a cause-effect connection: something happens *because* that other thing happened. And plot is, of course, the best way to show character: you can tell audiences that someone is evil, but it's more effective to show them mistreating animals or betraying a friend.
- **Conflict or contrast**: Contrast refers to some element of opposition that needs to be resolved — a "something gotta give" situation that necessitates a change. Good stories never fit the formula "A happy person has everything they need and achieves their goals without effort." Conflict, as defined in Chapter 17, involves parties with incompatible goals who are dependent on each other. Some people think that a

1. Denning, S. (2005). The leader's guide to storytelling: Mastering the art and discipline of business narrative. Josey-Bass.

2. Storr. W. (2019). The Science of storytelling. William Collins.

good story needs to include a villain, but I like to point out how many loved and respected films don't have a villain (*Chariots of Fire*; *Rain Man*; *A Beautiful Mind*; *Apollo 13*; *The King's Speech*; *Gravity*; *Inside Out*), although one could argue that there's a nonhuman "villain" in the form of nature. Even without a villain, however, there's always a challenge that the main character has difficulty overcoming.

- **Theme** or underlying message. I'll use K.M. Weiland's definition of theme: "A unifying idea or subject, explored via recurring patterns and expanded through comparisons and contrasts."[3] For ideas about developing a theme, see Chapter 13.
- **Dialogue** between characters. Not every story must have dialogue, but dialogue is helpful because it's how humans experience much of our life: we find out what's going on from other people talking to us. You can convey many of the other story components through dialogue. One of the best ways to show someone's character, for example, is to have them talk to other people, and a great way to express a story's theme is to have a character say it out loud. As any writer can tell you, the hardest part about writing dialogue is making sure it sounds natural and fits the character of the person speaking.
- **Resolution**. How does the conflict or contrast work itself out? It doesn't have to be a "happy" resolution in which everyone is back to a place of peace and quiet (many of Shakespeare's plays were tragedies), but if element 4 says "something's gotta give," element 7 answers the question of what "gave."

The Pixar Formula

If formulas work better for you, Emma Coats, a storyboard artist for Pixar Animation Studios, outlines a simple one you could use:

> Once upon a time there was ________
>
> Every day, ________
>
> One day ________
>
> Because of that, ________
>
> Because of that, ________
>
> Until finally ________

3. K.M. Weiland, (2020). Writing your story's theme: The writer's guide to plotting stories that matter. PenForASword Publishing

Other sources point out the value of techniques such as foreshadowing — giving out information early in the story that seems peripheral, but by the end is revealed as predicting the resolution — and including small details, vitally important in making a story come alive and helping the audience place themselves inside the story.

An Illustration: Jack's Story

My favorite story is one that was told to me, just once, by a Canadian named Jack who was a lifelong member of Alcoholics Anonymous. I heard it over 30 years ago, but the fact that I still remember it vividly shows you the power of stories.

> When I joined AA, it saved my life, and I went to the meetings every week. One of the things they ask you to do in AA, after you've been helped by it, is to find someone else to help. I had been quite the drinker, so of course many of my friends were alcoholics too. One friend, Tom, lived in a one-room "flophouse" in downtown Toronto with another guy: just two beds, a small kitchen, and a bathroom. I went to visit Tom all the time to try to talk some sense into him. I visited that apartment day and night, and talked to Tom when he was drunk, and when he was sober. I kept it up for weeks, but eventually it was obvious that I was getting nowhere. So sadly, I gave up on Tom and didn't see him anymore. I felt bad about it, but sometimes it's no use.
>
> Of course, I kept going to the AA meetings. Years later, at a meeting, I was approached by someone I didn't recognize. This guy came up to me and said, "Do you know who I am?" I looked at him and said, "No, sorry, I don't." He said, "My name is Bruce, and you're the reason I'm alive." That's quite a thing to hear from a stranger! Bruce went on,
>
> "You remember a couple of years ago when you'd come over to Tom's apartment and talk to him all the time? He never did listen to anything you said. But I was the guy in the other bed, and I was lying there listening to every word. You made so much sense, and that's what got me into AA. You saved my life!"

This is the kind of story where the setting, "a one-room flophouse… [with] two beds," is crucial. That little detail about the physical layout also foreshadows the "twist" at the end. The protagonist, Jack, has a goal: to help someone else. Plot-wise, not much appears to happen: Jack tries the same action over and over, and appears to fail. The contrast is initially between Jack's persistence and Tom's indifference, but the ending reveals a more important contrast: between Tom not listening, and Bruce listening intently. In the end, the protagonist discovers that he did succeed in helping someone after all, so it's nicely resolved even though Tom was never saved.

Note that you could tell the story from Bruce's point of view ("I shared an apartment with an alcoholic named Tom, and Tom's friend Jack used to come over…"), but that would spoil the impact of the ending.

BOX 11.5: WRITING A GOOD EULOGY

Call me strange, but I like reading obituaries and hearing eulogies for people I don't know, for the simple reason that I like learning the life stories of non-famous people — stories that don't suffer from the burdens of representativeness and hindsight bias that biopics carry. Of the two, spoken eulogies are usually much better than written obituaries, perhaps because of audience and length: eulogies are traditionally five to ten minutes long, given to a live audience of people who knew the deceased directly. Obituaries are much shorter, posted to a remote audience, and sometimes look obligatory (telling people where the funeral will be, or listing surviving family members). In my view, only about one in ten local obituaries are worth reading, but the tenth one makes it worth looking through the rest.

Ineffective obituaries and eulogies have one trait in common: they consist primarily of adjectives: "Eunice was loving, hard-working, loyal, proud of her grandchildren,…" These do nothing for me because almost everyone uses the same set of adjectives, these words don't make the person come alive for me, and they are "all claim, no evidence" (see Chapter 7), leaving me no way to participate with the story. Just calling someone "kind, generous, loving" is to me equivalent to saying "they had black hair, brown eyes, and a full set of teeth."

The good eulogies and obituaries, on the other hand, take advantage of the story format to paint a picture of a person, allow me to draw my own conclusions about them, and make me miss them — even if I never met them. This doesn't mean that you have to try to tell the person's entire life story; a short anecdote or two can be even more powerful. Just don't forget to include the basic story elements: character, setting, plot, contrast/conflict, perhaps a little dialogue, and a theme. Instead of saying "Their smile lit up a room," tell a specific story about a specific time when that smile made a difference to you or someone else, pulling you out of a bad mood and making you smile back. Don't say "My mother was the most loving and nonjudgmental person on earth;" instead, tell the story of when you were stranded in a place you really shouldn't have been in the middle of the night, and you were scared to call her because you were sure she'd yell at you, but she came to get you at 3:00 am, never said a harsh word, drew a bath for you when you got home, and by the time you woke up the next morning your clothes were all clean and folded. Don't call the person "smart"; tell the story about the moment when you realized they were smarter than you.

11.6 FIVE COMMON STORYTELLING MISTAKES

Another way to learn about stories is to analyze the ones that don't work. You could look around for novels or movies that you think failed in their storytelling, but they may be difficult to find since they were written by professionals. It's easier to look to other contexts for examples, such as family gatherings or a night out at a bar. Can you think of a relative or co-worker whose stories you dread hearing? What is wrong with the way they do it? Perhaps they make some of these mistakes:

- **Too much unnecessary detail**. People lose patience with long stories, and nothing makes a story feel long like a lot of detail that doesn't contribute much. Some storytellers get hung up on trying to remember the name of a particular person, forgetting that the name makes no difference to the listener.
- **Forgetting necessary details**. It takes work to figure out what needs to be foreshadowed and what background information the audience needs to hear so that the end of the story has the intended impact. It's no surprise, then, that many storytellers get to the end of a story and realize "Oh, I forgot to tell you that Tom's room had two beds in it."
- **No ending / no point**. In the original *Star Trek* series, the set designers made a lot of fancy-looking ductwork for the engine room, labeling it with the initials "GNDN." This was an inside joke: GNDN stood for "Goes Nowhere, Does Nothing." Now, when someone asks me what I thought about a pointless story, I'll say "It was a gundun."
- 

- **Not giving the audience a reason to care about the protagonist**. There are many reasons that an audience might care about a character in a story: they're kind, they're vulnerable, they're being thwarted by oppressive forces, they're carrying scars from previous failures, or the audience simply identifies with them. Some storytellers forget all of these elements, and as a result the audience loses interest in how the story turns out.

- **Telling, not showing**. Explicitly telling the audience what kind of person the protagonist is, and how they should feel about events, rarely works.

11.7 PRACTICE EXERCISES

Like anything else, storytelling skills develop with practice. If you have a romantic partner, you've probably told the story of how you two met (even if you met through a dating app, you can tell the story about how your first in-person meeting went). Try retelling that story in a way that incorporates the standard story elements. Specifically:

- Think of what details in the story reveal what kind of person your partner is, and how you discovered it. Instead of saying, "And then I fell in love with him," can you tell the story in such a way that it's obvious to the listeners that falling in love was inevitable? What specific behaviors helped you fall in love with them?
- How much of your story can be conveyed in dialogue? Between which people? What are the telling speech patterns that the characters use?
- What elements can you foreshadow early in the story?
- What contrast was present at the time? Was there a reason you were afraid that you two would not work as a couple? How did that get resolved?
- What other characters were important in the story of your development as a couple?
- When was the turning point in the story? Can you start the story there? (Note how many stories start in the middle or the end, and then flash back to the beginning. Why do they do that?)
- How does the story end? Since the story is about an ongoing relationship, the ending will have to be arbitrary: which moment would make the best stopping point? Which parts of the story do you need to cover in order to give that ending maximum impact?
- What is the theme of the story? When it comes to "how we met" stories, the themes tend to fall into certain categories:
    - "Fate meant for us to be together."
    - "You have to fight for what you want."
    - "I was an idiot; others could see what I couldn't."
    - "The most precious gifts can be found in unlikely places."

Now practice telling a more tragic story: a failed relationship (romantic, platonic, or business). Most of the same questions apply:

- What details of the story reveal what kind of person the other party is, and how you discovered it? What specific behaviors foreshadowed the end of the relationship?

- What reveals the contrast between the kind of person you are and the kind of person they are? How do you want to characterize the other person? (A bad person, or just clueless? Or were you the bad person, and the other person was relatively faultless?)
- Did the relationship start well? What was it like in the beginning? What was the turning point between "when things were good" and "when things started falling apart"? Was there a "low point" that was different from the turning point, when things were at their worst? The turning point may be subtle; the low point never is.
- What other characters were important in the story? Did anyone predict that the relationship would fail?
- How does the story end? Is there an "epilogue" that adds meaning to the story?
- What is the theme of the story? It could be "We were oil and water — we tried, but the relationship was doomed." Or "It takes a while to recognize that someone's crazy." Or "I was stupid back then; I've grown a lot since then." Or "Trying to make someone else change is futile."

I presume that you told the failed relationship story from your point of view. If you want a greater challenge, tell the same story from the other person's vantage point.

The last step is to go back and trim. Is there anything in the story that is not essential? Is there a shorter way to tell it? Stories can be too brief, of course, but it's generally better to leave the audience wishing for more than to make them resentful that you went on too long. It's okay to have gaps in the story. Filmmakers know that if a character goes from her house to her office, it isn't necessary to show her locking her front door, walking to the car, driving, parking, walking, and opening the office door. If the gap is glaring (e.g., the protagonist ends up on the top of a mountain and we don't know how she got there), it can be a distraction, but for the most part it's best to edit as much as you can.

CHAPTER 12: NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

12.1 HOW TO MAKE EVEN LAWYERS STOP TALKING

It may not surprise you to hear that lawyers like to talk — sometimes too much. This is not a slight against their profession: they are advocates, so even when they are told to stop talking, they sometimes feel compelled to keep going on behalf of their clients. This was a problem for a judge who got frustrated with lawyers ignoring his attempts to cut off their long speeches. Then the judge made a simple discovery: if he held his hand up, palm facing the speaker, the lawyer would stop immediately.

Try it yourself: ask someone to tell you what they had for supper last night, and as soon as they start talking, put your hand up. When I've done this in the classroom, the student invariably stops. If I ask why they stopped, despite me *explicitly commanding them to talk*, they say "You told me to stop!"

"I said no such thing," I point out. At least, not with words.

The lesson is clear: the nonverbal gesture overrode the verbal command, which can be interpreted as *"Nonverbal communication is more powerful than verbal communication."*

12.2 THE POWER OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION (GOOD AND BAD)

You've probably known about the complex relationship between nonverbal communication and words since you were a small child, if an adult played a game you could call "Don't Give Me a Hug." It's extremely simple: the adult verbally tells the child not to approach and hug them, but their tone of voice, facial expression, and outstretched arms say the opposite. The child laughs and laughs, and runs up and gives them a big squeeze. It's not only a funny game that a two-year-old grasps, but a lesson adults want to teach children: sometimes people send contradictory messages, and you need to know which channel to trust.

Those same children, when they get a little older, might recognize that the game is not always funny. If the child tells an adult some exciting news about an accomplishment ("I made you this drawing!"), and the adult says "That's very exciting, honey" in a distracted monotone without looking away from their computer screen, the child knows the adult didn't mean it. (Children know that if you're truly excited about something, you have to use your *legs* to express it.) When they hit adolescence and report a small fender-bender, their parent may say "I'm not upset about it," but their facial expression or tone of voice may say otherwise. This can be a form of **double-bind message**, a situation in which a source sends two messages simultaneously using two different channels, and the recipient can't tell which one to believe. Double-bind messages cause anxiety and frustration, and can be a form of emotional abuse. (They are also a form of **gaslighting**, described Box 17.1).

Double-bind messages illustrate the good and the bad aspects of nonverbal communication: having channels of communication in addition to words allows for rich expression, nuance, and complexity, but also opens up the possibility of conflicting messages, which makes life difficult. The point about rich expression, nuance, and complexity also reinforces the value of multiple channels: if you are using *only* words to communicate a thought, the message will probably have little impact. Not taking advantage of other channels of communication is a wasted opportunity.

BOX 12.2: QUANTIFYING THE IMPACT OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Is there a way to accurately measure the impact of nonverbal cues on the interpretation of messages? Psychologist Albert Mehrabian set out to answer this question in the late 1960s.

Specifically, he was interested in the contradiction question: if words don't match tone of voice, how much weight do people put on one channel over the other? This led to the widely cited — and widely misunderstood — statistic that only 7% of meaning is conveyed through words, 38% through tone of voice, and 55% through "body language." This became known as the 7/38/55 Rule (or sometimes the 55/38/7 Rule), but most people who cite that rule are unaware of what it means or where it came from.

In two studies, Mehrabian had one research participant, A, read cards with a single word on each, and another participant, B, rate A's attitude toward B. To control for extraneous variables, the participants were not sitting across from each other . Instead, B was shown a photograph of A , heard a recording of the word spoken in different tones of voice, and was instructed to "imagine" what A was feeling. (Mehrabian & Ferris, 1967, p. 250). The experiment was done on only 17 subjects, all female, and the results have never been replicated.

Mehrabian notes that the scope of the study was narrow: the research was only intended to measure "liking" and only in situations where cues contradict each other. Six decades later, it is cited as a "rule" that applies to job interviews, business negotiations, public speeches, and many other contexts that reach far beyond the scope of the original experiments. Try explaining to someone how to fill out form 1120-S for S corporations filing federal taxes, or the history of mRNA vaccines, and see if facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures get you 93% of the way there. To put it simply: one should not rely on those numbers for any purpose beyond the original intent.

Mehrabian's research also raises the question: is there a need to quantify the relative impact of nonverbal communication? Such numbers should be taken with a grain of salt, and they can lead to harmful conclusions like "You don't really need to prepare the text of a speech as long as you have dynamic nonverbals."

Despite all the limitations, however, the basic lesson — that nonverbal factors affect how we interpret verbal messages, and sometimes overpower the words — is a good lesson for all communicators to keep in mind.

RECOMMENDED READING

12.3 IS "BODY LANGUAGE" A LANGUAGE?

In informal settings, nonverbal communication is often referred to as "body language." The reason is obvious: just like spoken or written languages, your body can express thoughts and emotions, persuade or control others, organize activity, and form bonds between people. Add to that the common perception that thoughts and emotions expressed through your body are more genuine than words (captured in the Shakira song title, "Hips Don't Lie"). People have long relied on nonverbal signals, such as eye contact, fidgeting , or stress reactions, to try to ascertain if someone is lying. And people who can't speak due to disabilities can still convey information through other bodily channels,[1] and nonverbal communication transcends language barriers.

Why, then, do serious scholars usually avoid the term "body language"? It helps to turn to another academic discipline that has defined the necessary components of language: linguistics. For something to qualify as a language, linguists will tell you, it must have a vocabulary and a grammar — a set of syntax rules . The vocabulary is a set of words or symbols with agreed-upon meaning, like the words "that," "dog," "is," "biting," and "Kate." The grammatical rules tell you that "That dog is biting Kate" means something different from "Is Kate biting that dog?," and that "Biting is dog Kate that" is meaningless nonsense.

How do bodily gestures fit those requirements for language? Certainly there are many gestures that can convey meaning, from hand signals to shoulder shrugs to foot positions to how you stand. The question is: is the meaning of those gestures "agreed-upon"? Some sources will confidently tell you what these movements and positions mean, but can they be trusted?

If someone is holding their forearms in a crossed position in front of their stomach, for example, what does that mean?

1. Several people who could only communicate with a twitching eye or finger have still succeeded in authoring books, including physicist Stephen Hawking, who wrote books long after he lost the ability to speak or type, and Jean-Dominique Bauby, whose 130-page memoir, The Diving Bell and the Butterfly, was dictated to a very patient assistant using only his left eye, one letter at a time. She would recite the alphabet until she got to the letter he wanted, Bauby would blink, then the assistant would start the alphabet again. It took two months and 200,000 blinks to write the book. Then there's Jacob Rock, a 20-year-old non-verbal autistic man who composed the 70-minute symphony "Unforgettable Sunrise" with collaborator Rob Laufer

It may mean they are not open to what you are saying and doubt or disagree with it. The relevant word in that sentence is "may," which leads to the followup questions, "Does it *always* mean that?" and "What else could it mean?" Those crossed arms could also convey:

The person is cold.
The person is covering up a mustard stain on their shirt.
The person is embarrassed about their pot belly.
The person doesn't have pants pockets and doesn't know where to put their hands.
The person is mirroring what you are doing, which can mean they *are* open to what you are saying.

Likewise, a yawn can mean "I'm bored with what you're saying," "I'm fascinated…but I didn't get enough sleep last night," or "I saw someone else yawn and it's contagious." How can you have a language if there is so little agreement about what the vocabulary means? Sources that tell you any particular gesture has only one meaning are usually ignoring all the other possibilities or oversimplifying things. Of course, many words also have multiple meanings, but one way to sort out semantic ambiguity (when a person says "box," do they mean a square cardboard structure or the act of punching someone?) is to look at syntax: how is the word used in a sentence? In reference to nonverbal communication, are there similar rules about how bodily movements are combined?

The acknowledgement that "body language" may not meet the requirements to qualify as a language doesn't mean that it's a less legitimate form of communication. It does, however, mean that it's more difficult to study than verbal language. Aside from the ambiguity of many gestures, there are other challenges that make nonverbal communication a more ambiguous terrain than verbal language, and influence how people communicate nonverbally.

12.4 VARIABLES IN NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR USE

Why are simplistic guides about using or interpreting nonverbal behaviors unreliable? For several reasons:

Nonverbal habits are deeply personal. One person may cast their gaze downward most of the time while their best friend looks people in the eye whenever possible; one sibling is perpetually smiling while their brother looks grumpy all the time; a child goes up to just about anyone and hugs them while their parent is reluctant to hug even their own siblings. Instincts sometimes conflict with training, such as for a salesperson taught to shake customers' hands vigorously or a politician learning to shout and pump their fist at rallies, though their natural inclination is to speak quietly and keep their hands in their pockets. Personal habits can derive from many external sources (your family upbringing, generation, past relationships, media, and training you've received) or internal personality traits.

Nonverbal behaviors depend on social context. Looking at one person's behavior in isolation can blind you to the social dimension of nonverbal communication. People don't always smile because they are happy; often it's because they want another person to like them, or everyone else is doing it, or it just fits the situation. Even when it comes to things like arm and leg positions, people are often unaware of how much they imitate each other ; this is called "**postural congruence**"[1] or "mirroring." Once I learned about it, I couldn't unsee all the times I was in a group and at one point every single person had their hands intertwined behind their neck and their right leg crossed over their left knee; 15 minutes later, everyone had their hands folded on their stomach and their left ankle resting on their right . As far back as the 1960s, therapists have recommend this as a subtle way of establishing rapport with patients,[2] and salespeople picked it up as well. People instinctively wince when they see someone else experience pain, which Bavelas calls "**motor mimicry**."[3] In short, nonverbal communication might not express how *we* feel so much as how we want to connect with *others*.

Rules governing appropriate behavior are many, and violating those rules can be more serious than violating rules of speech. Some of these rules are explicitly spelled out, others are left unstated; some are widespread, others are unique to a particular group. Touch, for instance, is an important means of communication, but the rules around the kinds of touch that are appropriate or inappropriate are serious,

1. Knapp, M.L., Hall, J.A., & Horgan, T.G. (2021). Nonverbal communication in human interaction (9th edition). Kendall Hunt Publishing.

2. Charney, E.J. (1966). Postural configurations in psychotherapy. Psychosomatic Medicine, 28, 305-315,

3. Bavelas, J.B., Black, A., Lemery, C.R., & Mullett, J. (1986). "I show how you feel": Motor mimicry as a communicative act. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 50, 322-329.

and you can get arrested for violating them. Even if there is no risk of criminal penalties, standing so closely to someone that you "invade their personal space" can cause discomfort and social difficulties, and different cultures have different guidelines about where the boundaries are (these have been studied extensively by the pioneering nonverbal researcher Edward T. Hall).[4]

Cultural variations can be wide, puzzling, and troublesome. Many travel guides warn you about gestures that mean different things in different countries . If you are going to Thailand, for example, and are unaware that showing the bottom of your feet to others is highly offensive, you could discover that rule the hard way. Author Rory Stewart walked across Afghanistan, and described a conversation he had with local tribesmen in someone's home. That conversation was possible not only because he could speak fluent Pashto, but because, more importantly, he knew the vital importance of where people sit relative to the door, which is a reflection of their status.[5] Even within one country, such as the United States, cultural variations can have unfortunate consequences. Some Native American tribes, for example, consider direct eye contact to be defiant, and downward gaze is seen as more respectful—but if someone from that tribe is arrested and interrogated, the police might assume that their lack of eye contact means they are lying.

Some people have social-emotional agnosia. This is the inability to read facial expressions, tone of voice, and subtle bodily cues, which can be a symptom of schizophrenia or autism. Blindness and deafness also limit a person's ability to pick up on visual or audio cues. On the expression side, there are numerous conditions that interfere with someone being able to send nonverbal signals ; you can't, for instance, adopt the correct facial expression if you've had a stroke and can't control some of the muscles in your face.

It may not be an exaggeration to say that everyone has some **anxiety** about their nonverbal skills . On the one hand, you were communicating nonverbally long before you uttered your first words, so you could say that the majority of the population is better at nonverbal communication than verbal forms, On the other hand, it's easy to overestimate how fluent people are in this "language," and you've probably had experiences with misinterpreted signals. You might find it fun to take a test of your ability to read nonverbals.

… or you may worry that you'll fail that test.

Also keep in mind that nonverbal communication has an element of vulnerability . Expressions like "the eyes are the window to the soul" or "I can read you like an open book" can be scary ; what if you don't want to be an open book?

BOX 12.4: Expectancy Violations Theory

4. Hall, Edward T. (October 1963). . American Anthropologist , 65(5): 1003–1026. doi:10.1525/aa.1963.65.5.02a00020

5. Stewart, R. (2006). The Places in between. Harcourt.

U.S. president Lyndon B. Johnson was known as an aggressive leader, and one might use the phrase "in your face" to describe his style. That is not just a metaphor: one of his habits was to literally stand "in someone's grill" — closer than normal distance rules would allow . In this photo he 's talking to Senator Richard Russell Jr.

Standing with your nose two inches away from a romantic partner may be an expression of love, but if the person is a political opponent, that stance means something else entirely. Johnson knew this, and used it as an intimidation tool and a way to get Russell's undivided attention.

You can try this technique with a rival, but be prepared for it to backfire . This is an illustration of Judee Burgoon's **Expectancy Violation Theory**, which states that violations of nonverbal rules like this can lead to either dramatically good or dramatically bad outcomes, depending on how the people perceive each other.

You can use rule violations not only to intimidate people but to excite them . Some attractive servers in restaurants have figured out, for instance, that they can not only get away with touching customers on the arm or whispering rather intimately in their ear, but that they get bigger tips this way. If you overestimate your attractiveness, on the other hand, it's a quick way to get yourself fired.

With those cautions in mind, let's explore the ways in which you can communicate without words.

12.5 EIGHT FORMS OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

First, let's look at the different kinds of behaviors and signals that are usually included under the umbrella of nonverbal communication. Each channel has a common name, but scholars also use more esoteric terms that I include in case you want to do further research.

Hand gestures, which can replace spoken or written words , such as the "talk to the hand" gesture in the chapter opener , or supplement speech , such as using a gesture to emphasize a key point, or "enumerating fingers" when going through a numbered list .

Head motions, including nodding, shaking, and wobbling your head (which has multiple meanings in India).

Posture, which can be used to express interest (by leaning forward), anger (especially through a rigid, tense posture), and sadness (as seen in the posture of Napoleon Dynamite, who somehow looks like he feels defeated by the world even before he has spoken a word).

image source

Movement, which includes where you stand or face relative to others, and distance regulation — also known as "proxemics." For example, in the book *How To Talk Minnesotan*, author Howard Mohr includes diagrams of how Minnesotans typically stand when talking to each other (e.g., not directly facing each other, but at an angle, staring at the horizon).

Touch, also known as "haptics," which includes touching others as well as self-touch (such as scratching or rubbing your face).

Facial expressions, which are used both to convey your emotions and to regulate conversation (such as a raised eyebrow meaning, "Yes? Do you have a question?"). The world's leading expert on facial expressions is Paul Ekman, who has developed the Facial Action Coding System (FACS) to analyze facial expressions.[1]

Eye contact, which is more formally known as "gaze," since "eye contact" implies two people looking at each other, but one person can gaze at another person even if that person doesn't look back .

Vocal behavior, a category that closely overlaps with speech, but which includes everything conveyed through the voice that is not about the words: tone of voice, intonation, speech rate, and loudness, as well as non-word-related vocalizations such as sighs, groans, laughter, and yawns. For an illustration of how much impact intonation can have, try saying the sentence *"Do you want me to eat that cake?"* Which of the eight words did you stress, and how much difference would it have made if you had stressed a different word instead?

You could also incorporate architecture, furniture, territoriality, clothing, scent, and the use of time (known as "chronemics") under the umbrella of nonverbal communication, but that's more than we can cover in this chapter.[2]

1. Ekman, P., & Rosenberg, E. (eds.). (1997). What the face reveals: Basic and applied studies of spontaneous expression using the Facial Action Coding System (FACS). Oxford University Press.

2. For a more detailed analysis of forms of nonverbal communication, see Knapp, M.L., Hall, J.A., & Horgan, T.G. (2021). Nonverbal communication in human interaction (9th ed .) . Kendall Hunt Publishing.

12.6 SIX PURPOSES OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

A related question is why we use these channels : what can they accomplish? The fact that there are an unlimited number of things you can do with your body implies that nonverbal communication can serve an unlimited number of purposes , but several common ones emerge:

Bonding and intimacy. We use nonverbals to communicate forms of love, whether that be romantic love between life partners, or simple friendship. It is largely through nonverbals that we let potential partners know we like them, let new group members know they belong, and let people in a conversation know that we really want to hear what they have to say.

Enhancing verbal communication. Hand gestures, facial expressions, and vocal emphasis can contribute a great deal to the meaning of spoken words , and sometimes replace the need to say them. If someone asks where the nearest bathroom is, you can just point. On the other hand, nonverbals can muddy a situation instead of clarifying, as is the case with the double-bind messages discussed earlier.

Expressing emotions. This connects to purposes 1 and 2, but clearly one of the things nonverbal communication does particularly well is represent your emotional state. Have you ever wondered why humans can cry? Like most animals, we have tear ducts to prevent our eyes from drying out — as do cats and horses, but they don't convey emotion through drops of water falling from their eyes. A 2001 BBC documentary called *The Human Face* begins with host John Cleese asking "Why is it that so few soap operas feature crocodiles?". The answer, he suggests, is because crocodiles can't make facial expressions, so they are extremely limited in how they can express emotions — in contrast to humans, who have many facial muscles that help them convey a vast array of emotions (see the "emotion wheels" in Chapter 8 for ideas about how many emotions there are).

Managing conversations. Nonverbals are a subtle but important way of letting people know little things like "I'm done talking; you can take a turn now," or the opposite, "I'm not done speaking; let me finish." People often use nonverbals to signal that they want to begin a conversation, or end one. When I moved to Minnesota three decades ago, I learned how you let people at a party know you want to go home: put your hands on your knees, bob your head, and say "Well, I suppose…"

Asserting dominance — or accepting it. President Johnson's "in your grill" behavior is a dramatic example, but there are many ways to claim power and importance through your vocal style and posture, as well as through clothing and the arrangement of nearby objects and furniture. Has a visit to a professor's or boss's office ever gone this way? The door is open, so you stand politely in the doorway and knock softly while they continue to stare at their screen, until they are done whatever they're doing and invite you to sit (or perhaps there's nowhere to sit, so you awkwardly remain standing). Then they "hold the floor" for the next 45 minutes, talking in a way that doesn't give you many opportunities to speak, until you are running late and have to figure out how to leave their office without being rude. They may not be mean-spirited or aggressive, but the whole interaction is still filled with reminders of which person is the important one.

Communicating identity, both on an individual and social level. How do you tell the world who you are, and what groups you identify with? Largely through forms of nonverbal communication that we aren't covering in this chapter (e.g., clothing, emblems, furniture, and architecture), but also through vocal intonations, gestures, and other bodily forms of communication. Although "gaydar" may not be reliable, it is often true that people signal their sexual orientation through nonverbal behaviors. Likewise, if you watch a soundless video of people from other countries speaking, you might be able to zero in on their national origin just from the gestures they use, or even their facial expressions and the way they hold their mouth.

So this sounds simple: to unlock the power of nonverbal communication, you just have to take that first list of eight forms and combine it with the list of six purposes, and you can figure out exactly what channels to use to meet your goals, and decipher what others are trying to tell you. Easy peasy! Well, if you think anything about communication, especially nonverbal communication, is easy, then you're reading the wrong book. And a book — a format that only encompasses written words and a few pictures — is probably not the place to go in the first place.

If the purpose of reading a chapter on nonverbal communication isn't to "unlock the secrets," what is its purpose?

12.7 WHY STUDY NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION?

One obvious reason to study nonverbal communication is to **increase your awareness** of what can be expressed nonverbally, and how to interpret nonverbal signals. There is ample research proving that infants are good at interpreting some nonverbals, but that doesn't mean they know everything, or that college students (or professors) do either. No matter what form of communication you're looking at, a large vocabulary is useful, and just as learning new words is a fun and potentially useful hobby (see Box 10.2), expanding the ways you can express yourself nonverbally will probably pay off. Learning about how people interpret nonverbals may also help you avoid sending unintended messages and clear up misunderstandings.

One problem here is captured in the expression "A little learning is a dangerous thing." A beginning student of nonverbal communication can easily get overconfident in their abilities, creating misunderstandings instead of clearing them up. Interpreting meaningless signals as flirting, for instance, can get you slapped or worse, and being too confident that you can spot a liar from nonverbals leads to false accusations (see below). This is why increased awareness must be tempered with a level of **humility**: don't get too sure of yourself, and always stay open to the possibility that you are reading things wrong.

As nonverbal communication teacher Amy Joyer explains, it's helpful to think of nonverbal behaviors in terms of a bell curve: nonverbal messages can often be interpreted in similar ways, but there are common exceptions to these interpretations, represented by the "tails" of bell curves. A person might not be aware of the nonverbal signals they're sending, or what they want to be communicating. In Joyer's words, "We are often displaying nonverbal behaviors without a conscious thought; we're not always 'deciding' our nonverbal behaviors, they can be subconscious or at least somewhat automated."[1]

It's thus useful to think of nonverbal behaviors in terms of **layers**: the surface layer is not the only thing going on, and the first interpretation of nonverbal behavior may not be the best one. In the "crossed arms" example discussed earlier, I suggested six different interpretations of that nonverbal signal, but the implication was still that one of those signals was the "correct one." What if that person is crossing her arms because she's cold *and* she's skeptical of what you're saying?

1. Personal interview, October 2024.

BOX 12.7 MOVIE EXAMPLE

Keep in mind that if the nonverbal behavior is expressing emotion, emotions can also be layered in complex ways. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Ron and Hermione ask Harry about his first kiss with Cho:

> Ron Weasley: Well? How was it?
>
> Harry Potter: Wet. I mean, she was sort of crying.
>
> Ron Weasley: [*laughs*] That bad at it, are you?
>
> Hermione Granger: I'm sure Harry's kissing was more than satisfactory. Cho spends half her time crying these days.
>
> Ron Weasley: You'd think a bit of snogging would cheer her up.
>
> Hermione Granger: Don't you understand how she must be feeling? Well, obviously she's feeling sad about Cedric, and therefore confused about liking Harry, guilty about kissing him, conflicted because Umbridge is pressing to sack her mum from the Ministry, and frightened about failing her OWLs because she's so busy worrying about everything else.
>
> Ron Weasley: One person couldn't feel all that. They'd explode!

If a person can feel multiple emotions at the same time (without exploding), they can also use their body to **express mixed emotions simultaneously**. Can you think of a time when you received a gift you were disappointed by, or found out that your friend is getting an award or promotion instead of you, and you managed to conceal your disappointment and put on a delighted expression at the same time? The delight doesn't have to be insincere: in the first scenario, you might think "I don't like the gift, but I'm touched that they thought of me," and in the second , you can be genuinely happy for your friend while at the same time wishing it had been you. When you are feeling conflicting emotions at the same time, you can't always control which ones are being displayed.

These examples also reinforce the point that nonverbals can be used to **conceal** as well as to express; a smile can cover up disappointment as well as express joy. Concealment can take the form of manufacturing an emotion that isn't there, replacing an expression with another one you want to convey instead, or simply "masking": trying not to express anything. If you want to be a good poker player, for instance, you'd better learn how to put on your "poker face" and not show any reactions to the cards you've been dealt; otherwise your opponents can exploit you. Since card players first gave us that term, people in many other contexts have discovered the value of having an inscrutable poker face as well.

The disappointing gift / award scenarios are also a reminder that nonverbal communication is not just about expressing yourself: it's also about **maintaining relationships**. These two factors — expressing yourself or working on the relationship — can work hand in hand or they can fight against each other, and when they are at odds, the question is: which one predominates? Some hugs are genuine, some are fake, and some are in between (it's not that you love or hate the person, it's just that you hug them because you're supposed to, not because you feel it). Because you can't tell from the nonverbal behavior alone, it's good to remind yourself that you don't really know what it means.

12.8 USING ONE CHANNEL TO HELP THE OTHER

It was my first full-time job: I was doing graphic design for a small advertising agency, a job that allowed a lot of talking while you were working on drawings. One of my co-workers chatted with me for a while and then needed to concentrate on what he was doing, resulting in a 20 -minute lull in our conversation. It was finally interrupted by him saying "I don't mean to imply anything by my silence." It was a funny moment, since I hadn't been thinking about it , but it was also a nice acknowledgement that I *could have been* sitting there wondering why I had offended him or he didn't want to talk to me anymore.

Since then, I've been in situations where someone yawned in front of me and quickly apologized, explaining that they didn't sleep much the night before. In other words, sometimes nonverbal signals are ambiguous enough that words are needed to clear things up. It may seem artificial or forced sometimes, but there is nothing wrong with talking about your nonverbal behavior and helping others around you figure out what you're trying to say or not say with your body.

On the other side of the equation, one of this chapter's themes is that nonverbals are an important enhancement to verbal communication, a way to express things that words don't convey well or to give the words more impact. Chapter 14 is about delivering speeches, and the success of a speech hinges largely on how the speaker uses their voice, hands, and face. In conflict situations, the difference between escalation and de-escalation can have a lot to do with tone of voice and other nonverbal behaviors, and a skilled communicator can get people to listen to messages they don't want to hear if the nonverbals are right. If the message you want to convey is "calm down," the way you say it and what you do with your body (such as holding someone in a calming embrace) are bound to have more effect than your words.

So there's one final reason to study nonverbal communication: to get you thinking about the relationship between verbal and nonverbal channels, and how to recognize when one side needs help from the other. The earlier discussion of double-bind messages and gaslighting shows what can happen when that relationship is deliberately abused, but inadvertent contradictions can cause stress too. Awareness of all the channels available to you can increase the possibility that those channels are all singing in tune with each other.

BOX 12.8: What Zoom Fatigue Teaches Us About Nonverbal Communication

The challenges of the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown were severe, but at least we had a big advantage over previous pandemics: the ability to have meetings over video platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and FaceTime. People who used these platforms couldn't help noticing something about them, however: they can be *exhausting*. Some people thought they were the only ones having that trouble until articles started appearing that put a name to the problem: "Zoom Fatigue." Why can a 30-minute video meeting be as tiring as an hourlong in-person meeting? The answers tell us something about the nonverbal signals we seek out in social situations, some of which the video platforms can provide, some of which they can't. Depending on the framing of the camera, for instance, you can't see much below a person's shoulders. Our brains are used to seeing a person's posture and what they are doing with their hands, and even when that information isn't available, the brain won't stop looking for it, like a cell phone searching for a signal in the woods . Continually searching for something that isn't there drains phone batteries and human brains alike.

Then there's the question of where to look. In a typical in-person meeting, when one person is speaking the others are usually looking at them out of respect, or to pick up facial expressions. This doesn't have to be laser-focused, however, and it's acceptable to look around at others to "read the room." Over video platforms, reading the room means looking into lots of isolated boxes, each with their own distractions. Some people feel obligated to keep staring at the speaker to avoid being rude, which can be tiring. There's also the quirk that you naturally look into people's eyes when speaking to them, but since those eyes aren't right next to the camera, it can look like they're not looking at you even when they are.

Having your own face and background on the screen is also a potent distraction. As Christina Cauterucci put it, "In a video call, there's too much information about the self, and not enough about the others." Imagine being in an in-person meeting and everyone at the table has a mirror in front of them.

