FUUR POWERS OF COMMUNICATION

Skills for Effective Learning

J. Michael Bennett



Four Powers of Communication

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University of Minnesota

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Four Powers of Communication: Skills for Effective Learning

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"The famous 'Mr. Ed vs. Francis . . . ," "Midway through the exam, . . ." From The Far Side © 1986,
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Preface

The idea for this book began to take shape as I experienced class after class with bright, eager freshmen and sophomores who were not quite prepared to begin formal college-level training in human communication. As my career advanced I found myself spending more and more class time teaching and discussing information and skills I had expected all high school graduates to possess.

It seemed to me that we needed a concise text that could be used by collegebound secondary students to prepare them to do well in college communication classes. This text also needed to be a useful information source in any secondary or post-secondary "how to study" class or lab.

Finally, it needed to be a book easily assigned as supplemental class work, or homework reading, for the large numbers of students at all educational levels who were already in college communication classes, but who needed some fundamental background in reading, listening, writing, speaking, and/or study skills.

I began to develop Four Powers of Communication with the hope of satisfying the needs of these groups of students, but during the development of the book I crossed paths with readers, researchers, and reviewers with a wide variety of backgrounds and special interests. These good people were quick to point out several other specific groups of students who would enjoy and profit from careful study of this text. I made some adjustments and a few additions to make the book fit the needs of several different types of students. For instance:

Independent study students, especially those whose training did not require enough work in the language arts, will find that this book lends itself well to study outside a formal class setting. It is complete in its coverage of the four major communication areas, and their interrelatedness and interdependence on each other, and does not necessarily require a teacher or tutor in order to achieve success.

Vocational/Technical school students will find that this text covers all the communication skills required by their various trades and professions. Extensive communication courses are often not especially welcomed by these busy, "handson" students, but Four Powers is broad enough to provide Vocational and Technical students with a firm grasp of the fundamental skills of human communication and brief enough to fit easily into a crowded curriculum.

International students for whom English is a second language will find this book most helpful and quite different from most ESL texts. It offers a fresh and unique look into many aspects of American culture and communication. Students from abroad should find Four Powers of Communication to be a very effective means of improving their competence and confidence in fundamental English communication.

I hope you will find new uses, different applications, and other potential readers than those I have considered. Please send your ideas and discoveries to me at the Rhetoric Department, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, 55108. I welcome your advice.

McGraw-Hill and I would like to thank the following reviewers for their many helpful comments and suggestions: Elizabeth Karzag, West Valley College; Linda Lisman, State University of New York, Binghamton; Cheryl McKernan, Central Washington University; and Beatrice Tignor, Prince Georges Community College.

I also wish to thank Steve Pensinger and Robert Linsenman for their excellent professional assistance in bringing this book to print. Finally, the enthusiasm and patience of Nancy Bush Bennett cannot be repaid, only acknowledged.

J. MICHAEL BENNETT

About This Book, or How to Play the Game of Education—and Win!

Getting an education should be fun. It should be a delightful experience. It really should be the best time of your life.

For many students, school and college days *are* the best of times. These are the months and years full of spirited competition, of being surrounded by interesting and attractive people, of having a reassuring sense of moving forward—of becoming a person of merit and substance and importance. This positive experience is exactly what education is for many students—but not for most. And that is the reason for this book.

This book has been written to help extend the joys and satisfactions of becoming well educated to a much larger percentage of students than is now the case.

How can one small book accomplish such a thing?

Rather efficiently, actually, because there are two main reasons that underlie relatively poor student performance in school and college, and the <u>nagging</u> unhappiness that accompanies such a waste of potential. They are

1. POOR ORGANIZATION

2. POOR COMMUNICATION

Chapter 1 of this book will get you *organized*, fast and forever—physically, psychologically, and mentally.

Chapters 2-5 will help you to communicate—effectively.

Chapter 2 will help you become a much better reader. You will read faster, more flexibly, more confidently, and with greatly improved short- and long-term retention (memory).

Chapter 3 will help you to listen—to eliminate bad listening habits such as daydreaming and being easily distracted. You will become an active, thoughtful, involved listener at lectures, sermons, seminars, group activities, meetings, and one-on-one sessions.

Obviously, when your powers to read and listen are up and strong, you will be a *much better student*. But reading and listening are only half of communication. They are the receiving skills—receptive communication. The other half is writing and speaking, the sending skills—transmissive communication.

Chapter 4 will help you to become a clear, concise, and confident writer. It will give you working knowledge of the formulas that usually produce good writing.

Chapter 5 will help you become an effective speaker. Most students try to avoid speech classes, and those who attend such classes often don't enjoy or profit from them. Why? Because they are afraid! And they're afraid because they don't know how to write or deliver a logical and impactful oral presentation. When you have completed Chapter 5, you will be on the way to being a pretty good public speaker.

