

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY COMMUNICATION, ...AND WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT?

com•mu•ni•ca•tion *n* 1: an act or instance of transmitting information; 2: a verbal or written message; 3: a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs or behavior.



Communication is defined as the process of sharing ideas, information and messages with others. In the Air Force, most communication involves speaking and writing, but this definition includes nonverbal communication such as body language, graphics, etc.

Any communication can be broken into three parts: the **sender**, the **message** and the **audience**. For communication to be successful, the audience must not only get the message, but must interpret the message in the way the sender intended.

Since communication requires effort, it should always have a purpose. If the purpose isn't clear to the audience, you will have a problem! Most Air Force communication is intended to direct, inform (or educate), persuade or inspire. Often the sender has some combination of these motives in mind.

Chapter 3 describes the process of determining your purpose and audience in detail, but here are a few examples of Air Force communication targeted toward a specific objective:

The headquarters staff (the sender)

writes a new policy on trip report procedures (the message)
and sends a copy to all subordinate units (the audience).

Purpose of this communication: to direct

An aircraft technician (the sender)

reports the results of an aircraft engine inspection (the message)
to his supervisor (the audience).

Purpose of this communication: to inform

A branch chief (the sender)

requests additional funding for new computers (the message)
in a meeting with the division chief (the audience).

Purpose of this communication: to persuade

Most communication outside the Air Force falls in these categories as well. Can you spot the purpose of each of the following sentences?

“You didn’t wash the car like you promised.”

“But Dad! Everyone else is going to the beach. Why can’t I go?”

“Son, I know you’re a fine young man, and fine young men keep their promises.”

“Aw, Dad...”

“Wash the car NOW!”

If you look carefully, you can see the efforts to inform, direct, persuade or inspire in this common conversation.

COMMUNICATION, TEAMWORK AND LEADERSHIP

Communication skills are vitally important in any environment where teamwork is important. Simply put, communication enables us to come together to accomplish things better than we can accomplish as individuals. Communication skills are particularly important for leaders. The ability to communicate a vision and direction, to motivate and inspire others and to persuade our superiors are all essential in bringing people together to achieve a common goal.

The military environment is unique, and much of its uniqueness requires extraordinary communication skills. We operate highly technical equipment in a lethal environment and we are held to very high standards by the country we serve. Miscommunication can cause expensive mistakes, embarrass our organization and in some cases cause accidents or even death.

A CALL TO ARMS...

This book is designed to give you tools and ideas that will help you learn to communicate better ... and to teach others as well.

Both the Air Force and the large culture we live in are drowning in a sea of information. Around-the-clock media coverage, universal electronic mail (e-mail), and the expansion of the Internet and other electronic information sources make it difficult for us to sift out the valuable information we need to accomplish our mission. Now, more than ever, it’s important to communicate with clarity and focus.

The only way to become a better writer and speaker is to work at it—there are no short cuts. The good news is that service in the Air Force will provide plenty of opportunities for you to improve. Your communication skills will become stronger with practice, regardless of your initial ability, and this book is designed to help you on your journey.

“Perseverance is a great element of success. If you only knock long enough and loud enough at the gate, you are sure to wake somebody up.”

– Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Once you accept that communication is important, it's important to understand what makes communication succeed and what makes it fail. Most mistakes are caused by forgetting one of five principles of good communication. This section addresses these core principles, which we've organized to spell out the acronym FOCUS. It also describes some of the most common mistakes that occur when you miss the mark.

① FOCUSED: ADDRESS THE ISSUE, THE WHOLE ISSUE AND NOTHING BUT THE ISSUE

The first hallmark of good communication is that it is focused—the sender has a clear idea of purpose and objective, locks on target and stays on track.

In staff or academic environment, writing and speaking often attempts to answer a question provided by either a boss or an instructor. In such situations, the principle may also be stated as the following:

Answer the question, the whole question and nothing but the question.

Failure to focus comes in three forms:

fo·cus *n*

1. a state or condition permitting clear perception or understanding; direction; 2. a center of activity, attraction or attention; a point of concentration; directed attention: emphasis.

FOCUS Principles Strong Writing and Speaking:

Focused

Address the issue, the whole issue and nothing but the issue.