You may have noticed that normal speech patterns take more effort online too. There are those awkward moments when someone starts speaking and has to be told they're muted, and the moments when no one has anything to say, or a topic wraps up, leading to pauses that seem excruciatingly longer and quieter than similar pauses in face-to-face meetings.

The point here is not to complain about the limitations of video meetings (a technology I'm extremely grateful for), but to reveal features of normal face-to-face conversation you may not have noticed before. Our experiences with video meetings show that being able to see more than a person's head, being able to look around the room, the subtleties of smoothly riding through conversational gaps and interruptions, and the ability to look people in the eye while talking are all important features of natural conversation.

12.9 NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN SPECIFIC SITUATIONS

Just as with the Ethics chapter, I'll end by digging into a few scenarios to show how an understanding of nonverbal communication can be useful .

Context #1: How to Tell If Your Partner Loves You

> Some people never say the words " I love you"
> It's not their style to be so bold
> Some people never say those words "I love you "
> But like a child they're longing to be told
> *Paul Simon, Something So Right (1973)*

Human beings are apparently a little insecure, needing reassurance that people love us. In Minnesota there are a lot of "Ole and Lena" jokes about an old married couple, and my favorite goes:

> Lena: Ole, you never tell me you love me!
> Ole: I did when we got married. If I'd changed my mind, I woulda let you know.

I side with Lena on this one: telling someone just once that you love them is not enough, and Ole is not holding up his end. But that doesn't mean he has to say the words "I love you," which the Paul Simon song suggests is not everyone's style. How else can you say it? Advertisers will tell you that a good way is to "say it with flowers," or diamonds, or an exotic trip. Ole might be more inclined to say it by changing the oil in Lena's car, making sure there's a hot cup of coffee brewing when she wakes up, or just listening to her. There are many ways to convey love.

You may have heard of the concept of "love languages," popularized by Gary Chapman in his 1992 book *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate* (and several followup books focused on other situations like parent-child relationships or apologies). That book was not based on empirical research, and recent studies have questioned the validity of some of its central concepts, such as the assertion that a person has one "primary" love language, or that there are just five to choose from.[1] But the enduring popularity of the concept suggests that it has value for people.

1. Impett, E . A., Park, H. G ., & Muise, A . (2024). . Current Directions in Psychological Science , 33 (2): 87–92. doi:10.1177/09637214231217663.

I prefer an older version of the same idea, proposed by Kenneth Villard and Leland Whipple in their book *Beginnings in Relational Communication*.[2] Villard and Whipple called them "relational currencies" instead of love languages, and listed 14:

> Positive verbal statements
> Self-disclosure
> Listening
> Positive nonverbal affect displays
> Touch
> Sexuality
> Aggression
> Gifts
> Money
> Food
> Favors
> Service
> Time together
> Access rights (which refers to giving someone special permission to use a prized possession, such as letting someone drive your beloved car or sit in your favorite chair).

You can probably think of others, such as staying in touch, sacrifices, humor, discipline, and more . Since I value the concept of an expanded vocabulary, I don't see the need to limit the the list to just five, or pinpoint one as your "primary" currency. I also like the term "currency" because it implies that these relational currencies are about conveying something of value, and also hints that not everyone values the same thing. For some people, Indian rupees or amusement park tokens or cryptocurrency may be priceless, but to others may be just "funny money " — just as a bouquet of flowers or an expensive greeting card can be loaded with meaning for one person but a waste of money to another.

Having a wide vocabulary of approaches to express love is very useful, but there are several ways things can go wrong. One is the problem of **mismatch**: Lena wants to hear Ole say "I love you," but Ole wants to express his love through acts of service. A parent disciplines their child as an act of love to form them into a responsible adult, but to the child the discipline feels like hatred, not love. Think how many movies involve a parent who sees themselves as providing "everything" for their children (meaning: gifts and money), but the child just wants them to stay home from work and toss a ball in the backyard (time together).

Another issue is **implicitness**: people may not explicitly tell others what makes them feel loved. Why is that important? Because if the other person doesn't do that thing, the first person might silently brood about being

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2. Villard, K., & Whipple. L. (1976). Beginnings in relational communication. John Wiley & Sons. The original book is long out of print, but the concept of relational currencies is summarized well in Kathleen Galvin's family communication textbook: Galvin, K.M., Braithwaite, D.O., Schrodt, P. & Bylund, C.L. (2019), Family communication: Cohesion and change (10th ed .). Routledge.

unloved: "If he loved me, he would unload the dishwasher more often." Even if one person does express their preferred currencies, it may still feel meaningless to the other ("doing dishes is just a chore, not an act of love"). Sometimes people just have to take it on faith that when their partner says doing dishes makes them feel loved, they mean it.

There are several lessons related to nonverbal communication that you can draw from this:

- Even if you think the nonverbal actions should convey love on their own, you may still need to verbally state your thoughts and feelings. This might feel uncomfortable or unnatural. For example, if the currency is sexual touch, many people feel awkward talking about sexual preferences (which is why sex columnists so often have to insist "Tell your partner what you like!")
- If there is a contradiction between the verbal currencies (#1 and #2 in the list above) and the nonverbal currencies (all the rest of them), don't be surprised if the nonverbal ones carry more weight. Even if Ole does say those magic words "I love you," Lena might be paying more attention to his facial expression, gaze, or tone of voice as he says it. Does your partner's face light up when you walk in? Do they come over to sit next to you when you're in a room together?
- For many of these behaviors, expressing love is not the only variable: there may be reasons that some expressions of love are "off the table." There might be good reasons your partner can't eat the food you lovingly prepared. Your partner may have experienced sexual trauma or have a physical ailment that makes sex uncomfortable, and it's not about you. Self-disclosure (opening up and saying what's on your mind) may feel unsafe for people who have been in abusive relationships.
- Culture can play a big role in what kinds of expression are preferred. In some countries, public displays of affection are taboo and explicit statements of love are rare, but acts of sacrifice send the message "I love you." It is not easy to overcome one's culture, so even if you have had many discussions with your partner about what makes you feel loved, you may experience "bumps" and misunderstandings. That doesn't mean you don't love each other.

Context #2: Spotting Liars

For centuries, people have relied on nonverbal cues to tell if someone is lying. The amount of research on nonverbal cues to deception is staggering, and the number of cues that might be "giveaways" of lying is bigger than you might imagine . DePaulo's 2003 meta-analysis of all the published research incorporated 158 different cues.[3] These included subtle nonverbals such as "lip stretch," "duration of facial expression," "changes in foot

3. DePaulo, B.M., Lindsay, J.J., Malone, B.E., Muhlenbruck, L., Charlton, K. & Cooper, H. (2003). Cues to deception. Psychological Bulletin, 129(1):74-118.

movements," and "neck muscles tightened," as well as verbal factors such as "pronoun and tense deletion" and "self-references." What is the big picture conveyed by all of this research? It's murky at best. The more reliable indicators are connected to the content of the speech, not the nonverbal cues.

If you've assumed that eye contact is a good indicator — believing that liars can't "look you in the eye" like truth-tellers can — the research doesn't support that conclusion. One reason is because eye contact is so easy to control: there's really nothing to prevent a liar from peering straight into your eyes while lying. Perhaps you, as the would-be lie detector, think that liars don't know this is considered a "give-away" clue, but that's naive: of course they know it. That implies they *can't* look you in the eye even if they try to, but why would that be?

Let's step back and ask a broader question: why would lying produce any physiological reactions at all? The assumption is that the act of lying creates anxiety and physiological arousal. This is what polygraph machines measure — heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, and perspiration — so instead of the nickname "lie detectors," they should really be called "anxiety detectors." For some people, the anxiety caused by lying *does* show up in those physiological reactions, but the problem is that for others , especially people who lie frequently and get away with it, it doesn't.

This is why polygraphs aren't admissible in most courts: the legal system knows about the dangers of false positives (a truth-teller failing the test) and false negatives (a liar passing). Why would a truth-teller fail a polygraph? Maybe because being hooked up to straps and leads and grilled by a suspicious interrogator makes them anxious. On the other hand, if the person keeps themselves calm, they will pass whether they are lying or not.[4] This is what happened with Aldrich Ames, an American spy who was suspected of being a double agent for the Russians. His CIA supervisors became so suspicious of him that they made him do two polygraph tests, and he passed them both. How? In his words, "My Russian bosses told me to just relax."[5]

Polygraphs are also based on contrasts, assuming your body responds one way when you're telling the truth and another way when you're lying. That requires getting a good baseline measure of your "normal" heart rate, breathing, and blood pressure. If your heart rate suddenly spikes when they ask you if you've ever stolen from your employer, then they've got you. This can be easily manipulated by an unscrupulous polygraph examiner, but also suggests that someone who knows you well would make a better lie detector than a stranger. Family members, friends, and co-workers can tell when something is "off" about you or you're not acting normally, which is much harder for police officers or customs agents to recognize.

Even if your blood pressure or perspiration don't correlate with lying, does your face reveal it? The scholar who has done the most research on that subject is Paul Ekman, who learned everything he could about the human face, and developed the Facial Action Coding System, or FACS (cited in footnote 6). One of his discoveries is that the muscles in the human face are a blend of some that can be voluntarily controlled and

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4. Alder, K. (2007). Lie detectors: The history of an American obsession. Free Press.

5. Weiner, T., Johnston, D. & Lewis, N. A. (1995). Betrayal: The Story of Aldrich Ames, an American spy. Random House. ISBN 978-0-679-44050-5.

others that cannot. If a liar sets their attention on controlling muscles that are thought to be indicators of lying, they'll probably succeed — but the involuntary muscles, or the ones the liar doesn't pay attention to, can be give-aways of anxiety. Ekman paid special attention to "micro-expressions" that are so fleeting (less than half a second long) that they may escape the attention of both the liar and an untrained observer, and recent research by Matsumoto and Hwang[6] suggests that this could be a promising avenue for detecting liars. The problem, as these researchers would be the first to admit, is that even if you can tell *what* a person is really feeling from these facial expressions, you can't tell *why* they are feeling that way.

Speaking of emotions: what emotions does a liar feel? They might feel guilty if they have a strong conscience — but not everyone does (apparently Aldrich Ames didn't). Guilt could explain the theory about eye contact, since a guilty person might not want to directly face the person they are deceiving. Other liars might feel a fear of getting caught, which is different enough from guilt that it would presumably show itself differently. Then, to really complicate the picture, some liars enjoy the process of lying, which is called "duping delight." Guilt, fear, and delight are quite a range of emotions to be on the lookout for.

Another avenue of research has looked at the cognitive side, and whether there are clues that the mind is working one way when lying and another way when telling the truth. If someone has to make up a complex lie on the spot, for instance, that takes a lot of mental work, which may show on their face. The theory of Neurolinguistic Programming, or NLP, includes a model of which direction the eyes go when performing certain mental functions (one direction when remembering something that happened, and another direction when making up something that did not happen). This led some people to think that a liar will look upward to the right when lying, and upward to the left when telling the truth. The research supporting this model is not strong,[7] and the model doesn't address some important variables like whether it's a spontaneous lie or a rehearsed one. If you had plenty of time to craft a good lie, rehearse it, and perhaps tell it often, it shouldn't take much mental effort.

The frustrating conclusion from all of this is that nonverbal cues *may* give away lying, but the indicators are weak at best. DePaulo et al. conclude, "In some ways, liars are less forthcoming than truthtellers, and they tell us less compelling tales… Their stories include fewer ordinary imperfections and unusual contents. However, many behaviors showed no discernible links, or only weak links, to deceit" (2003, p. 74). Reaching conclusions based on terms like "more tense" and "less forthcoming" can get you in serious trouble. It seems you're better off not looking too hard at nonverbals, and focusing on the content of the lie instead: is it internally consistent? Plausible? If those are better indicators than the nonverbal ones, perhaps this section is in the wrong chapter.

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6. Matusomot, D. & Hwang, H.C. (2018). Microexpressions differentiate truths from lies about future malicious intent . Frontiers in Psychology, 9: 2545.

7. Zaharia, C., Reiner, M., & Schütz, P. (2015). Evidence-based neuro linguistic psychotherapy: A meta-analysis. Psychiatria Danubina, 27(4), 355–363.

CHAPTER 13: PUBLIC SPEAKING I

13.1 THE BEST SPEECH I HEARD IN FLORIDA

Academic conventions can be overwhelming, and the 1993 conference of the Speech Communication Association[1] in Miami was no exception: thousands of attendees, and at any given moment, more than a dozen presentations on the latest in communication. Everyone at the convention was in the academic discipline of communication (I was a graduate student), and I'm willing to bet that most had taught public speaking.

At many of the presentations, however, I saw speakers who read their conference papers in a rapid monotone, not looking up from their paper, and overestimating how much they could get through in their allotted time (usually around ten minutes, to allow half a dozen presenters to squeeze into an hourlong panel). The authors wrote good papers, but some didn't think much about the difference between a paper and a speech, and I'm not sure they would even think of their presentation as a speech.

After a few days, I took a break to go on an afternoon tour of the Everglades. Our tour guide was 19 years old, identified himself as a member of the Seminole tribe, and spoke passionately about the history and geography of the region. Three decades later, I still remember his presentation well, and look back on it as the best speech I heard all week — perhaps all year. The irony of a lay person doing a better job at public speaking than the scholars at the Speech Communication Association national conference has stayed with me ever since.

Granted, the tour guide had some advantages over the scholars. He was giving a speech he'd given many times before, and got to take breaks while we rode around in air boats and held baby alligators. The scholars, in contrast, had a tight time frame, were probably intimidated by their audience, and probably hadn't presented their papers before. Of course, those conditions also apply to many wedding speeches — given only once, to a potentially intimidating audience, and if you go on too long, you're keeping people from getting their wedding cake and dancing —but that doesn't prevent grooms like this guy, Ben Carpenter, from crafting and delivering a brilliant speech that goes viral:

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://open.lib.umn.edu/commpractice/?p=489#oembed-1

Even if you don't spend a year learning Korean, or don't want a speech of yours to be viewed 4.9 million

1. Now known as the National Communication Association.

times (as of this writing), learning how to write a good wedding speech will pay off. And even if you're never a speaker in a wedding party, or a tour guide, it's likely that other situations will arise that call on you to give a speech in front of a live audience: coaches give speeches at year-end banquets, employees give pitches to bosses or clients, students present projects to teachers and classmates, lawyers make opening statements, athletes give press conferences … and maybe, just maybe, you will one day go up to a podium to receive an award and say a few words. And if you count presentations given to remote audiences as speeches, that includes recording podcasts and putting together YouTube videos.

As I noted in Chapter 2, I discovered that Speech is a college major when someone recommended I take a public speaking course, which got me into an academic discipline I have never left. You may not be as eager as I was to take public speaking: it might be a requirement for another major, a course you're postponing like a dentist appointment, or a class that produces more anxiety than any other. (The next chapter covers how reduce fear of public speaking). But there is a good reason so many college majors require you to take public speaking: because so many fields require public communication.

Public speaking also allows you to put all of the previous chapters (listed here in parentheses) to good use: a speech can be viewed as a situation in which your understanding of the listening process (4) can be used to craft an ethical message (3) that is adapted to an audience (5) to persuade them (6), using a combination of logic and emotion (7 and 8), drawing on your credibility (9), effective use of language (10), and stories (11), and conveyed through your voice and body (12) and media (19).

All of these chapters could also be put to good use communicating in contexts that you might not call "public speaking," ranging from mass communication to one-on-one conversations with loved ones (see the Levels of Communication from Chapter 1). But public speaking is enough of its own entity that I'll devote two chapters to it. This chapter is focused on creating and writing a speech; the next chapter is about delivering it.

13.2 WHAT IS A SPEECH?

First, it's helpful to look more closely at what a speech is, and how differs from other forms of communication. A food vendor at a baseball game might be communicating to a large number of people when he calls out "Hot dogs! Get your hot dogs here!", but it's hardly a speech, nor is it likely that you'd use that word to refer to a reporter's on-air update about a flood. If a "birthday girl" says "Thanks for coming" to the 30 people who showed up to her party, it's not a speech, but if she goes on to talk for two or three more minutes, it might be. If a politician reads the U.S. Constitution aloud on the Senate floor, that's not a speech, but the same politician's prepared statement about the Constitution could be called a speech.

The word "speech" implies:

1. Communication prepared for a specific purpose and perhaps a specific occasion. "Prepared" could mean meticulously word-smithed weeks in advance, or thought up relatively spontaneously (see the description of "Impromptu mode" in the next chapter). Even with an impromptu speech, the speaker is still thinking about purpose; they're just thinking very quickly.

    - The speech may be given just once, or it may be repeated — but it wouldn't be repeated unless the same type of occasion arose again (such as a politician's "stump speech" that they go around delivering at rallies)

2. The speaker has some control over what they say, and is either the originator of the message or is in close contact with the speechwriter. This is why the speaker's credibility (Chapter 9) is always a consideration.

3. An audience who will pay attention (presumably without interruption).

    The length may vary from several minutes to an hour, but speeches longer than that are rare because they are too taxing on the audience.

4. There is an identifiable structure to the message, and a discernible theme. This is not to say that all public speakers are good at this or succeed at it, but they should at least try.

I spell out these criteria because they help identify the elements a speaker needs to think about when preparing and giving a speech. We looked at credibility in Chapter 9, and at audiences and their ability to listen in Chapters 4 and 5, so here I'll focus most on #1, purpose and occasion, and #4, structure and theme.

I'm assuming for purposes of this chapter that you'll write and deliver your own speech (i.e., the speech writer and speech deliverer will be the same person), although you may someday end up in a situation where you're doing only one or the other, in which case it's worth reading up on the relationship between a speechwriter and their client.[1] I will also focus on prepared speeches, although I recognize the value of impromptu speeches in terms of overcoming anxiety (see next chapter) and learning "boots on the ground" lessons about how to craft a speech.

1. Here's another guide to working with a speech writer.

13.3 PURPOSE AND OCCASION

The types of speeches are generally sorted into three categories: **informative**, **persuasive**, and **ceremonial** (or entertaining). The lines between the three can get blurry: informative speeches might be selling a particular point of view, while persuasive speeches usually have to be based on information and can take place during a ceremony of some kind. And while "to inform" and "to persuade" are specific goals, "ceremonial" says more about when and where the speech occurs, not what purpose it serves: To honor a person or group of people? To commemorate an occasion? To make the audience laugh? To bring people together in times of trouble? That depends on the occasion. Just as with movie genres, these labels don't have to be restrictive ("That movie can't have jokes in it, it's a drama!"), but they do help the person creating the speech stay focused on what they are trying to accomplish, and remind them that the audience can have expectations that should be met.

Informative speeches include the one I heard on my Everglades tour, a TED talk, a podcast, or any speech from which the audience expects to learn something. When creating an informative speech, consider these questions about your audience:

- What does the audience already know about the topic?
- What new information would they find interesting?
- How can you relate your new information to what they already know? Where will it fit in their "knowledge structure"? What are they likely to be skeptical of because they have heard otherwise?
- What misconceptions can you clear up?
- When will they hit the "information overload" point? (See Chapter 4)
- How can you make the information understandable? How can you relate it to their lives?
- What terms do you want them to learn?
- What simple lessons do you want them to take away from the speech? If someone later asks "What was the speech about?," how can an audience member answer that succinctly?

Because the line between informative and persuasive speeches can be a little fuzzy, you might also ask: will the audience be put off if you try to "sell" them something, whether it's an idea, a point of view, or an actual product? If you have strong feelings about the topic, will expressing those feelings enhance your speech or detract from it? (See Chapter 8).

Persuasive speeches have a more explicit goal of changing the audience's attitude toward something, or getting them to start or stop a behavior. See Chapter 6 [LINK] for ideas about what persuasion can look like and how to do it effectively, and Chapter 7 for how to argue for a position. Some of the same audience questions apply:

- What does the audience know about the topic? Do they already have an opinion? If so, are you trying to change their opinion, or reinforce it? If they don't already have an opinion, what related opinions will bring them on board with your point of view? If the audience is likely to be split on the topic, what strategies will you use to address a mixed audience? (Chapter 5).
- How much will your persuasive appeal rest on logic (the "rider" in the elephant-rider-path model from Chapter 6), how much on emotion (the "elephant" component), and how much on your credibility (Chapter 9)? If emotion is one of the key components, what emotions do you want the audience to feel?
- If your credibility is one of the pillars on which your speech rests, how can you convey that you are knowledgeable, trustworthy, and worth listening to? If you don't want the speech to rest on your credibility, what other authorities can you use?
- Why might your audience be resistant to your message, and how can you overcome that resistance?
- Are you trying to change an attitude, or a behavior? If it's a behavior, what exactly do you want the audience to do?
- Using the Yale 5-step model (Chapter 6), how can you get their attention, make sure the message is understandable, and get them to accept it, remember it, and act on it?

Ceremonial speeches vary widely based on the type of ceremony: birthday, wedding, anniversary, funeral, award ceremony, grand opening of a building or monument, celebration of an accomplishment, recognition of grief over a loss, formal thanks, or just fun. Questions to consider when writing a ceremonial speech include:

- Why are people gathered?
- What mood are they likely to be in? What emotions are appropriate or inappropriate to express for the occasion? Is humor appropriate? If so, how might the humor go wrong? (For example, the audience could be offended, miss an "inside joke," or just not find it funny.)
- Does everyone in the audience know everything about the situation, and if not, what should they be told? Even if it is not "information," what do you want to remind the audience of? For example, many national celebration speeches (such as the 4th of July in the USA) don't contain any new information, but are valuable reminders of the best qualities of the country.
- Will your speech be one of many speeches? If so, what will other speakers say, and how will yours fit in?
- What simple theme do you want people to remember from your speech?

13.4 CHOOSING A TOPIC

School is, of course, an ideal place to learn and practice skills such as how to give a speech, but it's an artificial environment, so it differs from "the real world" in several ways. For one thing, in many real-life contexts, speakers don't get to choose their topic from scratch. If you're a maid of honor and the bride asks you to give a speech, you don't get to say "Oh great; I've always wanted to give a speech about fair trade coffee;" your speech needs to be about the wedding couple. Lawyers giving closing arguments don't even get a choice about which side they are arguing for. Luckily, if you are a student, you probably do get to choose your topic out of an infinite number of possibilities. Where to begin?

If you are assigned to give an informative speech, the obvious starting point is to think about **something you learned that you found fascinating**. Here are some places to start:

- A new advancement (for example, what kinds of art can AI do well, and what does it do poorly?)
- Something scientific (when you get an itch, what exactly is going on?)
- Something historical (how did people trim their fingernails in the old days?)
- An interesting place you or someone you know has visited
- A fascinating person you read about, met, or know personally
- An experience you or someone you know lived through
- A skill you mastered…or failed at
- Something you learned on the job (how people behave in art museums)
- Something you learned in another class
- A form of art you like (favorite movie, TV show, podcast, music genre, unusual craft or hobby)

Knowing the time limits of your speech, consider what you can adequately explain in that time frame: Will you run out of things to say long before you hit the minimum length? Or do you have too much content, and a six-minute summary won't make sense to anyone? This depends partly on the audience's background knowledge of the topic, and whether you need to start on "square one." If they are already familiar with how social media works, for instance, you *might* be able to explain Section 230 without having to review how an ISP is different from a content provider.

If your topic is too familiar to your audience, they might stop listening because they assume they won't hear anything new. This isn't to say that you can't choose a familiar topic; you simply have to let the audience know early on that you won't be saying the "same old same old."

If you're assigned a persuasive speech, your starting point may be a little different. Keeping in mind that persuasion is fundamentally about change, first consider **what you would like to see changed** in the world. More specific questions could include:

- What is an aspect of modern society that just doesn't make sense to you?
- What will future generations think is wrong with the way things are now? (Imagine going forward 50 years, and hearing a historian say "I can't believe that back in the 2020s, they still __________.")
- What communities do you identify with (e.g., geographic region, demographic group, socioeconomic category, gender or ethnicity, hobby community, occupation), and what are the challenges those communities are facing now?
- What social policies have affected you, your family, or your friends?
- What is an ongoing argument you've gotten into with friends or family?
- What are you afraid of about the future?
- What's a significant personal decision you've made, and do you think other people should make the same decision?

If you're going to give a ceremonial speech in the classroom, do you get to make up any occasion?

13.5 GATHERING MATERIAL

Once you've chosen a topic and started to develop a theme, the next step is to do some research, which will serve two purposes:

- It will teach you more about the topic, and help you understand it in more depth; and
- It will provide evidence to support your claims. Why does evidence matter? See chapter 7 for answers.

For ideas about where to begin finding sources, you can consult Meggie Mapes' public speaking textbook *Speak Up, Call In*, which has a chapter about researching.

In addition to thinking about where to look for information, you should also think about what kinds of evidence will be most useful. Mapes lists five types:

- Examples
- Narratives (personal or historical stories) – See Chapter 11 for more about stories
- Facts
- Statistics
- Testimony (either from experts or from non-experts who have experienced something relevant)

While looking over those sources, keep a critical eye out for what makes a particular source credible, using a tool such as Sarah Blakeslee's CRAAP test, described in Chapter 7.

13.6 STRUCTURE AND THEME

I wish I still had a paper I wrote in high school. It wasn't a speech, but it would have made a great one. It was about the English band Jethro Tull, and was the first serious research project I had ever undertaken (this is the part where I could go off on a tangent about how hard it was to research a rock band before the internet, but that's beside the point). My teacher asked, "What is the theme of your paper?" I replied, "It's about Jethro Tull." "No, that's a topic, not a theme. What's your *theme*?" I got a little exasperated and kept saying "It's about Jethro Tull."

Looking back, I am grateful for his patience; it took me quite a while to grasp the difference. When I finally got it, it taught me a significant early lesson about the nature of communication. After many rounds of back and forth with him, I caught on: "My theme is: *There has never been another band like Jethro Tull*."

The teacher was satisfied, I was off and running, and since the actual paper is lost to the sands of time, I can get away with remembering it as the greatest high school research paper ever written.

In case that example doesn't make it clear: a **theme** is something that can be stated as a simple declarative sentence. Imagine it as the answer to "What are you *saying* about the topic?" I could have written an infinite number of papers about Jethro Tull, and each could have had a different theme: the band was overrated or underrated, they exemplify the progressive rock scene in 1970s England, they were a fad, they changed music history, they should have called it quits in 1980, etc. The difference between topic and theme illustrates the difficulty in distinguishing informative speeches from persuasive ones, since "what are you saying about the topic?" sounds a little like "what do you want to persuade the audience of?", but even an informative speech should have a theme.

What difference did it make for my paper? Before I settled on that theme, I gathered a lot of information and wondered what to do with it. Rattle it off in sequential order? ("They formed in London in 1968, then this person quit, then another person joined….") That would get very tedious very fast. Some public speaking teachers have their students start off by giving an introductory speech about themselves, and they can be tedious in the same way: "I went to middle school here, and high school here, and I like sports and music and…".

Having a theme, on the other hand, gives you a purpose that helps you decide what to put into the speech, and how to talk about it. It's the way to answer the audience question, "Why are you telling us all this?"

In my Jethro Tull paper, for example, instead of methodically plodding through personnel changes (which is *not* what made them a unique band), I focused on the fact that they had a flute player, which hardly any other rock bands have ever had, and that they blended old English folk styles and hard rock guitar. If something contributed to the theme "There has never been another band like them," I put it into the paper, and if it didn't touch on that theme, I left it out (they all had long hair, but so did every other rock band in those days). This focus guided my decision-making, in much the same way that "with great power comes great responsibility" frames everything about the original *Spiderman* movie (see Chapter 3).

How do you come up with a theme for your speech? That's not easy to spell out in a textbook, but going back to our list of ways to find topics may give you some thoughts:

- A new advancement (for example, what kinds of art can AI do well, and what does it do poorly?)
  - Theme: "Artificial Intelligence isn't actually intelligent" or "It's a miracle they figured out how to make this"
- Something scientific (when you get an itch, what exactly is going on?)
  - Theme: "It doesn't work the way you think it does"
- Something historical (how did people trim their fingernails in the old days?)
  - Theme: "Things were tough back then" or "People are ingenious"
- An interesting place you or someone you know has visited
  - Theme: "You never really understand your own home until you visit somewhere really different"
- A fascinating person you read about, met, or know personally
  - "This person inspired and influenced many other people, including me"
- An experience you or someone you know lived through
  - Theme: "Hardship makes you stronger"
- A skill you mastered…or failed at
  - Theme: "It's not as simple as it looks" or "Patience pays off"

- Something you learned on the job
  - Theme: "The public doesn't appreciate what goes on behind the scenes"
- Something you learned in another class
  - Theme: "Learning this made my life better"
- A form of art you like (favorite movie, TV show, podcast, music genre, unusual craft or hobby)
  - Theme: "This teaches you about human nature."

For persuasive speeches, the theme can be even simpler: "This has got to *change!*," or "It's time to rethink your position," or "They need your help to fix this problem." As the Spiderman example illustrates, you can take themes from movies, songs, fairy tales, common sayings, jokes, or memes.

The main point here is that **your theme should guide every decision you make about your speech**: how to boil down the information to the most important points, how to structure the speech, and how to begin and end it. (Watch this video to see why the theme of *The Lord of the Rings*, "even the smallest person can change the course of the future," made the filmmakers decide not to include a scene they spent three days shooting).

What if you can't think of a theme right away? Don't worry. It's probably going to be a back-and-forth process: although it's ideal to have your theme in mind before putting the speech together, it might not be until you actually work on the speech that a clear theme emerges. Circling back is a natural part of the process. The phrase "circling back" implies that you'll probably need to revisit and rethink things several times; if you've written 80% of the speech without a theme, and then the theme finally comes to you, then you might have to go back and rewrite that 80%. The worst thing here is to tack on the theme as an afterthought, without integrating it into the whole speech.

Once you have your topic and theme, it's a good idea to create an outline for your speech: what are the points you want to make, and where should they go? A good speech has an identifiable **shape** to it (as opposed to "Just talk for six minutes"), and this is where you decide what that shape is. Once again, Mapes' textbook includes a helpful chapter.

13.7 THE INTRODUCTION

What should go into your introduction? The most obvious requirement is an **attention-getter, also known as a "hook,"** to make your audience want to listen. In many situations, the audience is required to listen no matter what, so you might wonder why an attention-getter is necessary. The answer should shape what kind of technique you use.

If the idea is literally just to get them to pull their attention away from whatever they're doing at the moment, any technique will do: making a loud banging noise, squawking like a chicken, or whispering "Whose $20 bill is this?" I remember a student who began his speech by shouting "Sex!" and then saying, "Now that I have your attention, let me tell you all about warehouse pallets;" he proceeded to give a speech that was as exciting as you'd expect a speech about pallets to be (see the discussion in Chapter 6 about techniques for gaining attention that undermine the acceptance of your message).

Think instead of the concept from Chapter 4 that "paying attention" is an economic transaction. Your intro is a way of telling the audience that their time will be well-spent because your speech will be enlightening, entertaining, or, at least, something they haven't heard before. Begin with a fascinating tidbit of information, a story, a scenario, or a puzzling question.[1] If you have a clear theme, think of a way to weave that theme into the hook.

Your intro should also provide the audience with the **background information** they'll need to understand the main points of your speech. This might include "big picture" statistics showing why the topic is significant, a bit about the history of the subject, or details on how it relates to them personally. A student in one of my classes began his speech by asking if anyone in the room chewed tobacco. When no one raised their hand, he could have been discouraged and felt like he had done the opposite of what an intro should do: he had signaled that no one needed to listen. But he was well-prepared: he had statistics showing the likelihood that people in his audience knew someone who used chewing tobacco — a family member, friend or acquaintance — so they had a reason to care.

Intros are the time to **define the concepts and terms** your audience will need to know, and perhaps the broader frame these concepts and terms fit into (e.g., "price fixing is when different companies reach an agreement to all raise prices at the same time, which is an example of anti-trust laws that protect competition in the marketplace").

Instructors disagree on whether a speech intro should include a **preview** of what you will cover, like "Today I will be talking about what price fixing is, why it hurts consumers, and how companies get away with it even

1. You may have noticed that every chapter in this book begins with one of these four things; book chapters need hooks, too.

though it's against the law." This is an example of the **deductive style**, and it follows the advice, "Tell what you're going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you told them." In terms of clarity and expectations, this can be a helpful guide to the audience.

I'm not a fan of it, however; I prefer the **inductive style**, where you lead the audience down a path with an unknown destination. Perhaps it's because I love movies, and wouldn't want to see a movie that began with the director explaining "Here's exactly what's going to happen in this movie from beginning to end…". If your audience trusts you to take them on a worthwhile journey, it's more fun for them to not know where they're going.

BOX 13.7: USING THE INDUCTIVE STYLE

When my son got married, I gave a speech at the reception that used the inductive style. While talking about the bride, I told the story of going shopping for a desk at IKEA with the couple, a process that took much longer than I expected since she is a very deliberate and methodical shopper. While she pondered which desk to buy, I looked at every single item in the office furniture area, then wandered through the rest of the massive store, went down the cafeteria and ordered a snack while reading the local newspaper from cover to cover, and wandered back to the furniture department. When I got there, she was sitting in the same spot, still deliberating over which desk she liked best. Assuming most of the people in the audience knew her and probably had a similar story to tell, I ended by saying "So I think we can all agree that [the bride] is the choosiest shopper in the world."

Then I added, "So it means a lot to me that the choosiest shopper in the world has chosen my son as her life partner."

When we watched the video of the speech later, she told me "I didn't see that one coming!"

Had I said the punchline first and then told the story, it wouldn't have worked. Sometimes it's fine to use the deductive method of previewing the whole speech first, and then recapping it after. But sometimes it's better to save the best stuff until the end, and if you do it right, you won't have to repeat anything.

13.8 THE BODY OF THE SPEECH

The body of your speech is where you lay out the main points that support your theme, introduce the evidence, and explain things in depth. I'm a believer in the **Rule of Threes**, which says people are naturally attracted to things that come in threes: Papa Bear, Mama Bear, and Baby Bear; the Three Little Pigs; the Three Musketeers; Harry, Hermione, and Ron; the ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Future; life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; stop, drop, and roll; *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. Your speech will fit this rule if it has an introduction, a body, and a conclusion, but the body of your speech can also follow this rule. Aim to have three main points in your speech; if you have more, see if you can fit some in as subpoints under the three main points (or each main point can have three subpoints).

For an informative speech, you can use this structure in various ways. The simplest is just to list three things the audience should know about your topic. Another possibility is to talk about the past, present, and future of your topic (e.g., how an invention was originally thought up, how it's used now, and new developments to look forward to). If your topic is a skill you mastered, you could break it up into things you learned the easy way, things you learned the hard way, and why it was worth the trouble. Another structure is cause, effects, and remedy (e.g., why vaping is addictive, what it does to your body, and how to make it safer).

In persuasive speeches, the Rule of Three can be applied in many ways as well:

- What one side thinks of the issue, what the other side thinks, and why you side with one over the other
- Why something needs to be done about this issue, the barriers to solving it, and how to overcome those barriers

You might also adopt that movie theme from the 1960s and talk about "the good, the bad, and the ugly" sides of your topic.

Ceremonial speeches also work well with the Rule of Threes. For example, if you want to know what to say in a wedding speech, you can include:

- What makes one partner (your friend, sibling, child) a great person
- What makes their partner a great person
- Why they make a great couple

A memorial speech (such as a funeral eulogy) can be divided into:

- What everyone knows about the deceased

- What most people don't know about them
- How their influence will carry on (how they have shaped you as a person)

Or:

- The natural gifts they had
- The challenges they faced
- The accomplishments they left behind

The body of your speech should also include **supporting evidence** that backs up your points (the "grounds" we looked at in Chapter 7). How much evidence is needed, and what form it needs to take, depend heavily on your topic and your audience. The general rule is that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof": if you're going to argue that swimming is good for your health, you won't need much evidence, but if you're arguing that swimming causes cancer, you'll need plenty of strong evidence that your audience will find convincing. What form could that evidence take? It could be:

- Scientific studies, experiments, and statistics
- Authorities ("The World Health Organization says that…")
- Historical examples
- Personal stories
- Logic and common sense

Why does your audience matter? As noted in Chapter 2, Michael Beatty has pointed out that, to quantitative researchers, the last four types of evidence above don't count as "scientific," and these researchers would expect to see evidence that fits into the first category. Many other people, however, find stories to be the most compelling kind of evidence of all (see Chapter 11).

Finally, the body of your speech needs something that may seem small and insignificant, but is actually vital: **transitions**. Sometimes called "signposts," these phrases clue the audience in to where you are in the structure of the speech.

The necessity of transitions brings us back to the difference between written texts and spoken language: in a written text (such as this chapter), the reader has the advantage of headings, subheadings, paragraphs, and numbered lists, all of which provide a sense of structure and purpose. In a speech, if the speaker is using presentation software such as PowerPoint or Keynote, they can provide that sort of visual clue as well. Without such software, though, the audience depends on the speaker to provide clues about what's going on. Transition phrases might include ones like these:

- "With that said, let's look at the reasons to donate blood" (after the intro)

- "The third reason to consider donating blood is…" (in the body)
- "Now, there are some people who believe the opposite…" (to introduce counterarguments)
- "And in conclusion…" (to mark the transition between body and conclusion)

Each transition is an opportunity to reinforce your theme. If your theme is "It doesn't work the way you think it does," every transition point is another chance to drive home your theme. Instead of just saying "My second point is," say "The second aspect of __ that doesn't work the way you think it does is…"

13.9 CONCLUSIONS

When I teach public speaking, I use a form to record my reactions to the different aspects of a student's speech: how well the intro catches my attention, the strength of the evidence, the main points in the body of the speech, my thoughts about the conclusion, etc. I'm usually busy writing notes in different spaces on that form, so I'm often listening more intently than I'm watching the speaker. There have been many times when I'm taking notes about the body of the speech, and waiting for the student to transition into the conclusion. Instead, they just stop speaking, I look up from my notes to try to figure out what's going on, and realize that the speech is done. I'm often surprised, and say to myself, "Oh! I guess that's it then; speech over." If you have to say "End of story," like Mr. Mohra did when giving his witness statement in the original *Fargo* movie, something's wrong.

What does this tell you?

The lesson I learn from awkward moments like these is that conclusions are the hardest part of the speech to write. I'm waiting to hear a conclusion, and the student must think that their last points *are* a conclusion, but to me they sound like part of the body of the speech.

If your audience can't tell the difference between the body of your speech and its conclusion, you don't have a good conclusion. If the audience's only clue that it's time to clap is your silence, you could have stopped your speech at any point. It's not absolutely necessary to use the words "in conclusion," but there should be a shift in what you're saying and why. It may be a challenge to say something new in your conclusion, but you should at least say something different from what you said in the body of your speech.

