

CHAPTER

1



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INTRODUCTION: FOUNDATIONS OF COMMUNICATION

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- understand human communication in its broadest forms
- begin the process of honing your own communication, mindful of the complexity and inherent difficulties of communication
- describe how the dominant communication theories apply to business communication in practice
- develop a sense of communication purpose so that you can use language effectively in your business activities
- devise strategies for overcoming common communication barriers
- adopt logic, clarity and courtesy as your business communication principles
- develop a long-term and sustainable set of practices that are based upon ethical principles and that emphasise clear and truthful interactions with others.

KEY TERMS

abstract
channel
Cold War
communication
communication theory
comparative linguistics

consonants
culture
cuneiform
decoding
deterministic
encoding
feedback

grammatical systems
hieroglyphics
knowledge economy
mass communication
meaning
noise
pictographs

postmodernity
public sphere
receiver
rhetoric
semiotics
sender
signification

signs
structural anthropology
structural linguistics
syllogism
texts
vowels



Introduction: an overview of the essentials of business communication

COMMUNICATION
interaction between individuals or groups for the purposes of conveying some kind of information or sharing experience

KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY
an economic system that is based upon the sharing of ideas and information, rather than tangible assets

“The art of communication is the language of leadership.”

American lawyer James Humes

Business could not possibly exist without **communication**. In fact, business is a *form* of communication in itself. Business involves any number of communication interactions, whether verbal, nonverbal or visual, in their unlimited manifestations. Selling a product, creating new enterprise, opening a new outlet, designing a brand image and developing a new market are all forms of communication with an audience. The conduct of business arises from the human propensity to communicate and all forms of communication have been strengthened through business; business and communication are therefore intimately linked. So at the most fundamental level, communication is the stuff of business.

Having said that, communication itself has changed substantially over time, as has our understanding of how it works. The rise of new technology and the greater interconnectedness of the world generally (and the business world in particular) through globalisation and social media have altered the way we communicate, how we think about communication and how we plan to communicate effectively. The **knowledge economy**—commerce based upon information—has overtaken the old manufacturing-based economies that powered the Industrial Revolution over 200 years ago and established modern Western economic systems. New businesses these days

tend to be built on good ideas rather than on heavy machinery. The knowledge economy produces many different things, such as software, consulting and financial services, design, and creative products such as music (Meyer 2010, p. 3). Look at the current business superstars such as Google, eBay, Microsoft, Apple or Amazon—these are among the highest-value businesses in the world. Knowledge-based business requires strong relationships, and relationships are formed through communication.

A business of any size these days is more dependent than ever before on a rapid and unambiguous exchange of information, and more at risk if its communication activities are slow, unclear and filled with potential misunderstandings. These changes require a re-evaluation of how best to communicate both within and between organisations, and how to ensure that we can manage interactions between different professional and cultural groups to best effect. These activities must all be carried out while adhering to well-developed ethical practices. That's where this book comes in. We hope to help you develop your skills to a high standard to better equip you for a business career.

We interpret 'business' broadly in this textbook. The information you will find here will be applicable to workers in all kinds of commercial enterprises, but that same information will also translate into the government and non-government sectors as well as any other professional environment that requires clear, efficient, logical and courteous communication standards. We also interpret 'communication' broadly to cover writing, speaking, interacting in small or large groups, using and interpreting nonverbal signals, and reading and listening in various professional contexts.

Without doubt, well-honed communication skills are valued in the business world, and research shows that this trend has been growing over time (Maes, Weldy & Icenogle 1997). Have a look at job advertisements and you see that 'good communication skills' are almost always specified as essential for employment. This is because the efficient and effective flow of information within and between organisations often determines the success or otherwise of a business venture. Failed communication—whether in terms of misunderstandings within an organisation or poor transmission of messages to clients, government, the media, employees, collaborators or the general public—can have serious consequences for the conduct of a business. Perfect business communication is probably not possible, and communication will always be an art rather than a science. However, forms of business communication that are informed by sound principles and enacted effectively will help to smooth the way and increase your own productivity and that of your organisation.

Businesses have evolved new structures that depend greatly on communication for their success. Meyer (2010) describes some of the features of this new way of doing business:

- *Different management structures, which create 'flatter' organisations.* The old rigid hierarchies in which senior management operated in isolation from more junior staff have been replaced by more decentralised and democratic structures. Managers and their employees interact with each other more than ever before and must work together to solve problems and increase productivity.
- *More diversity in the workplace.* The old 'white Anglo-Saxon Protestant male' face of the traditional Western workplace has given way to a mixture of ethnicities, genders, ages, races, physical abilities and sexual orientations.
- *Emphasis on teamwork.* Most modern workplaces expect employees to cohere into efficient and effective teams, a form of activity that only works when good communication practices are in play.
- *Rapidly evolving communications technologies.* All modern businesses use fast, advanced communications technologies based on computing and telecommunications, such as next-generation mobile telephone networks. Apart from the basic elements of email and voicemail, many businesses have also embraced videoconferencing, the many commercial possibilities of the internet and the power of social media.

