

# **The Business of Writing and Speaking**

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**A Managerial Communication Manual**

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**Larry M. Robbins,** Ph.D.

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**Larry M. Robbins,** Ph.D.

Director, Wharton Communication Program  
University of Pennsylvania

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## **THE BUSINESS OF WRITING AND SPEAKING:**

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# Preface

Students and professionals today realize that clear communication is a prerequisite for success, and they need a book that will apply the basic skills of writing and speaking to the problems of business communication. *The Business of Writing and Speaking* is a concise but complete book that integrates basic skills, intellectual inquiry, and specific topics of communication applicable to the professional world.

Before we begin to communicate, we need to know why we are writing or speaking, what we need to say, and what our audience needs to hear. To address these important questions, the first section of this book deals with the general principles of communication, principles that underlie writing and speaking alike. Important features of this section include computer-assisted literature searching and methods of developing logical arguments. With proper research of topic and audience, we can begin to remove the barriers to clear expression.

The second section presents the basic types of written communication: letters, memos, reports, proposals (including fund-raising proposals), case analyses, and résumés. Each chapter includes examples, with suggestions for revising organization and unclear expression.

The section on general principles of speaking offers sensible suggestions for overcoming the problems of stage fright, organization, delivery, and the use of visual aids. Building on the principles introduced in the sections on writing,

the chapters on speaking show how an understanding of topic, audience, and personal skills can help speakers become credible communicators.

The fourth section covers the common types of oral presentations with specific attention to group presentations, questions and answers, meetings, and interviews. Each chapter includes specific suggestions on the types of presentations we are expected to give.

The book is tied together by a glossary of grammar, usage, logic and organization, format, spelling, and punctuation. End-of-chapter questions and an appendix with workshop exercises provide a model for instruction that can be applied to full courses or to short seminars.

This book recognizes that we have all had some experience in writing or speaking. The initial lessons of composition and communication were taught in “grammar” school, and although these lessons may have been incomplete or forgotten, we still manage to perform the daily “business” of communication. Nevertheless, now we must remember what we once learned and apply that knowledge to our specific needs. We need to understand how to revise, how to improve, how to be more concise, how to persuade, and how to evaluate the quality of our communication.

In writing or speaking, we follow the same rules of language and logic. These rules for clear communication apply to all disciplines. Business writing and speaking, technical writing, legal writing, or academic writing require no special variations. The differences lie in tone and in the types of words used in a specific profession. In short, variations of style among professional disciplines depend on the established audience.

The reason for joining writing and speaking in the same book seems clear: speakers and writers have to know how to put ideas together into meaningful sentences. In other words, clear writing precedes effective speaking. To do both, we must know the subject well and understand the audience’s needs. We should know the function of grammar and syntax, the precise meanings of words, and the ways to develop clear arguments. The rules that underlie writing also enable us to speak clearly.

What will be the use of our communication? Certainly immortality is not the goal of the professional world; in fact, only a tiny percentage of the words we speak or write are immortalized. Instead, we normally communicate to inform or persuade, to create the understanding that leads to cooperation. For these purposes, clarity and grace in language can lead to successful communication. After all, people are judged by their words as well as their actions.

Over the years, many people have tried to impart to me the valuable lessons of grace and precision. I am especially grateful to former teachers: Thomas Gilligan, who taught discipline in writing; William Koerber, who taught the power of words; and Keith Lindblom, friend and mentor, who taught the importance of making sense. I wish to acknowledge the guidance of the late J. Crozier Schaefer, who sought only one thing: perfection. He demanded it of himself and hoped for it in others. For enabling me to take the time to begin this

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book, I would like to thank Donald C. Carroll, former dean of the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

My wife Wendy has been steadfast in her support. She has made incisive comments on the manuscript and has patiently discussed the various transformations from first to last draft. My daughter Elizabeth has also helped me to understand that words should solve problems and not raise them.

My brother Martin, writer and editor, is a teacher's teacher. He has taught me to search for ambiguity and wordiness.