Organized

Systematically present your information and ideas.

Clear

Communicate with clarity and make each word count.

Understanding

Understand your audience and its expectations.

Supported

Use logic and support to make your point.

1. Answering the wrong question. This happens when we don't understand the assignment or what the audience really wants. Have you ever written what you thought was an excellent paper, only to be told you answered the wrong question or you missed the point? Have you ever asked someone a question and received a long answer that had nothing to do with what you asked?

2. Answering only part of the question. If a problem or question has multiple parts, sometimes we work out the easiest or most interesting part of the solution and forget the unpleasant remainder.

3. Adding irrelevant information. Here the communicator answers the question, but mixes in information that is interesting but unnecessary. Though the answer is complete, it's hard to understand—it's like finding that needle in the haystack.

Failure to focus can really hurt staff communication. Time and time again our efforts crash and burn because we never carefully read the words or really listen to the speaker for the real message ... for the specific question! Most executive officers will tell you that failing to answer the question is one of the primary reasons staff packages are dumped back into the laps of hapless action officers.

Chapter 3 provides suggestions on how to be clear on your purpose and avoid these problems.

② ORGANIZED: SYSTEMATICALLY PRESENT YOUR INFORMATION AND IDEAS

Good organization means your material is presented in a logical, systematic manner. This helps your audience understand you without reading your words over and over, trying to sort out what you're really trying to say.

When writing or speaking is not well organized, audiences become easily confused or impatient, and may stop reading or listening. Even if you're providing useful, relevant information, your audience may underestimate its value and your own credibility.

Chapter 6 is full of suggestions on how to organize well. Problems with organization are relatively easy to fix, and the payoffs are enormous. In these high-tempo environments, a little effort on your part will save your audience a lot of time and pain.

③ CLEAR: COMMUNICATE WITH CLARITY AND MAKE EACH WORD COUNT

This principle covers two interrelated ideas. First, to communicate clearly, we need to understand the rules of language—how to spell and pronounce words, and how to assemble and punctuate sentences. Second, we should get to the point, not hide our ideas in a jungle of words.

People are quick to judge, and mangled, incorrect language can cripple your credibility and limit acceptance of your ideas. Acceptable English is part of the job, so commit to improving any problems you may have. Developing strong language skills is a lot like developing strong muscles—steady commitment produces steady improvement. Always remember that progress, not perfection, is the goal.

Grammar scares most of us, but the good news is that many common mistakes can be corrected by understanding a few rules. Start by scanning our section on editing sentences, phrases and words on pages 95-101. If you want to dig deeper, then check out some of the books and Internet sites that address grammar and writing—contact your local librarian or our *References* section for some suggestions.

Using language correctly is only half of the battle, though—many Air Force writers and speakers cripple themselves with bureaucratic jargon, big words and lots of passive voice. These bad habits make it hard to understand the message. See Chapter 7 pages 73-88 for some suggested cures to these problems.

④ UNDERSTANDING: UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE AND ITS EXPECTATIONS

If you want to share an idea with others, it helps to understand their current knowledge, views and level of interest in the topic. If you've been asked to write a report, it helps to understand the expected format and length of the response, the due date, the level of formality and any staffing requirements. It's easy to see how mistakes in understanding your audience can lead to communication problems, and I'm sure you've watched others make this mistake. Check out Chapter 3 for some helpful hints on audience analysis.

⑤ SUPPORTED: USE LOGIC AND SUPPORT TO MAKE YOUR POINT

Most writers and speakers try to inform or persuade their audience. Part of the communicator's challenge is to assemble and organize information to help build his or her case. Support and logic are the tools used to build credibility and trust with our audience.

sup·port *n* information that substantiates a position.
v to furnish evidence for a position.

Nothing cripples a clearly written, properly punctuated paper quicker than a fractured fact or a distorted argument. Avoiding this pitfall is most difficult, even for good writers and speakers. Logic is tough to teach and learn because it challenges the highest levels of human intellect—the ability to think in the abstract. We slip into bad habits at an early age, and it takes effort to break them. Chapter 4 provides practical advice on how to use support and logic to enhance your effectiveness as a speaker and how to avoid common mistakes.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we defined communication as the process of sharing ideas, information, and messages with others, and described how effective communication enables military personnel to work together. To help writers and speakers stay on target, we introduced five FOCUS principles of effective communication. In the next chapter, we'll describe a systematic approach to help you attain these principles and meet your communication goals.