While everyone who works for a business must be a good communicator, some members of an organisation have particular communication responsibilities that have specialised requirements. You may, for example, become a media manager or a public communication specialist within an organisation (see Chapter 9), or you may be involved with internal communication (see Chapter 8) or stakeholder liaison or advertising. You may climb the ladder to the heights of management and need to demonstrate all the advanced communication skills that business leaders must possess. All of these roles, and more, require excellent communication skills. These skills range from your consistent ability to craft strong, clear and grammatically correct sentences to achieve a particular goal right up to preparing an incisive report on an important business activity, a persuasive proposal for a new business venture or a stunning keynote address at an international conference. You may need to speak to a diverse range of people in ways that are straightforward, compelling and purposeful. You may have to set up and run business meetings that efficiently come to decisions and assign responsibilities. You may need to ensure that within your own organisation the information flows are professional and fruitful. You may seek to establish a professional dialogue with colleagues or customers in other parts of the world where different communication norms are in play. You may need to ensure that you are aware of the nuances of nonverbal communication to ensure that your meanings are not distorted or lost—and you will need to read other people’s nonverbal signals, too.

This textbook will provide you with the foundational knowledge you need to become the sort of business communicator who gets positive results that contribute to the success of both you and your organisation, whatever form of business it carries out. Good communication leads to better decision making and problem solving, and therefore makes for better productivity. If you have well-developed communication skills, you are better able to minimise the barriers that inevitably exist between individuals. These skills make professional relationships more fruitful and the experience of working more enjoyable and rewarding. Before we get started on exactly how to achieve your business communication goals, let’s go back to the beginning to consider the fundamental nature of human communication.

What is communication?

Understand human communication in its broadest forms

Communication defined broadly is simply interaction between individuals or groups for the purposes of conveying some kind of information or sharing experience. As this book progresses, we will narrow that definition down to a range of specific concepts and activities that are applicable directly to the business world and can be put into practice by a new graduate. But for now it is useful to see what an all-encompassing idea communication actually is. The word has beginnings in Latin, the language of the Roman Empire that thrived between about 500 BC and AD 480 and dominated much of Europe during that time. The original word in that ancient language was *communicare*, which was a verb meaning ‘to share’ or ‘to impart’, the underlying concept it still describes today. The word entered English via old French after the Norman Conquests of Britain in 1066, and has taken on new meanings and nuances over the years, while still retaining the essential idea of the sharing of knowledge and experience. Now there are nearly as many definitions of communication as there are communication theorists. Some of the technical vocabulary in the field of communication studies may be off-putting to non-specialists because of its abstract and increasingly complicated nature. Certainly communication scholarship is one area of contemporary academic endeavour where simple, straightforward communication is rather hard to find.

In this book, we would like to avoid unnecessary complexity and ensure that communication as a concept and an activity can be understood by aspiring business graduates and practitioners without difficulty. Therefore, we will use simple and clear language throughout this text and encourage you to adopt this same form of language in your own endeavours, whatever they may be.

In the end, good communication is simple—even though it is not easy. All you have to do is ensure that you know what you want to say, who you want to say it to and how to use language effectively to say it clearly. You must do this in full knowledge of the needs and contexts of the recipient and with a clear view of what you would like them to do with the information. You must be aware of the possibilities of misunderstanding and you must act ethically at all times. These are the fundamental ideas that this book will flesh out.

Language as a unique human attribute

Human language is a wonder and a mystery. No one knows for sure when language first arose, though many theories—some more fanciful and mythical than others—have been formulated through the ages. What we do know is that spoken language dates back at least 100,000 years, and possibly a lot further back than that, and can be found in all human societies. Language is an intrinsic characteristic of human beings, for reasons that remain obscure and disputed. Humans acquire spoken language as part of their natural development as infants, though written language may never be acquired unless it is taught.

All human languages share some fundamental characteristics (Fromkin et al. 1996). For example, the grammar of every known language contains rules for how to form words and sentences, and grammatical categories such as nouns and verbs are always present. Every language has forms of words that can describe **abstract** concepts such as ‘ideology’ or ‘strategy’, and that can form questions, issue orders and express negative counterparts to positive words and statements. In the English language, negation is possible in several ways, including through the use of the word ‘not’, as in ‘This proposal is *not* acceptable’ as a negation of the statement ‘This proposal is acceptable’. Negation is a subtle and unique feature of human communication.

Forming questions is also especially significant, because of the sophisticated cognitive processes that are needed in an individual’s brain to recognise that other people might possess information that can be solicited by questioning. Although other animals do have communication systems of various kinds (not language as such, but various meaningful noises), they do not appear to have any capacity at all to ask questions of each other. Likewise, animals—even higher primates such as chimpanzees—cannot recognise or use numbers beyond 10 or ever acquire an understanding of how numbers work. However, humans can learn a basic numbering system easily as infants and then use the principles to apply in a huge variety of particular instances.

All languages have finite (limited) rules encompassed by their **grammatical systems** but also have the capacity to generate an infinite number of sentences. All speakers of a language have corresponding capacity to comprehend these sentences, which is indicative of a powerful and creative communication tool indeed. This capacity to match the limited elements of language to an unlimited number of thoughts is extraordinary and something worth pondering. Many of the sentences you form every day probably have never been written or uttered by anyone else before. And yet others can understand what you are saying, as long as you abide by the agreed rules of the language you are using.