Other friends and colleagues have offered helpful suggestions. My thanks to Richard A. Block, Ann Bohara, Rosalind Carter, John Gaggin, Anne Greenhalgh, and David Wolford. I am also grateful to others who have made valuable comments on the manuscript: Paul Anderson, Miami University, Ohio; Paul A. Argenti, Amos Tuck School of Business, Dartmouth College; Alan T. Belsches, University of North Carolina; Vincent DiSalvo, University of Nebraska; Robert Gieselman, University of Illinois; Carolyn Gold, Marshalls, Inc.; Barbara Jensen-Osinski, Rauch Center for Executive Development, Lehigh University; James J. Kiely, Bentley College; Robert E. Reinheimer, Fuqua School of Business, Duke University; Kathryn J. Seidel, University of Maryland; Gary Shaw, Colgate Darden School of Business, University of Virginia; John W. Simms, AT&T Bell Laboratories; and Betty Evans White, Washington University.

A short time ago, I told my colleague, Roland M. Frye, a distinguished professor of Renaissance studies, that while preparing this book I was learning how to write again. He asked me how old I was, and when I answered, he said, "You have about eleven more times left." Learning to communicate is a lifetime process.

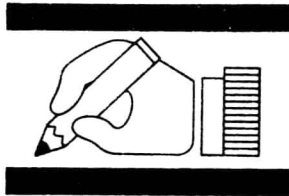
**Larry M. Robbins**



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PART 1

# General Principles of Composition



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## Chapter 1

# The Nature and Uses of Communication

### The Process of Communication

The prefix of the word *process*—*pro*—denotes forward movement; the whole word denotes the idea of change. Communication creates change because the participants in the exchange of ideas learn something that adds to their store of knowledge. Since not all communication is effective, not all change is positive. When communication is clear and logical, the barriers to change are removed and the process of increasing knowledge or motivating someone to act moves forward.

Communication is a process involving a sender and a receiver. The writer or speaker sends a message which is supposed to elicit a response from a listener or speaker. Thus, communication is a two-way process. Poor communication occurs when the line is broken between sender and receiver or between receiver and sender. The interruption or “noise” preventing clear communication can be faulty organization or misinformation on the sender’s part or the receiver’s inability to understand or listen to the message.

The message directed to a particular audience is a primary form of communication. Often, however, the sender will reach a secondary audience of

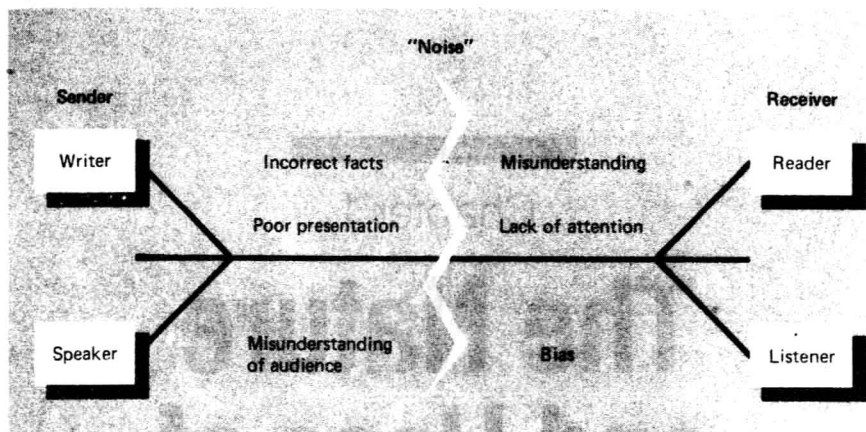


Figure 1-1 Interrupting the communication process

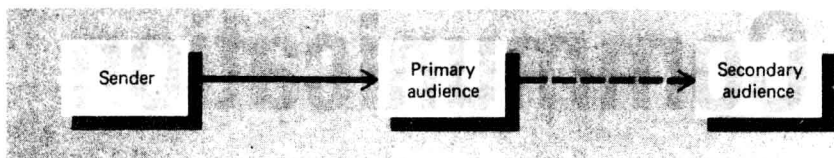


Figure 1-2 Primary and secondary audiences

receivers (readers or listeners). For example, a memo written by a company's research director to project heads may eventually be read by the comptroller or a lawyer. Therefore, the writer should avoid the use of jargon, vague allusions, and confusing abbreviations. In one firm, the abbreviation M & E had two meanings. The accountants thought that it meant *maintenance and equipment*, while the engineering department defined M & E as *mechanics and engineering*. Writers and speakers can avoid costly confusion if they ask themselves, "Would someone with a limited knowledge of my topic understand what I am saying?" The secondary audience may be peripheral, but they may need to respond to communication between the sender and the primary audience. For example, a memo concerning safety regulations may be sent to department heads, but the memo also may be posted for all employees. To respond sensibly, the secondary audience must be able to understand the communication.