As you proceed through your education, you will probably take at least one credit class in each of these four communication areas, maybe more than one in the writing field. Such classes will expose you to detailed lectures and provide you with in-depth exercises in each field.

This little book, however, is based on the KISS principle:

Keep It Short and Simple

Its aim is to help you develop strengths in each of the four areas—partly so that you will learn a lot and get good grades in the *various communication courses* you will take as you go through school, and partly to enhance your overall academic endeavors.

Chapter 6 takes a thoughtful look at how to study and take tests effectively. It aims to help you become a more sophisticated student. It suggests ways to read and study textbooks in all areas, from the sciences to the humanities. And it discusses the various types of academic tests: Chapter 6 will help you achieve better grades in *any* class.

But of course this book can go only halfway in achieving these aims. The other half is up to you. If you participate actively and wholeheartedly in the activities and suggestions that follow, you will find yourself doing much better in communication-related tasks. Then you too will end up a winner in that great game—education.

Personal Assessment

The first major move toward realizing your academic potential—and thus getting more fun out of education—is to maneuver yourself into the most favorable possible position for takeoff.

But before you can seriously consider where you're going, you must first think about where you've been and who you are: your concerns, your attitudes and mindsets, your weaknesses and strengths.

For starters, please carefully answer the following questions. Don't be negative, and don't try to be cute; be thoughtful, and try to help yourself.

| | Do you really wish to be a successful student? Why are you in school? | |
|----|--|--|
| 3. | What do you hope education will do for you? | |

| 4. | What characteristics does a "good" student possess? | | |
|----|--|--|--|
| 5. | What do you need to do in order to become a good student? | | |
| 6. | What are some of the differences between being a full-time worker and a full-time student? | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |

Now that you have given some thought to your attitudes, and assessed your strengths and weaknesses, you are ready to move on to the first of the two major tasks that lie ahead on the road to realizing your full academic potential—getting organized.

Contents

PREFACE xi

ABOUT THIS BOOK, OR HOW TO PLAY THE GAME OF EDUCATION—AND WIN! xiii

PERSONAL ASSESSMENT

xiv

CHAPTER 1

Getting Organized 1

| IFA | RNING | THE | RIHES | 2 |
|-----|--------------|-----|-------|---|
| | $m_{\rm HI}$ | | NULLA | • |

LEARNING TO MAKE DECISIONS 3

Benjamin Franklin to the Rescue!

Setting a Goal

LEARNING TO MANAGE YOUR TIME 6

A FINAL WORD: THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

. 14

Obstacles to Good Time Management 6

Time Is Precious

′

Planning a Schedule

CHAPTER REVIEW

11

CHAPTER 2

| Efficient | and | Effective | Reading | 15 |
|-----------|-----|-----------|---------|----|
| | | | | |

MEASURING YOUR READING SKILLS: THE READING EFFICIENCY INDEX (REI) 16

READING PRETEST 17

"How Fast Should a Person Read" 17

An Explanation of the REI 22

THREE BAD READING HABITS 23

Polysyllabic-Word Fixation 23 Vocalization/Syllabication 24 Habitual Regression 26

ADULT VERSUS CHILD READING 27

Adult Reading Needs: The "VCR" Syndrome 27

The Reader's Responsibility 27 INTERIM READING TEST 28

"Two Words to Avoid, Two to Remember" 29

THREE GOOD READING HABITS 34

Setting a Purpose 34

Pushing Yourself Along 34

Concentrating 36

READING POSTTEST 39

"Attitude—Asset or Liability?" 40

CHAPTER REVIEW 44

CHAPTER 3

Efficient and Effective Listening 46

MEASURING YOUR LISTENING EFFICIENCY 47

How to Use the Listening Tests 47

LISTENING PRETEST 48

From How to Build a Power Vocabulary 48

READING VERSUS LISTENING 50

"After This Manner, Therefore, Listen" 51

THREE BAD LISTENING HABITS 53

Hysterical Hearing 54

CONTENTS

Sloth and Indifference 55 Mental Minutiae 55

THREE GOOD LISTENING HABITS 56

Setting a Purpose 56
Pushing Yourself 57
Concentrating 58

NOTE TAKING 59

How to Take Effective Notes 60 How to Use Your Notes 62

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT 62

LISTENING POSTTEST 64

From How to Build a Power Vocabulary 65

CHAPTER REVIEW 67

CHAPTER 4

Efficient and Effective Writing 69

ELEMENTS OF CORRECTNESS AND STYLE 70

Audience Analysis 70

Rationale 72
Intentions 73
Methods 73

"How to Write with Style" 74

Mechanics 77

Reference Works 88

ELEMENTS OF ORGANIZATION 89

SOCO 89 GO 90

The Harvard Outline 90

FOUR GREAT EXEMPLARS OF EFFECTIVE WRITING 91

Thomas Jefferson 92

The Declaration of Independence 92

Benjamin Franklin 93 Abraham Lincoln 94

The Gettysburg Address 94

Winston Churchill 95

CHAPTER REVIEW 96

CHAPTER 5

| Efficient and Effective Speaking | 97 |
|----------------------------------|----|
|----------------------------------|----|