What is the purpose of a conclusion? If you're following the deductive model, the purpose is simply to repeat what your audience has already heard, but this isn't the best you can do. (It's like the director of a movie coming out at the end and saying "Here's the whole plot of the movie again," which sends the message "I assume you have a bad memory and need help remembering what you just saw.") Better ways to end a speech include:

- Giving one more insight into the ramifications of your topic, something your audience may not have thought about before.
- Making a call to action: if your audience is motivated to act, what should they do?
- Restating your theme.
- Making statement about the urgency of the situation, or one last appeal to your audience's emotions (Chapter 8)
- If you started your speech with a story, conclude by telling how the story ends.

Since this chapter is about the importance of being able to write a good speech, and how to do it, you could turn the chapter itself into a "speech about the importance of speeches." How might I end such a speech?

As an example of the first technique — offering an insight about the ramifications of the topic — I could conclude by telling the story of the man who saved public television with one speech. The man was Fred Rogers, host of the children's television show *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, the year was 1969, and the context was a hearing of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Communications about the proposal by President Richard Nixon to cut funding to public television. Mr. Rogers testified to Congress, asking them to give $20 million to PBS instead of cutting it. Speaking for less than seven minutes, Rogers was so effective that the committee chair, Senator John Pastore, said, "Looks like you just earned the $20 million." Nixon not only increased the fund to $22 million, but appointed Rogers as chair of the White House Conference on Children and Youth the next year. To see how much difference one speech can make, watch the video.

CHAPTER 14: PUBLIC SPEAKING II

14.1 THANK A HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER FOR DARTH VADER

He was only five years old, an African American boy from Mississippi, when his father left town for work, and his mother left him in the custody of his grandparents. They lived in Michigan, and the trauma of that move from the deep south to the north was enough to give that boy a severe stutter, and he became functionally mute. He didn't speak again until he was 14 years old. He says:

> I resigned to it as a kid.... When I was approaching serious schoolwork, you had to really report what you knew, and the teacher accepted that I could do all my reporting with a pencil. I didn't have to speak. Oral examinations? I did all mine written. And I became just a non-verbal person. I became a writer. And I was resigned to that.[1]

1. https://achievement.org/achiever/james-earl-jones/#interview. SHORTER VERSIONS: https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/james-earl-jones-recovered-mute-childhood/ https://www.stutteringhelp.org/famous-people/james-earl-jones https://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/01/08/earl.jones.vader.mute/index.html

, via Wikimedia Commons" href="https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:James_Earl_Jones_2010.jpg" data-url="https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:James_Earl_Jones_2010.jpg">

James Earl Jones, 2010. , via Wikimedia Commons" data-url="http://Photo by Stuart Crawford, CC BY 2.0 , via Wikimedia Commons">Photo by Stuart Crawford, CC BY 2.0

It was a high school teacher who finally coaxed the boy into reading his poetry in front of the class. He never fully overcame his stutter, but he learned to control it, and he joined the theater program. From there, he followed in his father's footsteps and became an actor, eventually getting the part of one of the world's most recognizable voices: Darth Vader. After that, he provided the voice of Mufasa in *The Lion King*, uttered the CNN taglines, and took on many other roles. Even when people could see his face on stage and in live action movies, the thing they seemed to respond to most strongly was his voice. So thank goodness that teacher convinced James Earl Jones to begin speaking again.The voice is a powerful tool. Consider this: in today's science fiction and fantasy movies, hundreds of millions of dollars are spent on visual effects and the creation of magical creatures that the world has never seen before. But when it comes to providing a voice for one of those characters, what do they do to the actor's voice? Usually nothing at all — sending the message that you can't improve on the human voice. (The only thing you can do to it is make it creepy, so characters' voices are occasionally modified, but even the apes in the *Planet of the Apes* series have normal human voices). Or think about the popularity of podcasts, which primarily consist of just people talking. In a book called *The Human Voice,* Anne Karpf writes "The voice is one of our most powerful instruments, lying at the heart of the communication process… It bridges our internal and external worlds, travelling from our most private recesses into the public domain. You can't really know a person until you have heard them speak."[2]

You may not like the sound of your voice,[3] or think that you'll ever sound like James Earl Jones or Scarlett Johanssen, but this chapter is about developing that tool of your voice (and other body parts), and using it to bring to life that speech you wrote in the previous chapter. Just as a meal isn't really a meal until it is eaten, a written speech isn't really a speech until it is delivered. How can you do that effectively?

Before we get to that, however, you might have an even more pressing question on your mind: how can you give your speech without passing out? The finer points of voice delivery and gestures won't matter much if you're consumed with anxiety about giving your speech.

2. Karpf, A. (2006). The human voice: How this extraordinary instrument reveals essential clues about who we are. New York: Bloomsbury, p. 4.

3. If you especially dislike hearing recordings of your voice, there's an understandable reason: when you hear your own voice, much of what you're hearing is conducted through your bones, not through your ears, but when you hear recordings, you lose the bone conduction element. That version of your voice must sound nice, since many people think that recordings of their voice are less rich than what they normally hear. Think about it this way: if you think other people's voices sound pleasant and rich, remember that their voices sound even nicer to them.

14.2 MANAGING ANXIETY

Where do you fit on this scale?

1. You feel no physiological reactions at all to giving a speech; you are so relaxed that giving a speech is the same as watching television.
2. You feel some anxiety, but it's low enough that the audience doesn't notice.
3. Your anxiety is noticeable to the audience, but doesn't interfere with the speech, and perhaps produces a little sympathy in the audience.
4. Your anxiety is so bad that it ruins the speech and makes the audience annoyed.
5. Your anxiety is so bad that you feel like you're going to die at the podium, and you pass out mid-speech.
6. You actually die at the podium.

I don't think Level 6 actually exists; if anyone has actually died while giving a classroom speech, I haven't heard about it. I'm also doubtful that Level 1 exists: it's likely that you'll have at least some physiological reaction to giving a speech. So what looks like a 6-point scale might really be a 4-point scale, and if you're at Level 2 or 3, that's not a significant problem. If you're at Level 5, the advice in this chapter will probably not be enough for you, and it may be time for some intensive coaching and/or medication. This section, then, is about Level 4, and how to get it down to 3 or 2.

Who is at Level 5? Even the words James Earl Jones used to describe his mute days weren't that dramatic (he just said that his stutter made speaking more trouble than it was worth). King George VI of England, whose plight was depicted in the semi-fictionalized 2010 movie *The King's Speech* (mentioned in Chapter 5), was definitely at Level 4 early in his time as monarch, but with work he reached Level 3. (If you don't want to rely on the movie depiction, you can hear the real king speaking here).

If you take out the audience reaction component and the risk of fainting, and only look at the fear, who suffers from severe stage fright? That list includes Adele, Rihanna, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, Barbra Streisand, Carly Simon, Laurence Olivier, Peter O'Toole, and even the greatest orator in Ancient Rome, Cicero (who wrote: "I turn pale at the outset of a speech and quake in limb and in all my soul"). The important thing about all of these people is that *they kept performing anyway*.

How did they do it? Along with individual techniques, they must all have one thing in common: the desire to communicate their message overrides their fears. So that's the first thing for you to keep in mind if you "quake in limb" when you get up to speak: focus on what you have to say, instead of on yourself. Stage fright can lead to a vicious cycle of increasing self-focus, obsessing over how you think you look or sound instead of focusing on your message. To me, the most anxiety-reducing thing I can tell myself is, **"I have something valuable to say."** If I've prepared my message well, I know it's true.

Imagine ordering a pizza one night, and in 20 minutes the delivery person is there with your nice warm supper. Do you care if her hands are shaking, her forehead is sweating, and she fumbles her words a little? Not if she brings the pizza you wanted, right? If the customer gets the food intact, nothing else matters. Think of the pizza as your speech; if it's full of content that your audience finds nourishing and satisfying, they'll be forgiving.

Another thing to keep in mind is that **the symptoms of nervousness are probably not as obvious as you think they are**. A sweaty forehead and shaking hands might be visible to an audience, but what about the fact that your stomach is doing flips? Can they see your heart pounding? Even anxiety symptoms that are detectable to the audience are probably not *that* detectable; people have to be pretty close to see your hands shaking. (How did Cicero know he turned pale, anyway?) In a public speaking course with 25 students, many of them think they are the most nervous speaker in the whole class, which tells you that they can't tell how nervous their classmates are; from their perspective, everyone else looks calm at the podium.[1]

Knowing your own unique anxiety symptoms is an important starting point. First, it can help you figure out what to prepare for: Does your mouth dry out? Don't go to the podium without a full bottle of water. Do you sweat profusely? Have a handkerchief at the ready. Does your stomach get upset? Don't eat before a speech. (This is one of my symptoms, and made me pass up a hot meal before my speech at my son's wedding; I'd rather eat cold food afterward than have my stomach distract me during the speech). If you know your hands get sweaty and trembly, don't count on holding things; find a music stand to rest your notes or phone on, and maybe skip the props you thought would make good visual aids if there's a high risk of you dropping them.

Speech anxiety is an evolutionary anomaly. Your body evolved numerous mechanisms to help you in stressful situations, and many of them belong to the "fight-or-flight" category. Long ago, if you came across a saber-toothed tiger, it was good that your body pumped you full of adrenaline to help you either run faster than you'd ever run before or fight that tiger head on. Responding to a speech situation in the same way, however, isn't much help; you shouldn't get in a fight with your audience, nor should you sprint out of the room. Just when you need your mouth to work at its best, *that's* when all the saliva dries up and your throat closes? Thanks, body! Will you have to stand for ten minutes to give your speech? Having all the blood in your body leave your brain and pool in your feet (known as vasovagal syncope, in case you thought it was just you) won't be helpful. Even the thought that your body is going to turn traitor on you at the worst time can make your anxiety worse than it already is.

So what helps? First, think of that **nervousness as a form of energy**. The specific symptoms may be counterproductive, but the underlying idea — that your body wants to give you energy to prepare for

1. This is an example of a broader phenomenon known as the "spotlight effect": the tendency to overestimate what others notice about you.

something important — is a good one that you can use to your advantage. Can you take that energy and channel it differently? If you can't sleep the night before a speech, is that a chance to do more preparation? Will that energy make you more animated and engaged at the podium? If it's more energy than you need, figuring out how to burn off some of it in advance — in the form of a brisk walk, or pushups — can help, as long as you time it right (don't show up breathless at the podium).[2]

In other words, instead of framing the problem as symptoms you need to suppress, frame it as controlling and capitalizing on the gift of energy your body is giving you. Also remember that, while you can't slow your heart rate down or make the adrenaline stop pumping, you can always control your breathing, and long deep breaths can work wonders.

Beside for compensating for your own unique set of symptoms, what else can you try?

2. Some speakers' bodies work the opposite way, making them feel sleepy instead, in which case the trick may be to figure out how to wake your body up instead of calm it down.

14.3 ANXIETY-REDUCING TECHNIQUES

1. **Open Yourself Up**. As part of the vicious cycle described above, nervous speakers who start obsessing about how foolish they look to their audience tend to also close themselves off from that audience. That's why they hide behind the podium, or never look up from their papers: they don't want to see the horrified looks on the faces of the audience. But since they're not looking at the audience, they don't realize that the audience members don't actually have horrified looks on their faces after all, and are more likely to be showing signs of enjoying the speech.So the first thing to do is to look up from the page — as long as you can find your place again (see the section below on Delivery Mode). Try to consciously counteract the instinct to close up; instead, use wide gestures and step out from behind the podium. I once saw a judge give a speech in which the first thing he did was throw his arms up as high as he could, spread out wide with his fingers extended. Maybe he did it just to get the audience's attention, but I bet it also sent the message to his body that he was embracing the audience, not hiding from them.
2. **Find the Friendly Faces**. Speaking of looking up at the crowd, what if there are a few audience members who *aren't* smiling, and are just sitting there stony-faced? Don't waste your energy on them. Look around for the people who are smiling, nodding, and showing signs of support. No matter what the context or how hostile the audience (see Chapter 5), there are bound to be a few of those naturally encouraging people in the room, and it won't take you more than a few seconds to spot them. Give your speech to them — as long as you don't go too far and make it obvious that you're only talking to those two or three people (hopefully the friendly faces are spread out, unlike the divided audience described at the beginning of Chapter 5). If you need a quick boost of confidence, they are there to give it to you.
3. **Fake It Till You Make It**. Keeping in mind that the symptoms of nervousness are mostly invisible, you can get away with acting more confident than you feel. One concrete way to do this is to picture a confident speaker (like a newscaster, actor, or teacher), keep their image forefront in your mind, and act like them as much as you can. If you take this route, you'll need to fight the instinct to tell your audience how nervous you feel, which can be a powerful urge. A professor of mine said, *"Don't start ducking until they start throwing things at you."* Unless your audience is actually exhibiting Level 4-type annoyance, keep your nervousness to yourself and channel a confident speaker.
4. **Be Prepared.** If you know you have a well-crafted message, it will give you confidence, and you can keep repeating **"I have something valuable to say"** to yourself. If you've rehearsed your speech, you can add **"and I know how to say it."** Be careful, though; overpreparation can make things worse, not better. It's very much related to the different delivery modes I'll describe later (writing out every word, making it up on the spot, or something in between). "Be prepared" doesn't just mean knowing exactly what you want to say; it also means being prepared for things to go wrong, like losing your place or being

interrupted.Think of it like the difference between a train and a car. A train is fully prepared for its journey, since the tracks are all laid out in front of it, and as long as nothing goes wrong it gets exactly where it intends to go. Trains aren't, however, good at dealing with the unexpected, and can't just swerve around a boulder that's fallen on the tracks. A "trainwreck" of a speech might not mean a total derailment (e.g. ,having to abandon the speech in the middle and move on to the next speaker, or the equivalent of "cut to commercial"), but it might mean having to go back a few pages, wasting time trying to relocate your place, or ignoring something that just arose. Cars, in contrast, are good at swerving and sudden braking (within limits), and if they have to go "off road" for a minute, they can usually find their way back. So try to prepare in a "car-like" way — know where you're going and where the turning points are, but be able to adapt on the fly. Also remember to prepare for your anxiety symptoms, which might include a "brain freeze;" if your mind shuts down for a second, do you know how to boot it up again?

5. **Memorize the Introduction and Conclusion**. One of my favorite pieces of public speaking advice is to "Start with a dynamite intro, end with a dynamite conclusion, and put them as close together as possible."[1] This doesn't mean you can't give speeches more than a few minutes long, but it does emphasize the value of a "dynamite" beginning and ending. Depending on what delivery style you choose, you may want to write out the intro and conclusion word for word so you know exactly how to say it. The downside of that method is that it will make you start and end the speech by looking down at the page instead of connecting with your audience, which is why memorization is better. But the most important principle is to prepare those pieces in advance, so you don't start off by fumbling for words, or approach the end of the speech without knowing exactly how you're going to wrap it up. Remember that the two most important parts of a flight are the take-off and the landing; no pilot gets 90% of the way through a flight and then says "Okay, I'm done; no need to think about how to get the plane on the ground again."

Time to turn to the question of "serving up that meal": how to deliver your speech, in terms of your voice, your body, and visual aids. But first, let's tackle the most basic question of all: are you going to read your speech or not, and if so, from what?

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1. Although I have never been able to trace it back to a written source, I remember hearing this advice from Jesse Jackson III, who got it from his famous father, Rev. Jesse Jackson.

14.4 DELIVERY MODES

If you watched Ben Carpenter's wedding speech, mentioned in the previous chapter, you may have noticed an extraordinary thing: Ben has nothing in front of him through the entire nine-minute speech, even the parts that are in Korean. That's almost as daring as spending a year learning a new language so you can talk to your in-laws. Was he making it up as he went along? It's so well-structured that it doesn't seem so. Did he memorize the whole thing? I'm certain he memorized the part in Korean, but nine minutes is a lot to memorize...and clearly some of it is responding to the situation, such as the boy who walks back into the room near the beginning. How did Ben do that, and why?

There are four general approaches you can take to delivering a speech, each with their own challenges.

1. **Manuscript style** means writing out every word of the speech, and reading it to the audience.
2. A **memorized** speech is written out word for word, but instead of reading it, the speaker goes through the whole speech from memory. This is what actors in most movies and plays have to do (the exception being "improv" scenes).
3. **Extemporaneous style** means coming up with a structure for the speech and deciding ahead of time what the main points will be, but making up the phrasing as you go along
4. **Impromptu style** means making up the whole speech on the fly, without any preparation.

, via Wikimedia Commons" href="https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lewis_Hamilton_-_Media_Interview_(European_GP_2011).jpg" data-url="https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lewis_Hamilton_-_Media_Interview_(European_GP_2011).jpg">

Lewis Hamilton Media Interview. , via Wikimedia Commons" data-url="http://John O'Nolan, CC BY 2.0 , via Wikimedia Commons">John O'Nolan, CC BY 2.0

Manuscript style has the advantage of meticulous word-smithing; you (or your speech writer) have figured out exactly how to say everything, and there is no risk of fumbling for words, working to figure out the most effective phrasing, or your mind going blank. If it is a challenge for you to speak fluently without a script, or if there is a high risk of getting in trouble by saying something not perfectly right, this is the best option. It's the preferred choice of world leaders and political candidates, celebrities issuing apologies, and company spokespeople reporting something to the public with potential legal consequences. On the other hand, the drawbacks are many:

- If you're reading from paper or an electronic screen, your eye contact with the audience will be poor, which can create a bad impression. Some teachers recommend using 3"x5" cards, but it's hard to fit every word of a speech on those small cards, you may end up squinting at them, and if you drop them it can be catastrophic. Full sheets of paper are another option, and allow for bigger font sizes, but can also be dropped. Obviously there's a tradeoff between number of pages and font size: the bigger the type, the more pages will be required and vice versa. If you read a speech from paper sheets, even if the font size is on the smaller side, I *strongly* recommend you write the page numbers in very large dark print, to minimize the risk of mixing up pages. In terms of technological options, reading from a cell phone is, in my opinion, a terrible choice that inevitably seems to end up with a lot of squinting, scrolling, and technical glitches. Another technical solution is teleprompters, if they're available. They work by projecting the script up onto an angled pane of glass, allowing the speaker to read the words as they scroll by, but the audience just sees clear glass. This creates the illusion that the speaker is looking at the audience, especially if there are multiple teleprompters spread throughout the audience. Another option is to put the entire speech into PowerPoint slides, allowing the audience to read along; but this can require an overwhelming number of text-heavy slides, be deadly in terms of keeping the audience's attention, and sometimes make audience members wonder why they can't just read the slides on their own.

- With any scripted speech, regardless of the technology used, the audience doesn't know if the speech was written by someone else (e.g., a speechwriter, publicist, or lawyer). This can severely undermine the impression that the speaker is being sincere, and raise questions about their credibility. This can be a big problem in personal or corporate apologies, for example, where there is a world of difference between "speaking from the heart" and reading something you were forced to read.
- As I noted in the Listening chapter (Chapter 4), written language is quite different from spoken language, which makes it more difficult for audiences to listen to. Written language is also more difficult for a speaker to say, which some speakers don't realize until they try to read a written speech out loud. Some speechwriters just treat this as the listener's problem, while more considerate ones will read the speech aloud once or twice to identify which parts are difficult to read, and change the language to a more easily spoken style.
- With manuscript style, you can't adapt on the fly, or respond to what is going on in the room. This removes an element of spontaneity that might have enhanced the speech. How important is spontaneity? It depends on many factors, of course, but think about why *Saturday Night Live* has been running for 50 years: how much is because of the "Live" factor?
- If anything goes wrong (the teleprompter fails, your phone battery runs out, or you drop your notes), the train derails. (See the "Be Prepared" section above). A wise speaker should have a backup of some kind, or be prepared to switch to one of the other three delivery modes instead.

Memorization is the most difficult choice, at least for modern audiences. The Ancient Greeks were very good at it, though, and came up with useful techniques (SEE BOX 14.4). Actors can memorize thousands of lines for a three-hour Shakespeare play, so it is possible to memorize even lengthy speeches. You can maintain eye contact with your audience, retain the advantages of having all the wording worked out in advance, and not worry about dropping paper or having technology fail you. But it's hard, and the risk is obvious: what if it's your memory that fails you instead of a teleprompter? It can happen, especially when there's more adrenaline in your system than there was when you were practicing alone.

On the other end of the scale is **impromptu speeches**, where the speaker makes it up as they go along.

These can be fun and lively, demonstrate credibility, and be engaging for the audience. The art of acting is to a large degree about making scripted speeches sound impromptu. Some people say that the best part of a stand-up comedy is seeing how the comedian responds to hecklers, since those impromptu responses show the comedian's true talent (and proves they aren't just reciting jokes purchased from others) — but one sometimes wonders if even the heckling is rehearsed, since it is such high risk. Impromptu speeches, short or long, are difficult to pull off and require a lot of quick thinking. The likelihood of a lot of hemming and hawing, backtracking, and disjointed thoughts is high, and the only real way to get beyond that is an awful lot of practice.

That brings us to **extemporaneous style**, which is the preferred style of many public speaking teachers. It involves carefully constructing the *structure* of the speech, but not the actual *wording*. It leads to a more natural speaking style, requires you to be engaged and thinking, and allows for flexibility and eye contact. The risk of "derailment" is low: if you veer off the road for whatever reason, it's easy to get back on. Yes, there is still risk that you'll have to struggle to figure out how to say things, but the payoff is worth it. And it can be mixed with other styles; there may be parts you've memorized, and sentences that are carefully worded, but most of the speech will be in "skeleton form."

How can you capture this structure for your speech? By using the same methods already mentioned: 3"x5" cards, full-page notes, or PowerPoint. If you opt for 8-½"x11" paper, keep it to a single page; if you use PowerPoint, be sure to limit the number of lines on each slide and the number of slides overall (see guidelines below). You can start by writing out the speech in full and then creating a skeleton outline from it, or start with the outline itself.

The most important principle is to **practice, practice, practice** your speech from the skeletal outline. The more you practice, the better the extemporaneous style works, and the more you get the benefits of audience connection without the risk of being at a loss for words. You may even find that you can memorize the structure (using one of the techniques from Box 14.1), so you don't need any notes — which I think is what that groom did.

BOX 14.4: MEMORIZATION TECHNIQUES

The Ancient Greeks developed a number of tools for memorization, most of which relied on some kind of association, often visual. These techniques do take work and are not fail-safe, but they've been used successfully for thousands of years.

- **Acronyms**. This is probably the most commonly used technique today, and can take the form of letter sequences that can be memorized in their own right (especially if they spell a word), or of a sentence where every letter begins a different word, such as *"My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nachos"* to denote the planets (Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune).

- **Rhyme**. How rhyme works is not quite as straightforward as it appears, but it works nonetheless. What months have 30 days? *"Thirty days hath September, April, June, and November."* What's odd is that April and June don't rhyme with anything, and "December" rhymes just as easily with "September" as "November" does. Yet the rhyme somehow helps us remember the whole phrase.
- **Grouping**. Categorize a list into smaller subgroups with a shared characteristic. If you come from a large family clan and tried to name all of your cousins, for instance, it would be much easier to do so by family groups than, say, alphabetically. If you want to memorize all the movies in the Marvel Universe (33 as of this writing), you could arrange them by the five phases in which they were released, or by different actors who show up in several of them.
- **Loci**. This is an interesting visual technique where you associate ideas you need to remember with a house, building, or familiar route. Take something that you can spatially reconstruct, and imagine walking through it in a predictable sequence. Then connect each of the points you want to memorize with a different physical point in that space. It helps to make these associations vivid, or even bizarre, but with a reason they would be connected with that space. For instance, you can take your speech, and think of something that would connect your intro with the front porch of your house. Then form an association between your next main point and your living room, and the point after that with the dining room (or however you would normally walk through your house). Or if you are very familiar with the cities of the American west coast, think "My Seattle opening line is ___, my Portland next point is ___, then we get to the San Francisco problem, the Los Angeles solution, and the San Diego conclusion."

Perhaps more important than all these association techniques, however, is having your points flow in a logical order. If it makes perfect sense to you how your second point grows out of your first point, you won't need to use any unusual techniques like these.

14.5 VOCAL DELIVERY

People say that a good actor can create an effective performance even when "reading out of the phone book"[1] — meaning that their delivery is so compelling that they can convey meaning even without meaningful text. This phrase illustrates how your job when giving a speech is not just to get the words out there, but to bring them to life, and your voice is well-suited to that task.

Keep in mind: many of these points are context specific and culturally specific; what works in a courtroom won't work at a protest rally, and what works in Mexico might not work in Denmark or Japan.

If you ask people in any audience what makes a speaker difficult to listen to, they tend to identify the same problems over and over: monotony, mumbling, consistent mispronunciation, and hesitation. Of these, monotony is the easiest to overcome, but it takes practice. Monotony is simply another term for lack of variation, so the solution is obvious: increase the variation of your voice. The most basic things you can vary are pitch, volume, and speed.

> **Pitch**: Some speakers have a naturally narrower pitch range than others, but novice speakers tend to keep their voice within an unnecessarily narrow range. Why don't they widen the range, saying some words in a high pitch and others down low? Unless it's a neurological issue, the answer seems to be simple fear that you will sound ridiculous if you raise your voice too high or drop it too low (and yes, some comedians do that on purpose). If that's the case, you can start by giving yourself permission to "go wider" than normal. Pay attention to people who use their voice for a living, such as politicians, voice-over actors, and newscasters: if you listen closely, you'll realize that their pitch variation is very wide, going extremely high on some words and dropping down into the lower depths for others. You may even start to think that their pitch is overexaggerated, but remember that you didn't think that before you paid attention to it. In other words, your fear that you'll sound "silly" if you have too much variation may be just as unfounded as your fear that the audience can tell that your stomach is in knots — and the *possibility* that people might have a reaction to a wide pitch range is overshadowed by the *probability* that they'll react negatively to monotonous tone.
>
> Pitch does two things. First, it tells the listener what is important, distinguishing key information from supporting ideas, and if there is no variation in pitch it sends the message that "None of this information is important." It also engages the ear, since ears, like most sense organs, depend on variation and get numb

1. Don't know what a phone book is? Just a list of thousands of names, addresses, and phone numbers in a city or town; the kind of reference that you only use to look up a specific person, not something anyone would read in sequential fashion.

when variation is lacking. Notice that both high and low pitch can add emphasis, but since high pitch is intrinsically easier to hear, make sure you don't also drop volume when you hit the low notes.

There's a simple exercise to expand your pitch range: read a paragraph of text out loud, deciding which words to say in your highest register, and which to say as deeply as you can. Then read it again, going even higher and lower the next time. For more ideas, watch this video on "How to Fix a Monotone Voice" by speech coach Elisa James: https://elisajames.com/how-to-fix-a-monotone-voice/#

Volume works similarly, and serves the same two functions: giving the ear the kind of variation it needs, and adding emphasis to the most important words. Just remember that there's a volume level you shouldn't drop below, and it's probably louder than you think. Speaking louder than normal will be doing a favor to audience members with imperfect hearing, and probably won't bother the rest.

To work on this, do something similar to the pitch exercise: before reading a paragraph out loud, circle a few words per sentence that you will "hammer." Once again, "hammer" can mean pitch and volume, but however you want to do it, hit those words *hard*.

Speed is a little more complex. Let's begin with the basics: most people speak at an average rate of 125–150 words per minute. This is useful for timing a written speech: just divide the word count by 150 to estimate how many minutes the speech should take.

Like many people, however, I speed up when I get nervous. When I took public speaking as a college student, the teacher said there would be penalties for going over 7 minutes or under 5, and every time I practiced my first speech, it was almost exactly 6 minutes long. When I actually gave the speech in front of a live audience, however, I found myself saying the words "in conclusion" before the timekeeper even held up the "4 Minutes" sign. After that, I learned to write reminders to "SLOW DOWN" all over my speech notes.

It's also good to take nice long pauses periodically. These might feel to you like "dead air" you need to fill, but they're another chance for your audience to process what you're saying — and perhaps a chance for you to sip some water or think about what you're going to say next.

Listeners *can* keep up with speech faster than 150 words per minute: many audio and video players allow you to speed up to twice or 3x speed, which might work well for you. If you're giving a speech live, though, remember that that's too fast for some people, especially non-native speakers of the language. Familiarity with your subject matter is a factor as well: if the topic is brand new to your audience, they'll probably need to absorb the content more slowly than you think, and if you're going too fast or don't pause, you might lose them without realizing it.

Pauses do one more thing as well: they add emotional impact. A "dramatic pause" can have as much effect as shouting, and sends the underlying message: "You should *really* pay attention to what I just said." On the other extreme, even though people's brains could keep up if you spoke twice as fast, speed sends the underlying message "Don't stop to think about what I'm saying." This is one reason the phrase "fast-talking lawyer" has negative connotations, and the word "hustle" is a synonym for a scam or con:

audiences are naturally suspicious if the speaker doesn't give them a second to think about what they're hearing.

Finally, slowing down is a good clue to your audience that you're approaching the conclusion, just as an airplane must slow down when it comes in for the landing. Inexperienced speakers often hurtle along at full speed until they get to the last word, which can be jarring to their audience. Even the word "in conclusion" is not necessary if they can hear from your voice that you're approaching the end.

"Frankfurt Airport – Grassy Area & Landing Plane" by Lewis Clarke on geo.hlipp.de is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

14.6 USING YOUR BODY

Your body can contribute to or detract from the effectiveness of your message. As you give a speech, the most important body part, obviously, is your **eyes**. How much you can look at your audience depends heavily on the delivery style you choose, but even if you read the whole speech, you can still look up from time to time. Just make sure to glance at a different segment of your audience each time. When are the most important times to look at your audience? At the very beginning and very end of the speech, which is why I suggest memorizing the intro and conclusion.

The rest of your **face** can also convey a great deal, and just like the point about pitch and volume variation, you can probably get away with more facial expressiveness than you think. Unusual facial expressions can be distracting, of course, but don't be afraid to use your facial muscles for their intended purpose. Try watching late night TV hosts like Stephen Colbert or Seth Meyers, and notice how much of their message is conveyed with facial expressions.

Finally, don't forget your **hands**. Gestures can add emphasis, contribute to the meaning of your message (such as conveying spatial relationships), and even do simple things like track a list that you may be running through by counting on your fingers. If you're not using presentation software like PowerPoint, hands can also keep the visual learners engaged by giving them a moving visual to latch onto.

"Archer Mayor gesticulates" by Muffet is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

14.7 USING VISUAL MEDIA

A book like this is not the best way to learn how to use presentation software (PowerPoint, Keynote, Prezi, and others), but I can at least cover some basic principles and traps to avoid.

Before you even start your slideshow, it's worth checking whether the audience can see the rest of your desktop, and if so, is there anything there you don't want them to see? Even if it's not as embarrassing as a website tab that you don't want people to know you visit, it can still be a distraction or send an unintended message (such as that you're a messy person).

I remember a presentation from a high-level university executive who was urging us to get in touch with her if we ran into any problems. She hooked her computer to a projector, then opened up her email account to access the slideshow she wanted to present. The problem was that the brief glimpse into her email account revealed over 12,000 unread emails in her inbox, which sent the unintended message "If you email me, I will never see it."

Don't compete against your slides. You might be tempted to include all the words you want to say on your slides. As I mentioned, this can be overwhelming for the audience, and raises the question: if they can read the whole speech from your slides, what are *you* there for? There's also the speed question: people generally read faster than speakers speak, and as soon as you put a slide up, they will start reading it. They might reach your final point by the time you're just getting to the second line, and you're just noise in the background making it more difficult to concentrate on what they're reading. There are different animation options that allow you to control what they read when, but that doesn't address the duplication issue: are the words on the screen helping, or getting in the way of them listening to you? Another possibility is that you're not just reading what's on screen, but saying something *different*, which brings up the question: where does your audience's attention go? Brain research shows that it can't go in two places at once, so they have to pick between reading or listening.

You might try using only a few slides, and stay on each one for a long time before moving to the next. This can, however, be visually frustrating for the audience, and create the sense that the speech is going on forever. It may be better to just go to black, so they look at you instead of staring at a screen that is not giving them anything.

You can also think of the slides differently: if the main points come from your voice, what job can the slides have instead? If you replace words with images, they can perform a different function than the text of the speech: illustrating and enriching your points, and engaging your audience in a different way.

Don't overload the slides. Some presenters believe in the 6×6 rule: no more than six words on each line, and six lines on the slide — a maximum of 36 words per slide. I find this too restrictive, but I do try to keep the font size at least at 32 points, which allows for maybe eight lines, with eight words per line.

High contrast. I try hard to avoid anything that strains the eyes, which includes not only small font sizes but low-contrast colors: a pale pastel font color against a pale pastel background, or a dark blue font against a black background. I generally aim for a dark font against a lightly colored but not distracting background.

Not too much dazzle. Do you like to use fancy wipes, zooms, and fades? Is that to appeal to the visual learners, especially if you think the points in your speech aren't very interesting? Animation can keep your audience's attention, but can also easily distract or annoy, especially if it has no apparent purpose. Look at each element on your slides and ask, does it help your audience grasp the points of your speech, or does it get in the way?

Don't turn around to read off of the screen. The worst thing you can do during a slideshow is to turn your back on the audience so you can see the slides; the audience won't be able to hear your voice clearly, and won't see your face. And if you sound surprised at what pops up on the screen ("Oh, I guess next we're going to be talking about…"), that's a dead giveaway that you don't know your own speech well. Most presentation apps have a mode where you can see the upcoming slide.

"Presentation at GLAM Wiki Summit Toronto 2019" by Cristina Pietropaolo is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

Don't forget to stop screen sharing as soon as you can. I have seen too many Zoom presentations in recent years where the speaker is just one tiny box because they are sharing their slides. That's fine while the slides are being used, but once the slide show is over, I want to go back to seeing the person (and maybe other meeting participants) at a reasonable size, which means stopping the screen sharing function instead of keeping us all looking at the "Thank you! Email me at ____" final slide.

Sometimes posters serve your purpose better than slide shows, such as in court or the Senate floor, where you want the audience to be able to see an exhibit for an extended time. There are times when physical props can be very effective, too. Just keep in mind the potential risks of dropping something or knocking it over.

Speaking to Camera

Public speaking is no longer limited standing up in front of a group of people who are in the same room. You may be called on to give a speech on camera, either with a remote audience or as a recording. Chapter 5 discusses Imagined Audiences, where the speaker has to rely on their imagination to anticipate how the real eventual audience may react, so I won't repeat that here, but will just touch on a few mechanics of how to speak to a camera.

- **Train yourself to look at the camera**. If you're presenting on a video platform such as Zoom and you look at your notes, yourself, or audience members, you're not looking straight at the camera, which means your audience won't see you looking directly at them. It's off-putting to see a speaker giving a speech but looking elsewhere.
- To make life more pleasant for your viewers, put thought into **camera angle and background**. Avoid "nostril view" low camera angles, bright backgrounds (which put you in silhouette), and positioning yourself too close or far away from the camera. Also remove as many distractions from your background as you can, or blur the background.
- **Use a good microphone**. Remember that seeing you is less important than hearing you, and if your audience has to struggle to hear you due to poor equipment, the cost of listening (see Chapter 4) may become too great. If you're going to be on camera regularly, invest in an external mic; others will thank you for it.
- As mentioned already, before screen sharing, check to make sure that you are not sharing too much, such as tabs that are open in your browser.
- If your cat, dog, or child wanders into the frame, introduce them to everyone else. 🙂

CHAPTER 15: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

15.1 WHY IS YOUR WATCH SET THAT WAY?

The author is indebted to Stephanie Galarneault for insights on this chapter.

One day in Minnesota years ago, I was hanging out in a cafe with a Tanzanian musician friend I'll call Ali. One of Ali's friends stopped by our table and started chatting with him, ending with asking what time it was. Ali looked down at his wristwatch and said, "It's 3:15."

The thing is, I could see his watch, and it *didn't* say 3:15; it said 9:15, which was six hours off from the actual time. I had to ask, "Ali, why is your watch set six hours early?" "Oh," he said, "that's the way we do it where I come from. Tanzania is on the equator, so the sun rises at 6:00 a.m. every day of the year, and we start counting the hours from sunrise — 7:00 a.m. is 'the first hour,' 8:00 a.m. is 'the second hour,' etc., so we set our watches that way."[1] I asked him to remind me how long he'd been living in the USA, and he confirmed that it was more than five years. It was a revelatory moment for me, realizing that my friend looked at the world differently than I did, and he would rather do the mental calculation of adding six hours every time he looked at his watch than give up the system he grew up with.

It made me think of a line from the movie *The Adventures of Milo and Otis*, which my children were watching around that time (the early 1990s). The movie is about a talking cat named Milo who encounters a dog named Otis. Milo has apparently never seen a dog before, and says:

> Milo: You're a strange-looking cat.
>
> Otis: Oh, I'm not a cat; I'm a dog.
>
> Milo: All right, a dog, I understand.... But deep down inside, we're all cats, right?

Sorry, Milo, but no: deep down we're not all cats; there really are fundamental differences between creatures. Of course, it's a fantasy film, and if it were two human beings bumping into each other, Milo could be justified in saying "deep down inside, we're all humans, right?", even if the person he's encountering is from the opposite side of the planet and sets his watch differently. But it's a question of how "deep down" you go:

1. The Bible does the same thing: when it says that Jesus was crucified at "the third hour," that's referring to "Jewish reckoning," and it means the third hour after sunrise, not 3 a.m. It was the occupying Romans who started the clock at midnight (known as "Roman reckoning"), and Western civilization kept that system.

there are levels at which the differences are very real, and assuming the other person is just like you leads to trouble and misunderstanding. For example, Ali told me about an awkward encounter he'd just had with an American friend he hadn't seen for a few years. When he bumped into her, he said joyously, "You're looking fat!" He was confused by her offended reaction, since that would have been a compliment in the food-insecure part of Tanzania he was from — the equivalent of saying "You look healthy!"

Image by the author

15.2 DON'T BE RUDE: THE DANGERS OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Many travelers have similar stories of inadvertently offending, despite good intentions. One of the main complaints of people all over the world is how rude others can be, but that rudeness may not be due to thoughtlessness or self-centeredness; it's often just the result of an inability to understand the culture of the place you're visiting. Being able to speak the local language is one thing, but even if you get the words right, you can still miss nuances that make all the difference between effective communication and disaster.