## Levels of Communication

Whether you are communicating to a group or to an individual, you need to plan carefully to meet the audience's needs. In interpersonal communication, the sender can analyze the audience of one and design the message to meet very

specific needs. If the message is not completely clear, the receiver can ask a question that will clear up uncertainty. In group communication, the sender must try to avoid every ambiguity because all the members of the audience will not be able to respond personally. In either type of communication, the speaker or writer must anticipate the audience's response and use facts and logic to prevent ambiguity.

## INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

People may talk to themselves or imagine conversations, but as Paul R. Fimm has said, "such internal communication is another way to describe thinking."<sup>1</sup> Interpersonal communication occurs when an individual has direct interaction with every member of an "audience." The audience may be one other person, or it may be a group in which people interact with one another. Communication between individuals requires the skills of organization, clear expression, and listening.

**Organizing.** Since interpersonal communication involves reacting as well as initiating, you cannot control all interactions between people. Nevertheless, keeping the purpose of the discussion in mind will guide you to your goal. In a business setting, which may extend from an office interview to cocktail conversation, two people may wish to discuss a problem as equals, or one person may wish to establish authority. For example, a superior usually leads a conversation by introducing new topics, asking pertinent questions, and stating conclusions. Subordinates may wish to show deference to the superior by following the superior's lead, or they may wish to establish their own credibility by responding accurately and by directing the discussion according to their own personal agenda. In the give and take of communication, participants should defer to the common goal, if there is one; or, at least, they should be willing to listen as well as talk. *Planning* helps attain the flexibility needed to achieve the goals of a particular type of communication.

**Expressing ideas clearly.** In conversations or official meetings between two people, participants should have a goal in mind in order to eliminate digressions and ambiguity. Many people begin sentences two or three times before coming to the point; others start a sentence without knowing how to conclude. To avoid misunderstanding, write out a simple outline before the conversation begins or make a mental outline as the meeting progresses. Try to use simple sentence structure and unpretentious words. When making a statement, eliminate the digressive preface (I'm not sure whether I should ask this or not, but . . .) and come to the point. When answering a question, give a complete but simple answer, and once you have answered the question, do not repeat yourself or

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<sup>1</sup> *Managerial Communication* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980), p. 16

digress to other ideas. As successful salespeople have learned, knowing when to stop talking is an important skill.

**Listening.** Effective communication of any type—but especially interpersonal communication where immediate response is demanded—requires careful listening. To be a good listener, you must maintain eye contact, just as a speaker must. By looking directly at a person, you prevent yourself from being distracted, and in turn you make the speaker concentrate on you. As you listen, you can make mental notes of the main points the speaker covers and of the questions you wish to ask in response. Receptive listeners can facilitate communication by responding with a nod or facial expression. A positive nod gives the speaker confidence to continue; a negative or quizzical look causes the speaker to clarify ideas immediately. The interaction between a well-organized speaker and a receptive listener leads to successful communication because both participants have anticipated and responded to each other's needs.

## GROUP COMMUNICATION

Communication by an individual to a group requires all the skills of interpersonal communication—planning, assessing audience needs, flexibility, clarity of expression, etc. The main difference between interpersonal and group communication is that a group cannot provide an immediate and uniform verbal response. Since most (but certainly not all) presentations to a group do not allow interruptions, the speaker must assume that if a message is well-prepared, the audience is receiving it clearly.

In memos and letters, try to remove ambiguity by planning and revision. When writing memos to more than one person, assume that your audience has a common level of knowledge about a topic and a common need to be informed or persuaded. After establishing purpose and audience needs, you should order facts in a logical sequence that will help achieve the objective of the communication. Breakdowns in communication occur when the sender fails to reach a common level of understanding with the audience or when the receiver lets personal bias distort the listening process that leads to understanding.