ABSTRACT
an adjective that describes concepts that are not available to the physical senses, such as ‘ideology’ or ‘strategy’

GRAMMATICAL SYSTEMS
the rules for how words form sentences

All languages change over time and no language can be described as ‘primitive’—all are complex and subtle and capable of expressing complicated ideas. Our brains are ‘wired’ for language and we acquire it even if we are born deaf and can’t hear other people speak. So, while animals do communicate with each other, they do not do so in the same way that humans do or with the same capacity for abstract thought. As far as we know, human language in all its complexity is unique. While we have many subtle and not so subtle ways to convey what we are thinking and feeling without the use of language (as you will see in discussion of non-verbal communication in Chapter 4), many of our activities are predicated on use of written or spoken language to make ourselves understood and our meanings clear. This textbook does place emphasis on the need for clear and purposeful language use in the business context. While this is not a language textbook, we would like the business student to think about language use. Mindful use of clear English is a primary skill in business communication.

Striving to use language as a precision instrument is one way that you can assist in developing your own business communication skills. For example:

- How might you make use of the rules of sentence structuring to create clear and unambiguous statements?
- How might you increase and hone your vocabulary to ensure that you always choose strong, concrete and meaningful words instead of weak, abstract and ambiguous ones?
- How can you simplify what you have written or plan to say so that you only use the most concise forms of words to ensure that your meaning is transmitted with both simplicity and clear meaning?
- How can you indicate empathy for your reader/listener by ensuring that you put their communication needs first?

These and many other questions arise when we consider what role language might play in communicating for business.

Begin the process of honing your own communication, mindful of the complexity and inherent difficulties of communication

History of human communication

The earliest tangible evidence we have of human communication is in the form of prehistoric cave art dating back over 30,000 years. However, speech predated art by many thousands of years. We don’t know exactly how our early ancestors spoke to each other as no traces remain of those early forms of human language. Nevertheless, we can see through the art of tens of thousands of years ago that early humans were developing ways of interacting that had not been a feature of life on Earth before. The higher brain functions inherent in communicating information about the type of animals they hunted, for example, showed clear evidence that human beings were distinguishing themselves at that point from other animals and were attempting to pass information to each other about the physical and spiritual meaning of their hunting activities.

In a sense you could say that media technology really began when humans started writing instead of just painting pictures. Amazingly, writing appeared completely independently in two separate parts of the planet in about 3100 BC: in the advanced ancient civilisations of Egypt and Sumeria (part of ancient Mesopotamia, now present-day Iraq) and in China (Hartley 2002, p. 164). And we humans have not stopped writing since, no matter what twists and turns our societies

have taken. Our languages are diverse and many, and our alphabets wildly divergent (contrast the English alphabet with that of the Thai language, for example), but they all fulfil the same need—to share our experiences with each other and to create coherent communities and interlinkages based upon these shared experiences.

Like so many topics of central interest to humanity, human language and communication were first studied in detail by the ancient Greeks. More than 2500 years ago, ancient Greek culture was burgeoning and had begun developing important ideas in philosophy and science that would become the foundation for much learning and intellectual endeavour over the centuries to come. The first known developed philosophical theory about the origin of language is credited to the brilliant Athenian Plato (Fromkin et al. 1996, p. 25), who lived from 427 to 347 BC. A factor crucial to our understanding of Greek philosophy and science is the Greeks' development of an alphabet that contained **vowels** (Russell 2000, p. 31). These are the letters that we know in English as *a, e, i, o, u* and that had their direct counterparts in the ancient Greek language. They were joined with the **consonants** (*b, c, d, f* etc.) to form a highly flexible alphabet. Earlier, the ancient Egyptians had used **hieroglyphics**, and other civilisations used written devices such as **cuneiform** or **pictographs**, which illustrated or represented the objects they were applied to. By adding vowels to the alphabet, the Greeks made it possible to link the sounds of the spoken language—the actual sounds made by the human vocal chords—to the written symbols. So linguistics was finally matched with an alphabet. This proved extremely important for conveying subtlety and complex information. As the English philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote, 'There can be no doubt that the acquisition of this convenient method of writing greatly hastened the rise of Greek civilisation' (Russell 2000, p. 31). The invention of vowels was just one development in the history of language, but it was an important and lasting one.

Language and communication are, naturally, closely interconnected. We use language, whether it is written, spoken or nonverbal, to perform many forms of communication in many different contexts. This simple fact has led to hugely important fields of enquiry around how we communicate. Communication studies really blossomed in the twentieth century. This burgeoning of interest in human communication was underpinned by the rise in communication technologies and mass media, particularly radio, television, satellites, computers and the internet (Littlejohn & Foss 2008). Theories of communication particularly proliferated from the 1940s, along with associated ideas in media, linguistics and cultural studies (Hartley 2002, p. ix). Theory started being applied to many humanities subjects, including literary studies and history, during this time. Ideas about how we speak to each other in literature or across the years joined with new notions of what we are doing when we enter the **public sphere** and interact with each other.