BBC correspondent Susannah Rigg tells the story of asking for chocolate ice cream from a street vendor in Guadalajara, Mexico. When the vendor said they were out of chocolate, she asked when more would arrive. The vendor replied "ahorita, "and Rigg knew Spanish well enough to know that that word meant "right now" on the denotative level. That put Rigg in a small dilemma: if a vendor says a shipment is going to arrive "right now," is it rude to walk away? She waited half an hour before asking again if the ice cream was on its way, and the vendor again replied "ahorita," this time dragging out the 'i' sound, with an expression on his face that was "a mix of confusion and maybe even embarrassment." She continued to wait, but eventually gave up and left, and when she signaled to the vendor that she was going, he looked even more confused.

Rigg writes: "[C]racking what I came to call the 'ahorita code' took not a fluency in the language, but rather a fluency in the culture." She learned from a Mexican linguistics professor, Dr. Concepcion Company, that "When a Mexican says 'ahorita,' it could mean tomorrow, in an hour, within five years or never," depending entirely on context. What Rigg failed to pick up is that when the vendor stretched out the *i* in "ahoriiiiiiita," the length of the vowel was meant to signal to her not to bother waiting. If this sounds confusing to an English speaker, imagine a non-native speaker trying to sort out when "yeah, right" is a straightforward confirmation and when it is a sarcastic way of saying "I don't believe you," which also might come down to exactly how long the 'i' sound is.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://open.lib.umn.edu/commpractice/?p=554#oembed-1

Obviously, learning the finer points of cultural interpretation takes years, so what can one book chapter hope to accomplish? I won't set my sights too high: I'll just try to bring a few basic concepts to light, and include a reading list for those who want to learn more. First, let's talk about stereotypes.

15.3 HOW TO USE STEREOTYPES

Your first reaction to that phrase might well be "*Don't!*" — as in: "You shouldn't use stereotypes at all; they're bad, they're discriminatory, they're nothing but trouble!" If you watch old movies, one of the most cringeworthy aspects is the reliance on stereotypes, and thank goodness some enlightened filmmakers in recent years are trying to reduce racism by steering clear of stereotypes. In your own life, you may have put a lot of effort into trying not to make assumptions about anyone, especially people in different demographic categories from your own, and instead just look at them as people.

That's an admirable effort, but it runs into a few roadblocks.

- **Human beings are pattern-seekers**, continually trying to form generalizations to help make sense of the world. This is especially true when you are in a foreign country: your mind can't help but start working on figuring out "What are people like here?" If you are visiting Finland and try to strike up a conversation with a stranger on a bus but they just stare blankly at you, you can conclude "I guess my luck was bad: I found a person who doesn't like chatting with strangers." If you turn to the next person and get a similar reaction, it doesn't take long before you conclude that Finns aren't fond of small talk. Continuing to search for conversational partners on that bus doesn't seem wise: learn your lesson and adapt.
- **Assuming others are just like you is naive**, and you can easily sound like Milo saying "deep down inside, we're all cats, right?" One reason foreigners are sometimes perceived as rude is because they treat the country they are visiting just like their own, and assume that the people are the same as the people "back home." The assumption that everyone else is just like you is a feature of **ethnocentrism**, the tendency to see the world from your own culture's perspective, and it is the cause of much intercultural friction.
- **Life without assumptions is extremely inefficient**. Taken to the extreme, the avoidance of stereotypes can look like someone starting from "square one." with every single person they encounter, building up an accurate perception of the person one step at a time: Does a smile mean they are happy? Do they understand what a question is? Do they know how to read a clock? Do they love their children? Approaching every new person like Louise Banks approaches the heptapods in *Arrival* would slow life down to a dead crawl.

Stereotypes, in other words, serve a function: they allow us to make predictions, to interpret other people's behavior, and to figure out how we should act in certain environments. This book is full of models of communication, and they perform the same functions. I'll repeat a thought from the preface of this book:

that communication models try to "neatly encapsulate phenomena that are messy, complex, inconsistent, unpredictable and baffling" ... which is a pretty good description of what travelers have to do to survive. But that phrase appears right after an expression coined by statistician George E.P. Box: **"All models are wrong, but some are useful."**

The real lesson is not to avoid assumptions entirely — which is like trying to get parts of your brain with no "off switch" to shut down — but to use those stereotypes or models productively, without clinging to them too tightly. Stereotypes are a "first best guess" about how and why people behave. What is most important is to recognize that it is *only* a guess, and abandon that guess in the face of contradictory evidence. The chapter on logic and reasoning includes a list of logical fallacies, one of which is called "Whole for the Part": the assumption that what is true for a greater entity (such as "the values and habits of Brazilians") is true for every part of that entity (i.e., the Brazilian person you are speaking to right now).

Indrei Ratiu did a fascinating study of intercultural skill,[1] based on a survey on 250 attendees of international schools for business managers, asking them which managers are the "most international." After identifying the top 10 percent of managers who thrived in international environments, Ratiu sought to understand what made them different, and the answer was surprising: they did not rate very highly on factors you might consider vital to intercultural competence — patience, flexibility, broad-mindedness, or empathy — but they did stand out in their attitude toward stereotypes. They all used cultural stereotypes to some degree, but "the so-called 'most international' use them self-consciously and tentatively, as if recognizing the stereotype as no more than a temporary hold on an elusive reality" (p. 142). One of the internationally savvy managers described himself as "forever testing" and watching closely for reactions (p. 143). This is in contrast to other managers who used stereotypes conclusively, assuming they were valid and stable and not in need of constant re-examination. The dangers of **confirmation bias** are ever present: once you think you understand how people from a particular culture work, you start ignoring counterexamples and alternate interpretations.

It brings to mind the popular 1992 book *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, by John Gray, a book that reinforces gender stereotypes that are not supported by empirical research.[2] Whenever I hear people talk about gender in simple categorical terms, like Gray does, I ask "Do you know any man who *isn't* Mars-like? Any woman who *isn't* Venus-like?" (Personally, I know many Venus-like men and Mars-like women.) Likewise, when someone describes Japanese people as being collectivistic, I think "except for the Japanese people who aren't." It's okay to have a starting assumption, as long as you are willing to leave it behind and do the work of trying to figure out this particular person you are talking to right now.

Before we move on discussing particular features of culture, let me offer three cautions:

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1. Ratiu, I. (1983). Thinking internationally: A comparison of how international executives learn. *International Studies of Management & Organization*, 13(1-2), 139-150.

2. Carothers, B. J., & Reis, H. T. (2013). Men and women are from Earth: Examining the latent structure of gender. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 104(2), 385–407. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030437

1. Historically, one of the most common ways to talk about cultural differences was by country, i.e., "this is what Malaysians are like," "this is what Bolivians value." One issue with this approach is that **cultures don't line up with international borders very neatly**: there can be wide cultural variations within one country, and commonalities that cross borders.[3] From a distance, cultures may look uniform, but from the inside it's obvious to the members of a region how much variation there is. Say to a resident of the U.S. "You Americans are all alike," and you're likely to get an earful about how different New Yorkers are from Texans, or even how little New York City residents identify with rural residents of upstate New York.
2. Even if you can describe the dominant culture of a region accurately,[4] that doesn't cover **co-cultures** that also exist within that region (sometimes called countercultures or subcultures, although those terms imply that the "dominant culture" is inherently better). For example, inside many modern cities that are kept in a state of order by formal government structures, you can also find homeless encampments that operate under their own self-created governments.[5]
3. A single dimension can never adequately describe a human being. It's vital to remember the concept of **intersectionality**: the idea that any person's patterns and behaviors are shaped not just by where they are from, but also by their race, socioeconomic status, gender identity, disability status, family of origin, and life experiences. For example, accents are often discussed in terms of geographic regions, but the way a person pronounces words can also be influenced by their socioeconomic class, their sexual orientation, and their education. This is why talking about an "English accent" is simplistic: a person with a Cockney accent (associated with low education, working class status, and a particular district in London) doesn't sound much like King Charles III, even though their homes are only a few miles apart.

With those precautions in mind, we can look at some of the dimensions that scholars have identified to help understand differences in how people communicate and behave. The most well-known researcher in the field of cultural dimensions is Dutch psychologist Geert Hofstede, and if you have 32 minutes, it's worth hearing him talk about this work. The value of a dimensional model is not in painting a particular culture with a broad brush, but in helping people understand how people may think differently than you do, and learning to be on the lookout for the stumbling blocks that lead to miscommunication. What are the differences that make a

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3. Even the number of countries in the world is more ambiguous than you might realize: as of this writing, the United Nations recognizes 193 countries, but other organizations come up with quite a different count, and there are many regions with disputed status, so don't be surprised if the number is different by the time you read this.

4. The dominant culture can be defined as the group with the greatest control over how the culture carries out its business, even though it may not be the largest group.

5. Sparks, T. (2017). Citizens without property: Informality and political agency in a Seattle, Washington homeless encampment. *Environment and Planning*, 49(1):86-103.

difference? The more you learn about those differences, the easier it is to see things in a new light and find tools to achieve mutual understanding.

15.4 DIFFERENCES IN LANGUAGE: DIRECTNESS VS. INDIRECTNESS

One of the differences Hofstede has observed is the preference for explicit, direct communication versus indirect communication, which he called the "Uncertainty Avoidance" dimension. (Note: discussing this dimension gets potentially confusing due to the double negative — you might think a culture that scores high on uncertainty avoidance is "indirect" because the language features a lot of uncertain terms, but it's actually "direct" because of the word "avoidance." That's why I'll use different terms than Hofstede for this one — which in itself is a signal that I come from a "low uncertainty avoidance" culture.)

Do you equate "good communication" with clear, unambiguous, and explicit communication? When my students write papers that include a recommendation section, often the recommendation is that "communication should be open and honest." Also, because my students get frustrated with unclear directions or rules, over the years my syllabi and assignment descriptions have gotten longer and longer in the name of making sure that everything they need to know is spelled out in detail.

At the same time that I'm making my assignments ever more explicit, I like watching movies from places all over the world (including the UK) where subtlety and nuance are prized, and spelling everything out feels crass and unnecessary. In many areas, hinting is preferred over explicitness, which is why the ice cream seller in Susannah Rigg's story seemed "embarrassed" when she flat out asked him when the chocolate ice cream would arrive. This is related to concepts such as **tolerance for ambiguity**: do ambiguous or paradoxical situations cause anxiety, or is that the normal state of life? In many cultures, predicting the future seems foolish and shows a lack of faith in the divine, so people are hesitant to pinpoint deadlines or make firm promises.

Take the example of shopping in a foreign country: do items being sold have price tags? In areas that favor explicitness, price tags are seen as a requirement, along with the assumption that "the price is the price" — it shouldn't vary depending on who the customer is or what's going on in their life. In other areas, haggling is the norm: if the seller states a price, that's just the starting point for a conversation about all of the variables that should go into the negotiation.

In many cultures that favor indirectness, there is a prohibition against flatly saying no to someone's ideas or requests. This doesn't mean people in those situations can't disagree or refuse a request; it's a question of how they do it, which should be just clear enough for the other party to "get the hint" while saving face. Sometimes the best way to say no without explicitly saying no is silence, leaving the listener to draw inferences from the context instead of the words. Picture a negotiator from Boston who flies to Tokyo to set up a business deal: the Bostonian hears the Japanese counterpart agree to the deal, so they go home assured that everything was worked out. Only later do they discover the deal wasn't firm after all, and that when the counterpart said "maybe," it didn't mean "we can work out the details later; "maybe" meant "no."

This overlaps with the concept of **high context vs. low context cultures**, first named by anthropologist Edward T. Hall. In low context cultures, the message takes priority, and should have the same meaning regardless of context. The goal is to remove the "it depends" factor, and state things in a way that works in all circumstances. High context cultures prefer communication that is less direct, more human, and more emotional; low context cultures prefer communication that is more direct and emotionally neutral. In high context cultures, the connotative level of communication is more important than the denotative level.[1]

1. Usunier, J.-C.; Roulin, N. (April 1, 2010). "The Influence of High- and Low-Context Communication Styles On the Design, Content, and Language of Business-To-Business Web Sites". Journal of Business Communication. 47 (2): 189–227. doi:10.1177/0021943610364526

15.5 DIFFERENCES IN RELATIONSHIPS

Part 1: Collectivism vs. Individualism

When you face a major life decision, such as making a commitment to a romantic partner or taking a job far from home, who should have a say in that decision? If your first instinct is to "follow your heart," or to think primarily about your needs and goals, that's an indication that you may be from an individualistic culture, one that places more value on the rights and needs of an individual. If your first thought is "How will this affect my family?" or "Does this help the group I belong to?," that's a clue that you hail from a collectivistic culture, one that values group interests over individual interests.

If you are a fan of love stories, think of the moral of your favorites. The first movie to earn a billion dollars, *Titanic* (1997), was popular not just because of the shipwreck aspect of the story, but because of the love story between Jack and Rose (which can be seen as an updated version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, another story about young lovers who didn't care what the world thought; the love between the two of them was all that mattered). Rose is the epitome of an individualistic thinker: she has no feelings for the man she is supposed to marry (Cal), feels constricted by the social world she belongs to, and would rather dance with Jack and the poor immigrants in the bottom of the ship than hang around with her family.

How would such a story sound to a collectivistic culture? In many places in the world, arranged marriages have been the norm for centuries: it is your parents, or a matchmaker, or perhaps a group of elders, who decide who you are going to marry, and the good of society takes precedence over the feelings of one or both partners. If a particular action (such as marrying a poor American you fell in love with on the deck of a ship) would bring shame on your family, you wouldn't consider it. One of the benefits of such a system is that you don't have to face the disapproval that Jack would have surely faced if he had survived and married Rose. Collectivistic cultures place high value on harmony and loyalty, and speaking your mind or following your own path may be seen as a threat to that harmony.

If you want to see a more recent love story that includes discussion of collectivistic values, watch *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). Much of the dialogue revolves around whether the central characters represent true Asian values or whether they have been corrupted by living in America. Some admire the character of Nick for choosing to be with the woman he loves despite family disapproval, but others might ask, "Wait a minute: who's going to take over the family empire?" Looking out for the welfare of everyone involved in a large family business by not handing it over to an incompetent relative is important, too.

How does this affect communication patterns? Along with factoring into life decisions, it can also have an effect on how a person interacts in a group. If you don't agree with a majority decision, do you speak up? Chapter 17 discusses conflict styles, including avoidance. People from individualistic cultures might view avoiding conflict as a moral failing: if you have a problem with someone, say something! People from collectivistic cultures might be more concerned with preserving harmony in the group, and not expressing upset is a way of showing respect for others.[1] Is staying silent cowardly, or unselfish? Often, it is our cultural conditioning that dictates our answer to that question.

Part 2: Power Distance

What do you call your teachers? As a teacher myself, I have noticed a lot of ambiguity about this issue: some students call me by my first name, others are more formal, calling me "professor" or a similar title. To reduce the potential anxiety about this, I tell my students to call me "Dr. J." — intended as a compromise between the informal and the formal. Still, a lot of students continue to call me "professor," and others use my first name.

This reflects another dimension that Hofstede identifies: comfort with the idea that some people have far more power than others. In high power distance (HPD) cultures, people are accepting of hierarchy and not inclined to question authority. In contrast, you can tell that the American "founding fathers" leaned more toward low power distance (LPD) because they wrote things like "all men are created equal," and decided the leader of the country should be called "Mr. President" instead of "Your Royal Highness." Of course, many of those same founding fathers also owned slaves, so their commitment to LPD was not total. Even better examples can be found in Scandinavia, where the informal Law of Jante says "*You are not to think you're anyone special, or that you're better than anyone else."* (You can hear Scandinavians talk about the good and bad sides of this philosophy in this video).

How does this dimension show up in daily life? It translates into the expectation that children should be unquestioningly obedient to their parents (HPD), or that decisions should be made by democratic vote (LPD). People in HPD countries are more focused on individual success and achievement; people in LPD countries are more concerned with the social welfare and making sure no one gets left behind (you can probably see a connection to Individualism-Collectivism).

If LPD people see an extreme exercise of power, such as an authority figure blatantly disobeying rules everyone else has to follow, they demand an explanation or a reckoning; HPD people, in contrast, accept the situation for what it is. Is questioning an authority figure's decision seen as "insubordination" (HPD) or admired as "speaking truth to power" (LPD)? The contrast is depicted humorously in a scene from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, where HPD King Arthur gets in an argument with LPD peasants who object to his claims to power. When Arthur orders one of the peasants to be quiet, they respond, "Order, eh? Who does he think he is?" Arthur asserts his divine authority (the Lady of the Lake bestowed the sword Excalibur on him),

1. Ting-Toomey, S. (2014). Managing Identity issues in intercultural conflict communication: Developing a multicultural identity attunement lens. In V. Benet-Martinez & Y.-Y. Hong (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Multicultural Identity: Basic and Applied Psychological Perspectives* (pp. 485-506). Oxford University Press.

but the peasants don't buy it: "Strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government."

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://open.lib.umn.edu/commpractice/?p=557#oembed-1

15.6 DIFFERENCES IN TIME

Perhaps the hardest cultural difference for people to understand is the perception of time — not how you set your watch, but how you understand and value time. What is considered late? Friends of mine recently visited Switzerland and were impressed by the extreme precision of the train system there: when the Swiss say a train will arrive at 2:18 p.m., that means *exactly* 2:18 and 0.00 seconds, and they synchronize all the clocks in the stations to a central signal so there's no ambiguity about exactly when 2:18 is. When they took an excursion to Italy, in contrast, they found that even though it's a neighboring country, the Italian attitude toward time was completely different, and it was not uncommon for trains to be an hour late. In many countries in the world, showing up to a social gathering two or three hours behind *is* being "on time," and no one has to apologize.

One reason these differences are difficult to grasp is because time is both a social construct *and* something that can be measured with precision. As a teacher, I make sure that my classes start at the designated time, and I stop when the class period is over so the students can get to their next class. If I have to catch a flight, I am anxious that I will miss it, knowing the airline will do their best to leave when they said they'd leave or risk lowering their "on time departure" ranking. I set many alarms throughout the week, and if one of those alarms fails and I'm late for something, I apologize to the people I "wronged" by being tardy. People who are routinely late seem inconsiderate in my eyes.

What I don't often do is stop and think about different ways of treating time, and how they translate to a different kind of consideration. In cultures where time is not treated as rigidly, there's a saying: "The relationship matters more than the clock." If you get in a conversation with someone, you continue that conversation until it is complete, and saying "Oops — gotta go to my next appointment" would be inconsiderate. In these cultures, life is about enjoying the moment, and rushing around because the clock says you have to is just prioritizing the wrong things.

If you think "time is money," does that mean you are overly obsessed with material wealth? As Mumby and Kuhn point out in their organizational communication textbook,[1] the idea of being paid by the hour is a very recent innovation: before the rise of factories, craftspeople worked on their creations until they were finished.

Perceptions of time also overlap with beliefs and attitudes about fate and control. Imagine an international company that orders parts from a distributor and demands to know exactly when the parts will arrive. To the distributor, setting a positive date can feel like peering into the unknown: they can have the *intention* of shipping the parts promptly, but who knows what fate will have in store? If the distributor is Arabic, they may

1. Mumby, D. K., & Kuhn, T. R. (2018). Organizational communication: A critical introduction (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

add "Inshallah" ("if God wills"), an acknowledgement that although they intend to hit the deadline, humans should not be so arrogant as to assume they are in full control of life.

Cultures can also differ in how people view the past, how important it is to follow tradition, and how much time and effort should go into honoring ancestors. If you focus enough attention on your ancestors, it makes you want to *be* a good ancestor as well, thinking of future generations when you make decisions. The Iroquois Nation of Native Americans even wrote that principle into their constitution (a document that predates the United States Constitution): "In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations."

BOX 15.6: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN THE WORKPLACE

How do these cultural dimensions translate into actual expectations and behaviors in the workplace? I'm not talking about "corporate culture," a phrase that refers to the specific culture that arises in a specific organization, but about working with others who come from different cultural backgrounds than you do, whether that means talking to them long-distance over Zoom or the phone, or working beside them. Here are a few scenarios where cultural dimensions can make a difference.

- **"Open Door Policy."** Many managers and bosses like to maintain a policy of open communication with their employees, and as a result they say "If you have anything you want to talk to me about, just come to my office — the door is always open." What they may not realize is that the likelihood of an employee taking advantage of that policy depends on where they fit on the Power Distance dimension. LPD employees can actually picture themselves knocking on the boss's door and having a good chat, but this might be unimaginable to an HPD employee. If that's the case, then the LPD employees have a distinct advantage: their opinion gets heard, and in turn they learn more about what's going on in the higher levels of the organization. Meanwhile, HPD employees who keep a respectful distance and only speak when spoken to can get "left out of the loop."
- **"It's in the employee manual."** Orientation (or, as it's known sometimes, "onboarding") is a vital part of becoming a successful employee, but it's unrealistic to think that an employee learns everything they need to know in a few days. If an employee has questions later, how do they find answers? One option is to use written documents such as an employee manual, a "policy library" (a website that gathers all of the company policies in one place), or an FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) page on the company website. Just be aware that that kind of

system reflects a low context/direct culture mindset: employees from high context/indirect cultures won't put much faith in such documents, and will still wonder how things "really" work. If they see the phrase "no exceptions" in a policy, they might assume that's not reality; of course there are exceptions!

- **Bonuses and Incentives**. Many companies talk enthusiastically about teamwork and collaboration, but when it comes to rewarding success, they reward employees individually. Perhaps management can't grasp the concept of a team reward because it's too collectivistic. Meanwhile, employees from collectivistic cultures might be uncomfortable with contests and individual bonuses — things that feel like they undermine the collective harmony.
- **"Punch the clock."** Business leaders long ago realized that if their company was doing well, it was advantageous to open factories and plants in foreign countries. They also assumed the system that brought them success in the first place should be carried overseas, and this system often included rules about working hours: e.g., employees must show up precisely at 8:00 a.m., punch the clock as they enter, take no more than 30 minutes for lunch, and clock out at 5:00 p.m. Then they proceeded to hire employees from the local community who had an entirely different conception of time and were used to totally different laws and labor practices. This is a perfect example of a situation where "something's got to give" — either the employees had to adapt to a different approach to time itself, or the company had to become more accepting of flexibility.

15.7 LEARNING ABOUT CULTURE FROM THE SOURCE

What do these words mean?

1. Bharat
2. Zhōngguó
3. Misr
4. Suomi
5. Hrvatska
6. Elládha
7. Magyarorszag
8. Nippon
9. Eire
10. Sverige
11. Deutschland
12. España

Answer: they are all country names. If you're not familiar with them, it's probably not because you're bad at geography or they are tiny countries, but because you're more familiar with their "**exonym**": the name used by outsiders for a country, city, or region. In much of the English speaking world, for example, those countries are known as:

1. India
2. China
3. Egypt
4. Finland
5. Croatia
6. Greece
7. Hungary
8. Japan
9. Ireland
10. Sweden
11. Germany

12. Spain

The last one might have been the easiest one for you to get since it is so close to what actual Spaniards call their country, except for one small problem: according to Spanish pronunciation rules, you can't start a word with "sp." Imagine how arrogant it would sound if someone from thousands of miles away told an Arkansas resident that they are saying the name of their state wrong: "No, it's not ARkansaw, it's ArKANsas!" The respectful thing to do, obviously, is to honor what the locals call themselves. Even if you grew up hearing a group of people referred to as "gypsies" or "Eskimos," if they ask you to call them "Romani" or "Inuit" instead, especially after they explain why the old terms are offensive to them, you should go to the trouble of learning the new term.

Using **endonyms** (the name the natives use, such as the twelve names in the first list) is just one example of a broader habit of listening to what people say about their own culture. If you are truly interested in the female experience, don't rely on men "mansplaining" it to you, but let women tell you about their lives. If you want to understand what it's like to live with autism, ask an autistic person. If you want to understand the conservative mindset, don't rely on analyses written by liberals, but instead engage a conservative in conversation. The same is true for all the aspects of culture discussed in this chapter.

Granted, there are reasons to talk to outsiders sometimes: a brain biologist, for example, can tell you things about the neurological aspects of autism that an autistic person may not understand. Sometimes understanding something fully requires stepping outside of that realm and looking at it with an outsider's eyes. There's an old expression that **if you want to learn about water, don't ask a fish**, or, as Albert Einstein put it, "What does a fish know about the water in which he swims all his life?"[1] If you want to understand what it's like to live in the water, at least ask an amphibian that goes back and forth between water and dry land. That said, relying only on research by outsiders will never give you a complete understanding of a culture.

Unfortunately, much of the research on intercultural communication was historically done by westerners: Geert Hofstede was Dutch, Edward T. Hall was a white North American. In a chapter entitled "Whiteness in Intercultural Communication Research," Thomas Nakayama, Judith Martin, and Robert Razzante note that, as recently as 2023, "non-white scholars continue to be underrepresented in publication rates, citation rates, and editorial positions in communication studies" (p. 521).[2] One result of this is that whiteness is often portrayed as "normal," and the standard by which people from other cultures evaluate themselves.[3] Whiteness,

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1. Einstein, A. (1936). Self Portrait. In Einstein, A. (1995). Out of My Later Years, Citadel Press.
2. Nakayama, T. K., Martin, J. N., & Razzante, R. J. (2023). Whiteness in intercultural communication research: A review and directions for future scholarship. In The Routledge Handbook of Ethnicity and Race in Communication, 521-534.
3. Nakayama, T. K., & Krizek, R. L. (1995). Whiteness: A strategic rhetoric. The Quarterly Journal of Speech, 81(3), 291–309. https://doi.org/10.1080/00335639509384117.

in other words, is the "water" that the scholars themselves have trouble recognizing. In recent years, more attention is being paid to scholarship that is not so Eurocentric.

BOX 15.7: Intercultural Research by Non-Europeans

If you're interested in scholarly research on intercultural communication that isn't written by the white male crowd, I don't think you should rely on summaries by me — an American white male. Instead, here is a reading list of sources to dig into, compiled by librarian Kim Clarke.

NOTE: it has been said that the problem with information in the modern world is that bad information is readily available for free, but high-quality information is hidden behind paywalls. These sources are in the second category, and in order to read them, you will have to access them through a library system (either a college library or your local public library) or pay for access.

- Anderson, R. (2012). Molefi Kete Asante: The Afrocentric idea and the cultural turn in intercultural communication studies. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *36*(6), 760–769. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2012.08.005
- Biswas, M., King, E., Newton, A., & Nguyen, N. (2022). Addressing diversity across the communication curriculum: A case study. *Teaching Journalism & Mass Communication*, *12*(1), 24-35.
- Cardwell, M. E. (2023). Charting a path: Race, research, and practice in communication studies. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, *47*(3), 358-380.
- Enghel, F., & Becerra, M. (2018). Here and there: (Re)Situating Latin America in international communication theory. *Communication Theory*, *28*(2), 111–130. https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qty005
- Ganter, S. A., & Ortega, F. (2019). The invisibility of Latin American scholarship in European media and communication studies: Challenges and opportunities of de-westernization and academic cosmopolitanism. *International Journal of Communication*, *13*, 68–91.
- Hua, Z. (2024). Intercultural communication. In *The Routledge Handbook of Applied Linguistics* (2nd ed., Vol. 2, pp. 81–93). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003082637-9
- Li, H., & Wekesa, B. (2022). Beyond De-Westernization: Transcultural communication studies

perspectives from the Global South — An introduction. *Journal of Transcultural Communication*, *2*(2), 123–128. https://doi.org/10.1515/jtc-2023-0002

- Li, M. (2020). Highlights, trends and patterns in Asian international communication research in the twenty-first century. *Journal of International Communication*, *26*(2), 238–259. https://doi.org/10.1080/13216597.2020.1780461
- Mano, W., & Milton, V. C. (2021). Afrokology of media and communication studies: Theorising from the margins. In *Routledge Handbook of African Media and Communication Studies* (1st ed., pp. 19–42). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351273206-2
- Mudavanhu, S. L., Mpofu, S., & Batisai, K. (2024). Connecting the dots: Decolonising communication and media studies teaching and learning in sub-Saharan Africa. In *Decolonising Media and Communication Studies Education in Sub-Saharan Africa* (1st ed., pp. 3–19). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003388395-2
- Mutua, E. M., Musa, B. A., & Okigbo, C. (2022). (Re)visiting African communication scholarship: critical perspectives on research and theory. *The Review of Communication, 22*(1), 76–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2021.2025413
- Rodny-Gumede, Y., & Chasi, C. (2021). Decolonising media and communication studies: An exploratory survey on global curricula transformation debates. In *Routledge Handbook of African Media and Communication Studies* (1st ed., pp. 107–125). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351273206-8
- Shi-xu. 2009. "Asian Discourse Studies: Foundations and Directions." *Asian Journal of Communication* 19(4): 384–397. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/01292980903293262
- Waisbord, S. (2022). What is next for de-westernizing communication studies? *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, *17*(1), 26–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2022.2041645

Adding to the problem of perceiving the white way as the norm is the dominance of Western popular culture throughout the world. When I was walking through a night market in Bangkok, Thailand, I was overwhelmed by all the Disney merchandise and NFL jerseys for sale, not to mention the American music being piped over the sound system. Many non-English speakers say they learned the language (and along with it, the culture) by watching English-language TV shows and movies. How widespread is the influence of American movies worldwide? Consider the reaction of Somali-born actor Barkhad Abdi to acting alongside Tom Hanks in the 2013 film *Captain Phillips*: "I can't believe I'm doing a scene with the Forrest Gump guy!"

How do you break out of the "U.S. = normal" mindset? Watching movies and TV shows from other parts of the world is always helpful, but of course the best way to broaden your horizons is to actually visit somewhere far from home. The first question this raises is how you can afford it, but I'll end this chapter by asking another question: what is your philosophy of travel? Are you an insulator or an embracer?

15.8 HOW TO APPROACH INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL: INSULATING OR EMBRACING?

In Anne Tyler's novel *The Accidental Tourist*, the character Macon Leary is a paradoxical person: a travel writer who hates to travel. His books are popular because they appeal to people like him: people who are forced to travel, but whose main desire is to stay within a cocoon of familiarity no matter where they go. I assume Tyler gave him the last name "Leary" as a reflection of his attitude toward life: uneasy about everything, never letting his guard down. Although it's a work of fiction, it's plausible that a travel writer with this attitude might achieve a fan base, since many people are understandably nervous about traveling abroad, and would rather find a familiar fast food chain than try the local cuisine. Some vacationers just want to experience a sandy beach without having to worry about changing money, learning the local language, or getting sick from drinking the water.

One strategy to avoid those stressors is to visit an all-inclusive resort. I've been to such a resort in Mexico, and while it was "care free," it didn't feel much like being "in" Mexico; it felt like hiding in a self-contained pod that had been magically transported thousands of miles from home. I looked at the staff and wondered what it would be like to visit their houses. I later traveled to Thailand in late December, and was disappointed to hear Christmas music everywhere I went (even though Christians make up only 4% of the Thai population) but never a note of Thai music.

This is why I admire travel show hosts like Michael Palin, a man who has traveled the world over but avoids hotels whenever possible, preferring to stay in people's homes and eat food cooked by people in their own kitchens. Yes, he has occasionally gotten sick, but that suffering pales next to the joy he feels embracing the local culture and meeting the local people. Instead of flying, he prefers to cross the Indian ocean in a dhow (tiny boat) or take a train across the Sahara desert. His desire to experience the world directly never seems to run out: as of this writing, he is 81 years old but still traveling.

Insulator or embracer: which one are you? A mix of both, I assume. There's nothing wrong with being risk-averse or a homebody, as long as you don't let that stop you from indulging your adventurous side every once in a while and seeing what other places are really like. If you can't afford international travel, try listening to music from faraway lands, watching a show or movie from the other side of the world, attending an international festival, or eating culturally different cuisine.

An international dance festival I stumbled across in Minneapolis

What if you don't like the food, get tired of reading subtitles, or find the music irritating? Well, at least you caught a glimpse of other ways to do things, other standards of what is beautiful or tasty or funny, and that might make you appreciate your own culture more. To visit that water metaphor one last time, you have left your own little pond for a minute, thereby learning a little more about the water you swim in.

BOX 15.8: Music from Across the Atlantic

Ali Farka Toure was not from "the middle of nowhere," but he was from a region that came to symbolize the middle of nowhere: Timbuktu, Mali (a major trade capital five hundred years ago). He was a popular musician in Mali before he was discovered by western audiences. One fan was American musician Ry Cooder, who brought him to New York to record the album *Talking Timbuktu* in 1994. While he was in America, Cooder wanted to introduce Toure to American music, so he put on an album of Mississippi blues, curious as to what Toure's reactions to this unfamiliar genre of music would be. Cooder was surprised that Toure didn't find it unfamiliar at all: he immediately recognized it as Malian music.

There's a mini-lesson here about the history of musical genres. When the slave traders stole people from West Africa and brought them to America, the West Africans brought their music with them. After crossing the Atlantic, that style turned into Mississippi delta blues, which achieved modest success in America, but really caught the attention of English guitarists like Eric Clapton (Cream), Jimmy Page (Led Zeppelin), and Keith Richards (The Rolling Stones), who turned it into British rock and roll. That led to what is known as the "British Invasion" of English bands into America. If you've lost track, the music has crossed the Atlantic four times already, and kept bouncing back and forth until the distinction between English rock and American rock became meaningless. People from both countries are largely unaware that it originated from a different region entirely. So next time you listen to good old American rock and roll, remember that it comes from "the middle of nowhere" in Mali.

CHAPTER 16: GROUP COMMUNICATION & DECISION-MAKING

16.1 WHY YOU CAN'T PASS A SIMPLE QUIZ

Try this little "Name the Inventor" quiz (with the date of invention included).

Who invented:

1. The printing press? (1450)
2. The cotton gin? (1793)
3. The sewing machine? (1850)
4. The telephone? (1876)
5. The light bulb? (1879)
6. Radio? (1901)
7. The airplane? (1903)
8. Television? (1928)
9. The photocopier? (1949)
10. Videotape? (1953)
11. The cell phone? (1973)
12. The compact disc (CD)? (1982)
13. The DVD? (1995)
14. Blu-Ray Discs? (2006)
15. Tablet computers?

How did you do? You probably got three or four of the first seven, but I'm pretty sure you didn't get a single answer after #7. Why is that? Why does there seem to be a cutoff around 100 years ago?

I think it's because the age of the single inventor is over. The light bulb is not particularly complicated, so it was possible in 1879 for one person (Thomas Edison) to invent it by himself … *sort of*. But could one person have possibly invented the cell phone? No way.

Here are the simplistic answers:

1. Johannes Gutenberg
2. Eli Whitney
3. Isaac Singer
4. Alexander Graham Bell
5. Thomas Edison
6. Guglielmo Marconi
7. Orville & Wilbur Wright
8. Philo Farnsworth (depending on who you ask; other possible answers are Vladimir Zworykin, or John Logie Baird)
9. Xerox
10. RCA
11. Motorola
12. Sony
13. Philips, Sony, Toshiba and Panasonic
14. Sony, Dell, HP, LG, 20th Century Fox, Hitachi, Panasonic, Mitsubishi, Philips, Pioneer, Samsung, Sharp, TDK & Technicolor USA
15. Too many companies to name....

Inventions, in other words, have become too complicated for any individual person to create by themselves. The pace of invention hasn't slowed, but now the work is done in groups and, more recently, in collaborations between rival companies.

Speaking of groups, let's have a closer look at the inventor of the light bulb: Edison. Nine other inventors developed incandescent bulbs before he did; those bulbs just didn't work very well or last long, so Edison really just discovered the right kind of filament to use. And he had a group of assistants working with him. He may have been the brains of the operation, but he couldn't have done it without his team. Even those "individual" inventors at the beginning of the list, then, aren't as individual as they appear.

As life gets more complex, more and more things must be done in teams: a patient might have a team of a dozen doctors; a "solo" musician like Taylor Swift works with teams of musicians, dancers, and producers; television shows and movies are made by teams; verdicts are reached by juries; and even individual athletes have teams of trainers and coaches behind them. If you're a college student, probably a significant portion of your grades has been earned in groups.

This is not good news for everyone. The term "grouphate" refers to the negative feelings people have about having to work in groups.[1] Many students wish they could escape group work, and are unhappy that their grade depends on others who never seem to pull their weight. The economy has been steadily shifting away from the idea of working for a company to a "gig economy," where people can earn money on their own — contractors working *with* rideshare or delivery companies, for example, but not *for* them — avoiding the need for endless workday meetings and having to get along with annoying coworkers. And when COVID hit, some people welcomed the order to work from home and avoid congregating in groups.

Committees have always had a reputation for making bad decisions, and the collective term for political leadership in America, "Congress," has abysmally low approval ratings (as the old joke goes, if the opposite of "pro" is "con," then the opposite of progress is congress). People have long suspected that when individuals get together, instead of pooling their wisdom and getting collectively smarter, maybe it goes the other way. In the film *Men In Black*, Will Smith's character finds out that New York is full of aliens from around the galaxy, and he asks Agent K (Tommy Lee Jones) why they don't tell people about it, adding "People are smart; they can handle it." Agent K corrects him: "*A person* is smart. *People* are dumb, panicky, dangerous animals and you know it."

Still, the need to get along with others, and produce work with them, will never go away. Working from home during the pandemic didn't remove the need to collaborate with others: it just meant that people had to learn how to collaborate remotely. Indeed, COVID proved that humans suffer when they can't be around other people.

The bad reputation of committees is inaccurate, by the way: although sometimes groups do slip into unfortunate habits, on the whole they have been found to make better decisions than individuals. There's a reason why so many important decisions — from hiring university presidents to city planning to reaching verdicts to deciding who wins awards — are made by groups. Groups can collectively process and remember more information than individuals, they keep their misbehaving members in line, and they help balance out any biases. As an African proverb goes: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

1. Soreson, S. (1981, May). Grouphate. Paper presented at the International Communication Association Association, Minneapolis, MN.