## Tools of Communication

### LANGUAGE AND GRAMMAR

Every language has developed standards in its evolution, for without rules of syntax, ambiguity would make language useless. The English language evolved from Germanic roots with many infusions of Latin and French words. Usage became codified, and today there exists a tongue called Received Standard

English, used mostly (if at all) by graduates of Cambridge and Oxford.<sup>2</sup> Even the *name* of this kind of English suggests a divine giver of language who thunders at "mistakes."

The argument between those who prescribe rules and those who describe usage need not be resolved, *except* by an individual writer or speaker. A writer must make decisions about audience, tone, and diction (types of words) in order to use language effectively. There are times when "Quiet!" is far more effective than "Silence is requested."

Before you can decide which rules to follow, you must know those rules. Words convey meaning, but if the words appear randomly, no one can understand them: "Closed collapsed building today the because the stock market." Thus, for the sake of survival, we learn grammar and syntax when we start speaking in whole sentences. That is, we learn what forms are *proper* without knowing their names. Knowing the names of grammatical forms is unnecessary if words are to be spoken once and forgotten, but writers who want their words to be durable need to understand the tools of language (grammar, syntax, structure) in order to revise and improve. Only conscientious revision can lead to clarity, and that process requires knowing what it means to change the passive voice to the active, to eliminate prepositional phrases, or to use the restrictive or the nonrestrictive pronoun consistently. Is it a hard job to remember all the grammar learned (or not learned) in school? Not really. Only a basic grammar review is necessary and a willingness to examine each word, phrase, or clause to see what works and what fails.

## LOGIC AND ORGANIZATION

Failures in communication are part of life, unfortunately. Even the most precise words, in the best English, may cause confusion if logic is lacking. Therefore, it is essential to test logic before presenting ideas to the public. This topic will be discussed more fully in Chapter 3, but as you begin to think about the process of communication, consider the following ways to test the logical validity of your statements.

For deductive logic, use the "how?" and "why?" test. After every sentence, ask "how?" or "why?" to see if you have supported your statements. The answer to "how?" is "by means of," and the answer to "why?" is "because." *Because* clarifies, because all the steps of logic are filled in—assertion, support, conclusion. In most cases, the answers to "how?" or "why?" will be in the sentence itself or in the very next sentence. If the answers are lacking, *by means of* and *because* will supply the supporting ideas needed to compose a coherent paragraph.

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<sup>2</sup> See "Received Standard English" and "Received Pronunciation," *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 2d college ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982).

## STATEMENT NEEDING SUPPORT

"The government ought to prevent the bankruptcy of corporations essential to the national welfare." How? " . . . *by granting emergency loans.*" Why? " . . . *to prevent a serious disruption of the national economy.*"

## STATEMENT COMPLETE IN ITSELF

"To prevent a serious disruption of the national economy (*why*), the government ought to prevent the bankruptcy of corporations essential to the national welfare by granting emergency loans (*how*)."

Logic, syntax, and grammar are not the only tools needed for clear communication. Without tight organization, overall meaning may be lost in random thoughts. There are many ways to organize ideas: by time sequence, by place, or by natural relationships (comparison and contrast, cause and effect). Whatever method you use, another simple test will help keep the organization in order. At the left-hand margin of every paragraph, write down a capital letter (A, B, C, etc.). At major divisions, insert a roman numeral. This outline *after the fact* should correspond to the outline made before any words were set down. If the two outlines are not the same, there is nothing to worry about. The second one will probably reflect sensible revisions of organization. Compare both to see if you have conveyed all relevant points in a logical order.

## REVISION

By now it should be clear that effective communication requires planning, organizing, and revising. However, many beleaguered writers and speakers say, "If I spend all my time revising, I'll never get anything done. And besides, I barely have time to finish a first draft before it's due." Revision can speed up communication, not slow it down. If you know you use too many prepositional phrases ("*available to the organization to the fullest extent*") or too many compounds ("*significant and important*"), you can eliminate this "clutter"<sup>1</sup> as you write, saving time for the more important change in logic and organization.

Experienced writers know that they can improve a manuscript by eliminating excess words, correcting minor errors, adding a supporting argument, or rearranging paragraphs for the sake of coherence. Eventually, writers can learn to make such changes as they write if they know the simple rules of revision. (See Chapter 4 for a discussion of the process of revision.)