The public sphere is a powerful idea that has influenced media and communication theory since it was first described by the theorist Jurgen Habermas in 1989 (Bainbridge, Goc & Tynan 2011, p. 13). In this theoretical space, power is endlessly negotiated and contested. Many see it as a way that citizens in a democracy communicate with each other and battle for ideas (such as those around climate change or civil rights). As such, it frames how businesses communicate as well, since businesses are elements of democracies and partake in the big themes that run through democratic societies as well as conducting battles with competitors for public favour and profits. No Western democracy can exist without its commercial sphere, and commerce drives much of the social and political agenda of democratic life. For example, the banking sector in Australia is central to the way our society is organised: how our homes are funded, how we save our money and how our investments are made. Community discussion about the role and responsibility of banking forms part of the public sphere. The public sphere concept is at its heart concerned with communication—in fact, communication on a higher and more idealistic plane than day-to-day interaction: 'the Habermasian public sphere is presented as an ideal for how society *should* operate' (Bainbridge, Goc & Tynan 2011).

VOWELS

the English letters *a, e, i, o* and *u* that correspond to sounds made in speech

CONSONANTS

all English letters other than vowels

HIEROGLYPHICS

particularly in relation to ancient Egyptian written language, pictorial symbols used to represent meaning

CUNEIFORM

wedge-shaped characters used in the ancient writing systems of Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq)

PICTOGRAPHS

pictorial symbols for words or phrases, used as the earliest known forms of writing

PUBLIC SPHERE

the public spaces of work, leisure, politics, religion, academia and the mass media

Some do not find theories of communication helpful in the practical world of business. But understanding what is going on behind the scenes—the cogs, levers and wheels that make up the intricate mechanisms of communication—can be enlightening as well as providing some ideas on how to refine our own communication. Therefore here we outline some of the main intellectual threads in communication theory. We have stripped out much of the intimidating jargon to provide a clear summary of the ideas, and then propose how these ideas might be useful in practice.

Communication in theory

COMMUNICATION THEORY

the concepts or ideas that seem to explain communication effects or performance; the main threads of communication theory are the transmission models and the transaction models

Theoretical perspectives provide some useful frameworks for considering the concept of communication. According to Mackey (2004, p. 43), ‘To think theoretically is to use a set of assumptions about how the world works in order to be able to predict and make conclusions about what happens’. Not surprisingly, modern communication theory had its beginnings in the intersection between information technology and mathematics. This means that communication theory is relatively young in relation to human communication more generally. **Communication theory** ‘refers to the concepts or ideas that seem to explain communication effects or performance’ (Mohan et al. 2004, p. 4). While no one theory can explain all communication, two main threads can be observed:

1. transmission models
2. transaction models.

While each has been refined and elaborated by various theorists over the past 60 years or so, the fundamental distinctions between these two ways of looking at communication remain more or less intact.

Transmission model

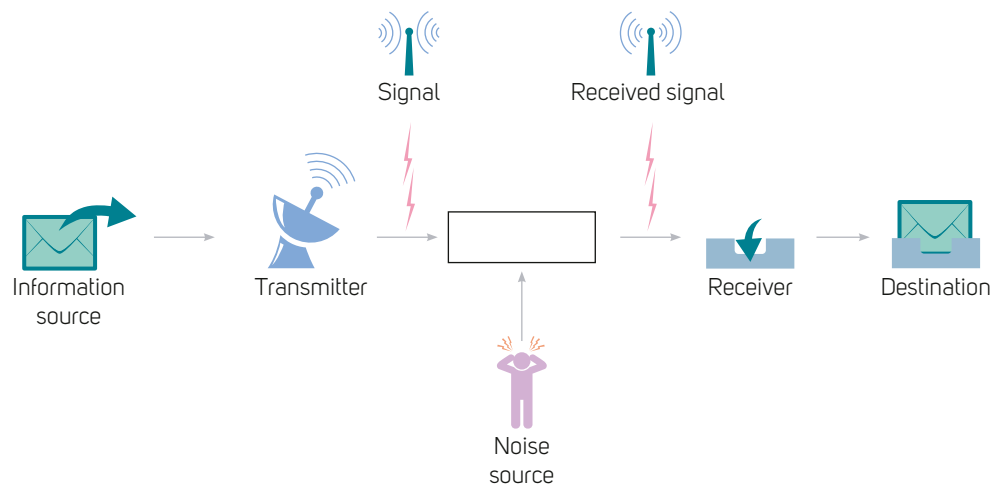
The older theory is the transmission model, first proposed by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver in 1949. Shannon was an engineer employed by the Bell Telephone Company (now Bell Laboratories) in the USA. He and Weaver, a mathematician and academic, became interested in mathematical models of telecommunications as a way of understanding how a message was converted to an electrical impulse and then sent down the telephone line to a receiver, where it could be decoded and understood by its human recipient (Meyer 2010, p. 8). They had begun formulating their famous communication model during the Second World War (Fiske 1990, p. 6), a conflict that had spurred a rapid rise in communications technology because of the urgency of war. Shannon and Weaver published their theory in a famous book called *Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Shannon & Weaver 1949). This book set out a model that introduced a novel array of theoretical terminology for the study of communication and created a new field of study.