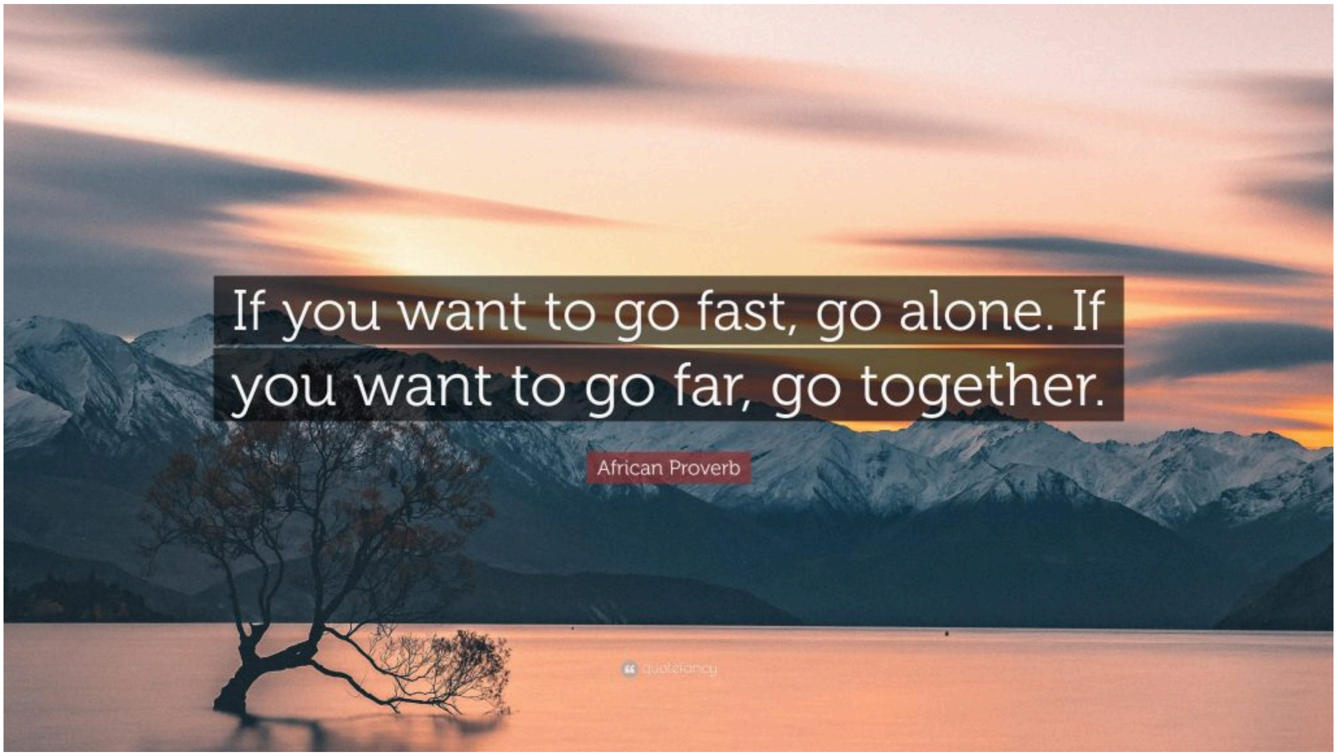

Image from Quotefancy, photo by Casey Horner

16.2 SYSTEMS THEORY: YOUR GROUP IS LIKE A POND

The study of small groups was a hot topic of research among sociologists in the 1950s, but the prevailing model for how groups work did not come from a sociologist; it started with a biologist named Ludwig Von Bertalanffy. After studying different kinds of biological systems, he started to notice some similarities: cells behave like organs, organs behave like trees, trees behave like weather systems, weather systems behave like ponds. There were some common features among all these systems in the natural world, and his General Systems Theory attempted to pinpoint those features. From there, social scientists noted that the same patterns apply to human systems as well: families, institutions, governments, small groups. What are the similarities?

All of these systems are composed of parts that are **interconnected and interdependent**. The human body, for instance, is composed of subsystems such as the nervous, circulatory, and musculoskeletal systems, all of which work closely together. If you're going to give a speech, your body might respond by producing more adrenalin (endocrine system), which makes your heart (circulatory system) beat faster and your breathing increase (respiratory system). The interconnection factor means that a change in any part of the system can produce effects in other systems, the extreme version of which is called the **butterfly effect**: even a small change (a butterfly flaps its wings in Toledo) can create a series of consequences with potential huge results (a hurricane forms in Cuba).

What does this mean for groups? Let's take the example of a hypothetical group of students who like playing quidditch (the game derived from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books) and want to see it adopted as an official sport at their college.

"Quidditch" by John Loo is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

The group starts with eleven members, but one of them, Anjuli, finds out that her brother is in the hospital and decides she has to give up quidditch to take care of him. Anjuli was working with a school administrator on the paperwork to gain official status, but she's too preoccupied with her brother's condition to remember to tell anyone else how to do that job when she leaves. Grant takes over talking to the administrator, but he can't figure out the forms and paperwork and misses a deadline, and in the process annoys that administrator, resulting in a delay of at least a year. Luckily, Grant is dating Nola, who is pretty good with social media and revamps their Instagram account, generating more publicity for the team. But Nola is the jealous type, and she doesn't like the way Penny, the treasurer, looks at Grant, which leads to a spat that makes Penny decide it's not worth the hassle for a sport that might fizzle out in a few years anyway, so Penny announces that she's quitting this fad sport, which makes three other players think she has a point there, so they join a lacrosse team instead, and on and on. Blame Anjuli's brother, the butterfly in this system.

Another principle of systems theory is that **systems must adapt to their environment** in order to survive. In the case of the quidditch team, one environment to which they must adapt is the college administration; if Grant had figured out how to complete their forms or who to talk to, the team would be in better shape. But the team also exists within other environments, such as the Harry Potter fandom world, and Penny's opinion that anything Harry Potter-related is falling out of fashion could spell trouble. Meanwhile, they didn't notice that other quidditch teams were forming alliances with rugby, dodgeball, and tag players, creating the new sport of Quadball. Now the team might have to join that movement if it wants to survive.

A third feature that systems share is a **boundary** of some kind: a "membrane" that separates people inside the boundary from people outside of it. In group terms, this relates to the very basic question, "are you in the group or not?" Some groups have official enrollment lists (perhaps with membership dues), others don't, but even with formal boundaries it's sometimes difficult to tell who's in and who's not. Nola was never actually a member of the quidditch team; she was just hanging around and helping her boyfriend, Grant, but she might have had more influence than other people who were official members from the start.

This points to another feature of boundaries, **permeability**: some boundaries are hard to pass through and others aren't. Your body has different kinds of membranes. Some are "permeable" (easy to cross), including the membranes inside your lungs that allow oxygen into your bloodstream. Others are "impermeable" (hard to cross), such as the blood-brain barrier, which protects certain drugs from reaching your brain, or the lining of your stomach, which keeps digestive acids from leaking into other organs. In group terms, this permeability is an analogy for groups that are easy to join and leave vs. other groups that are hard to get into and nearly impossible to leave (such as crime organizations or cults).

Once again, though, formal membership is not the only factor: there can be informal **ingroups** within an organization — the inner circle of people who get involved with everything and feel a strong sense of belonging — and **outgroups** who might feel excluded or less committed even if they've officially belonged for years. On the quidditch team, the three who left after Penny's announcement were feeling "on the outside" already, and wondered if the lacrosse team might welcome them more warmly. Two of them suspected that their outgroup status was because they are African American, and the inner circle focused more of their attention on each other because they are all white. Some boundaries are fairly invisible, and the people enforcing them might be unaware of what they are doing.

Finally, systems theory stresses the principle of **homeostasis**: the tendency of all systems to stay balanced within certain parameters. When your body gets too cold, you'll shiver to produce warmth; if you get too hot, you'll sweat to try to cool yourself down. On a group level, this might translate to things like the balance between work and play; if a group is used to a certain amount of productivity, then overwork will make members yearn for a little down time and recreation, but if they spend too much time in "vacation mode," they'll feel the urge to get back to work.

Homeostasis is a basic survival mechanism, but it also means that systems are resistant to change, and conscious efforts to change dysfunctional norms won't progress easily. This is why social movements can be frustratingly slow: attempts to address dysfunctional cultures with police departments, for example, push up against the natural tendency for systems to stay the same, and even if you replace every member of the police force, the problems might persist. In the case of the quidditch team, after Penny and the three others left, the remaining members made more efforts to be inclusive to new members, but those efforts felt a little forced and eventually the current members reverted to hanging around with the people they were most comfortable with and subconsciously ignoring newcomers.

16.3 NORMS AND ROLES

When groups form, two curious things happen. The first is that group members start acting alike in conscious and unconscious ways, called **norms**. In group contexts, for example, when you ask people to go around the room and introduce themselves, there are many possible ways they can do this and many types of information they could include. But I've noticed that if the first person starts by saying how long they've lived in the area, what their hobbies are, and how they came to be in the room, other people instinctively follow the same format, and by the seventh or eighth person, the norm of how to introduce yourself is already set like concrete: they all report how long they've lived there and their hobbies, but no one mentions their major or their age.

Some norms are consciously spelled out, such as Rules of Conduct or legal guidelines. In an elevator, for example, there is only one **explicit norm**, printed on a sign at the front: the number of people allowed to be in there (the weight limit). The absence of any other written rules implies that "anything goes" in an elevator, but of course that's not true. There are many unspoken rules, or **implicit norms**, that people diligently follow even if those rules aren't written down anywhere. Space yourselves evenly apart, face the front of the elevator, don't sing loudly, no sitting on the floor, move over to let others out when the doors open, and so on (these norms vary in different parts of the world).

One challenge of the COVID era was the necessity of new, explicit norms that went against implicit norms. Some elevators, for instance, had signs warning that only one or two people were allowed in an elevator car at a time, and if the door opened and a new person wanted to get on, you were supposed to violate politeness norms and tell them to wait for the next car. The elevator sign here is an even more extreme example of trying to impose explicit norms that fly in the face of implicit ones.

Did anyone ever follow this standing arrangement? It's hard to believe they would, no matter what the sign says. (For an older example, think of apartment buildings with strict rules about letting nonresidents in, which get violated when someone leaving sees another person trying to get in and holds the door open for them to "be nice.")

One curious thing about group norms is that the members of the group might be completely unaware of them. When I taught Small Group Communication, I put students into stable groups that met once a week to work on a series of projects, and had them write journals about how the group was going. If I asked them about the norms in their group, many would say "We don't have norms in our group; we're just *normal*" (not noticing that they used the word "norm" in the middle of the word "*norm*-al"). To open their eyes to their own group norms, I would have a group skip a meeting one week, and ask each member to visit another group in the class, which is when they first realized that all groups are different. (If you want to identify cultural norms in your country, the quickest way may be to visit another country and see how they do things over there.)

Some norms deal with the **task dimension** of the group: getting the work done. One basic factor is how committed members are to the tasks — do they stay for long meetings, or just do the minimal amount of work and leave as soon as possible? Is all work done meticulously and checked and rechecked by others, or is it "slap dash" and hasty? What is the information flow in the group: is everyone kept informed of everything, and if so, through what channels? How are decisions made, and who is included in that process? In the quidditch team, decisions are mostly made informally by the "ingroup," but its members are not very good about letting others know what was decided. Sporadic emails and group texts are sent out by two or three members, but most of the time people find out what's going on just through in-person conversations at practices.

Other norms revolve around the **social dimension** of the group: how much time people spend chatting before they get down to business, how well they get to know each other, how "personal" things get, what the emotional climate of the group is (warm, chilly, heated, calm?), the morale level, how big a role humor plays, and how conflict is expressed (see next chapter). In the quidditch team, a norm quickly sets in of quoting lines from *Harry Potter* movies, and trying to imitate the accents of different characters. People's dating lives are a frequent topic of conversation at team practices, and sexual humor is common.

A second curious thing also happens when groups form: group members start acting differently from each other, and taking on **roles**. One person takes over as the group's comic relief, for instance, another acts as a task-master; a third expresses much more interest in the social side of the group, a fourth is full of suggestions, and a fifth is skeptical of all these ideas and says why they won't work.

These specific behaviors may all seem to be personality-based, but personality is only one of the factors that go into a person's group role. Another factor is what the group needs. Grant didn't want to be the paperwork guy, but after Anjuli left, someone had to do it. That's a formal role, but even informal roles such as "blocker" (the member who questions all decisions, doesn't like any suggestions, and vetoes initiatives) can be adopted because someone thinks that function needs to be done, even if it's not their normal style. For this reason, you shouldn't assume that everyone is happy with their role in a group.

Group communication textbooks typically break down the common roles into categories:

- **Task-related**: delegating work, suggesting ideas, gathering information, synthesizing it, seeking opinions, and serving as recorder-secretary
- **Social:** encouraging and supporting people, relieving tension, maintaining communication ties inside and outside the group, smoothing over conflict
- **Disruptive**: blocking, seeking attention, distracting, mocking

Any person can hold several of these roles, of course, and the role of leader is usually a composite of many of them.

Along with roles comes the idea of power, which is an unavoidable facet of group life. Some groups have a norm of being locked into constant power struggles, but even in harmonious groups, certain members have more power than others. Using a typology first developed by French and Raven, you can identify five types of power among group members:

1. **Legitimate power** comes from having formal authority, an official title, or the ability to legally make decisions for others. The quidditch team hasn't elected any officers yet, so no one in the group has this form of power at the moment.
2. **Expert power** comes from having knowledge or skills that are valued by other group members. Nola's adeptness with social media gives her considerable power in the team; Troy is an awesome (goal) keeper.
3. **Popularity** and likeability are forms of power as well, which Grant has even though he's not good with forms or even at playing quidditch. French and Raven originally called this "referent power," stemming from people identifying with a member and wanting to be like them.
4. **Reward and Coercive power** are two sides of the same coin: the ability to bring the group something it wants, or threaten to take away something it values. Fay had access to a practice room the team could use (reward power), so the team treated her well, and when she threatened to quit the team (coercive power), they bent over backwards to placate her.
5. **Alliance power** comes from joining forces with others, knowing the right people, and networking. Brandon's power comes from being close friends with Grant.

The interaction of norms and roles — how groups act alike vs. how the individual members act differently — never ceases to fascinate me. In families, for example, it's fun to look for patterns and overall family traits, but it's also interesting to observe the roles played by individual members: the "black sheep of the family," the communication "node" (the person at the center of the flow of communication), the conflict mediator, the spokesperson who represents the family when talking to outsiders.

I'm equally intrigued by musical groups and sports teams, where you have assigned positions and instruments, but they don't necessarily connect to the social roles that members take on. In rock bands, for example, the lead singer is referred to as the "front person" (the most visible performer), but this is not the same as the leader who actually runs things and makes decisions. Some bands are democratic, with everyone having an equal say in decisions, while others have a dominant leader who dictates decisions and treats others as "hired guns." And some bands pretend to be the first kind but are really the second kind. (If you're interested in the difference between being a member of the band and being a musician for hire, I recommend Fran Stine's 2016 documentary *Hired Gun* and Denny Tedesco's 2008 film *The Wrecking Crew*).

BOX 16.3: VIRTUAL TEAMS

How do group dynamics work if the team doesn't meet in person? Thanks to video conferencing software, it's easier for groups to meet online than it is to find a common time and place when everyone can come together in person, so it's no surprise that a much larger percentage of group work is now being done in virtual or remote groups.

A quick note about the name: "virtual teams" seems to be the preferred term for these groups, but it sounds like it means a group that isn't *actually* a group. Keep in mind that "virtual" here refers to how the group meets, not how real the team is. That said, there are many kinds of virtual groups, from anonymous international collaborations[1] to long-term groups that meet sometimes in person and sometimes through video conferencing.

The technology question isn't usually the issue, although Box 12.2 {LINK} addresses why remote meetings can be more tiring than in-person meetings. The issue is how well virtual groups function, and how to make them function better.

Starting with the task side of things, the good news is that there are plenty of collaboration platforms to help virtual teams coordinate their work. Rather than describe particular software (since anything I say will probably outdate quickly), it's more useful to list the features to look for in the best collaboration tools. The tool should allow for whole group and individual communication (i.e., you can choose to talk to one member or the whole group), should accommodate synchronous (live meetings) and asynchronous (written or recorded messages that can be accessed any time) communication, and should include ways for team members to see what everyone else is doing.[2]

1. Baruah, J. & Green, K. (2023). Innovation in virtual teams: The critical role of anonymity across divergent and convergent thinking processes. The Journal of Creative Behavior, 57(4):588-605.

2. https://teambuilding.com/blog/virtual-team-communication

Sites such as TeamBuilding.com emphasize that clear expectations and frequent check-ins with every member are more important in virtual teams than in situations where members see each other often and have more chances to talk.

Perhaps less obvious is recognizing that the social/emotional side of virtual teams needs more conscious attention. Since virtual teams depend on members being willing to speak up, and one survey reported that 52% of remote workers identified that "speaking up and sharing their concerns with teammates" was their biggest concern,[3] an environment of psychological safety is vital.[4]

I have been in too many Zoom meetings where the facilitator asked "Does anyone have anything they want to say?" and almost no one did. This may sound to the facilitator like there are no pressing issues, but it's equally likely that the participants actually do have something to say but won't say it.

Nan Gesche, who teaches a course in virtual teams, emphasizes that establishing the right culture in a team is crucial, and that this involves seemingly trivial things like virtual water cooler chat. Jordan Birnbaum stresses that a large part of a leader's power comes from being liked, a key component of which is commonality: "The most effective way to discover shared interests is by asking questions, which in and of itself makes us more likable by demonstrating curiosity." He calls it the 'First Five Minutes Rule': "If you get down to business right at the start of a meeting, you obliterate your opportunity to nurture your most important assets: human relationships. The first five minutes of every virtual meeting — whether one-on-ones, team meetings, sales meetings, or client meetings — must be devoted to personal connection."[5] Ask about personal lives, hobbies, families, and do ice-breaker exercises even if they feel corny. Being "all business all the time" is a mistake. If you were meeting in person, that "idle chatter" time before and after the meeting would be more important than it appeared for forming social bonds. It just takes a little more work to duplicate this kind of thing online.

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3. "How to lead virtual teams," from Crucial Conversations for Mastering Dialogue, which can be found at https://cruciallearning.com/courses/crucial-conversations-for-dialogue/

4. Lechner, A., & Mortlock, J. T. (2022). How to create psychological safety in virtual teams. Organizational Dynamics, 51(2), 100849. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2021.100849

5. Birnbaum, J. (2024). Building a Human Connection in a Remote World. MIT Sloan Management Review. Reprint #66233 • sloanreview.mit.edu

16.4 DECISION-MAKING

The quidditch team has been together for eight months, but they haven't yet managed to decide on a name. This is a task many groups have to face, and not all groups handle it well (the Goo Goo Dolls thinks their band's name is "kind of a stupid name"). Making decisions is one of the central things that groups do, and thankfully it's also a research topic that has received a lot of academic attention.

Starting in the 1940s, social scientists began assembling people into groups in lab settings and giving them decision-making tasks, from simple chess problems to selecting from a list of items they would want if were stranded on the moon. In some ways, these experiments were the precursors to "escape rooms," where a group of people is given all the tools needed to solve a puzzle and get out of a captive situation before the time runs out.

Thousands of research articles were published about these experiments, although this is one area where the "controlled vs. natural" dilemma discussed in Chapter 2 was an issue. Some critics argued that watching a group of strangers thrown together in a lab setting and given a simple decision-making task can result in findings that don't necessarily carry over into the real world. In an experiment, the researcher can measure how correct the decision is (e.g., don't bring a set of matches or a flare on that moon expedition; they need oxygen to work), but when a real-life band settles on an odd name like "Pink Floyd," who's to say that's an "incorrect" choice? Psychologist Karl Weick noted that many groups don't make decisions in a single meeting, free of distractions and without a history of power dynamics between members. Those lab groups weren't given the option to just not solve the problem in front of them, but real groups put off decisions all the time, and sometimes that's not a bad thing. Not all problems have to be solved, and sometimes "normal" problems fix themselves or just go away.

That said, the group decision-making literature can provide helpful guidance to our unnamed quidditch team. For example, the team can start by deciding whether they want to use a **rational** decision-making model, or a **non-rational** one (not to be confused with "irrational ").

Rational Models

Most rational models can be traced back to a philosopher named John Dewey, who, in the early 1990s , laid out the systematic steps in making a decision. He was talking about how an individual person should think through a decision, but group scholars realized that these steps work for a group process as well. The steps evolved slightly over the years and came to be known as the Standard Agenda, which generally looks like this:

1. Identify and analyze the problem

2. Spell out criteria to evaluate the solution
3. Generate solutions
4. Evaluate those solutions against the criteria in step 2
5. Select the best solution

Two additional steps are sometimes included — implement the solution, and later go back and evaluate whether it was a good solution after all — although you could argue that decision-making ends with step 5, so those are a different kind of thing. This model is so clearly logical that it holds up well after a century.

Too bad it so rarely works in practice.

Why not?

Let's visit our quidditch team and see what they did instead. After practice one day, this dialogue unfolded:

Brandon: "You know, we really have to come up with a name sometime"
Willem: "Yeah, I guess you're right. How about Woghorts?"
Nola: "Woghorts? Taking Hogwarts and switching letters around? No, I'm not going for that."
Willem: "What's wrong with it?"
Nola: "Just no. I hate it."
Willem: "Do you have any better ideas?"
Fay: "What about an animal name? Like the Hippogryphs or something."
Andy: "I bet there's a million quidditch teams that already went with that."
Troy: "Should we look up a list of existing quidditch team names?"
Nola: "What good would that do? That'll only show us names that are already taken."
Brandon: "Man, you really don't like anyone's ideas, do you Nola?"
Nola: "I'm just trying to not waste time."
Willem: "How about Hagrid's Bucket o' Slugs?"
Fay: "All your ideas are disgusting. Can't we come up with something pleasant?"
Grant: "It doesn't have to be taken from a *Harry Potter* movie. What about the Wolverines or something?"

The conversation continues like this for another 20 minutes, until Grant suggests that they go home and sleep on it and resume the discussion next week. John Dewey would shake his head over how little their process resembled the standard agenda: they didn't spend any time on step 1, never clearly discussed step 2 (although they are implicitly dancing around criteria such as "A name not taken by other quidditch teams," "not disgusting" and "not taken from a *Harry Potter* movie"). Instead, they jumped straight to step 3, and kept bouncing back and forth between steps 3 and 4 (without the "against the criteria in step 2" element), which is what most groups would do without explicitly trying to follow the model.

In my experience, groups almost always skip Step 1, cycling back to it only if they realize that the later steps aren't working. Even if they do try to stick to the model, it takes considerable discipline to follow the steps in order, and that kind of discipline just doesn't match the norms of this team.

If they were intent on using the model, it may help to set up a form that they could fill in. Step 2, for instance, might look like:

STEP 2: What are your criteria for a good group name?

Criterion 1	Criterion 2	Criterion 3	Criterion 4
Derived from a Harry Potter movie	Original (not already taken)	Easy to remember	Pleasant

Then they can list all of the name suggestions without judgment, and only *after that* start looking at how the suggestions fit the criteria:

STEP 4: How well does each suggested name match the criteria?

SUGGESTED NAMES	Criterion 1: Derived from HP movie	Criterion 2: Original	Criterion 3: Easy to remember	Criterion 4: Pleasant
Woghorts	Yes	Probably	Yes	No
The Hippogryphs	Yes	Probably not	Yes	Yes
Hagrid's Bucket O' Slugs	Yes	Yes	Somewhat	No
Wolverines	No	No	Yes	Yes

Even then, there will probably be some circling back to step 2, since it takes a while to identify all the criteria you want to follow. The good news is that , as shown in research by group decision-making scholar Randy Hirokawa, sticking to the steps in strict order is not important, as long as you cover them at some point.[1]

Hirokawa's other important contribution is an examination of the things that get in the way of Dewey's very logical — but idealistic — model. Forms of **disruptive** communication that derail the process include:

1. **Hidden agendas and secret goal**s. For instance, since Grant is dating Nola, he might want to back her suggestions just to keep himself out of trouble on the home front. Sometimes a person's hidden agenda might be as simple as "Make myself look smart" or "Stay out of trouble"; other times, it might involve actually undermining your own group for some reason.
2. **Fear-based thinking**. As covered in Chapter 8, when fears show up, logic tends to disappear. Sometimes the only thing that helps you explain puzzling group decisions is to ask, "What are they afraid of?"

1. Gouran, D. S., Hirokawa, R. Y., Julian, K. M., & Leatham, G. B. (2012). The evolution and current status of the functional perspective on communication in decision-making and problem-solving groups. In Communication Yearbook 16 (pp. 573-600). Routledge.

3. **Sloppiness**, laziness, and biased thinking. This includes falling into any of the logical fallacies covered in Chapter 7.
4. **Undue influence of powerful members**. The assumption that "the boss knows best" is deep-seated in many people, and blinds them to the fact that sometimes powerful people have bad ideas. The flip side is also true: sometimes good ideas come from surprising places, including people you might not think are credible [SEE Chapter 9]. For this reason, group decision-making experts recommend using platforms that separate ideas from people, so you can just look at an idea's merits without knowing who came up with it.

Finally, with all this attention on steps 2 and 4, the group didn't realize that step 5 was a little unclear: how exactly do you "select the best solution?" Stare at the chart and count up which row has the most yeses filled in, which seemed rather impersonal and mindless? What if no obvious winner is apparent? Take a vote and go with the majority? Talk it all out until they achieve full consensus?

In the end, the deciding factor was simple fatigue: they discussed numerous options until they were just tired of talking, and at that moment the option under discussion was "the Hippogryphs," so they went with that one. They tried their best to be as rational as they could, but the final step didn't seem very rational at all, and no one was particularly enthused about the final choice.

Non-Rational Models

What if all these steps aren't necessary? After all, rational processes can't guarantee good results. Chapter 8 raised the question: What if there is a bias in the preference for rationality and logic over other ways of thinking?

Malcolm Gladwell's 2005 book *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* made the case that instinctive "thinking from your gut" is sometimes preferable to logical analysis. That book begins with the story of the J. Paul Getty Museum buying a marble statue for $10 million, doing 14 months of extensive research to make sure it was authentic, then having others recognize it as a fake as soon as they saw it based on "hunches" and "intuitive repulsion."[2] This can be easily misinterpreted to mean that anybody who thinks from their gut is always right (Gladwell emphasizes how important it is to study a subject for years before developing instincts that are worth trusting). But at the very least, it provides groups with an alternative to rigid processes like the Standard Agenda. What might those alternatives look like?

One option is **brainstorming**, a term that has come to mean any kind of idea generating. The person who

2. https://toktopics.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/blink-handout.pdf. Or cite the original book: Gladwell, M. (2005). Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking. Back Bay Books, Little, Brown.

came up with the term, an advertising executive named Alex Osborne, wanted to help his teams break out of stale old ideas and come up with new ones. He observed, for instance, that when people mixed the idea-generating phase with the idea-evaluating phase — which the quidditch team did in the dialogue above — it stops the "creative juices" from flowing. When Nola and Fay shoot down both of Willem's suggestions, Willem might feel resentful or discouraged enough that he stops contributing to the discussion.

Osborne came up with specific guidelines about how to brainstorm, including "Withhold criticism" (Nola and Fay, if you don't like Willem's ideas, bite your tongues until later). Brainstorming is not a decision-making process: the goal is to end up with a lot of wild ideas instead of trying to identify a single good one. The philosophy is that stimulating creative thinking can lead to brilliant ideas just "popping out," and when they do, you can recognize their greatness without going through any kind of Standard Agenda-like process.

Back to our team, the next time they meet, Mack (who didn't contribute any ideas the previous time) says, "You know my favorite line in the first movie? When Hagrid says *'Dry up, Dursley, you great prune!'* to Uncle Vernon."

Dave chimes in, "So we could call ourselves the Great Prunes? That's excellent!" Four or five people add that they love it too, Nola says she'll go post the news on the social media sites, and the rest of them head off to practice.

16.5 WHEN DECISION-MAKING GOES WRONG

It was a nice moment: they made the decision in two minutes and told the world that the team is now The Great Prunes. Except.... It bothers Fay a little that no actual vote was taken. She didn't want to look like a stick-in-the-mud by insisting on a formal procedure after that name "popped out" and got such a great reaction, so she figured she was probably the only one who wasn't sure about it. Meanwhile, Willem thought that nobody else would catch that obscure movie reference and wasn't crazy about being named after a dried fruit — but he didn't speak up, either, because everyone else seemed happy about the name. And it turns out that even Mack didn't intend to propose it as a team name; he just wanted to mention that he liked that line from the movie, and Dave took it and ran with it. In other words, it *seemed* like there was consensus among the whole team, but there wasn't.

Management professor Jerry Harvey would say that the group had "driven to Abilene."[1] He coined the term **Abilene Paradox**, based on an incident with his family in which they took a 106-mile trip that, it turned out, no one in the family actually wanted to make. The core problem is that people in the group are acting based on what they assume other people want, and no one is clearly stating what they want.

On the quidditch team, this is what happened with Troy and his partner Lacy last Friday, when he came home exhausted and wishing to just spend the night on the couch. But when Lacy came home, Troy could see that she had had a rough week too, and he knew that she liked to relieve stress by dancing. So Troy said "Want to go out to a club?" (secretly hoping she'd say no). When Lacy heard that, she *thought* to herself "Not really — I'd rather stay home, but he's so sweet, and it sounds like he really wants to go out, so sure, I guess I can do that." But out loud she *said* a cheerful "Sure," and off they went. All evening long, both of them were just waiting for the other to say it was time to go home, which neither of them did until after midnight. If either one had ever uttered the phrase "I'd rather stay home," the night out would not have happened — but each was afraid that it would spoil the fun for the other one.

So when other members of the team didn't express any reservations about the Great Prunes before Nola went off and posted it on social media, was it because they didn't want to spoil the fun of the moment? Perhaps, or it may have been something even more serious.

In **groupthink** situations, members are actually afraid to speak up, and those that do are often attacked for it. Irving Janis (one of the developers of the 5-step persuasion model from Chapter 6) analyzed a number

1. Harvey, J. (1988). The Abilene Paradox and Other Meditations on Management. Lexington Books

of cases of political disasters in which groups of smart people made disastrously bad decisions in the name of preserving the cohesion of the group. Groups in groupthink mode tend to:

1. Overestimate their moral superiority (of *course* we're the "good team," so nothing bad can happen to us) and underestimate the opposition, often demonizing or mocking them.
2. Put too much faith in their leader, assuming that whatever ideas the leader comes up with must be brilliant.
3. Ignore red flags, warnings, and alternatives: they decide on a course of action and don't listen to any "naysayers" who express doubts or raise objections
4. Stress loyalty above all else, and attack doubters for being disloyal. If one or two people get pilloried for speaking up, everyone else in the group who has doubts keeps their mouth shut to protect themselves.
5. Impose unnecessary and unrealistic deadlines, and play the "time-shift game." The game goes like this: if someone suggests that maybe they should take the time to consider the wisdom of an action the leader wants to perform, the response is "This is the time for urgent action; we can talk about it later." But later when people ask "*Now* can we talk about it?," the response is "What's the point now? What's done is done."

The 2017 Fyre Festival seemed to exhibit all those symptoms. The music festival ended so disastrously that it resulted in eight lawsuits from frustrated concert-goers and the organizer Billy McFarland going to prison for four years for fraud. Watch the documentaries *Fyre: The Greatest Party That Never Happened* or *Fyre Fraud* and decide for yourself if all five groupthink symptoms were present.

Groupthink doesn't only happen in high profile cases. As a teacher, I've seen classroom project groups exhibit at least some of those symptoms, and several times I've heard students admit after the fact that they knew the project was turning into a trainwreck. This raises the question: ***why didn't they speak up to prevent that trainwreck?***

That question puts the onus on the doubters to say something, and in general it's a good principle of group functioning that people should speak their minds. But there are other ways of looking at the same situation, and alternative questions one could ask. Why don't group leaders, for example, check in and make sure they know what their members are thinking? Something like a secret ballot or anonymous survey can reveal things that people may be reluctant to say out loud.

On a more general level, a different phrasing of the question is: "What are the reasons people don't express their views in groups?" The climate of the group might be intimidating, or members might come from cultures in which speaking up is not the norm [See Chapter 15]. And hidden agendas give members reasons not to speak their mind. At the least, **group leaders should not assume they know what everyone is thinking just because no one expresses any objections**, and should understand that consensus is sometimes an illusion. It takes work to find out people's opinions, and being aware of the reasons people don't speak up can be very valuable.

On the other hand, it can be deadly for leadership to gather opinions from group members and then not do anything with that information. My favorite example comes from 2016, when the British National Environment Research Council (NERC) spent £200 million to build a research vessel, and then told the public they wanted their input on what to name it. The top choice was "Boaty McBoatface," earning 124,109 votes, nearly twice as many votes as all the other suggestions combined. This left NERC with the choice: honor the public opinion poll, or make their own decision? They just couldn't see writing that name on the side of an expensive ship, so they opted for "RSS SIr David Attenborough" instead…but they did use the voters' favorite name for a 12-foot autosub.

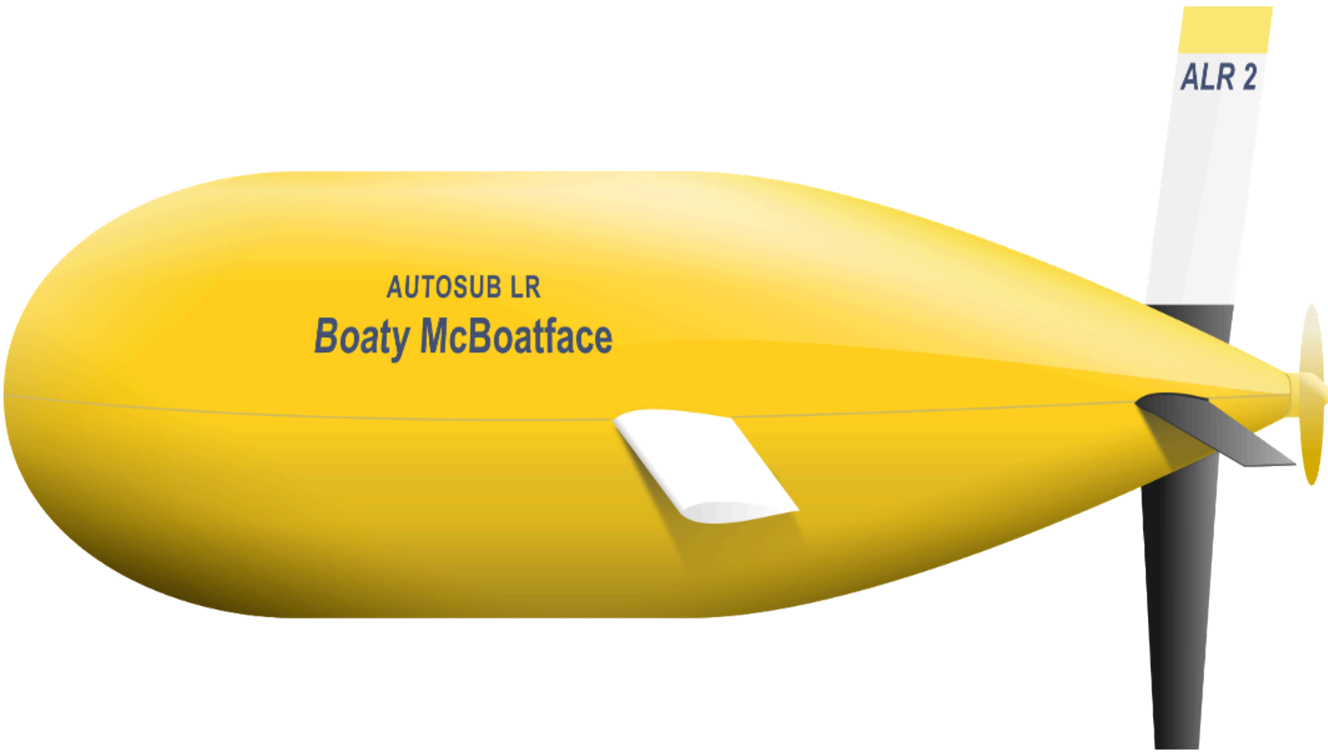


Image by Seloloving, shared with CC-BY-SA 4.0

For some people, the lesson to be drawn here is that people on the internet don't take polls seriously, but I see this as an example of a much more serious issue that applies to many contexts. With "empowerment" being a popular buzzword these days, many group leaders make a good show of sharing power with others. If that takes the form of asking members (or the public) for their input on decisions, it raises a question that the leaders may not have thought through: *"What will you do if you don't like that input?"* They may just think, "Well, if we don't like their ideas, we can just thank them for the suggestions and do what we want to do anyway." Whenever I hear the phrase "We'll take that under advisement," I wonder if it's a euphemism for "We'll humor you, but there's no way we'll actually surrender decision-making power to you."

The problem is that people know when their input has been sought, and watch to see what will be done with that input. If the answer, or even perception, is "nothing," the actual power situation is made clear, which leads to resentment, bitterness, and disengagement. (See the note above about bands that pretend to be democracies but are really dictatorships in disguise). I know many workers who fill out employee engagement surveys every year, only to realize that no one ever does anything with those survey results.

Despite the silly name, the **Boaty McBoatface Dilemma** is a problem that no leader should ignore: if you're going to ask for input, you'd better be prepared to actually do something with it, which means surrendering your own power.

One last decision-making problem I have observed comes **when a decision is remade several times**. Revisiting a decision is a good idea: perhaps it wasn't a great idea to begin with, or perhaps the circumstances have changed. But if you revisit the same decision more than two or three times, coming up with a different solution every time, the group will never be able to keep track of the final decision. So, for instance, if you have a group that normally meets on Wednesdays at 3 pm, but in the summertime, when people's schedules are more free, they decide that 2 pm would be easier, but then rethink the decision again and go back to a 3 pm start time, people won't remember what the latest decision was, and some will just stay home.

If the Great Prunes decide that this isn't the best name after all, and change it to the Hippogryphs, and then the Wolverines, people will be permanently confused about what their "real" name is. Perhaps they will do what many people did after the musician Prince changed his name to an unpronounceable symbol in 1993: they called him "TAFKAP" (The Artist Formerly Known As Prince) until he changed it back in 1998. You may have done the same with "X" (formerly known as Twitter) or "Max" (formerly known as HBO Max, or was it HBO Now, or HBO Go?). To prevent the quidditch world from referring to your team as "formerly known as the Great Prunes" for the next 10 years, you should put more thought into getting it right the first time.

CHAPTER 17: CONFLICT

17.1 IT'S NO USE, JIMMY

The 1991 film *The Commitments* is about a soul band in Dublin, Ireland. The drummer, Billy, has a problem: he has to quit the band because he can't stand the singer, Deco. When the manager, Jimmy, tries to talk him out of it, Billy says:

> Billy: "It's no use, Jimmy, it'll end in violence. I'm going to have to hit him, and I'm on probation."
> Jimmy:"Probation? What for?"
> Billy: "For hitting a prick just like him."

I'm glad Billy decided not to resort to violence, but is quitting the group the only other option? Perhaps you can relate: group life doesn't always go well, and it often seems like the problem is unresolvable.