“Jargon allows us to camouflage intellectual poverty with verbal extravagance.”

– David Pratt

PREPARING TO WRITE AND SPEAK: THE FIRST FOUR STEPS

Like many things, good communication requires preparation, and the first four steps lay the groundwork for the drafting process. Though much of this seems like common sense, you'd be surprised at how many people skip the preparation and launch into writing sentences and paragraphs (or speaking "off the cuff"). **DON'T DO IT!** Good speaking or writing is like building a house—you need a good plan and a firm foundation.

SEVEN STEPS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

1. Analyze Purpose and Audience
2. Research Your Topic
3. Support Your Ideas
4. Organize and Outline
5. Draft
6. Edit
7. Fight for Feedback and Get Approval

① ANALYZE PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

*"Where there is no vision, the people perish."
— Proverbs 29:18*

Too many writers launch into their project without a clear understanding of their purpose or audience. This is a shame—a few minutes spent on this step can save hours of frustration later, and help determine whether you end up looking like an eagle or a turkey. You're much more likely to hit the target if you know what and who you're aiming at.

Carefully analyzing your purpose helps with FOCUS Principle #1: "Focused—answer the question, the whole question and nothing but the question." In some cases, if you take a hard look at the purpose you might find that a formal paper or briefing might not be needed. You'd be startled at how many briefings, paper documents and electronic messages are processed in a typical day in a MAJCOM or wing. Formal communication takes effort and costs money—make sure you don't unnecessarily add to everybody's workload.

If you take the time to "understand your audience" (FOCUS Principle #4) and think about their current knowledge, interest and motives, you'll be better able to tailor your message so that you'll accomplish your purpose, regardless of what it is. Instructing a hostile audience about changes in medical benefits will be different than inspiring a friendly audience at a Veteran's Day celebration, and writing for the general's signature will be different than writing for the base newspaper. Chapter 3 has lots of helpful suggestions about analyzing purpose and audience.

② RESEARCH YOUR TOPIC

*"Truth is generally the best vindication against slander."
— Abraham Lincoln*

Remember that FOCUS Principle #5 states good communication should be *supported* with information relevant to your point. Step Two—"Research your topic"—gives you the raw material to build your case.

For many of us, "research" sounds intimidating—it brings back memories of painful school projects and hostile librarians who wouldn't let us sneak coffee into the building. Don't let the idea of research scare you. In the context of the seven-step approach,

research is the process of digging up information that supports your communication goals. Think of it as “doing your homework” to get smart on your communication topic. Chapter 4 is full of helpful advice on how to approach the challenge. For those of you interested in academic research, Appendix 2 has additional information on the topic.

③ SUPPORT YOUR IDEAS

“If you can’t dazzle them with brilliance, baffle them with bull.”
– Anonymous

Often our communication goal involves persuasion. In such cases, throwing information at our audiences isn’t enough—we have to assemble and arrange our facts to support our position. Different kinds of information gathered during the research process can be used to form a *logical argument*. A logical argument is not a disagreement or a fight—it’s how we assemble information to make decisions and solve problems.

At the same time we are trying to persuade others, others are trying to persuade us and not all their arguments are airtight. A *logical fallacy* is a weakness or failure in the logic of an argument. Chapter 5 describes logical arguments and several common logical fallacies—allowing you to recognize mistakes in other’s arguments and avoid them in your own.

Building logical arguments are part of everyday life. We build arguments when we decide which new car to buy, who to nominate for a quarterly award or how we should spend our training budget. You’ll find that many of the ideas described in Chapter 5 are part of the way you think, even if you didn’t know the formal terminology.

④ ORGANIZE AND OUTLINE

“Organizing is what you do before you do something, so that when you do it, it’s not all mixed up.”

– Christopher Robin in A.A. Milne’s *Winnie the Pooh*

You know your purpose and audience, you’ve done your homework—it’s time to deliver your message, right? Not so fast! Before starting to write sentences and paragraphs (or deliver your speech), you’ll save time and frustration by organizing your thoughts and developing an outline of how you are going to present your information.