Terms such as sender, receiver, channel, encoding, decoding, feedback and noise were used for the first time in this connection. Put simply, the Shannon and Weaver model (see Figure 1.1) stated that communication could only take place when there was a **sender** and a **receiver**—a source and a destination. Messages had to be turned into a form capable of being sent (**encoded**) then interpreted at the other end (**decoded**). The information could be subjected to interference (or ‘noise’) as it was sent along a **channel** of some kind (for example, a telephone line, but also

CHANNEL

the means by which the message is sent (for example, a telephone line)

Figure 1.1 The basic Shannon and Weaver transmission model of communication



Source: adapted from Fiske (1990, p. 7).

by a letter, email or video link) between the two. **Noise** does not necessarily mean something that is noisy; it just means ‘anything that is added to the signal between its transmission and reception that is not intended by the source’ (Fiske 1990, p. 8), such as an uncomfortable chair that distracts the receiver, or information overload when the receiver is inundated with too many messages at once. The source is the decision maker in this process (although their decisions might come to nothing if the noise distorts the message too much), having the task of deciding the content of the message. The receiver is somewhat passive apart from an ability to provide **feedback** during or after receiving the message.

The sender decides upon the message and then encodes it by putting it into a form able to be sent (words, diagrams or nonverbal symbols). The message would then be received and decoded (interpreted) by the receiver, whereupon feedback to the message could be sent back to the sender. Feedback can take place during the transmission of the message, and can be as simple as a nod of the head, or it can be a written or spoken reaction later on. Essentially in this model, a message is transmitted from one to the other in a simple linear manner (Fiske 1990). The model’s very simplicity and linearity have proven a rich source of critique, but the fact remains that Shannon and Weaver did provide a new way of examining human communication. In so doing, they placed a spotlight on what it actually means to communicate, what activities are taking place and how our communication may be distorted between sender and receiver.

Many theorists came along after Shannon and Weaver to elaborate on the transmission model, while accepting its basic premises that the message was provided by the sender and sent to a receiver. For example, Lasswell (1948), Newcomb (1953), Gerbner (1956), Westley and MacLean (1957) and Jakobson (1960) all contributed to new understandings of transmission of messages in human communication (Fiske 1990 pp. 24–37). These subsequent theorists all brought something new to the simple, mathematical and mechanistic approach of Shannon and Weaver, introducing concepts in mass media, sociology and linguistics to the basic pattern.

The transmission model in its various manifestations retains explanatory power, particularly when it comes to understanding how we speak on the telephone, give a public talk or announce news in a media release. However, for insights into many other forms of communication we can turn to more recent theories based upon the transaction model.

NOISE

anything that is added to the signal between its transmission and reception that is not intended by the source, such as an uncomfortable chair that distracts the receiver

FEEDBACK

a message sent back to the sender by the receiver in response to the message

Transaction model

MEANING

the outcome of communication

DETERMINISTIC

an adjective referring to the idea that events are determined by external forces

POSTMODERNITY

a type of Western thought that accepts that a wide variety of groups in society have different perspectives, and that these differences should be respected and alternative viewpoints considered

TEXTS

anything that can be said to have meaning, such as fiction or non-fiction books and other forms of written word, and also visual art, graffiti, cartoons, clothing or many other items

SIGNS

concrete things in the world that we are able to perceive with our senses, such as a colour or a texture or a shape or a movement

SIGNIFICATION

the relationship between the actual physical sign and the more abstract concept to which it relates

This model takes into account the fact that human beings are not essentially mechanistic in their behaviour. Just because the sender of a message has selected the form of the message does not mean that the receiver will perceive it in that form. The transaction model places much more emphasis on the receiver of the information and gives greater consideration to the idea of meaning. **Meaning** is the outcome of communication: the end result (Hartley 2002, p. 140). This new emphasis served to account for the fact that identical messages will not necessarily lead to the same result, whether they are sent to different receivers or to the same receiver at different times (Mohan et al. 2004, pp. 15–16). Humans react differently to the same messages depending upon other factors, such as whether they are being distracted, feel unwell, have just heard good or bad news, or many other circumstances that can determine their current state of mind.

Therefore, the transaction model is not **deterministic** as the transmission model was. In the transmission model, a particular message selected by the sender would have a predictable effect upon the receiver, once the ‘noise’ was taken into account. There is no such predictability in the transaction model since there are many variables in the environment inhabited by the receiver. So you can see that a transaction—a two-way operation—has to take place between the sender and the receiver of the message. The receiver brings her own ideas, assumptions, biases and perceptions to the negotiation of meaning.

Just as the transmission model introduced new terminology, so, too, has the transaction model. Among the terms used in this context are texts, signs, signification, semiotics and culture. Rather than engineering, telecommunications and mathematics that provided the intellectual underpinning of the transmission model, this school of thinking draws its ideas from linguistics and the humanities generally (Fiske 1990, p. 2) and therefore echoes some of the ideas and terminology of **postmodernity**. **Texts** are simply anything that can be said to have meaning. This can be fiction or non-fiction books and other forms of written word, but the ‘text’ can also mean visual art, graffiti, cartoons or even clothing (Bainbridge, Goc & Tynan 2011, p. 164). Texts are made up of **signs** and these signs enable us to read a text in a certain way (Bainbridge, Goc & Tynan 2011, p. 169). Signs are concrete things in the world that we are able to perceive with our senses. They can be a colour or a texture or a shape or a movement—things that we will interpret to create meaning. For example, Fiske (1990, p. 41) gives the example of a participant in an auction touching his ear, which is interpreted by the auctioneer as a bid to buy the item that is for sale. Signs imply both a creator and an audience: you cannot have a sign if it is not part of an act of communication that is perceived and interpreted.