I have been approached by many students who asked to either quit a classroom project group, or kick someone out. The first class I ever taught was an example: it was a Small Group Communication course, and back then students had the option to expel a member who just wasn't pulling their weight — as long as they understood that 50% of the grade was based on group work, so kicking someone out would mean their automatic failure. This was intended as a deterrent, as leverage to motivate someone to pitch in and do their part when all else failed. So my heart sank when a group approached me halfway through the semester and told me that they wanted to eject not one but two members of the five-person group: *here we go!*

My first question was, "What have you said to these two members about this?"

Their answer, perhaps unsurprisingly, was "Nothing."

"Oh, well, talk to them first, and if you can't make any progress, then we'll discuss what happens next." I didn't hear anything from them over the next week.

When I asked them the following week how it was going in the group, they cheerfully replied: "Great! We worked it out." I was quite relieved … and impressed, partly because we hadn't even gotten to the textbook chapter on conflict yet. But there was a conflict chapter in that small group communication textbook — there's *always* a chapter about conflict in group communication textbooks, and in organizational communication textbooks, and family communication textbooks, and interpersonal communication textbooks. Going back to the forms of communication in Chapter 1, conflict can occur on the mass, public, group, interpersonal, or intrapersonal level, and may refer to everything from large-scale wars between nations to having a "falling out" with a roommate. Any book about communication and relationships that doesn't discuss conflict is ignoring an inevitable part of life.

17.2 A DEFINITION OF CONFLICT, AND WHY IT'S HEALTHY

Why is conflict inevitable when human beings get together? Is it because there are so many intolerable people in the world that the statistics are stacked against you: the odds of everyone being nice are too low? No, nice people get in conflict too; it's not something reserved only for jerks. How people express conflict or manage it may differ based on personality, but personality doesn't explain why conflict arises in the first place.

Defining what conflict is, on the other hand, does show why it must rear its head from time to time. Conflict has four component parts:

1. **Incompatible goals**. *I* want you to finish your part in that group paper; *you* have other priorities. *I* want the thermostat to be set at 72 degrees Fahrenheit; *you* want it set at 65 degrees. Having different goals isn't enough to create conflict; if I get on a bus, my goal is to arrive at my destination, and everybody else on the bus has a different destination. That's not a problem, though, because we're not interdependent: it makes no difference to me where another passenger gets off, and vice versa.
2. **Interdependence**. Interdependence means our fates are tied together somehow; we will all get the same grade for that term paper, or we have to find a room temperature we can both live with. If you can "agree to disagree," that means you don't have the element of interdependence; if you do have it, then letting everyone follow their own path is not an option. This is one of the frustrating aspects of group life, and one reason that students who earn high grades in other courses sometimes struggle with group communication classes: the idea that your grade depends on what someone else does is not always a comfortable one. Occasionally, a student will gripe about doing group projects in college, thinking that that's not necessary to prepare them for the work world where that sort of thing doesn't happen. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but if anything, the interdependence problem is worse in the work world than it is in school; even freelance workers and solo practitioners with no employees still rely on vendors, customers, and allies.
3. **Perceived interference**. This element stems from the previous two — if I want Goal A, you want Goal B, and we are tied to each other, you are in the way of me achieving my goal. If a bus passenger hijacks that bus and won't let me off at my stop, they are preventing me from getting where I need to go, and I need to do something about it.
4. **Communication**. This is an issue of definition: can it be conflict if it's not communicated? A person might get angry with someone else about incompatible goals and perceived interference, but they might just "bottle it up" and not express that frustration. We won't call that conflict. To earn that name, someone has to express the conflict somehow. It doesn't have to be words — it can be an "evil eye" look

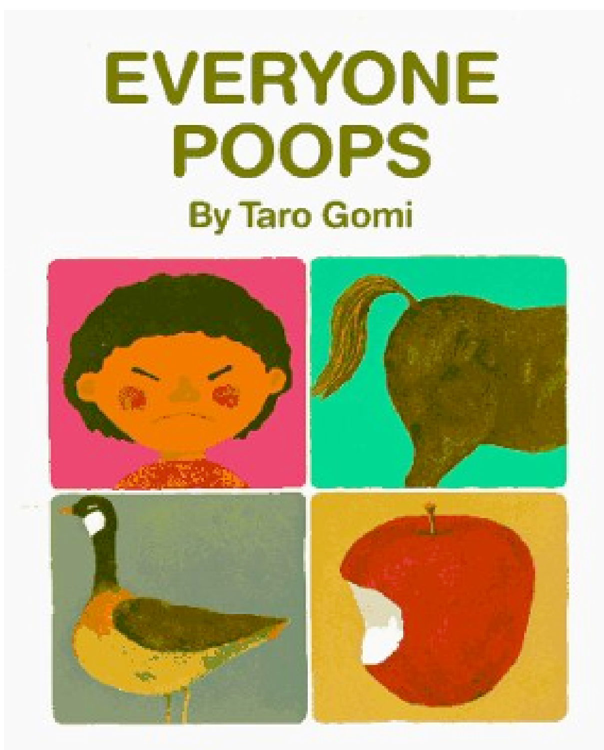
> or a slammed door — and people have different thresholds for what kind of expression is required to earn the name conflict. I knew of a mild-mannered professor who married into a "vociferous" family, and the first time he went to his in-laws' house, there were plates flying through the air and people shouting. He was shocked, but his wife said, "Oh no, they're not fighting; they're just letting off a little steam."

Breaking the definition into component parts helps us answer two questions about the nature of conflict. First, why is it inevitable? Because no matter how well people like each other or generally get along, their goals will never be identical. Second, can communication solve all conflicts? I hear people sometimes imply that "opening up a dialogue" is all that's necessary to work everything out, and this was true for the student group. I would go so far as to say that conflict can't be resolved *without* communication (even wars end with agreements and conferences), but that's different from saying that communication can fix everything.

One key word in element three is "perceived," and communication is vital in clearing up misperceptions and helping people realize that their goals are not as incompatible as the participants thought. Sometimes, though, they just *are* incompatible and the interference is real, and no matter how long the dialogue goes on, the conflict won't be fixed. There are irresolvable conflicts, and maybe Billy quitting the bad was the only thing to be done.

Let's take a metaphor and explore its implications a little further, perhaps to the point where it gets a bit weird, but bear with me. Chapter 16 introduced systems theory, which is based on the metaphor that a group is like a living organism. If that's true, then what is one thing that all living organisms do?

Ask children's author Taro Gomi:



Let's use the phrase "excrete waste" instead. When people interact with each other, it can bring up unpleasant thoughts and feelings that must be processed somehow. Following the "excrete" metaphor, there are healthy and unhealthy ways for that to happen. If your attitude is that bodily waste is so unhealthy that you avoid going to the bathroom, things won't go well for you. On the other hand, the reason most people avoid conflict is because they find it unpleasant and potentially toxic, which is true for bodily waste as well. The point is that finding healthy and productive ways to deal with this part of life is important, and there are consequences if it's not handled well.

How you think about conflict makes a difference in two ways:

- **Your willingness to engage in conflict** when it arises. If you think of conflict as inherently unhealthy, you will avoid it at all costs, and perhaps panic when it rears its head. You don't have to be happy when signs of conflict pop up, but the difference between "Okay, now it's time to deal with something that needs to be dealt with" vs. "Everything's fallen apart! Time to end the relationship and head for the hills!" can affect everything.
- **Your expectations for success**. If you think of conflict as a process with a potentially good outcome, it's worth putting up with the unpleasantry. If, on the other hand, your belief is that it never ends well, is always harmful, or spells the end of a relationship or group, it won't be easy to put the energy into it and try to make it work. By the way, that Dublin soul band in *The Commitments* fell apart after only a few gigs, depriving the world of great music that could have enriched everyone.[1]

Healthy conflict management can have many benefits, including:

- **Close examination of issues**. It's easy to float through life without looking at how things are working for everyone. Conflict makes people stop and look closely at whether things are actually working. Before the George Floyd protests in 2020, for instance, many people thought that race relations were at an acceptable point in America and other countries. It took that upheaval to get people to really see what life was like for people of other races, and how systematic racism is perpetuated.And while you may have mixed feelings about lawsuits, one thing that trials do particularly well is examine things very closely. Did you know that when legislators pass new laws, no one tests to see if those laws are constitutional until someone sues and a case rises to the level of the Supreme Court?
- **Recognition of difference**. Going back to the thermostat example under "Incompatible Goals," you may have thought, "Someone likes the thermostat set at 65 degrees? Really?" Yes, there are people like that in the world, along with people who have different religious beliefs, attitudes toward guns, definitions of family, and even opinions about how your classroom project ought to be done.

1. That's the fictional band in the movie. The real-life band that arose from the movie is still going after three decades.

- **Overcoming resistance to change**. People have a natural resistance to change, some more than others, and sometimes it takes some powerful dynamite to break through that barrier. If you are an American, try this thought experiment: if there had been no American Revolutionary War, would the United States even be a country, or would it still be a British colony?

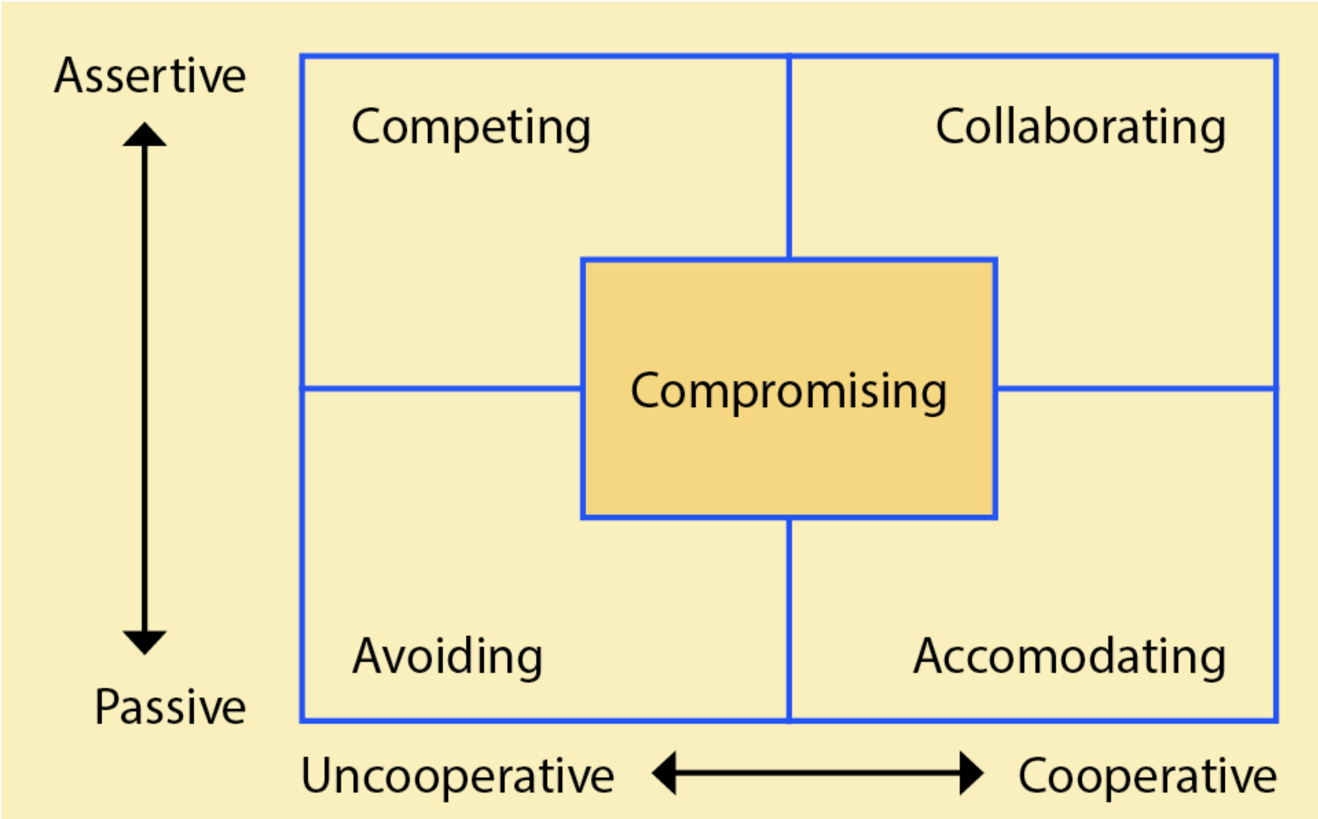
That said, it's important to also acknowledge that some conflict is wholly destructive. If your direct experience of conflict has been the toxic or abusive variety, whether it be in the home, in romantic relationships, in groups, or in the workplace, I don't blame you for not being able to see the positive side of conflict or for having extreme anxiety when it arises. Hopefully you can find resources to help you overcome your past trauma and learn coping strategies.

17.3 CONFLICT STYLES

In 1995, trial lawyer Gerry Spence published a book with a promising title: *How to Argue and Win Every Time: At Home, At Work, In Court, Everywhere, Everyday*. No wonder it became a bestseller: who wouldn't want to win every argument every time? Well, just as there are people who like their thermometer set at 65 degrees, there are people who do not want to win every argument. Why not? Because when it comes to conflict, "winning" isn't everything for them: they are also concerned with other things, like getting along with people. Some people care about relationships so much more than they care about the topic of the conflict that they will automatically concede defeat: "Sure, we can do it your way." Others never concede, and want to get their way at all costs. Many people are in-between, fighting to win on some points but giving up on others. And others adapt their style to the situation, being more concerned about relationships in one context and determined to win in another.

This observation led several different scholars to create a two-dimensional conflict grid, depicting these two concerns — getting your way, and getting along with others — as vertical and horizontal axes. The most famous of these models was developed by Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann in 1974.[1]

1. Drawing on earlier models by Robert Blake and Jane Mouton, and by Jay Hall, with "concern for task/goals" and "concern for people/relationships" as the dimensions



Is this grid a depiction of personality types and preferences (different kinds of **people**), or does it depict **strategies** that anyone could choose in a particular situation? Although people could identify their preferred style by looking at the grid, it is probably more fruitful to think of the elements in the grid as choices a person could make in a conflict. Research has shown that, personality differences aside, people switch styles frequently in conflict situations. As Kramer and Bisel put it, "Our preference and self-perceptions about conflict management can change rapidly."[2] Let's look at the elements one at a time, exploring the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Competing style is highly assertive, concerned with getting your way but not concerned with how this will affect relationships. This style is captured in the expression "It's my way or the highway!"

If you have positional power and you are sure about your ideas, this is the way to go: you don't want to let others with weaker ideas get in your way, nor do you want to waste a lot of time gathering input from others that you won't use. Steve Jobs of Apple Computers was famous for being a visionary and a genius at knowing what the public wanted, and he was notorious for butting heads with engineers who didn't like his ideas and kept telling him why they wouldn't work. If you have an iPhone in your pocket, that's partly thanks to Mr. Jobs adopting the competing style.

2. Kramer, M.W., & Bisel, R.S. (2021). Organization communication: A lifespan approach (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press, p. 271.

One more advantage to consider for this dictatorial style is that it's quick: giving orders and having people obey them is much faster than talking everything through in a democratic fashion.

What are the style's disadvantages? Some people with this aggressive style are not as smart as they think they are, and their ideas should not be adopted. In the realm of organizational communication, there has been a gradual shift over time from thinking that the Big Boss must be the smartest person in the room, and thus should give all the orders, to thinking that gathering input from everyone is a more productive approach. (This shift happened at the same time that a lot of countries changed from kingdoms to democracies.) Also, because the competing style is low on the dimension of cooperation and concern for relationships, it can lead to a lot of unhappy people. Employees quit and spouses file for divorce, or, at the very least, they might stop offering their opinions.

Accommodating is at the other extreme, the "we'll do it your way" corner. If you are an accommodator by habit, it may be because you recognize a battle that can't be won when you see it, and consciously decide not to fight. From your perspective, this approach is quick and easy, and others are happy that they get their way. Of course, this presumes that you consciously choose to accommodate, which isn't always the case: sometimes you're forced to cave in and aren't happy about it.

This distinction may not be visible, which can result in the main hazard for accommodators: **resentment**. The question, "Are you really okay with never having things your way?" may eat away at them, sometimes resulting in them exploding in anger later. This can be a big surprise for the other parties, who might respond with "But you always seemed to be okay with me taking charge." I've heard of many divorces that caught the Competing-style partner off guard, and musicians suddenly quitting a successful band to go solo. This points to another disadvantage to the Accommodation style beside for resentment: their ideas never get heard, and maybe those ideas were really good.

Collaborating seems like the ideal corner, and is sometimes called the "problem solving" mode. Ideas get fully explored, people strive to find a win-win, and, if they succeed, everyone's happy. This style, however, takes the most time and resources: be prepared for many long meetings, and perhaps the need to bring in outside facilitators or mediators. The word "strive" was deliberately chosen: it may take a lot of creativity to discover that win-win solution, and there's no guarantee that such a solution exists. Sometimes groups expend all that time and energy and just give up. Or else they switch to another mode: compromise.

Compromise means everyone wins a little, but also loses a little. Each party is somewhat satisfied, but no one is fully satisfied. The reason people who attempt the collaborating style sometimes resort to this is because it's easier: "how about if we just split it 50-50?"

Compromises may involve creativity, but often they are lazy. Laziness may explain why so many group decisions seem to be head-scratchingly bad; there was probably a mindless compromise somewhere in the decision-making process. Some compromises really are bad ideas: if you're living in Boston with a committed partner and they get a job offer in San Diego, moving to Topeka (halfway between Boston and San Diego) is a terrible solution. I suspect that compromise is the reason why so many television shows and movies are uninspired: because there were too many people with too many different ideas involved, and they settled on a mediocre compromise.

If this makes it sound like I don't believe in collaborative decision-making, or that all greatness has to be created by a Steve Jobs-style competitor, it's not true: there can be great value in everyone listening to each other and giving up some of what they think they must have. Some analysts have noted that a big problem with American politics in the 21st century, for example, is that "compromise" has become a dirty word, implying a selling out of your values, and as a result, very little gets done in Congress.

Avoiding: if the opposite corner, collaborating, is the win-win corner, does that make avoidance the lose-lose corner? Logically speaking, perhaps so, but this doesn't acknowledge that there are advantages to avoiding conflict. It may be the wrong time or place to engage in conflict, the battle may be unwinnable, and conflict takes an emotional toll on people.

It also raises the question: if conflict avoidance is dysfunctional, why is it the style preferred by most people most of the time? Some scholars, such as Stella Ting-Toomey, have argued that there is a cultural bias in labeling avoidance as the worst conflict strategy. Ting-Toomey has done a lot of research on the concept of face-saving (preserving the dignity of self and others, and avoiding humiliating people), and how it differs in individualistic vs. collectivistic cultures. In collectivistic cultures such as Japanese society, avoidance is a key tool in preserving face for other people, rather than just a way to avoid dealing with something unpleasant.[3]

Another point to make about avoidance is that it doesn't always take the obvious form of pretending a problem doesn't exist. An alternate form of avoidance is to have a brief discussion about a problem, but set it up in such a way that it's too short to actually accomplish anything, and only serves to allow people to say "We dealt with that." Saving a conflict topic for the last agenda item in a meeting, for example, might be a way of guaranteeing that the discussion only lasts for five minutes.

Another habit that could be called avoidance is talking about an issue with everyone except the person directly involved — e.g., complaining to co-workers about Andrew, but not saying anything to Andrew himself about it (which is what that group who wanted to evict two members was doing). In this scenario, a problem may be talked about at great length, but if the discussion doesn't involve the right people, it's still avoidance.

Finally, if you divide group life into the task side and the social side [see Chapter 16], you can avoid a conflict on one side by retreating into the other. If a work group can't agree on how to do a task, for example, they can say "Let's take a break and go out to happy hour." If they're having a personality clash, they could say "Let's forget all this personal stuff and just get down to work."

Again, these may be wise strategies in the short run, as long as you recognize that you'll eventually need strategies to actually resolve what has to be resolved.

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3. Stella Ting-Toomey, "Managing Identity Issues in Intercultural Conflict Communication: Developing a Multicultural Identity Attunement Lens," in The Oxford Handbook of Multicultural Identity, Verónica Benet-Martínez and Ying-yi Hong (eds.), Oxford University Press, New York, 2014, pp. 485-506

One other point: the chapter subtitle, "Can't we all just get along?" — or its corollary, "It's not worth fighting about" — can be helpful or extremely unhelpful, depending on who's saying the words. If the issue at hand is your own concern, then telling people it's not worth fighting about is fine; that just means you're choosing the accommodating style. But what if someone *else* says this about your issue? That's a way of defining the concern as trivial, which is likely to be perceived as insulting and will probably escalate the conflict. So if you're a third party or bystander and want to say those phrases to help out, first consider how they will be perceived by the different parties.

One of the main reasons people avoid conflict is because of the emotional toll of "rolling in the mud" and hashing things out. Picturing how ugly things might get is normal, and gets people in an economic frame of mind, asking "Is it worth it? Will the benefit outweigh the cost?" In some situations you might conclude that it's not — say, if you get frustrated with a project group a week before the semester ends, and decide "One more week and I won't have to see these people anymore." But there are three questions to consider if you are deciding on the value of bringing things up vs. keeping quiet:

- **Will it have consequences beyond this immediate time**? You may not see the group after the project is done, but if the project ends up being done badly because of unresolved issues, it will affect your grade. As a teacher, I have often heard from students who waited until after the semester was over to tell me they thought their group was doing a poor job, but didn't say anything to the group. Likewise, I've read comments by movie producers and directors who seemed aware that they were producing a "stinker" but let it go, perhaps resulting in huge losses. (See the discussion of "The Adventures of Pluto Nash" and other business disasters in Chapter 5). The decision to keep your mouth shut may be a rational one — or may be an example of flawed thinking. Speaking of which…
- **Is the emotional cost already too high for you**? Students sometimes tell me they dread group meetings due to unresolved issues, describing the anxiety symptoms and physical effects they suffer when they think about walking into the group meeting, but then add, "But it's not worth dealing with it because talking about it would be even worse." Perhaps, or perhaps they could be making a poor economic decision: putting up with weeks of misery to avoid an hour of uncomfortable discussion. A child with a splinter in their finger might beg an adult not to pull the splinter out because it will hurt, not acknowledging that it *already* hurts, and a quick pinch will relieve the pain for good.
- **Are you missing an opportunity to learn and grow**? Dealing with a situation head on can help you develop your skills at conflict resolution; not doing so may deny you an opportunity to learn valuable life lessons.

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EXERCISE: CONFLICT ANIMALS

This exercise works best with larger numbers of students; 15 may work well, 25 definitely would. It is also one that does not require a lot of explaining up front — in fact, that may hinder the process. I put the discussion questions up on slides so that students can keep referring back to them.

- Question 1: "When you are in conflict situations, what is your preferred, instinctive conflict style? (as opposed to what you have been trained or required to do). Are you a **lion**, a **puppy**, an **owl**, or a **turtle**? Based on your preferred style, go to one corner of the room to meet others who share your style."

  (Let students know which corner the lions should meet in, where the puppies should go, etc. Also let them know that they are allowed to change corners if the discussion makes them feel that they are in the wrong corner).

- Question 2 (in groups): What made you choose that animal? What are the qualities you share with that animal in conflict situations?

  (For example, if they chose "turtle," is that because of slowness, or because of having a "shell"? Encourage them to think metaphorically).

- Question 3: What are advantages and disadvantages of that conflict style?
- Question 4: What messages do you want to send to the other groups? (For example, "When you're in a conflict with an owl, make sure your arguments are logical" or "If you get frustrated with a turtle, it doesn't help to just yell at them to come out of their shell")

After 20 minutes, have a representative from each group share the key points from their discussion. The teacher can then wrap things up with an appreciation of difference: although each of the animals may get frustrated with the others, all can appreciate that if everyone in the world was their type of animal, things would not go well.

17.4 WHAT EXACERBATES CONFLICT

We've looked at why conflict arises in the first place; let's take that a step further and look at why conflict sometimes escalates into an unhealthy, potentially even toxic, form. This is not an exhaustive list of negative factors, but may help you recognize why things can go so wrong sometimes.

1. Pride and ego. Do you know about the longest trial McDonalds has ever been involved in? It's not the spilled coffee case (described in Chapter 8.3), which was a normal length for a lawsuit. This case, *McDonald's Corporation v. Steel & Morris*, took place in England, and holds the record for the longest-running libel case in English history.

It began with a small group of protestors handing out leaflets in front of a McDonald's in London, accusing the restaurant of a number of things, from animal cruelty and environmental damage to paying their workers low wages. McDonald's sued for libel in 1990. English libel cases take a while in part because the court goes through each accusation and determines if it's true. The court ruled that some of the accusations were true, but that others were libelous, and the defendants were ordered to pay a modest amount. So McDonald's "won" the case — but in winning, they racked up ten years of legal fees, proved that many of the accusations against them were in fact accurate, and became the subject of a documentary called *McLibel*, which has been viewed by more than 25 million people. Keep in mind: the party that files a lawsuit always has the option to drop it, so McDonald's could have ended this trial at any point. I should also point out that originally they asked the five protesters to apologize, and three did so: the case was only against the two people who wouldn't back down.

This is not the only example of a fight extending far longer than it should have because one or both parties have too much pride. To see a recent television show that depicts how pride destroys lives, watch *Beef* (starring Stephen Yuen and Ali Wong), about a minor road rage incident that escalates beyond any rational level.

2. Short-term thinking. It's possible to overthink things, especially when it comes to trying to predict consequences far down the road. Still, it's better to consider those consequences than to ignore them. Helen Caldicott, an Australian anti-nuclear activist, put it well in 1984: "If you don't like the guy in the other end of your life boat, you don't drill a hole in his end to fix him." On a literal level, there are countries that are not currently at war, but that are dealing with land mines planted during a war decades ago, with civilians still getting killed by those mines. That in itself is a huge problem, but it's also a good metaphor for things people do in interpersonal conflicts to solve a short-term problem, not realizing how they could "blow up" years later. If you find yourself in any kind of ongoing feud with someone, at some point you should ask yourself "How will this war end?" and "What happens after that?"

3. Attribution is not a flaw in thinking, but a necessity of life. It refers to the reasons people assign to other people's behavior: why is that person driving so fast? Why did your girlfriend not answer your call? Why is that stranger frowning? Some attributions are internal ("That's just the kind of person they are") and some are external ("They need to do that for circumstantial reasons").

The problem is not that we engage in this process constantly: it's that we often get it wrong. There is a bias that is so common that psychologists call it the **Fundamental Attribution Error** (or FAE): It says that when you are assigning reasons to other people's behavior, you tend to chalk it up to their disposition or character: *they* are doing 92 mph on the highway because they are a speed demon; *they* are late to the meeting because they are inconsiderate and self-centered. However, when people ask you why you're acting the way you do, you explain it in terms of external factors: I'm going 92 mph because I have to catch that flight to Miami; I'm late to the meeting because of road construction.

"Speed" by Arup Malakar, shared with CC-BY 2.0 license

There's a natural reason for this tendency: you don't know about the circumstances in other people's lives, so of course you think the main reason must be "who they are." (I've only met one kind-hearted person who said, "When I see someone driving 92 mph, I assume they must be in labor.") Psychologists have proven that the FAE is a strong pattern, but it's not impossible to overcome: it just takes some conscious effort to reverse the usual pattern.

How does the FAE exacerbate conflict? Start with how the different attributions sound to other people. "I'm late because of road construction" may sound reasonable, unless it's coming from a friend or co-worker who's always late to everything; there's always a reason it isn't their fault, which after a while sounds like "excuses, excuses, excuses." Why don't they take responsibility for checking road conditions first, or leaving early so that they might have to wait for you instead of you always having to wait for them? Because of this, if the conflict erupts into a shouting match, some of that shouting is bound to be you trying to get the other person to look at flaws or decisions they've been ignoring.

Now let's switch sides and look at how it feels when someone says "It's just who you are." It's inherently personal, it sounds fatalistic, and it doesn't acknowledge that there are actually unforeseen conditions you had to deal with. So you shout back, "You don't understand!" and then double-down on the circumstantial reasons for your behavior. This will continue to escalate unless one or both of you is willing to recognize the FAE and try to counteract it. That means listening to them when they tell you about situational factors you weren't aware of, and also being willing to admit that your own personality and decisions might be a factor worth acknowledging.

4. Technology can aggravate conflict as well. "Flaming," for instance, is the term used for the well-documented phenomenon where people are far more vicious over technological communication channels than they would be in face-to-face conversations. Why does this happen? Sometimes the culprit is anonymity: if no one knows who you are, you might feel more confident in showing your ugly side.

It's not just that nobody knows who you are, though: it's also the tendency to forget that the people you're writing about are human beings. I think this is the reason there are "road rage" incidents more often than "sidewalk rage" incidents: it's easy to get mad at "that black Toyota" if you can't see the person inside it, whereas if someone bumps into you on the sidewalk and apologizes, you can see the apologetic look on their face. This can even happen with people you know well: when texting or emailing a friend, you can't see their face so you might say hurtful things without realizing how they are reacting to it.

This is especially true when using "lean media" instead of "rich media" (a distinction we'll explore in Chapter 19). Rich media refers to channels that carry more information, such as Zoom or FaceTime, in comparison to channels that don't allow you to see or hear the recipient (such as emails). The odds of misunderstanding are much higher when you're using a lean channel, which suggests that if you're upset with someone, wait for a chance to tell them in person or over a video call instead of texting. The other thing about video calls are that they are **synchronous**, meaning that all participants have to participate simultaneously in order for them to work, as opposed to **asynchronous** channels like podcasts or video recordings, where the time when the message is created is separate from the time when the receiver gets it. Synchronous channels allow a back-and-forth discussion, which avoids problems with asynchronous channels.

To illustrate: imagine being upset with a friend who didn't show up for a lunch date, so you send an angry text. They don't reply, so you follow up with "Why are you ignoring me?" Your blood is still boiling, so you keep sending increasingly angry messages. Meanwhile, they got in a car crash and are being whisked away in an ambulance. When they regain consciousness and get their phone back, the first thing they see is 17 furious texts and 4 voicemails from you about what an unforgivable person you are.

Finally, there are two things technology allows that can make things worse. The first is **ghosting** — not responding to the other person. (I think Alexander Graham Bell would have found this ironic; he invented telephones as a way for people to talk to each other, and now they are used as a way for people to *avoid* talking to each other.) There are times when this is understandable (such as when you told someone with a crush on you that there's no future in this relationship, but they won't let it go), but other times when it creates great anxiety and uncertainty for others. Consult the chapter on Ethics (Chapter 3) for guidance on when ghosting is acceptable and when it might be a violation of the Respect or Equity components of the TARES model.

Technology also allows a person who is upset with someone else to **take the grievance public**, telling the whole world about it instead of dealing directly with the individual. I don't imagine it feels good to find out from your news feed or a "diss track" that someone is unhappy with you; it would be preferable for them to contact you personally first.

Technology may allow conflict resolution where it would not otherwise be possible (for instance, if you are thousands of miles apart from the person you are upset with), but careful thought about what technology does best and what it doesn't do well can prevent a minor infraction from turning into an all-out war. Perhaps you decide it's time to put your phone down and just talk instead.

17.5 WHAT HELPS TO RESOLVE CONFLICT

If conflict can end up providing benefits, and can be done in healthy ways, you may still be wondering: how do you get there? Here are a few strategies that can help:

1. **Listening**. If Chapter 4 sounds like a pitch for listening being a magical cure-all, that's not too far from the mark. I do believe that listening is the single best technique for resolving conflict, and much of that chapter could be put to good use in conflict situations. The reason people raise their voices in conflict is because they want to be heard, so letting others know that you do hear them can go a long way. Of course, Chapter 4 also explains why listening is hard work, and listening can be particularly challenging when you're upset with the person who wants you to listen to them, and you think what they're saying is ridiculous — but do it anyway.
2. **Turn-taking**. One reason listening can be very difficult in conflict situations is because you are so eager to say your side of the story. If you give the other person a chance to speak their mind, will they also give you that chance? It's not guaranteed, but if you do both feel like you have the opportunity to say whatever you want to say, that is tremendously helpful. This is something professional mediators, judges, and couples counselors enforce, but even without an outside referee, if you can get your opponent to agree to the ground rule of equal time, you can make progress. Of course, the important thing isn't to time the length of the speaking turns down to the second, but to make sure that each person is uninterrupted until they have finished what they have to say. Without a referee, that may be hard to enforce, but the best way to establish the rule is not to keep injecting "Let me finish, let me finish" but to wait *your* turn and let *them* finish without jumping in yourself. Model the good behavior, and hopefully it will be contagious.

“stop” by Christine592, shared with CC-BY-ND 2.0 license

3. Pick the right time and place. Implied in the technology discussion above is the principle that being able to speak face to face is optimal, especially in an environment without distractions and outside interruptions. The turn-taking principle also implies that you will have adequate time for both parties to say everything on their mind.

Do you want there to be others present? Having other people along for moral support and/or to serve as witnesses can be helpful, or it may be better to speak in private. Sometimes the best way to deal with unhealthy group dynamics, for instance, is to speak to a group member individually instead of trying to work things out on a group level. People generally don’t like to feel trapped, so creating a “set-up” or misleading people about how the discussion will go can be disastrous (for example, if you bring a team along for your side, but the other person didn’t know you would and feels outnumbered, they’re likely to get defensive).

It’s also worth thinking about energy level and exhaustion. If a group is worn out from an all-day project, adding an extra hour at the end to work on interpersonal conflicts might not be wise. There are many variables to ponder, but it's generally better to make conscious choices than to forget that factors in the physical environment can make a difference.

4. I-statements. In conflict situations, keep in mind that the T in the TARES model stands for Truthfulness, which requires you to avoid saying things you don't really know (listed as one of the 10 forms of lying in Chapter 3). One thing you can't assume you know is what's going on in other people's minds — what they are thinking, feeling, or intending — so you shouldn't talk about that. Stick to the things you do know: what you yourself are thinking, feeling, or intending, collectively known as "I-Statements."

This may seem risky, since it means making yourself vulnerable by exposing your inner mind, but paradoxically, it's also safe, since you're talking about things no one else can deny. If you say "You're trying to undermine this group by pushing your own agenda," that's likely to lead to a lot of denial and counterarguments: "No, you're wrong, I'm not…." But I-statements are impervious to "No, you're wrong" responses. (Imagine telling someone your favorite color is orange, and they respond with "No, you're wrong, your favorite color is blue.")

Granted, it may take a lot of skill to figure out how to express your thoughts in I-statements, and just beginning the sentence with "I feel" is not always enough. ("I feel you're being selfish and stubborn" is *not* an I-statement, since it's talking about the other person's thoughts, feelings, and intentions). So how could you rephrase "You're trying to undermine this group by pushing your own agenda"? If tacking on "I feel" at the beginning won't make it a true I-statement, how about saying "I get angry when you don't listen to other people's ideas" or "I'm concerned that there are other agendas going on that we don't know about"? If the other person can't legitimately respond with "No, you're not angry" or "No, you're not concerned," then you've used a valid I-statement and you're safe.

5. Avoid dirty fighting techniques. This includes "gaslighting" (making the other person question their own sanity or perceptions of reality — SEE BOX 17.1), name-calling, bringing in unrelated issues as a diversion, and deliberating employing the fallacies listed in Chapter 7.

6. Respecting difference. One of the main take-aways from the "Conflict Animals" exercise described above is that the world would not function well if everyone was an owl, or a lion. In the Thomas-Kilmann grid, if everyone employed the "competing" style, there would be a lot of dead bodies, but if everyone just agreed to go along with other people's ideas (accommodating style), there would be nothing to agree to. Different types of people may get irritated with each other's conflict styles, but it helps to step back and appreciate what others bring to the table talents that you don't.

7. Focus on the common goal or potential benefit. Sometimes people get engrossed in the us vs. them mentality and need reminding that there are common goals you are all striving for. Also, since working through conflict can be draining or sometimes feel hopeless, it's helpful to remind people of the light at the end of the tunnel: "If we get through this, think of what we can achieve."

Finally, think about what happens if you win. In a win-lose scenario, people sometimes respond to achieving their goals by gloating, saying to the opposing side "You lost; get over it." It feels good to take a victory lap, but it's also wise to think about how that makes the other side feel.

First, it reinforces the whole idea of "sides" instead of the alternative view that we're all in this together and all benefit from growth. Second, it puts them in the "loser mentality," licking their wounds and plotting revenge in the next round. Some conflict scholars talk about a "latency" period, when there doesn't appear to be any conflict, but it has just gone underground and will rear its head again when the opportunity arises. Think of two well-known fantasy series villains, Voldemort in the *Harry Potter* universe, and Sauron in the *Lord of the Rings* series. What do they have in common? They both used to have earthly bodies until they were "defeated," but lurked in disembodied form for a long time before they rose again. Why is this such a common trope in fantasy series? Perhaps because it resembles patterns in human history?

To get away from that seemingly endless cycle, an important step is one that is sometimes forgotten in the conflict process: the "patching up" phase. If you handle that stage well, no one feels like a "loser," and everyone instead feels like a mutually beneficial resolution has been found. There won't be a revenge match, and you can get on with the business of being a well-functioning team.

BOX 17.5: GASLIGHTING

Imagine making a movie that does moderately well at the box office, and then seven decades later the title becomes an extremely common term — but no one remembers the movie it came from. That's what happened with George Cukor's 1944 film *Gaslight*, a thriller about a schemer who manipulates his wife into thinking she's going insane. (Cukor was the director; the original author was a playwright named Patrick Hamilton; John Van Druten, Walter Reisch, and John Balderston turned it into a movie screenplay). It's set in pre-electricity era England, where the houses are lit by lamps that burn gas supplied by the city.

If you've ever used the word "gaslighting" but didn't know its origin or what the psychological technique has to do with Victorian era illumination, read on — or better yet, watch the classic movie: it's really well-written. The plot is complex, but the basic version is this: Paula (Ingrid Bergman) is wooed by Gregory (Charles Boyer), who, it turns out, only married her because he heard about some jewels her mother used to own, and he wants to find them.

Gregory needs time to scour the attic for those jewels, so he tells Paula he's going out, then sneaks into the sealed-off attic and pokes around. When he fires up the light in the attic, it makes the lights in the rest of the house flicker, which Paula notices. When he returns, she tells him about the flickering and the footsteps she heard, and Gregory's response is to accuse her of hallucinating. He proceeds to launch a campaign to convince her she is losing her mind (doing things like buying her a brooch, stealing it, then asking her to wear it to an event, and scowling with concern when she can't find it). The best reason to find the original film is to watch the sneaky techniques he uses to make her question her sanity, which are so successful that eventually she wants to check herself into an asylum.