FEAR OF SPEAKING

SPEECH PREPARATION 100

> 100 Phase 1: Ideas/Information Gathering

98

Phase 2: Planning/Organization 102

Phase 3: Delivery/Presentation 105

106 SPEECH EVALUATION

FINAL EXERCISE 107

CHAPTER REVIEW 108

CHAPTER 6

Efficient and Effective Studying and Test Taking 109

113

EFFECTIVE STUDY SKILLS 109

> Study Formulas and Learning Styles 109

> REAP-A Very Successful Formula 112 Learning Styles: Holists and Serialists

EFFECTIVE TEST-TAKING SKILLS 113

> Nine Rules for Test Takers 114

TYPES OF TESTS 115

> 115 **Essay Tests**

Problem-Solving Tests 117

True/False Tests 117

Fill-in Tests 117

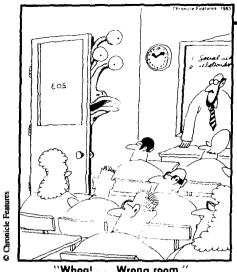
Multiple-Choice Tests 118

CHAPTER REVIEW 119

AFTERWORD 120

ANSWER KEYS 121





"Whoa! . . . Wrong room."

If you are going to take charge of your education, if you are going to start doing things, instead of having them done to you, you must ruthlessly assess your strengths and weaknesses, right now. Check either "Yes" or "No" in the self-test that follows.

Getting

Organized

Are you an effective and efficient

| | YES | NO |
|-------------------|-----|----|
| 1. Organizer | | |
| 2. Decision maker | | |
| 3. Time manager | | |
| 4. Reader | | |
| 5. Listener | | |
| 6. Writer | | |
| 7. Speaker | | |
| 8. Studier | | |
| 9. Test taker | | |
| 10. Thinker | | |

There are two points to consider here:

- 1. If you find you have more than three check marks in the "No" column, you have to do something drastic about making some changes.
- 2. Every "Yes"—that is, every strength—can be used to overcome weakness in the other categories, because all ten of these skills are interrelated and interdependent.

The great majority of persons are "organized" on a scale that varies from

Confusion ← Chaos

Important meetings and classes of all kinds are *forgotten*, essential paperwork is *lost*, deadlines are *missed*, and potential is *unrealized*—all because of disorganization.

Can anything be done? Absolutely!

There are three very important aspects to getting organized: (1) learning the rules, (2) learning to make decisions, and (3) learning to manage your time.

Learning the Rules

You cannot compete well, and you most certainly cannot win, at games for which you don't know the rules.

Education, particularly postsecondary education, is a very complicated game. Like most things, though, from driving to diving, you do better when you know what you're doing. Then you can truly tap your potential.

Try to accomplish the goals listed below as *soon* as you can—they are all very important to your feeling strong, competent, and knowledgeable.

- 1. Get and read the college catalog. The catalog is a carefully written, all-inclusive publication that will acquaint you with the school rules. It should contain everything from a campus map, to a discussion of college/department requirements for graduation, to a full academic-year calendar, to a listing of all the courses taught at that particular school. The catalog is a gold mine of information. It takes enormous amounts of effort, creativity, and money to produce it. Use it wisely and well.
- 2. Get to know the college bulletin. The bulletin is a quarterly (or semesterly) publication which lists all the courses being taught that school term and indicates the times, places, and instructors. The college calendar and other announcements are also included, as are student-related ads, announcements, cents-off coupons, and "freebies."
- 3. Walk or bike the campus. Most campuses are beautiful and worth seeing, but they can be confusing. Don't wait until you have to rush off to a new class before finding out where the hall or building is located. Then, too, knowing your way around the campus (and the town) makes you feel both knowledgeable and secure, and very much at home. There's not much to be said for feeling like a stranger.

Get Your Books as Soon as You Can

Don't wait around to buy your books. You'll have to get them sooner or later anyway, and sooner is better for these reasons. First, bookstores don't like to have excess books on hand, so there aren't many extras. There may not even be enough if enrollment in a class is unexpectedly high, or if students from another class buy books ordered by your professor. When additional books have to be ordered, the wait is usually six to eight weeks—which means you may as well drop the class.