Signification is the relationship between the actual physical sign and the more abstract concept to which it relates (Bainbridge, Goc & Tynan 2011, p. 171). Therefore, a street sign indicating slippery conditions is made up of the physical sign that is placed on a pole by the side of the road and the abstract idea of *slippery conditions*. The familiar visual form of such a sign, with its yellow tilted square showing a picture of a car with squiggly lines underneath, does not in itself *mean* anything. This symbol gains meaning through a general agreement that this is what that particular sign represents. This relationship is known as signification.

The concept of signification is pertinent to written languages, particularly in this case English. As mentioned before, some early languages such as that of ancient Egypt used hieroglyphics that were pictorial representations (signs) of what they meant. Some modern languages such as Mandarin or Kanji (one form of written Japanese language) also have a strong link between signifier (words) and signified (concept) because the symbols have a visual relationship to the object they describe. Signification is more overt in these languages. However, the English alphabet and English words do not have such a visual link. We can’t tell by looking at the word ‘horse’ that this collection of five letters refers to a large four-legged herbivore. Again, the meaning we attach to this and any other word depends upon what we agree they mean.

These communication activities take place within the context of **culture**. The word ‘culture’ has taken on new meanings since the advent of twentieth-century humanities theories, including communication theory. In addition to its aesthetic meaning (to do with art, music and other forms of creative refinement) or its anthropological meaning (to do with customs of a particular nationality or group), the word ‘culture’ now also refers to power relationships in society. According to Hartley (2002, p. 53), ‘Since the late 1960s the notion of culture has been reworked largely in terms of Marxist, feminist and multiculturalist approaches’. In communication theory, culture plays a role in how the audience perceives communication and forms part of the ‘transaction’ involved when people seek to communicate. How the message is received, according to this form of theory, has much to do with cultural pressures bearing down upon the individual. This means that a woman will receive the message differently from a man, a black person differently from a white person, a poor person differently from a rich person, a homosexual person differently from a heterosexual person, and so on.

Semiotics is the study of signification in communication, with a particular emphasis on how meaning is made—how it is produced and then understood by an audience. For example, in certain contexts and cultures, colours carry particular meanings that are often exploited by companies. The colour gold gives the impression of quality (Mackey 2004, pp. 48–9), for example, or blue presents either a restful or a conservative image, depending upon the context. (The colours associated with emotions in different cultures are discussed further in Chapter 5.)

Figure 1.2 is a graphical representation of one form of the transaction model (there are various others). It has arrows that represent relationships between participants in the communication activity, rather than representing just an expression of the direction a particular message takes when it is sent, as the earlier transmission model (Figure 1.1) depicted. The transmission model tended to place emphasis on the *process* of communication, while the transaction model places emphasis on the way the message itself *creates meaning*. You can see how this model gives a

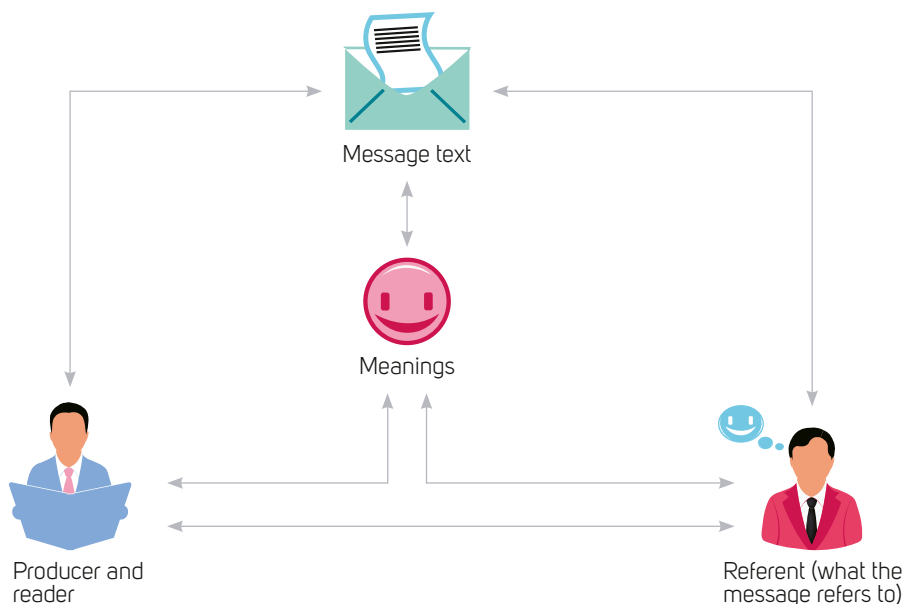
CULTURE

this word has taken on new meanings since the advent of twentieth-century humanities theories, including communication theory; in addition to its aesthetic meaning (to do with art, music and other forms of creative refinement) or its anthropological meaning (to do with customs of a particular nationality or group), the word ‘culture’ now also refers to power relationships in society

SEMIOTICS

the study of signification in communication, with a particular emphasis on how meaning is made

Figure 1.2 Graphic representation of one form of transaction model



Source: adapted from Fiske (1990, p. 4).