Successful communicators organize their material logically and in a sequence that leads their audience from one point to the next. Audiences often “tune out” a speaker or writer who rambles on without a logical pattern. Poorly organized essays are a common complaint in both civilian and military schools. Save yourself and your audience a lot of pain—read Chapter 6 to learn different patterns and techniques to organize and outline your material.

FOCUS Principle #2 states that good communication should be *organized* so that the audience can efficiently understand your point. You’ve taken the first steps towards accomplishing this principle when you take the time to organize and outline your work before starting to write ... but how you actually draft and edit paragraphs will take you the rest of the way.

DRAFTING AND EDITING: WHEN THE FINGERS HIT THE KEYBOARD

The first four steps are identical for both writing and speaking assignments, but the drafting and editing processes are somewhat different for the two forms of communication. In this section we'll describe the steps from a writing perspective, and Chapters 9 and 10 will describe how the steps are adapted for Air Force speaking.

⑤ DRAFT

"Writing is easy. All you do is stare at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead."

— Gene Fowler

When we think about the writing process, we immediately think of drafting sentences and paragraphs. If you're uncomfortable with your writing skills, this step usually causes the most anxiety. The good news is that your work on Steps 1-4 will make the drafting process less painful and more efficient.

Once you've completed the preliminaries and are ready to write, there are several practical ways to ensure you connect with your readers.

- First, get to the point quickly—use one or more introductory paragraphs to state your purpose up front. Most Air Force readers don't have the time or patience to read a staff paper written like a mystery novel with a surprise ending.
- Second, organize your paragraphs so the readers know where you're leading them, and use transitions to guide them along.
- Third, make sure your sentences are clear and direct. Cut through the jargon and passive voice, use the right word for the job and don't make them wade through an overgrown jungle of flowery words.
- Finally, summarize your message in a concluding paragraph that connects all the dots and makes the message feel complete.

Chapter 7 is full of practical advice on drafting, and it takes a top-down approach. It begins with preliminaries such as writing tone and formats, transitions to paragraph construction, provides practical tips on writing clear, vigorous sentences, then concludes with advice on overcoming writer's block.

⑥ EDIT

Experienced writers know that editing should be a separate, distinct process from drafting. When you draft, you create something new. When you edit, you shift from creator to critic. This change in roles can be tough, and no one wants to admit that his baby is ugly. Remember that criticism and judgment are inevitable in communication. The better you are at critically evaluating and correcting your own writing, the fewer people will be doing it for you.

There are two important aspects of the editing process—WHAT you are editing for, and HOW to edit efficiently. What to edit for is simple—remember those FOCUS principles from Chapter 1? How to edit is a little more complicated, but we recommend starting with the big picture and working down to details like spelling and punctuation. Ironically, many people do just the opposite; they focus on details first. Some even think that editing is all about the details. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Though details are part of editing, they’re only part of the puzzle.

⑦ FIGHT FOR FEEDBACK AND GET APPROVAL

“Wisdom is the reward you get for a lifetime of listening when you’d have preferred to talk.”

– Doug Larson

When you’ve completed the editing process and done what you can to improve your communication, it’s time to move outside yourself to get feedback. We are all limited in our ability to criticize our own work, and sometimes an outside opinion can help us see how to improve or strengthen our communication. Your objective is to produce the best possible product; don’t let pride of authorship and fear of criticism close your mind to suggestions from other people. Also, what we write or say at work often must be approved by our chain of command through a formal coordination process. Your supervisor needs to see it, the executive officer needs to see it, then the big boss, and so on.... Chapter 9 provides tips on how to give and receive feedback and how to manage the coordination process.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we summarized a systematic process—**Seven Steps to Effective Communication**—that will help you achieve the five FOCUS principles. These steps will help you improve your writing and speaking products. Each step is described in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

THE BASIC STEPS...

1. Analyze Purpose and Audience
2. Research Your Topic
3. Support Your Ideas
4. Organize and Outline
5. Draft
6. Edit
7. Fight for Feedback and Approval

FOR MORE DETAILS, REFER TO:

- Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7 (Writing); Chapter 11 (Speaking)
Chapter 8 (Writing); Chapter 11 (Speaking)
Chapter 9