Second, having your books from the very beginning of class allows for textbook familiarity. This term refers to the very good habit of becoming at ease with your textbook, whether it's on literature or on science. A large, expensive, difficult textbook can be very intimidating. The feeling of dread and apprehension such books tend to generate can be eased by buying the book early, writing your name in it, reading the prefatory material and table of contents, looking through it. In a word, becoming familiar with it.

- 4. Pay good attention to all class handouts. Most professors will give out a class syllabus, or guide. The syllabus has been carefully constructed to inform students about the limits of the course and the expectations of the instructor. Study it carefully. The same is true for any other handouts—such as scoring guides, study guides, lecture guides. All of these are very helpful and should be used for all they're worth.
- 5. Get special help if you need it. For each of your classes, find out if there is an "old test file" available or if help sessions are provided. Also, find out the office hours of the instructor and take advantage of one-on-one counseling if you need it.
- **6.** Go to class—always. Never miss a class. Attendance pays off—whether it's counted as part of the course grade or not. Missing just one session can put you behind and make you feel alienated and out of sync with the class.

Learning to Make Decisions

Martin Luther is said to have observed, "To not decide, is to decide." In other words, if you don't make decisions for yourself, then they will be made for you.

Too much of the time people (1) are reluctant to decide things, (2) decide on important matters without any rigorous reasoning or analysis, or (3) choose the easiest, least-demanding option.

This is no way to run your own life!

People do not do well when engaged in purposeless activities. Nor do they do well for long in environments where they have (or perceive themselves as having) no choices.

On the other hand, it is difficult to make choices—whether about clothes or

a car, an apartment or a major field of study—if one is unused to the process of decision making.

Benjamin Franklin to the Rescue!

Benjamin Franklin left us many things of great value, two of which are discussed in this book. The first is a method of learning to write with precision and clarity—something that is dealt with in Chapter 4.

The second is a method of decision making that is known as **doing a Ben Franklin**. Franklin evolved this procedure because he felt that with so much in our lives already decided for us, the decisions we do get to make should be good ones. We can't choose our relatives or our height, our IQ or our shoe size; but we certainly can choose our car, our college, and in large degree our level of success.

Doing a Ben Franklin works like this.

On a large piece of paper or pad, clearly and completely write down the decision to be made. Then draw two columns and label one "Pro" and the other "Con." Next, start thinking about every factor bearing on the decision, without regard to weighting or apparent importance. In the "Pro" column write those factors that lean toward a positive decision; in the "Con" column write those factors that lean toward a negative decision. When you are completely finished with this process, sit back and evaluate carefully the **evidence** before you.

Only by doing a Ben Franklin can you make a decision honestly based on a comparison and contrast of essential factors. An example of a "Ben Franklin" follows.

Problem: My father will arrange the down payment and the financing necessary to get me into a new car for my college graduation. I like the cute Ford Escort for some reasons, and the stately Pontiac Firebird for others. Which should I buy?

The Escort

| CON |
|-------------------------------------|
| Small-car ride |
| Not elegant |
| Not fast or powerful |
| Just OK looking |
| No one notices it |
| Not many options |
| Not sleek |
| Stops and handles OK, but not great |
| Less safe in accident |
| Not too comfortable |
| Gets "old" quickly |
| |

The Firebird

PRO CON

Gorgeous and elegant Expensive

Powerful and fast Fairly high maintenance

Good handling and braking Worry about thieves and vandals Smooth Fair mileage

People notice Police notice it too Poor visibility Very comfortable Loaded with options Two passengers only

Very safe in accident High insurance cost

Another way of doing a Ben Franklin is to label your columns with the options and do an item-by-item analysis. In the preceding example the options were Escort versus Firebird. In the example that follows, the options relate to choice of a career: professor versus lawyer.

Problem: I think I would be a good college professor in my field. I would also be a successful lawyer. Which career would be best for me?

PROFESSOR LAWYER

Decent money Lots of money Good hours Long hours

Usually around nice people Often around terrible people

Prestigious Prestigious

Good fringe benefits for my family Good fringe benefits for my family

Good when you get older OK when you get older

Outside \$ opportunities such as Rub shoulders with some pretty consulting and publishing

important people

Admired by general public Not liked by general public

Many "bosses" Independence

By making lists of this kind, you present the evidence. The next step is to weigh that evidence in terms of your criteria. In choosing a car, for instance, what is your most important criterion? Economy? Safety? Power? Making an impression on your friends and others?

When you have decided on your most important criterion, you can weigh the evidence in relation to that criterion. In choosing a career, for instance, what is it you value most? To live a pleasant life? Or to make a lot of money? To which end of the scale does the evidence "tilt" your decision?

More pleasant life More profitable life