Decades later, marriage counselors started using the term *gaslighting* to refer to any manipulation technique that makes your partner question their perception of reality. These techniques include **double-bind messages,** in which the source sends one message ("I'm not angry") at the same time they send a contradictory message (an angry tone in their voice), and makes the receiver struggle to determine which is the "real" message. If the receiver points out the angry tone, the sender just denies it, leaving the receiver to question their ability to interpret nonverbal signals.

Another variant is the "I'm just joking" ploy, where the source sends a disturbing message, followed by an explanation that they were just kidding (even though there were no indications that the message was funny), often adding an accusation that the receiver has no sense of humor. Around 2010, the term *gaslighting* entered the general lexicon when public figures started denying saying things that were captured on tape, and it was the audience who scoured through the recordings and wondered if they could have possibly misinterpreted anything, rather than the source owning up to what they said. The term was also applied to politicians who asked their constituents to deny their own direct experience and accept the politician's version of reality instead. This led some modern comedians to slightly update a line from the 1933 Marx Brothers movie *Duck Soup*: "Who are you going to believe: me, or your lying eyes?"

The reason the term became so popular seems to be due in part to how many different kinds of people can use it in various contexts (such as companies who describe employees as "their most valuable asset" while at the same time exposing them to hazardous conditions). It's also due to a fundamental vulnerability of communication: yes, sometimes perceptions can't be trusted, memories get distorted, and it's hard to know how to interpret meaning.

CHAPTER 18: MEDIA PART I - HOW TO THINK ABOUT COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

18.1 A TALE OF TWO GENERATIONS

What role does media play in your life? Let's explore that question by looking at the lives of two hypothetical characters three generations apart.

J.B.'s Life

Photo from Unsplash

The year is 1965. John Bartholomew — "J.B." — Martin is 39 years old, married, with three children in their teens. They live in a three-bedroom house in Berwyn, Illinois, and J.B. works as a porter and sometimes conductor for a passenger railroad company that would later become Amtrak. Every morning, before heading off to work, J.B. reads the newspaper and discusses some of the stories with his wife, Katherine. In the evenings, sometimes the family argues about what to watch on television, which they all have to agree on since there's only one TV set in the house. Occasionally, something in a show upsets him, and J.B. reacts by yelling at the television set.

The Sunday paper includes a TV Guide (a listing of every show that will be on the five broadcast channels in his area), and J.B. circles the movies he or his family might want to watch throughout the week. Once, a James Bond movie aired at midnight on a Friday, and he got his oldest son out of bed to watch it with him. The previous year, J.B.'s cousin Ronnie in Ohio had been contacted by the Nielsen ratings people, and Ronnie's family spent a week writing down everything they watched in a small notebook, which was how television stations gathered data about viewership. Nobody has ever collected any data about what J.B.'s family watches.

His family has the TV on for about four hours a day, which is close to the national average. When he gets home from his job, J.B. often wants to listen to music instead, and he puts jazz records on the turntable and sings along. He is a pretty good jazz singer, but there are no recordings to prove it. No one in the house owns headphones, and sometimes the children complain about the music he listens to. He doesn't want to be too domineering about his musical tastes, so he lets the children listen to their own records, but he has mixed feelings about the styles they choose.

J.B. also has a hobby of growing exotic plants, and when a cactus finally blooms after 17 years, he takes photos with his analog camera. He has to wait until the 36-exposure film roll is finished, and then brings it to a drug store to get developed and waits a week to find out how the pictures turned out. Three of the photos turned out well, and he carries those three around in an envelope in case anyone wants to see them.

A landline telephone hangs on the wall in J.B.'s kitchen, and two other phones are connected to the same number. Next to the kitchen phone is a messy handwritten list of phone numbers, with many crossed off or inserted between others. J.B. rarely looks at that list, since he has memorized the numbers of most of his family and friends. When Ronnie calls, J.B. likes to talk to him for a long time, but the kids get anxious because there's no way to know if their friends are trying to get through on the same phone line.

While cleaning one day, J.B. comes across the box of letters he and Katherine wrote to each other during their courtship. He considers throwing them out, but asks his children if anyone want to hang onto the letters, and his middle child shows interest.

Katherine passes away 20 years later, and J.B. lives a few more years after that. He does not make it to 2024, the year his great-granddaughter, Jarice, gets a job with his old employer, Amtrak.

Jarice's Life

Photo from Unsplash

Jarice is 23 years old, a recent college graduate with a degree in Communication Studies, and her new job with Amtrak is working remotely as a "social media specialist." Jarice's mother has only a vague conception of what that is, even though she can overhear Jarice on Zoom meetings several times a day. Her mother also has trouble being able to tell when Jarice is working or not working, since Jarice rapidly shifts between managing Amtrak's social media posts and checking her own personal social media sites.

When Jarice applied for the job, one of the things Amtrak asked about was how many followers she had on her personal accounts, and they were impressed that the answer was in the thousands. Although she is not aware of her great-grandfather's singing skills, she inherited the gift; using just her phone, she records videos of herself singing, edits them, and posts them online. The most popular of these singing videos has 82,726 views, although Jarice is as puzzled as anyone as to why that one did so well but similar follow-up videos were only seen by a fraction of that number. In addition to the music videos, she has 5,329 pictures stored on her phone, and roughly three times that number stored on the cloud. She posts about a dozen of those photos on social media every week.

Jarice's cell phone is in her hand for a significant portion of the day, but she rarely uses it to make actual phone calls, instead preferring to send text messages, often with photos or video clips attached. Other than her own number, she doesn't remember anyone else's phone numbers, which created a big problem when she lost her phone on a trip to Houston and had to figure out how to recreate her contact list from scratch. When driving anywhere outside her neighborhood, she uses the GPS app in her phone to give her directions. At night, before going to sleep, she plugs in the charger on her night stand and closes out of the apps that are open — sometimes surprised at how many have been running all day long.

There are four television sets in her home, but Jarice prefers watching shows on a tablet. She has paid subscriptions to four streaming video services, but often watches pirated shows and movies. She recommends shows and movies to her friends, but has trouble remembering what platform they were on. The platforms, on the other hand, remember everything she has watched, and use sophisticated algorithms to recommend new shows for her. They even know when she pauses scenes and backs up to rewatch them. After the shows end, she is usually asked to let the platform know how much she liked them.

In addition to the television and movie streaming services, she watches YouTube frequently, and subscribes to 23 channels, some by her friends. She tries to remember to like all of her friends' videos, even the ones she doesn't particularly care for, just out of loyalty and politeness. She can't help noticing that some of the videos posted by her friends receive only a few dozen views, and she thinks she ought to do more to advise them on how to increase those numbers. Most of the videos she watches, especially the mainstream ones, start with popup ads, but she intently watches the countdown clock next to the small "SKIP" button in the corner of the screen, and takes satisfaction in hitting that little “x” a split second after it appears. She has never bought anything as a result of those popups, and is sometimes puzzled by why certain types of ads keep cropping up.

She also subscribes to a music service which provides her with access to over 100,000 songs, but still enjoys the “retro” feeling of going to record stores and buying vinyl LPs. She particularly likes having friends over to her house and listening to records together — a communal feeling she just doesn’t get from listening to digital music through earbuds. Once, when her friend Morgan was over, they put on “old school” jazz records and Morgan asked about a cardboard box in the corner of the room. The box contained her great-grandfather’s letters, and Jarice and Morgan spent hours reading correspondence between J.B. and Katharine. While it was fun hearing about their courtship, what the young women enjoyed most was catching glimpses into what life was like 59 years earlier. Jarice wonders if anyone will be reading her 2024 social media posts in the year 2083.

18.2 A BRIEF HISTORY OF MEDIA

The Intersection of the Corporate and the Personal

Both J.B. in 1965 and Jarice in 2024 are frequent consumers of media, although in starkly different ways. In this discussion, I will be using the term "**media**" (the plural of "medium") to refer to any channels used to convey information from a source to a receiver, whether they rely on electronics or not: handwritten letters, photographs, Post-It notes on refrigerators, telephones, television, vinyl records, cell phones, text messaging, tablet computers, video conferencing, etc.

Of course, both J.B. and Jarice also spent parts of their day communicating without the use of media: speaking face to face, singing, hugging. I'll use the term "**communication technology**" to distinguish machinery or objects used to convey information to others (telephones, computers, cell phones) from technology used for other purposes (ovens, cars, lawnmowers).

A fundamental point about communication technology is that it costs money, unlike, for instance, people talking face to face. This means that even though this technology can be used to facilitate conversations between ordinary people, somewhere in that communication process you will find a **business**. When it comes to mass communication and entertainment, the business aspects are more obvious: when you watch a Disney movie, you know it took a lot of people and equipment to make that movie and that it must be paid for somehow. When you send a text message to a friend, you might not think about who is funding that — but someone is.

Tracing the history of communication technology, you see the same pattern over and over: a new form of technology was invented (printing press, telegraph, telephone, still camera, film camera, microphone, vinyl record, compact disc, cell phone, etc.), and initially that equipment was so expensive that only a few people or companies could afford it. That gave rise to book publishing houses, newspaper and magazine publishers, movie studios, record labels, radio and television networks, phone companies, and more, all making their money by reaching the public.

The public enjoyed these new forms of entertainment and connection, and in many cases the cost to the consumer was not direct — such as television shows being paid for by advertisements — so the public didn't have to think much about the business side. Even decades ago, when you were on the phone to your Aunt Louisa in Rio de Janeiro, you might be aware of your phone bill, but during the call itself you could just enjoy the fact that you were able to talk to someone thousands of miles away. If you went to a movie theater, once you were in your seat you could forget about how much you just paid for the ticket and instead focus on being in love with Morgan Freeman.

In other words, media always involves a blend of the personal and the corporate. As a television viewer, you might get excited about watching "your" show, with all the connotations of personal connection and meaning, while the executives who produced that show are thinking about advertising revenue and syndication profits. In the words of media scholar Robert Kolker:

> All media are owned, often by enormous corporations. We need to understand this, but not let it obscure the fact that, no matter how big the corporate structure of ownership has become, we still respond to the media as individuals. We have "our shows."[1]

Orality vs. Literacy

To examine the role of media in your life, try stepping back and imagining life without any form of communication technology — which was life for several hundred millennia before humans started writing on stone tablets roughly 6,000 years ago. When humans first developed **writing**, what changed?

One person who spent a lot of time thinking about this question was a Jesuit priest named Walter Ong, a man with a curiosity so intense that it led him to become a historian, philosopher, and professor of English literature in addition to the priesthood. As a historian, he noted that, out of all the civilizations that have existed on planet earth, only a small minority ever had a system of writing. And as soon as writing arrived, it created a divide between the people who could use this new system and the people who couldn't: **the literate vs. the non-literate** (or "illiterate," but that word has negative connotations). The divide existed on a societal level as well as on an individual one — some early cultures had writing systems and others didn't, but even within a literate society, only some people knew how to read and write.

What difference did that make? In Ong's book *Orality and Literacy*,[2] he showed that the creation of a writing system leads to fundamental shifts in many facets of society: who has power, what is valued, and even how people think. Ong argued that in oral societies, for instance, people view history as a series of cycles instead of as a linear evolution.

You are obviously in the literate category or you wouldn't be reading this book, so it may be hard to grasp what life would be like without books, websites, photographs, written contracts, or reference resources where you can look something up. How does a society retain knowledge? How would young people learn?

For one thing, you'd have to rely very heavily on people's **memory**: in an oral culture, if knowledge isn't in people's heads, it doesn't exist anywhere. Non-literate societies have to have a good system for remembering things, such as repeating simple sayings, and designating a few community members as memory-keepers. The

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1. Kolker, R. (2009). Media studies: An introduction. Wiley-Blackwell. P. 6.

2. Ong, W. (2002. Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word (2nd ed.). Routledge.

griots in western Africa, for example, are the "living archive of the people's traditions,"[3] musicians (since songs are a good way to remember things), and advisors to the royal family: very powerful people![4]

Once humans developed writing, the world was introduced to something new: **the document**, a permanent version of words that can be referred to at any later time. In an oral culture, words only exist in the immediate present, and once a sentence has been spoken, it disappears. Documents lighten the burden of having to remember what was said, and give people a way to resolve differences in memory. Rather than bickering over what was said (often called a "he said, she said" argument), they can go back and look at what was written down. Naturally, the documented version is going to resolve that battle quickly, and if the battle involves a mixture of recorded words and spoken words, documents will have more influence than memories of conversations.

Take a situation where you are living in an apartment, paying monthly rent to a landlord. One month you run into some unanticipated expenses and can't pay the rent on time, which you explain to the landlord and they verbally agree to let you pay late. But later something goes wrong and it ends up in small claims court: what's going to have more sway, a description of a remembered conversation in a hallway, or the lease that spells out "tenant must pay their rent by the first of the month"? This is why, when people do reach informal agreements like that, they are advised to "get it in writing." It's a way of saying that communication that uses permanent media is more powerful than oral communication that can't be documented.

This is an example of why **literacy is power**, and why history is full of cultural clashes in which a literate society subdues an oral one — such as white European settlers in America taking the land from the native tribes, who struggled to figure out how to respond to the argument "We have a deed that proves we own this land."

Another clue that literacy is power comes from the fear among slave owners in pre-Civil War America that their slaves might learn to read and write. At one point, the state of Virginia had laws on the books stating that "any slave or free person of color found at any school for teaching, reading or writing by day or night" could be whipped 20 lashes, and a white person caught teaching "free coloured persons or slaves" to read could be fined between \$10 and \$100 and serve up to two months in jail.[5] (A depiction of the fear of slaves becoming literate can be seen in the 2013 film *12 Years a Slave*). If slaves gain the power to read, the slave owners seem to be saying, we're in deep trouble.[6]

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3. Bebey, Francis (1969, 1975). African Music, A people's art. Lawrence Hill Books. See also Hale, Thomas A. (1998). Griots and griottes: Masters of words and music. Indiana University Press.

4. Griots are an old concept, but in case you think the role has become defunct, watch Zubin Cooper talk about his life as a griot in 2017: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dy-LBR1a2U0

5. Davis, Edward M. Extracts from the American Slave Code, 3rd ed. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, 1845

6. A similar struggle occurred in the early 1600s with the first English translation of the Bible, the King James Bible: it was fought tooth and nail by the

Over time, of course, literacy rates steadily rose, although they are still low in some demographic categories and areas of the world: in Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, literacy among women is still sitting at 52%. But assigning numbers to literacy means having to pin down exactly what "literacy" means, and just because you can read basic words doesn't mean you can interpret "legalese" in a contract, or that you fully understand your rights when you post a video on YouTube. Even people who have been to college can be exploited by lawyers who write contracts or terms of use in language they can't follow.

The problem with our discussion so far is that it presumes writing is the only way to record communication, a presumption which became inaccurate when **electronics** entered the picture. In the late 1800s, inventors like Thomas Edison and Emile Berliner were figuring out how to capture sound on cylinders and discs, and the Lumiere brothers created film (or "moving pictures," shortened to "movies"). In the ensuing decades we got vinyl records, tape recordings, and analog videotape, and then digital media took over. As for that discussion with the landlord about paying the rent late, you no longer have to get it in writing as long as you record the conversation on your phone. In other words, there are now more forms of permanence than there ever were before, and the word "document" can refer to a video or audio recording as well as to printed material.

The switch to electronic media also brought with it a shift in what "literacy is power" means: now it can mean knowing how to effectively use electronic media, how to become a successful vlogger, and how to gain large followings (which is theoretically possible even if you can't read and write). The success of presidential candidates or scientists might hinge on how well they grasp the potential of social media, or how good they look on television.

Take the example of Bill Nye the Science Guy, who is well known to millions and is called on as a science expert in many situations — not because his science background is so impressive (he only has a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering), but because he uses media so well; he should be given an honorary PhD in being a talk show guest.

Imagine being a teenager with so much power that the White House calls on you as a political consultant , which happened to some TikTok stars in March of 2022, garnering this *Washington Post* headline:

religious leaders who liked being able to tell the common folk what was in the Bible. If those commoners can read it themselves, what happens to our power? McGrath, A. (2001), In The Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How it Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture. Doubleday.

The White House is briefing TikTok stars about the war in Ukraine

With millions getting their information about the war from the platform, the administration wants to get its message to top content creators

6 min 252

By Taylor Lorenz

March 11, 2022 at 11:23 a.m. EST

Of course, by the time you read this you may be asking "What is TikTok?" or "Why aren't you talking about _______ [fill in the latest media platform that didn't exist in 2025]?" What will the future of media look like? I would be a fool to try to guess, but at least I can propose ways to classify and think about media — some dimensions and variables that will remain relevant no matter what new invention comes down the pike.

The dimensions I will explore are:

- 1) **Reach & ratio**: how many receivers can that communication technology reach? What ratio of senders to receivers is feasible?
- 2) **Gatekeepers**: are there people in the way of a sender being able to broadcast a message to the audience, or is the sender free to send messages without barriers?
- 3) **Permanence**: is the communication permanent, and if so, in what ways? Is there a difference between theoretical permanence and practical permanence?
- 4) **Richness**: how much information can the channel convey, and in what combinations?
- 5) **Personalization**: is the communication personalized to a particular target, or generalized for a broad audience?

The contrast between J.B. and Jarice's lives is a framework for examining each of these questions, and you can now see why I emphasized certain details in the stories.

18.3 DIMENSIONS OF MEDIA

Reach & Ratio

J.B. showing his cactus photos to a few friends and family members illustrates that, before electronic media came along, the number of receivers or audience members a typical person could reach was very limited. Even if you were a presidential candidate, before microphones and speakers you could only speak to a few hundred people at a time, depending on the strength of your voice. There were forms of mass communication 150 years ago — printed books, newspapers, magazines — but they did not allow for immediate communication or rich channels; they contained only words and, occasionally, pictures.

Theodore Roosevelt orating without assisting technology. From the Library of Congress

The advent of radio and television brought with it a new word, **broadcasting**, to refer to the ability to reach a very broad audience in real time. This made an enormous difference in fields like politics, where a leader could address an entire country at once, or entertainment, where a singer like Ella Fitzgerald or Elvis Presley could reach into millions of homes. The ratio of senders to receivers, in other words, jumped from 1-to-hundreds to 1-to-millions, and has continued to climb.

Eleanor Roosevelt speaks into microphones (photo from the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library)

J.B. was accustomed to being only in the audience role, one of millions of watchers of television shows or listeners to the radio or records; he never had the opportunity to be on television or the radio himself. In 1965, the ratio of senders to receivers was extreme: while almost everyone was in the audience role, only a very small, select group of people got to create the content. The technology simply didn't allow everyone to be in the sender role: the frequency range of radio stations went from 88 megahertz (MHz) to around 108 MHz, and radio stations with frequencies too close to another station would cause interference, so a particular geographic area could support no more than 20 radio stations. With the limited number of hours in a day, it's clear why there just wasn't room for most people to get on the radio and express their opinions or play a song. In America, the question of "who owns the airwaves" was resolved in favor of the government, so anyone who wanted to create their own radio station had to get a Federal Communication Commission (FCC) license, and other countries made equivalent decisions.

When television came along a few decades later, it followed a similar path: there were only a few channels, owned and operated by media corporations but under the watchful eye of the government, which could take away their FCC license. The owners of those media companies, not to mention the people they chose to put on the air, were mainly white men, and as a result, minority voices were seldom heard and the representation of other races, gender categories, and disabilities was rare or problematic.[1]

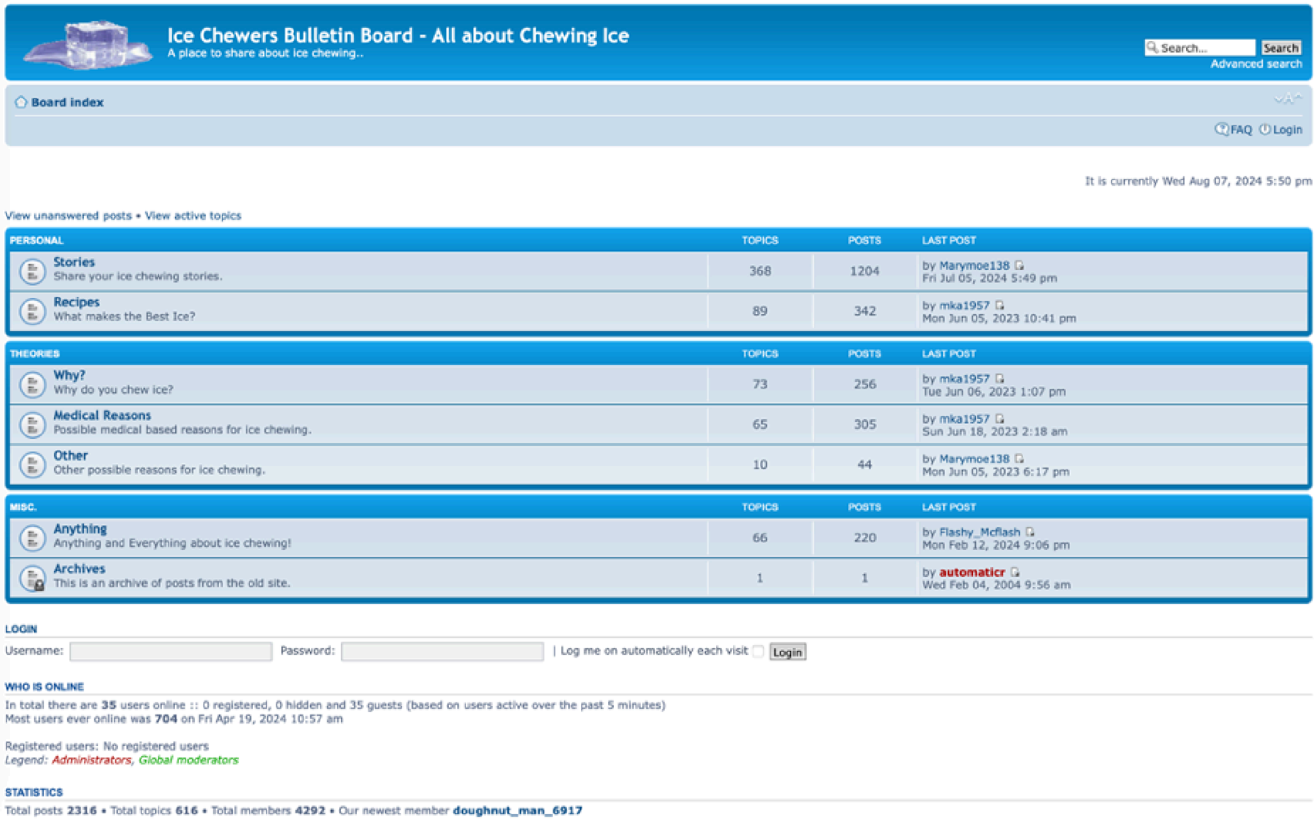
The dominance of gatekeepers changed with the introduction of digital media, which removed the physical limitations of earlier forms of media. Instead of being restricted by frequency ranges in the airwaves, cable television allowed for hundreds of channels. And once the internet became available to the general public in the mid-1990s, the capacity for creating new channels became virtually limitless. Anyone could set up their own website, which initially did cost a sizable sum of money, but nowhere near as much as it would cost to create a television station — not to mention the fact that websites didn't require getting an FCC license. Then, shortly after the turn of the century, social media took it a step further, establishing common platforms where individual users could create their own personal websites or channels: MySpace (created in 2003), Facebook (2004), and YouTube (2005) paid for the basic technology, and individuals could create their own pages and decide what content to put on them. While some of the terminology carried over, the capacity was totally different: J.B. was able to get six "channels" on his television, but Jarice was easily able to set up her own YouTube "channel" (alongside 114 million other YouTube channels).

To say that these developments changed the ratio of senders to receivers is putting it mildly: everyone could potentially become a source of media messages, and the reach wasn't limited by geography. Since the cost of producing and distributing media content also dropped drastically, the sender side no longer included just media moguls and corporations. Not only were many more people allowed to jump into the game, but the demands for large audience numbers went away.

In the old days of American television, when advertising paid for everything, advertisers were highly motivated to find out how many eyeballs their ads were reaching. If the research didn't indicate that the advertising was worth it (i.e., only two million people were watching your show, or those who did watch didn't go out and buy the brand of detergent advertised in the commercial breaks), the advertisers would stop buying ad time and the shows would lose funding.

The new model, in contrast, allows for **narrowcasting**: content that reaches only a few hundred people yet can still be economically viable. If someone wants to host a discussion board for people who really love chewing ice, why not?

1. For a thorough exploration of the historical depiction of different races, gender categories, disabilities, and age groups in American media, see Luther, C.A., Lepre, C.R. & Clark, N. (2012). Diversity in U.S. mass media. Wiley-Blackwell.



To save you the trouble of trying to read the tiny print on the bottom, it includes the stats "In total there are 35 users online" and "Most users ever online was 704 on Fri Apr 19, 2024." Reaching only 35 viewers is still worth it to these ice chewing fans to keep the site running.

If there are no web hosting costs, the numbers can be even smaller. In the 2018 film *Eighth Grade*, the title character Kayla (Elsie Fisher) posts motivational videos on YouTube and is discouraged to find out that her videos get exactly zero views. How long will she continue to make videos that start with the cheerful greeting "Hey guys" once she has found out that there are no "guys" and that her entire audience is imaginary?

Yes, modern technology allows for the *potential* of everyone being in the sender role and achieving huge audiences, but in reality the sender-receiver ratio is still extreme. The **"1% rule,"** sometimes expanded to the "1-9-90 rule," suggests that only 1% of any online community regularly contributes content, another 9% contribute sporadically, and 90% are content to be "**lurkers**," reading and watching but not posting anything.[2] Precise numbers vary depending on the context, but the general principle that far fewer people provide content than consume it seems very stable.

2. Arthur, Charles (20 July 2006). "What is the 1% rule?". The Guardian.

Gatekeepers

In J.B.'s day, when media was expensive and controlled by corporations, J.B. knew that no matter how good a jazz singer he became, he would never be able to record an album without going through a gatekeeper: a record label agent who would decide if his voice was worthy of ending up on a vinyl record. This was not a new idea: hundreds of years earlier, very few people owned a printing press, so an aspiring writer had to convince a publisher that it was worth the investment to print copies of their book (and not just one copy, but enough to make the printing run worth the time and effort). If those publishers didn't want to print your book, the "gate" was shut and there wasn't much you could do about it. When newspapers came along, the picture stayed largely the same: newspaper editors had the power to decide what would appear in the daily paper and what wouldn't, which meant having considerable power over the public consciousness and opinions. Electronic media didn't change the picture: radio and television stations all had employees whose job was to decide what got on the air and what didn't (and, as mentioned earlier, to worry about the FCC pulling their license).

There were several **reasons gatekeeping was a necessity**:

1. The limited number of hours in the day. Not every wannabe talk show host got their chance, and not everyone who thought they had experienced a significant news event ("I was stuck in a traffic jam for 45 minutes!") got to tell their story;
2. Production expenses, which meant that every time a media company did decide to invest in a particular piece of content, they were taking a financial risk;
3. Limits on the public's capacity for following the "stars" in any medium, which meant that constantly introducing new performers into the picture wouldn't work. If audiences loved a familiar set of movie stars, for example, casting agents had to be mindful of the rate of introducing new actors into the movies without bumping off old ones.

The upshot was that the tastes, preferences, and prejudices of those gatekeepers dictated what everyone got to see and hear: if a record company executive didn't like your band because "guitar groups are on the way out" and they thought Brian Poole and the Tremeloes were a safer bet, well, sorry Beatles, but no record deal (and if another record company hadn't made a different decision, the world might never have heard "the most influential band of all time"). When the Wright brothers first achieved human flight in December 1903, none of the newspapers thought that was worth reporting in the news.

Sure, human beings get it wrong sometimes, so the interesting question is not why they aren't 100% perfect at predicting success, but **what criteria gatekeepers use to make their decisions**. When the film *Killers of the Flower Moon* came out in 2023, the question it raised for many people was why this series of murders of Native Americans was "nearly erased from US history": some news executives at the time decided that the murders of at least 60 wealthy Osage tribe members were not newsworthy. Gatekeepers, in other words, have always decided what the public gets to hear.

Along with the sender-receiver ratio, the need for gatekeepers also changed drastically in this century. As noted, social media sites allow anyone to post (almost) anything, meaning that any garage band could put their songs on YouTube without having to get signed to a record label. At the same time, production costs went down and cheap or free tools became available to the public, so that band can record a whole album without having to shell out big bucks for recording studio time. Jarice can sing a song in her bedroom, edit it herself, and post it online without going through any music executive or talent scout. Print on demand means that a print shop doesn't have to invest in a run of a thousand books; it can wait until someone orders a book and then print one copy of it for that buyer, which made self-publishing very viable. Websites now allow painters to sell art directly to buyers without having to go through galleries, and people with ideas for a television series can shoot web series without going through a TV studio.

This suggests that the era of gatekeepers is over, and that the barriers to becoming your own superstar have been removed. While this is theoretically true, once again the practical reality looks different, as William Deresiewicz demonstrates in his book *The Death of the Artist*.[3] In fact, he argues that it is much harder for musicians, authors, playwrights, and dancers to have a career now than it was in the gatekeeper era, and reports that the number of musicians and authors who can make a living at their craft has recently dropped by 24–30%.[4] The number of musicians who are able to distribute their music to the masses has exploded (as of 2017, Soundcloud carried music by ten *million* artists), but that doesn't mean anyone ever hears that music, and the musicians themselves bear the weight of promoting their work instead of having a record label doing it for them. In Deresiewicz's words, "The good news is, you have the freedom to pursue new opportunities. The bad news is, so does everyone else. The good news is you can do it yourself. The bad news is you have to." He also points out that the need for gatekeepers did not go away; it just shifted away from the handful of corporate employees who used to do it. He writes:

> You don't have access to the audience if the audience can't find you, and nobody can search for you unless they know that you exist. For artists, the more noise there is in the system, the more valuable become the players who can cut through it, which mean the major corporations, old and new, of the culture industry. For the audience, the more valuable become the players who can filter it, who perform the work of "curation," of selecting and sorting. Whatever we'd prefer to think, the gatekeepers are not dead (a curator is just a gatekeeper that you happen to like), nor is it possible to imagine how they ever could be. (p. 61)

He also adds that gatekeeping is no longer primarily performed by humans, but by algorithms telling us what we will probably like. As media scholar Peter Gregg put it, the old fashioned habit of walking into a physical bookstore and browsing the shelves has been replaced by algorithms that learn what you like and

3. Deresiewicz, W. (2020). The death of the artist: How creators are struggling to survive in the age of billionaires and big tech. Henry Holt & Company.

4. Deresiewicz, p. 42.

then just keep presenting you with "more of the same." That's nice if all you want is slight variations in what you already like, but if you want to broaden your horizons and make surprising discoveries, those algorithms work against you, not for you. In a similar way, the film industry still includes many human gatekeepers, but the economics discourage risk-taking on truly creative and novel movies and instead favor an endless string of sequels, prequels and remakes. In Gregg's words,

> Humans, I think, like to explore, like to make connections, like to learn — but that stuff is longer term, that stuff requires work. We have technological practices that minimize work and maximize short-term feel good, but at the end of it you're left with not much.

Permanence

In 1994 I finished my Ph.D. dissertation, the biggest project I had ever completed, and I carefully stored it away in a fireproof box . But what, exactly, did I put into that box? A 3-1/2" high-density floppy disk containing digital files written in a software called MacWrite II. Only a few years passed before I realized that I no longer had any devices that had a floppy disk drive, and even if I did, I couldn't open the files because the software was obsolete. Good thing I printed my dissertation out on old-fashioned paper! Sometimes I pull out that disk, hold it up in front of my students, and say "I am holding my dissertation in my hand — yet for all intents and purposes, it has disappeared from the face of the earth." What I thought was permanent in 1994 turned out to be not permanent at all.

My dissertation, "here" but "gone" at the same time

Our earlier discussion of the "document" implied that if communication is stored in some form of media, it's permanent. There are written documents that still exist after 5,000 years, such as the Kish tablet (found in modern day Iraq), and paper documents that are more than 1,000 years old. When we get to the digital era, however, the permanence question gets a little foggier, which is why I ended Jarice's story with the question about whether her social media posts will still be accessible to her great-grandchildren the way her great-grandfather's letters are.

Again, you can approach this question from a theoretical perspective or a practical one. You may have heard the rule that whatever you post online is there "forever," so you should be cautious about anything you upload. It is true that deleting something you posted is impossible if it has been reposted on numerous other sites, and also that it can be accessed using the web archive "wayback machine". On the other hand, many websites are geared toward the immediate and posts are sorted by date, which makes it difficult to access anything older than a few days. Yes, that "needle" (something you posted four years ago) is still in that haystack, but it's buried so deep that no one is likely to ever see it again.

A related question is: do people want their digital materials to be permanent? Many litigants caught in a lawsuit have discovered the hard way that deleted emails can be recovered, leading them to wish that email wasn't so permanent. In 2012, CIA Director David Petraeus was found to be having an inappropriate relationship with Paula Broadwell. One thing they thought would protect them from scandal was an email trick: instead of actually sending emails to each other, they wrote emails that would sit in the "Drafts" folder of a shared account, and once the other person had read a message they would delete it without the email ever being sent. The fact that these messages were still found shows you that even this seemingly fleeting form of communication was more permanent and detectable than a CIA director thought it was.

Even if you aren't trying to hide anything, you may prefer non-permanent channels of communication just because you don't see a need to have a lasting record of the conversations. One 30-year-old I talked to had tried numerous different social media platforms, but settled on Snapchat specifically *because* the messages only stay up for a day. When you post on social media, is your goal to create a record of your life, or just to get through the day?

Richness

The next chapter explores Media Richness Theory, so for now I'll just note that different forms of communication technology are capable of carrying different kinds and amounts of information. In 1865, you could send a telegraph message from the east coast of the United States to the west coast, but that message consisted only of Morse code dots and dashes, which were translated into written words. When film was first invented, it took decades to figure out how to add the element of sound. Now, you can livestream high-definition videos with stereo sound, an infinitely richer form of communication. Well, perhaps I shouldn't say "infinitely," because that technology has its limits, too: as of this writing, you can't transmit aromas or tastes that way, or touch someone 1,000 miles away. The point is, when comparing different media formats, including new ones that will be introduced in the future, richness is one of the dimensions to consider. In Chapter 19 we'll look at its use in communicating particular kinds of messages.

You might think that the creation of richer forms of communication technology would mean the death of older forms, but it hasn't. Vinyl records were replaced by compact discs (CDs) in the 1980s, and people who had been frustrated by the pops and skips[5] were greatly relieved, and impressed at the perfection of digital

5. It's curious that the phrase "sounding like a broken record" has survived in the English lexicon long after the problem it refers to became unknown to most speakers. If you're not aware, a vinyl record consists of a single groove cut into plastic, and you play it by dropping a delicately balanced diamond needle into the groove (starting on the outside of the record, working its way to the inner ring), with the vibrations from the needle

audio. Then CDs were replaced by digital files, so it looked like the forward march of music formats was leaving a trail of corpses behind — until those corpses came back to life. As of March 2023, vinyl record sales outpaced compact disc sales, and now 180 million vinyl albums are produced every year. Low-quality Polaroid cameras were a cheap alternative to more expensive cameras in J.B.'s day, so it's no wonder that affordable digital cameras wiped them out, leading to Polaroid declaring bankruptcy in 2001… and then the brand was revived and is still alive now.

In other words, people who declare old technology "dead" have sometimes had to correct themselves — it's only "mostly dead." But as Miracle Max said in *The Princess Bride*, "mostly dead is slightly alive" and can come back with a roar. Why doesn't digital perfection replace less perfect media? Perhaps because people don't always *want* things to be perfect.

Personalization

One last variable that you can use to sort different forms of communication technology is the level of personalization: movies, television shows, books, podcasts, and billboards are designed for mass audiences, while letters, emails, texts, voicemail messages, and video calls are intended for particular people and can be tailored to their specific needs and tastes. This may or may not be related to the ratio question: if you're sending a message to thousands of recipients, there's usually no practical way to adapt it to individuals (although it may be possible to insert their name into a mass-produced message, making it look like it's individualized). But the option to send it to one person vs. 5,000 is not built into the medium itself: a sender can craft a voicemail for one recipient or make a recording and send it to thousands of phones at once. The word "intimacy" implies one-on-one communication, but a gifted performer can create the feeling of intimacy even in mass media messages, such as a singer who makes millions of audience members feel like the song was written "just for them."

translating into sound. Imperfections in the plastic would make the needle bounce up, and instead of landing back where it started, the needle would go back one revolution and play that segment again, until it hit the imperfection again and jumped back. The listener had to hear the same two-second loop again and again until they got up, walked over to the record player, and moved the needle into a later slot. The needle also sometimes left the groove and skidded diagonally across the record, causing a horrible, non-musical screeching sound nobody wanted to hear … until DJs and sound editors decided to insert the "needle scratch" sound into songs and movies.

18.4 ADDICTION AND FRUSTRATION

I ended that last list with personalization because it brings us back to the intersection of the personal and the commercial, and the reminder that while we may use communication technology to enrich our personal lives, at the end of the day, it's still a business. As businesses, media companies want their customers to be happy, so they want to design products with features that suit their customers' needs. In the early days, it was difficult to get precise feedback about what those needs were — it was hard enough just to find out how many people were watching your television show, let alone identify their reactions to it. Some media scholars tackled the question: what do people get out of watching television? This led to a field of media research known as **"Uses and Gratifications"** studies, which identified several distinct reasons people watch TV (or consume any other kind of media). Some people watch TV news, for instance, to find out what's going on in the world, others to give them something to talk about with their coworkers over lunch the next day, others because they feel a personal connection to the newscasters, others just to "veg out" after a long day. Equivalent studies have been done on social media, revealing a similar set of motivations. The take-away message is that media companies need to pay attention to what their customers are using their products for, and what customers want out of those products.

You might think research like this will lead companies to make products that perfectly meet their customers' desires, but that isn't quite what happens. Media users are often frustrated, unhappy, and disgruntled with the media they use. Take the topic of **advertising**: if you ask people if they would rather watch content without having to wade through ads, most would say an enthusiastic yes — they think of ads as the junk between show segments. But radio and television were supported by advertising right from the start: the reason daytime dramas are called "soap operas" is because companies like soap manufacturers paid for it all in exchange for ad time. What advertisers want, of course, is "eyeballs": to gain as many viewers as possible for their commercials. From their point of view, then, the show is the junk between ads. When television remote controls became available, the "mute" button was the advertiser's worst nightmare: a way for the viewer to avoid the very thing that made the shows free to watch. Viewers could also surf other channels until their show returned. Cable television suggested the promise of ad-free channels (what are you paying those monthly fees for, if not to avoid ads?), but many cable channels actually carried more ads than broadcast channels. The only other option for ad haters was shelling out extra for a few premium channels that were paid for entirely with subscription fees.