STRUCTURAL LINGUISTICS

studies that investigate the fundamental structures underlying all human languages

COMPARATIVE LINGUISTICS

linguistic studies that propose the notion of 'linguistic relativity', which suggests that different languages organise perception differently and therefore different cultures experience different realities

STRUCTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

studies that connect communication with anthropological concepts such as marriage and money and which suggest fundamentally similar structures, pointing to universals of the human mind

MASS COMMUNICATION

the practice and product of providing information and entertainment to large audiences by means of corporately financed and produced, state-regulated, high-tech, privately consumed commodities, particularly those of the electronic and print media

more active and equal role to the recipient of the communication, rather than the recipient being somewhat passive and secondary as the earlier model suggested.

The transaction model has been much elaborated over the years from its beginnings in the work of the philosopher C.S. Peirce and the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. This is a useful model, despite its postmodern complexities and lingo, because it acknowledges that human communication is not mechanistic and therefore is not entirely predictable. In fact, communication is dynamic and open to many different factors, such as the cultural background of both the originator and receiver of the message:

"[T]he transaction model of communication does not see communication as flowing from a source to a receiver and back. Rather, two or more parties respond to a phenomenon or to the environment and bring to it their own set of interpretations. They negotiate meanings and are themselves changed by the experience."

Mohan et al. (2004, p. 18)

The evolution of thinking in communication theory is demonstrated by the terms 'transmission' and 'transaction' themselves. As theoretical work has progressed in this area, theorists have seen greater complexity and nuance in human communication—from a simple expression of a message under the control of the sender to a range of factors that influence both the sender and the receiver, and that are capable of changing both the message itself and those involved in its passage.

The formulation of ideas about communication has been greatly influenced not just by the dominant transmission and transaction models outlined above, but also by other associated intellectual fields and the rise of technology. Among the influences on the way we think about communication are the following (adapted from Hartley 2002, pp. 32–4):

- European and American philosophical movements around **structural linguistics** examined the deep structures common to all languages and **comparative linguistics** examined the idea that different languages lead to different experiences of the world among their user groups.
- New thinking in **structural anthropology** discerned connections between communication and cultural activities such as marriage, money and kinship.
- Ideas around **mass communication** developed throughout the twentieth century, including a growing understanding of the societal role of advertising, journalism, public relations and propaganda.
- The post-Second World War economic boom, particularly in the USA, encouraged growth in new ideas around consumerism and maximising profit for consumer-oriented companies.
- Work by the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan blended literary studies, cognitive psychology and communication theory to come up with new ways of thinking about mass communication. McLuhan coined the phrase 'the medium is the message' to explain the fact that different media (telephone, television, radio etc.) affected how messages were received and understood.
- The **Cold War** and its associated nuclear arms race saw a great contest of ideas between the West and the communist states, and the constant threat of 'mutually assured destruction' (MAD) guaranteed by the stockpiling of nuclear weaponry. This idea framed much political discourse in the decades after the Second World War.
- An inexorable rise of communications science occurred after a major boost during the Second World War. The technologies that had their beginnings in the war included radar, satellites and computing.
- The widespread uptake of communications technologies, including the introduction of the personal computer in the 1970s, has over time resulted in computers appearing in almost every Western household (and increasing numbers of non-Western households, too). From this base of household computing power, the internet has now become a feature of everyday life.

As Hartley (2002) points out, these separate elements have all fed into growing interest in human communication without ever completely blending: ‘The earlier ambition of finding a unified science of communication in which they might all cohere was never realised.’ What we are left with is a theoretical melange and a field wide open to any budding theorists. We are also more aware than ever before in human history how important communication is, and how complex.

You will see that this listing also brings together not just philosophical and linguistic ideas from the social sciences, which relate directly to ideas of human communication (without an ‘s’), but also important developments in the scientific and engineering realm of communications (with an ‘s’). Getting these two entities mixed up is understandable, because they do in fact relate to each other and have informed each other’s development. However, it remains correct to refer to the process of human information exchange as ‘communication’, and to scientific and engineering issues connected with information technology (IT) as ‘communications’. We have adopted this approach throughout this book.

COLD WAR
ideological, political and economic tensions lasting from 1945 until 1990 between the Communist bloc, headed by the Soviet Union (USSR), and the West, in particular the USA and Western Europe

Combining theory and practice in business communication

What use is communication theory to the business student? It is a fair question—theory does not always seem to have everyday relevance. We believe that having a theoretical framework does help you understand how to create messages and to interact with your various audiences by providing some ability to predict what will happen in a given communication activity. Theory also puts some emphasis on the nuts and bolts of the process itself, and when you analyse processes you can start to see that certain patterns of behaviour are more effective than others. For example, if you craft a message using the language of the intended recipient (such as a young person) and send it through a channel that is known to reach that recipient (such as social media) you will have a greater chance of success. Deeper awareness of the unseen mechanisms of communication gives you a better chance of controlling your own information so it is clear and well received.