The process of revision should be applied to writing and speaking alike. Is the diction consistent? Is the style polysyllabic or simple, stiff, or colloquial? Good writers and speakers keep their audiences in mind at all times, being neither pretentious nor patronizing. What people say should always be more important

<sup>1</sup>A term used by William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 14.

than how they say it, and if language is filled with confusing noun strings (“officer analyst interaction system”) or awful metaphors (“run it up the flagpole to get a better bottom line”) then meaning may be lost in a muddle of words.

Careful revision should result in achieving the purpose of the communication. If the purpose is to inform, then the reader should learn something valuable. If the purpose is to persuade, the audience should be motivated by fact and logic to take action.

## Barriers to Communication

### PERSONAL BARRIERS

For some people, the process of communication is so intimidating that “writer’s block” or stage fright creates an almost insurmountable barrier. For others, not knowing what to say or how to say it results in the surmountable problem of procrastination. And for everyone, being anxious about the effect of words on an audience can establish still another barrier. Understanding the reasons for these barriers, some of them self-imposed, may help eliminate them.

**Writer’s block.** Inadequate information is the first symptom of writer’s block. Some writers are afraid to face the blank page because they think they do not know enough about the subject. This problem occurs when the process begins in the middle, namely, when writing begins before research and organization have taken place. Even writing down a title or topic will help focus ideas. After choosing a topic, write down a thesis statement or one-sentence abstract of your objective. Then write a simple sentence outline, covering major categories and subcategories. Expand that outline into a topic outline with key words and phrases you can use in the text. Fill in the outline with facts, and *then* you are ready to write.

A second symptom of writer’s block is a feeling of inadequacy. By not knowing how to edit and revise your own writing, you lose control over your words. You submit a draft to a superior or editor, and the manuscript is returned with red-ink tamperings that look like your own blood. True, some editors are autocrats and will put back mistakes you have corrected or replace your ideas with their own. However, because of their experience and acute sense of audience, good editors will exercise just enough authority to make your manuscript represent the organization. If editors are sensitive, they will improve the product without defacing the writer’s personality.

After the months or years it takes to serve an apprenticeship and learn your job, you can gain your own authorial voice. Credibility and self-confidence result from presenting consistently accurate information and valid arguments. The fantasy of believing that someday everything (or even something) you write will



be returned with no red ink may never come true because you will still need to adhere to *house style* or editorial policy. However, if you are not afraid of the editing process, and if you do some of it yourself, you will remove one of the barriers causing writer's block --intimidation.

Writer's block has many causes: lack of information, poor organization, faulty logic, incorrect usage, and the fear of disapproval. You can begin to eliminate these problems by carefully analyzing some of your own writing and the writing of others. Find the mistakes, and try to avoid them the next time you write. A blank page does not have to be intimidating if you understand that writing requires planning and revision.

**Stage fright.** If writer's block is intimidating, stage fright is terrifying -- at least to speakers who concentrate on themselves instead of their audiences. A certain amount of apprehension is positive because it will cause you to prepare as well as you can. Good preparation, which includes analyzing the audience's needs, organizing logically, and rehearsing, will eliminate most of the fear of the unknown. While speaking, good eye contact and attention to body movement will help establish communication between you and the audience. You will not be hurling ideas to the general mass but presenting your facts to individuals. No one can, or probably should, be able to eliminate apprehension completely. However, there is no reason to let fear of speaking block professional advancement. The chapters of this book on oral communication will present some suggestions on controlling a fear stronger than the fear of heights or heart attacks.

## ORGANIZATIONAL BARRIERS

The personal barriers of writer's block and stage fright can be overcome by experience. Often, though, even the best writers and speakers will face barriers having nothing to do with communication skills. A memo to a subordinate may be clear, but if the subordinate is not motivated to action, the communication fails. Sometimes the communications of superiors are not clear, and the subordinate cannot act without asking for clarification. Or, vague ethical standards may block effective communication because the reader has to infer the truth. No clear communication has ever been written between the lines.

**Barriers between superiors and subordinates.** Superiors are responsible for implementing company policy, but they should not let their authority make them dictators of style. In a large financial organization which publishes a quarterly journal, the supervisor was dissatisfied with the quality of writing sent to him for editing, and the employees were unhappy with what seemed to be arbitrary changes. To begin solving this problem, all staff members, including the supervising editor and his superior, attended a seminar to discuss ways to