The internet at first looked like a haven from advertisements. There was a time when you could watch videos on YouTube or Vimeo, browse Facebook to check up on your friends, and read postings on Reddit without encountering any ads. Early websites may have been built on an altruistic model of people posting things for the good of humankind, but as websites grew or were bought by corporations, the quest was to figure out how to monetize the sites. They had their expenses, and were providing something of value to the world, so it was only fair and reasonable to make a profit. The basic options were to charge fees for things that used to be free, set up paywalls, or accept advertising, none of which the public wanted. Writer Cory Doctorow called this "**platform decay**" or, more crudely, "**enshittification**,"[1] explaining:

> Here is how platforms die: first, they are good to their users; then they abuse their users to make things better for their business customers; finally, they abuse those business customers to claw back all the value for themselves. Then, they die.

In regard to Facebook, for example, Doctorow appreciates that it was originally appealing enough to attract millions of users to sign up. "Then, it started to cram your feed full of posts from accounts you didn't follow," such as other media companies encouraging you to click on articles that took you to their sites. As it became friendlier toward advertisers, it became less appealing to users. And then it raised the rates for advertising, until Facebook became "a terrible place to be whether you're a user, a media company, *or* an advertiser."

Declarations of the death of Facebook, or any other media platform, are probably as premature as similar declarations about the demise of vinyl records, and there are still millions of happy (or not *too* unhappy) followers of any major social media site. But Doctorow's model does explain why once-promising sounding new media spaces lose their luster over time, and why so many sites feel like they are urging you to do things you don't want to do. Do you have as many friends as you like on a social media site? They want you to invite more. Lost interest in posting anything? They will nudge you to repost something old, or celebrate an anniversary. Just want to buy a product or read a book in peace? They will beg you to write a review. To some, that pressure never seems to let up. It is good to remind yourself that the reason these sites have these habits is not to suit your needs, but to suit their own.

This is not to say that media sources don't try to provide content that serves the public's needs. But nothing is more profitable than addiction (ask a heroin dealer), so the question tends to shift from "What does the public like?" to "What keeps the public addicted?" This may encourage harmless television techniques such as the **cliffhanger** (we won't tell you who shot the lead character until next season) or the **news teaser** ("One of the candidates for governor was just arrested; tune in tonight to find out who"). Websites might rely on **clickbait** techniques get you to wade through long lists that may or may not be worth your time, often promising that "#13 will make you gasp!" even though it rarely does.

The emotional costs of social media, however, can be far from harmless. The birth of social media brought with it an increase in **"FOMO"** (fear of missing out),[2] and left some users in a state of constant jealousy: social media was showing them on a daily basis what a fabulous life everybody else was living. FOMO is ironic:

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1. A term I might avoid due to its potential offensiveness, except that the American Dialect Society named "enshittification" the 2023 Word of the Year, and Australia's Macquarie Dictionary did the same in 2024.

2. "Social Media and FOMO". Social Media Victims Law Center. December 4, 2023. Retrieved March 28, 2024.

a growing body of research shows that the more time you spend on social media to cure feelings of social isolation, the worse those feelings of loneliness and isolation get.[3]

Right about the time COVID-19 hit, the term **"doomscrolling"** entered the lexicon, representing the idea that the more time you spent reading or watching news stories, the worse you felt about life. This is largely due to the negativity bias in news stories, represented by the old saying "If it bleeds, it leads" (as in: a nightly newscast should lead off with its most violent story to grab the viewer's attention). Digital news sources could experiment with different headlines for the same story, experiments which proved that the more alarming the headline, the more people clicked on the story. News channels started to give more air time to commentators and pundits rather than just presenting news stories, and it was clear what kind of personalities hooked the most viewers: the ones who were perpetually upset. Books such as Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Sobiaraj's *The Outrage Industry* (2016) and Tobias Rose-Stockwell's *Outrage Machine: How Tech Amplifies Discontent, Disrupts Democracy — And What We Can Do About It* (2023) pinpoint the issue: a lot of media personalities wake up in the morning asking the question "What shall I get outraged about today?" and never seem to have trouble finding fuel for that fire. This leaves their followers with the feeling that the world is falling apart at a rapid rate.

Meanwhile, individual users on social media platforms scrambled to increase their personal followings. This may seem like it's just about getting "likes," but it's really about engagement — getting any kind of response at all — and, once again, negativity usually works. Calm and rational discourse might not get as much attention as ridiculous opinions and conspiracy theories, and posting clearly inaccurate information may get a lot of people to pounce on you to tell you you're wrong — but pouncing is engagement, so some online posters concluded that being attacked is far better than being ignored. These days, I see a lot of headlines about politicians who say something dumb and get "eviscerated" or "humiliated" or "destroyed" for it, implying that the politician must regret saying that dumb thing. I suspect, however, that they are glad for the attention, and not bothered that so much of it is negative.

Perhaps the most valuable take-away from all of this is that individual media users should take a deep look at whether the platforms they use are actually meeting their needs. I have seen some online games proudly described as "addictive," which is apparently meant to make you want to download those games, but it's worth asking yourself if you feel better or worse after an hour of playing them. Same for scrolling through social media, or reading too many news stories. News sources brag about being "up to the second" about what's going on in the world, a self-imposed pressure that makes them more motivated to "scoop" (be the first to report something) than to ensure accuracy. That's how news channels deal with competition, which is a legitimate business concern. On your side of the equation, though, it might make you start wondering why

3. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9817115/. Bonsaksen, T., Ruffolo, M., Price, D., Leung, J., Thygesen, H., Lamph, G., Kabelenga, I., & Geirdal, A. Ø. (2023). Associations between social media use and loneliness in a cross-national population: do motives for social media use matter? *Health psychology and behavioral medicine*, *11*(1), 2158089.

you are so impatient; why are you in a state of urgent curiosity about things that, on reflection, you really don't *have to* know right this second?

You might also feel the need to document every aspect of your life, without stopping to think why. At a concert, do you hold up your phone to get a poor quality recording instead of just enjoying the music in the moment? If you visit the Louvre Museum in Paris, do you feel like you have to take a picture of the Mona Lisa yourself? Why? You're afraid you'll never get another chance to see that picture? (I wouldn't worry about that). Or just to prove to others that you were there?

Photo from Unsplash

Perhaps it's so you can post a picture on social media in hopes of getting a satisfying number of likes. If your goal is to someday post something that goes viral, what happens if you succeed? I don't mean to impose any particular values system or lifestyle choices on you, or criticize anyone whose life revolves around media, nor do I want to attack media companies for doing what serves their goals best. But I do see value in asking yourself those questions, and perhaps revisiting your media habits as a result.

CHAPTER 19: MEDIA II - HOW TO USE MEDIA

19.1 HOW WERE WE SUPPOSED TO HEAR ABOUT THE BYPASS?

> It all seemed to boil down to three bitter complaints:
>
> First, that there was too much information;
>
> Second, that there wasn't enough of it
>
> And third, that in any event it was confusing and inconsistent
>
> A.H. Feller, 1943 (talking about the information campaign leading up to America's involvement in World War II)

The earthlings in Douglas Adams' science fiction classic *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* are caught off guard to find out that their planet is going to be destroyed in the next two minutes to make room for a "hyperspatial express route through your solar system." When they hear this announcement from the Vogons, the race that's about to vaporize them, the earthlings object that they never heard about this. The Vogons reply:

> There's no point in acting all surprised about it. All the planning charts and demolition orders have been on display in your local planning department in Alpha Centauri for fifty of your Earth years, so you've had plenty of time to lodge any formal complaint and it's far too late to start making a fuss about it now.[1]

This crisis mirrors one that the earthling protagonist, Arthur Dent, had been focused on until the space ships showed up: his house was also set for demolition to make room for a highway bypass. Arthur objected to a local councilman, Mr. Prosser, that he hadn't been sufficiently warned, and Prosser's reply was similar to the Vogons: "The plans have been available in the local planning office for the last nine months." (p. 8). It's understandable that Arthur, along with the whole human race, feels there was a failure of communication. It's no wonder they yelled **"You should have told me!"**

It's harder to sympathize with the Vogons, or Mr. Prosser, when they yell back **"You should have looked it up!"**

1. Adams, D. (1979). The hitchhiker's guide to the galaxy. Random House, p. 35.

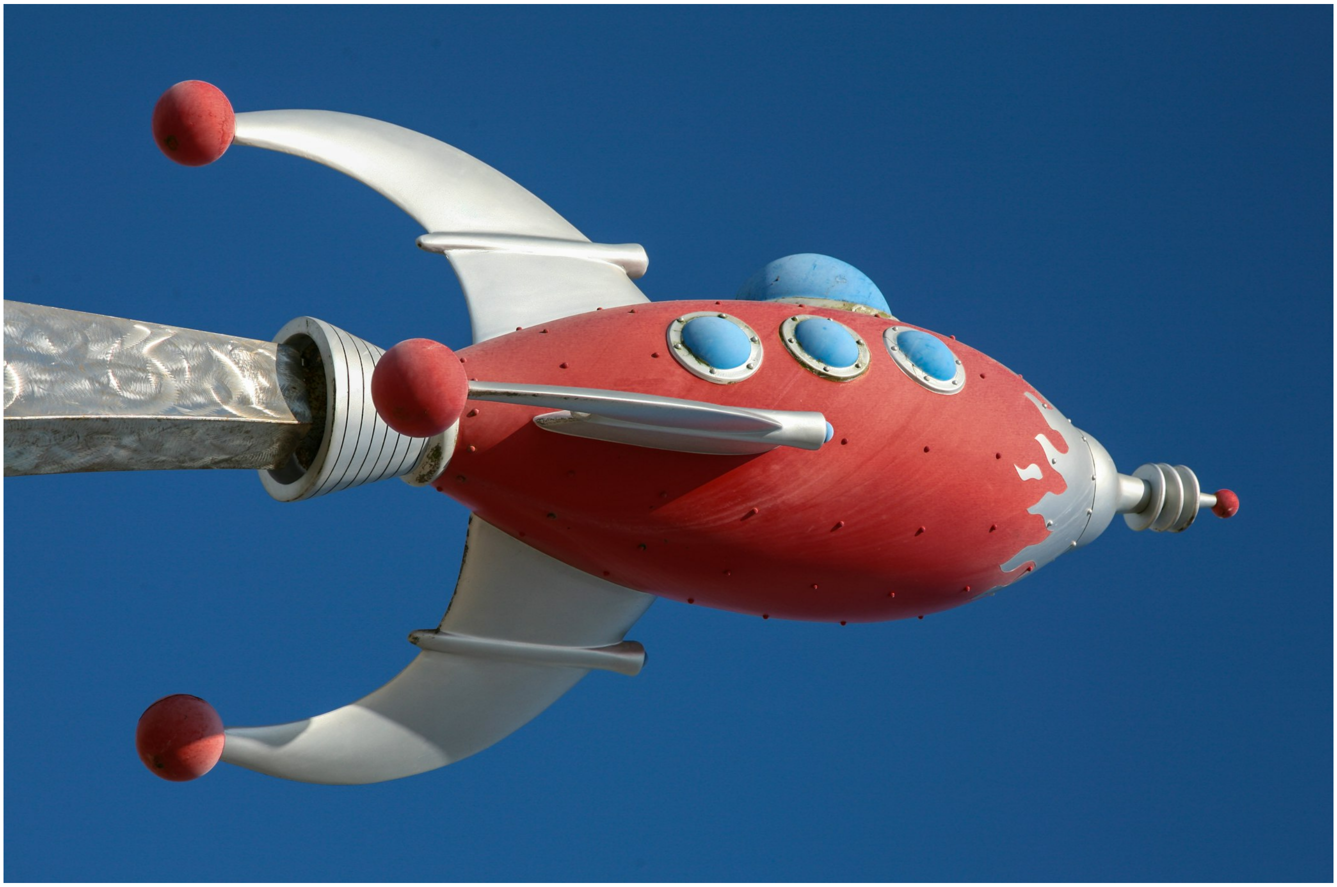

Image from Unsplash

Even though it probably didn't involve demolition or space aliens, you have probably faced a similar situation at some point. You might have missed a crucial announcement because you didn't look it up (on a website, instead of a distant planet), and were understandably annoyed that it was your job to discover that information instead of being told about it. Or you might have been the person responsible for making sure people hear important announcements, so you regularly sent out emails that were never read. Most of those emails contained a line saying "If you have further questions, visit this website," but the public rarely does that — and they get angry at you anyway.

Rather than looking at Arthur's side of things, this chapter will focus on the senders of media messages, and the things they should think about if they want to do their job well. We'll look at all scales: from a mass announcement sent to millions of recipients to a private message sent to a romantic partner.

19.2 EFFECTIVE MEDIA USE: FOUR CONSIDERATIONS

1) The Push-Pull Dilemma

The "you should have told me!" / "you should have looked it up!" argument is an encapsulation of the Push-Pull Dilemma, which looks at how to best get messages to the audiences who need them.

In "**push media**," the active party is the source of the information, and uses one or more channels to actively send a message to potentially interested audiences. This may take the form of emails, text messages, voicemail, newsletters, direct mail advertising, television commercials, billboards, or any other means to "get the word out" to receivers. Obviously, these are a mainstay of modern life, and are unlikely to go away by the time you read this. So what's the problem?

Let's start with your reaction when you're asked if you'd like to receive "push notifications." Say you hear a weird news tidbit and want the complete story, so you trace the story back to its original source, which turns out to be the *Chattanooga Times Free Press*. Since that newspaper is always on the lookout for new readers, before you can get to the story you see a pop-up message asking if you'd like to receive "push notifications" so you don't miss out on the latest Chattanooga news. Assuming you'll never visit that site again, you click no — but after doing this enough times on enough sites, you develop the habit of refusing push notifications from all sources, even in your neck of the woods. Maybe you just don't like the sound of the phrase "push notification" (just add a "y" to the end of the first word).

Add to this the **information overload problem** (mentioned in Chapters 4 and 13): many people feel bombarded with too much information to begin with. When I ask my students how many unread emails they have in their inboxes, it's not uncommon for a few to confess that they have more than 5,000. A few students say "zero!"; it takes a lot of work to achieve this, and must involve many quick decisions about what to delete without reading, and these students are rare. Some email formats include prioritization systems that try to help you identify "important" emails, but I think it's safe to say that no one wants the emails they send out to end up in the "unimportant" category or be deleted without a glance, so those systems run up against the "every message is important!" mentality.

Anyone in the public communication business should acknowledge that not everyone who receives their messages is in the "target audience" category, and shouldn't get upset to find that some recipients fall into the "unintended" category. But they should also acknowledge that even people who invited those messages can get overwhelmed and reach the "tune out" point.

Speaking of targeting, push notifications tend to belong in the category of **undifferentiated messages**: in terms of efficiency, it's a lot easier to send the same message to everyone rather than attempting to tailor it to specific audiences, and some channels don't offer any way of changing the message to suit different recipients.

"Pull media," on the other hand, do allow recipients to seek out the messages they need and ignore the rest. In a pull medium, it's the end recipient who does the active work — looking up a website, calling a hotline, or requesting information. Imagine if the IRS tried to send out instructions to every possible category of taxpayer about recent changes in the tax code. It's infinitely easier to set up a website where a small business owner can find the page they need, an unmarried filer who made charitable donations can go to a different page, and a retiree living in Bermuda can look somewhere else. This system allows for easier targeting of specific audiences: they can find the message that's tailored just to them.

This system isn't perfect, however. For one thing, it relies on the person knowing that they need to go to that website in the first place. People are understandably frustrated when they discover only after the fact that there was a piece of information *someone* knew and could have told them (Mr. Prosser or the Vogons in the *Hitchhiker's Guide* story), and feel it's unfair to blame the victim for not knowing information they didn't know they needed to know.

This system also relies on "ease of access," which requires good web designers or easy-to-reach operators to handle hotline calls so that the information seeker doesn't get frustrated and give up. Many people who get lost in a complex website or caught in a "phone tree" ("To open a new credit card account, press 1; to get your balance on an existing card, press 2….") bail out before they get what they want.

If your job is communication, how do you handle the push-pull dilemma? There are no simple guides, but understanding the dilemma can help you make wise choices. If you send out push notices, try not to send too many or they will backfire and be ignored. If you set up a site from which people can pull information, consider sending occasional push notifications to make sure people know about it, and do everything you can to make it user-friendly. Either way, it's going to be hard work, and you'll inevitably face frustrated customers no matter what you do.

2) Media Richness

Two movies that came out in 2009 addressed the question "What is the best way to deliver sensitive information?" One of those films was *Up In The Air*, featuring George Clooney as a person who fires employees for a living. Some organizations outsource that task, hiring another company to lay off their employees, and Clooney's character, Ryan Bingham, works for one of those firms. It's a very inefficient business, requiring Ryan to fly all over the country 300+ days a year so he can break the bad news in the gentlest way possible.

He is offended at the suggestion by a young associate, Natalie (Anna Kendrick), that it's much cheaper and quicker to fire people over a video call. In Ryan's mind, the cost to do the task in person (without the use of any media) is worth it for three reasons:

1. The media has limitations (what if someone storms out of the room when they hear they are being fired?).
2. The topic is one that should allow for back-and-forth conversation that incorporates the nonverbal realm as well as the verbal.
3. The use of a more "efficient" mode sends the message that the company doesn't care about its employees.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://open.lib.umn.edu/commpractice/?p=756#oembed-1

It's a lesson that many real companies have missed, including Google, which fired 12,000 employees by email in January 2023. This led to headlines like "A Google Software Engineer Says It Was a 'Slap in the Face' to Find Out He Was Laid Off Via Email After 20 Years at the Company" and "Layoffs by Email Show What Employers Really Think of Their Workers."

In contrast, the U.S. Army must sometimes send an even more sensitive message than "You've been fired": their Casualty Assistance Officers (CAOs) are the people who tell the family members of fallen officers that their loved one has died. The Army knows that in order to send the message that they care about their soldiers and their families, they need to deliver it in person, not through any media, even though the time frame is tight (within four hours of the death), delivery of the message requires travel, and the death can happen at any time of day. The Army's approach is depicted in the other relevant 2009 movie, *The Messenger*, in which the characters played by Woody Harrelson and Ben Foster take that duty very seriously. The Army, in other words, appears to have a better grasp on Media Richness Theory than Google does.

When Richard Daft and Robert Lengel first developed Media Richness Theory (MRT), it was before most modern communication technology was around, and they weren't thinking about death notification or layoffs: they were just interested in how people use different kinds of media in the workplace. The first part of the model involves ranking different communication channels in terms of how "rich" or "lean" they are, depending on certain criteria:

1. **How many different kinds of information cues can the channel handle simultaneously?** Lean media can only convey written words or still images; rich media can include moving images and sound. The "richest" option is to not use any media and to communicate face-to-face, which allows things that even high-tech options don't, such as smell and touch.
2. **Does it allow rapid feedback?** An asynchronous channel that creates a lag between when a message is sent and when the recipient responds (such as "snail mail" letters, email, or voicemail) is not as rich as a synchronous medium, such as a live phone call or video conferencing, where the conversation occurs in

real time.

3. **Does it have a personal focus?**[1] Is the channel tailored toward a particular recipient, or is it just directed at an undifferentiated mass audience? A text message written just for you is rich; an email alert sent to thousands of people is lean.

What's nice about this model is that it sets up a framework that can be applied to future communication channels, even if we can't foresee them now (just as it applies to channels that weren't available in the 1980s, when the model was developed).

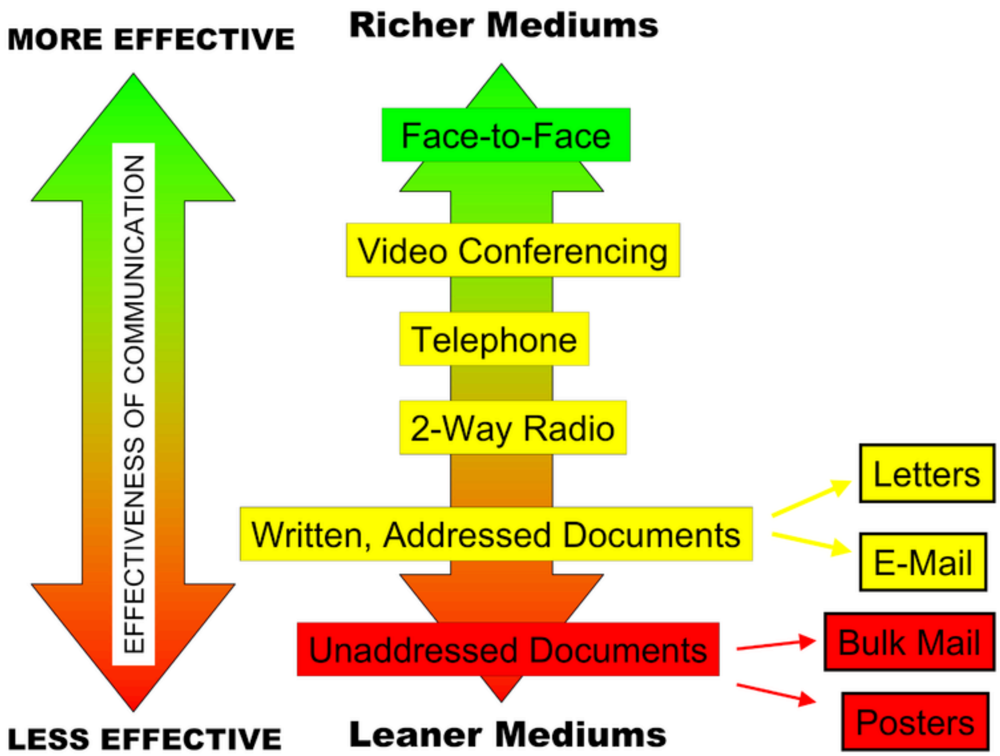

Image from [Wikipedia](#)

You might think that, since newer technology allows richer messages, we are steadily moving up the richness scale. For example, if bulk mail messages are lean because they don't have a personal focus (letters addressed to "Current Resident" are at the bottom of the richness scale), modern printing technology allows at least the illusion of personal focus (now it says "Dear Jordan" where it used to say "Current Resident").

The problem with lean media is not just that they don't convey as much meaning: it's that people often overestimate how clearly their messages come across. Writers of emails or texts, for example, are usually quite confident that the recipient can accurately pick up the intended tone of the email, such as light-hearted

1. Lengel, R. H., & Daft, R. L. (1988). The selection of communication media as an executive skill. Academy of Management Perspectives, 2(3), 225-232. doi:10.5465/ame.1988.4277259.

bantering or sarcasm. But sometimes recipients can't figure out the intended tone, and are left wondering "Is the writer upset?"

A particularly awkward example was posted on Reddit in 2017:

I am here for you
byu/selahbrate inUnexpected

If the recipient (in blue) had been able to hear the tone of voice of "I am here for you," or see who was sending the message, they wouldn't have interpreted it as social support.

To help prevent this sort of misinterpretation, people often suggest including emojis or typographical clues (such as AlTeRnAtInG UpPeR AnD LoWeR CaSe to denote sarcasm). Scholars use the phrase "**cues filtered out**" to denote the kind of information that doesn't come through in lean media.[2]

Given those problems, are lean media losing their relevance? Not entirely. Billboards, posters, and pre-

2. Brody, N. & Caldwell, L. (2017). "Cues filtered in, cues filtered out, cues cute, and cues grotesque: Teaching mediated communication with emoji Pictionary". Communication Teacher. 33 (2): 127–131. doi:10.1080/17404622.2017.1401730. ISSN 1740-4622.

printed direct mail advertisements still play a role in modern life, and many people prefer to use their smart phones to send (lean) text messages instead of making a (rich) phone call. If you go back and watch old sci fi movies, many of them predict a future full of synchronous video conversations. Curiously, though, none of them predict that people in the 21st century would rather just type with their thumbs most of the time.

They also don't predict the prevalence of "pop up" and "pop under" advertisements on video channels — the kind you may think of as just an easily ignorable box at the bottom of a video you want to watch. If you can make a commercial with live actors speaking, music, and dancing, why pay for a text-only ad that sits at the bottom of a window? The answer, of course, is that it's much cheaper: advertising rates have always been aligned with the richness of the medium. Television ads were more expensive than radio ads because they were more effective, so advertisers made decisions based on what they could afford. Are the "lean" commercials worth it? Apparently so, because advertisers keep paying for them.

In the workplace, the issue of cost looks a little different: your boss doesn't have to pay for airtime, but does have to make decisions about time and effort. The common expression "I survived another meeting that should have been an email" represents the idea that a lean email would have been fine for the employee; the topic didn't justify the boss choosing a channel that carries many information cues, allows rapid feedback, and has a personal focus.

Image from someecards

This brings us to the second part of the MRT, which provides more concrete guidelines than the Push-Pull Model:

- If the message is emotionally sensitive and inherently personal ("You are no longer needed at our company"), choose a rich channel.
- If the recipient is likely to have a lot of questions ("Do I get a severance package?"), choose a rich channel.
- If the message is meant for just one person ("This isn't a mass layoff; only you are being laid off"), choose a rich channel.
- If those criteria don't apply, choose a lean channel.

Of course, choosing a rich channel sometimes requires courage. In both *Up in the Air* and *The Messenger*, those delivering the sensitive messages have to deal with very upset people, and as Woody Harrelson warns his protege as they're walking up to a war widow's front door, "Some of them do have guns." If you fire someone over email, you don't have to worry about any of that. Imagine a boss who has to tell an employee that their coworkers have been complaining about their hygiene: it's so awkward that it's no surprise many bosses don't opt for the personal focus ("Kevin, you need to bathe more frequently") and instead just put a poster on the wall announcing a new hygiene policy that applies to everyone.

One subplot in *Up in the Air* deals with MRT in a context other than firing employees: Natalie's fiancé breaks up with her over text message, which seems like a cowardly act that flies in the face of those guidelines. At least the fiancé didn't ghost her. **Ghosting** refers to just not replying to someone you've been in conversation with, leaving them to figure out on their own what happened. On the MRT scale, "No message at all" would be below even the leanest of media. No wonder Dr. Theresa DiDonato ranks this the worst of seven strategies for breaking up with a romantic partner.

Some employers have been surprised to go through a lengthy hiring process with a new employee and expect them to show up for the first day of the job, only to have that employee ghost them without explanation. But a BBC study reveals how many employers themselves are ghosting prospective employees, leading to a "ghosting spiral." With ever more rich channels of communication becoming available to everyone, this reverse trend implies that there is more to learn about this concept.

3) Redundancy

One of my friends loves the old joke, "The Department of Redundancy Department." Redundancy sounds like an annoying thing — saying the same thing in different ways, repeating yourself, and expressing an identical thought in multiple ways (see what I did there?). But redundancy is good, because it beats the alternative: saying something just once, in one way, and assuming everyone got the message.

If your job is to ensure that the public receives a message, you should definitely send the message out more than once, because you can't assume that all audience members are tuning in at the same time, or that they will remember the message after hearing it once. You should also use multiple channels to convey the message, since different audience members follow different channels. The problem with the Vogons posting the demolition orders in Alpha Centauri is not just that they're relying on people to pull that information, but that they assume everyone in the galaxy can travel to distant planets. That's not too different from assuming that everyone checks your favorite social media site. If you really want to ensure that your message gets to everyone who needs to hear it, start by listing all the channels your recipients are likely to check and deciding how much effort you should make to reach all of those channels.

I once consulted with someone responsible for communications in the logging industry, which turns out to have a very diverse audience in terms of media use. He wrote a monthly newsletter, but struggled to keep track of all the means he had to use to distribute the newsletter to the loggers spread out across the country. Some checked email regularly, some visited Facebook, some visited the organization's website directly, some had a fax machine (still!), some had smartphones that read QR codes, some had older cell phones that could receive text messages but not visit websites, and some wanted him to just print out the newsletter on paper and mail it to them. This became a resource question: how much effort should you make to reach all those different audience segments? How much time does it take to duplicate the same content on various websites, and make sure they all match? How many stamps should you buy? How expensive is an extra phone line just for the fax machine?[3]

Like the "mostly dead but slightly alive" Polaroid cameras and vinyl records discussed in the previous chapter, new means of communication come along fairly regularly, but they rarely fully replace the old media.[4] That means there is an ever-growing list of things to check, and people are not always patient with you if you forget their preferred platform. My daughter-in-law works the kind of job where she has three screens in front of her and lots of ways that people can reach her. A particularly anxious boss once sent her an email, and then six minutes later sent a text message asking her why she hadn't yet replied to the email.

Three years ago, my cousin was organizing a large family reunion, and on a Zoom call with the relatives who volunteered to help set up the reunion, she touted the benefits of Slack and why it was superior to email. So the volunteers downloaded that app and gave it a try, which led to a small flurry of activity on Slack for about two weeks. Then the flurry dropped off; some never got the hang of the new app, others forgot to check it, and some were resistant to putting one more thing on their computer. How long did we use it before abandoning

3. If you're not familiar with fax (short for "facsimile") machines, they are scanners that are connected to a landline phone with its own phone number. The sender feeds paper into the machine, which scans a digital image and sends it over the phone lines to the recipient's fax machine, where it prints out on paper loaded into their machine. If the image doesn't go through the first time, the machine keeps resending the image, which can be a problem because fax numbers look identical to regular landlines and sometimes the sender misdials the recipient's fax number. The recipient picks up the phone, hears the unpleasant squeal of a fax machine attempting to send an image, and hang ups — but in the past, at least, the fax machine kept trying every 10 minutes throughout the day. These machines were used widely in offices in the 1990s, and are still in use today in medical facilities and law enforcement. https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/11/why-people-still-use-fax-machines/576070/

4. Did you know that the last telegram on earth was sent as recently as 2013?

it? I'm not sure, because when I recently clicked on the icon (for the first time in several years), I was told my version was obsolete and I'd need to download the latest version, open the installer in my Downloads folder, drag the icon into my applications folder, add it to my dock, launch the app, and then connect to my account, at which point I'm sure I'd be asked what my password is, which I've forgotten.

I am not, in Everett Rogers' terms, an Early Adopter. Rogers was fascinated with how new ideas catch on and spread throughout a population, a process he called **Diffusion of Innovation**. He found that it was not a simple mathematical process: one person hears about an idea and tells two friends about it, who each tell two other friends about it, who each tell two other friends until it multiplies across the globe. Instead, it was a process that depended heavily on different types of people with very different concerns and interests.

The first two categories of people, Innovators and Early Adopters, are eager to try out "the latest thing" and are the least worried that the innovation will not catch on (such as Google Glass, mentioned in Chapter 5). The difference between Innovators and Early Adopters is largely their level of influence with followers: Early Adopters are "opinion leaders" more than Innovators are. They are crucial to any innovation catching on, but they only represent 16% of the population.[5]

Most of the population is split between the Early Majority, who are open to new ideas but not eager to jump on a new fad right away, and the Late Majority, who want more reassurances that the innovations won't fail and they'll be stuck with something they can't use – and who also recognize that many forms of new technology come down in price later.

Last, there are the Laggards, who are the most reticent to try new things, are fine with what they've got, and would rather talk to you about how old rotary phones worked than touch a smartphone with a ten-foot pole.

These categories don't necessarily map with demographic categories (there are people in their 90s with Apple watches!), but understanding your audience and where they might fit on this scale can help you determine what channels you should use to get your message out.

4) Anonymity

When Han Fei Tzu wrote about communication 2,200 years ago (see Chapter 5), or Aristotle wrote about "ethos" (credibility) around the same time, they were thinking of situations where people knew who they were talking to. Without media (or elaborate disguises), it's not really possible to have a conversation with someone without knowing who they are. But communication technologies have made it quite easy to communicate anonymously.

Older forms of electronic communication allowed for only limited anonymous communication; you may

5. Peres, R., Muller, E., & Mahajan, V. (2010). Innovation diffusion and new product growth models: A critical review and research directions. International Journal of Research in Marketing, 27(2), 91-106. doi:10.1016/j.ijresmar.2009.12.012.

have seen news stories where an informant speaks on television, but they're in the dark and their voice is disguised. Anonymity reached a whole new level with the arrival of the internet in the 1990s: not only did the early architects of the internet decide to make it *possible* to communicate online without anyone knowing who you are, but it became quite *normal*.

When you make a new online account, the first thing you do is create a username. That name rarely tells the world much about who you are, or makes it easy for the public to find out more about you. The idea that everyone should be able to get your street address or phone number might seem highly risky — do you mean any crazy person could show up at your door, or call you randomly? Yet that's exactly what phone books used to do, and every phone booth had one, which usually meant that a total stranger wouldn't have to walk more than a city block or two to find your phone number and home address. When cell phones replaced landlines, some people suggested creating cell phone directories, but younger generations either didn't see the need or were horrified at the thought, and the idea died out quickly. In other words, there's a widespread assumption that letting everyone know who you are is a potentially dangerous thing to do… yet many people also strive to communicate with the largest audience they can, and hope something they post will go viral.

The anonymity of current media has led to many different kinds of problems. In Chapter 3, I wrote "If you look closely at all the ills facing modern society — war, racism, health, environment, financial crises, politics, sexual abuse — you will always find unethical communication hiding under those rocks." Much of that unethical communication takes place underground: lies pushed forward by hidden sources, money coming into questionable causes from unidentifiable donors, shadowy advisors whispering into the ears of world leaders like Grima Wormtongue in the *Lord of the Rings* series.

Perhaps the most damaging phenomenon that anonymity allows is **cyberbullying and trolling**: people taunting victims with the most cruel messages imaginable, which they would presumably not do if anyone could figure out who they were. In 2022, boxer Mike Tyson posted "Social media made y'all way too comfortable with disrespecting people and not getting punched in the face for it," implying that they are "too comfortable" because they can hide behind an anonymous computer keyboard.

Of course, there are plenty of people who are willing to share every intimate detail of their life with whoever wants to hear it. Some parents make their children the stars of their social media feeds — nicknamed "**sharenting**" — raising concerns about the potential harm to those children . Those oversharing parents are just the current version of TV talk show hosts, like Kathie Lee Gifford, who told countless stories about their children on live television. The film *The Truman Show* depicts a man whose entire life has been unknowingly spent in front of television cameras, and large audiences who didn't want to miss a single facet of his life. That movie came out in 1998, only a few years after the internet went mainstream, but as soon as the technology allowed it, some real-life vloggers happily chose to live-stream their daily lives. The only difference is the "unknowing" part: instead of being captured on hidden cameras, they set up those cameras themselves.

This is all meant to illustrate the range of choices people have about anonymity: some seek fame and show the world everything; some want the fame (or at least the influence) without people being able to identify who they are, such as the mysterious "Q" who founded QAnon or the English street artist Banksy; some might have preferred anonymity but were “thrust into the spotlight” by a scandal; some would prefer to go their whole life without any online presence.

When I talk to my students about credibility and anonymity, many are quick to say that they are **less likely to believe an anonymous source than an identified one**. Take someone who is inside the inner circle of a prominent politician and leaks to the press some juicy tidbits “off the record”: the first thing many people want to know is why that source wasn’t willing to be identified. What are their motives? How much do they really know?

Those same students, however, recognize that when they fill out evaluations of their teacher at the end of a semester, it’s important that their name isn’t attached to the form. If you want to conduct a survey to find out more about racism, you’ll never get fully honest answers unless you promise anonymity to the respondents. Those people who are willing to talk about something on the news only if their voice is disguised are sometimes the only people who tell the unvarnished truth — it’s the people who *want* their name and face to be on the TV whose motives you should worry about.

So: if your goal is to get a message out to the public, it’s worth taking some time to carefully consider whether you want the world to know who you are — and if your answer is yes, how *much* do you want to share? Does including personal details in the message help to humanize it, or is that “oversharing”? As with so many facets of communication, there are many possible choices you could make, each with their own advantages and disadvantages.

19.3 THE LAST WORD: IDENTITY AND EMERSON

I'll end this book with a topic that we haven't delved into very deeply, but that has become a common theme in recent communication research: **identity**. Much of the focus of this book has been on how to communicate effectively to audiences in a variety of contexts: how to persuade others to do something, how to formulate an argument that makes sense, how to tell a story that moves an audience, how to avoid misinterpretation of nonverbal signals, how to make good decisions in groups, how to get through conflict, how to choose the right media to deliver your message. These could all be lumped together under the umbrella "instrumental goals."

What if your goal is simply to tell the world who you are?

Some scholars have looked at communication along a continuum I haven't discussed yet, known as the **"instrumental" vs. "expressive" dimension**. Chapter 5's focus on audiences implies that all communication is about trying to affect an audience in some way. What if that's just not where your mind is, and instead you're thinking about what you want to "let out," regardless of how other people respond to it? I've read discussion threads, for example, about how people respond to men crying, with the implication that if you're an emotional man, you might want to suppress the tears in some situations (you could have a similar discussion about women or any other demographic category). Well, some suggest, maybe you should find a quiet room where no one's watching and do your crying there. Think about the audience first, not what is in your heart.

What does that say about authenticity, the A in the TARES model of ethics discussed in Chapter 3? I compare it to sneezing: some etiquette guides say you should suppress sneezes, and while I appreciate the consideration of not spreading your germs into the air, I also appreciate the argument that if your body wants to get that sneeze out of your system for whatever reason, then let it. Cover your nose with a tissue, but sneeze as hard as your body wants you to sneeze. Likewise, if you need to cry, then cry.

At least in American society in the 2020s, there's a growing recognition of the value of pursuing your authentic identity, and showing it to the world regardless of how the world responds. There are countless recent books about communication and identity, a topic I encourage you to pursue.[1]

This book has been about what you "say" — either in words, or through nonverbal communication or through media. As a communication teacher, I have never doubted that what you say matters. But in the back

1. An example that is focused on digital communication is Rob Cover's 2023 Identity and digital communication: Concepts, theories, practices, Routlege.

of my mind, I also hold a special space for an expression I heard long ago, attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson: **"Who you are speaks so loud, I can't hear what you say."**[2]

At the end of the day, effective, authentic communication is not something you can learn entirely from a book, a course, or even a series of courses, because in part it is about who you are. But hopefully, this book has given you a few ideas.

2. Did Emerson actually say it? Sort of. This blog investigates the question in depth and can't find an instance where he used exactly those words. Emerson did, however, write "What you are stands over you the while, and thunders so that I cannot hear what you say to the contrary" in his 1875 book *Letters and Social Aims.*

This is where you can add appendices or other back matter.