The ideas outlined here about communication theory provide an underlying framework for the specific topics we cover in this textbook. In business communication, we need to achieve a result. A communication activity serves no purpose if it does not achieve the result we are seeking: activity without achievement is useless. Is the message addressed to the wrong audience, via the wrong channel, using the wrong language and capable of being interpreted incorrectly through one of numerous cultural or interpersonal lenses the audience might apply? These things are hard to see if you don’t have a big-picture view.

Hopefully, understanding the basics of communication theory will make you not only an effective sender of information, but a good receiver as well. Being able to listen effectively, and read effectively, are important skills. You should be able to comprehend messages to a high level of sophistication, then act accordingly by applying the information you have been given, or by providing clear feedback to the originator of the message. The transmission model places emphasis on the mechanics of communication and encourages you to see it as a series of related linear activities. For example, making a company announcement might involve not only preparing a clear message for the selected audience/s, but also ensuring that the channel of communication suits the purpose by reaching the audience/s in the most efficient way possible and with minimal ‘noise’. Providing a mechanism for feedback from the audience/s has also become a central requirement of this model. Transaction theories place emphasis on the how meaning changes depending upon a wide range of factors, including the cultural forces that influence both the initiator and the recipients of the message. Knowing the nature of these forces helps you to work with them better.

Describe how the dominant communication theories apply to business communication in practice

Career advancement

These principles apply to the most junior employee right up to the most senior. This is one area where someone new to business can shine immediately. One way for a new recruit to be noticed in a positive way is to consistently produce clear, logical and technically correct professional writing that fulfils its function each time. While the basics of your written language use were likely instilled at primary and secondary school, learning to use the language effectively is a lifelong process. One impetus for improving one's language use stems from professional ambition. A good professional writer who appreciates the technicalities of language and uses language to good effect is a useful person in any business.

There is nothing wrong with having the ambition to climb to the heights of your profession, particularly if your ambition involves taking these fundamental skills seriously and working hard at them to give yourself a competitive edge. This sort of foundational work will help to prepare you for business leadership. Leaders and managers must communicate well, especially in the faster-paced, knowledge-driven environment of modern business. Build these skills early and they will help you later when managing staff, overseeing complex negotiations, complying with regulatory requirements, organising new product launches or any of the myriad activities that business leaders must do well to succeed.

Categories of communication

Communication can be broken down into three broad groupings, as categorised by Dwyer (2005, pp. 4, 5):

- *verbal communication*—communication based upon words
- *nonverbal communication*—communication by means other than words, including gestures, facial expressions, clothing, touch and many other elements
- *visual (or graphic) communication*—representation of ideas using shapes, lines, diagrams, pictures etc. This form of communication can have both verbal and nonverbal components, such as a stop sign that has an immediately recognisable red octagonal shape and the word 'Stop' in the centre.

Within these categories, many kinds of communication are possible. Dwyer (2005, pp. 5–6) categorises the types of communication as follows:

- *Intrapersonal*—essentially an individual's own thinking processes; the inner dialogue you have that helps to form your ideas and your messages. This process can be improved by building your knowledge of the communication process just as much as any other form of communication.
- *Interpersonal*—interaction between two people or between people within small groups. This more direct form of communication occurs, for example, between close colleagues and between supervisors and their staff. Managing how you communicate at this level can play a large role in your success within your workplace.
- *Public communication*—communication that originates from a single source and is sent to a number of receivers. In organisations this can involve either internal or external communication. Carefully crafted messages targeted at the audiences using suitable language and effective channels are important here.

- *Mass communication*—communication with mass audiences, generally through some form of media such as television, radio, newspapers or the internet. Your organisation's public image is exceptionally important, so understanding the pitfalls of mass communication and the best ways to manage it are crucial.

Purposeful language

We have seen in our brief exploration of history and theory that human communication is not as straightforward as it may appear on the surface. Individual experiences and understandings, intertwined with the various cultural, societal or professional groupings to which we belong, introduce elements of uncertainty into the way messages might be interpreted. How do we tap into the power of language in such a way that we can make sense in the business world and minimise the chance of being misunderstood? Language is a vast system of signs, enabling us to signify what we mean and have that meaning interpreted by the receiver, who then uses these same signs to provide feedback. Written and spoken language has tremendous potential power as well as many potential pitfalls. Naturally, we are concerned here with English language. English is a large, complicated and multifaceted language that provides us with many choices. You can marshal language for strategic purposes by adhering to its rules and conventions (see Chapter 2) and by applying critical thinking principles (see Chapter 7) to provide a sound foundation of meaning in whatever you write.

A sense of purpose will help clarify how to use language effectively in business communication. Purposes may include:

- providing information for consideration by the recipient
- ensuring that the information is accepted as true by the recipient
- changing the attitudes of the recipient
- changing the behaviour of the recipient.

Carefully selected language that is targeted at the purpose of communication can achieve these sometimes-difficult goals. Before embarking on your communication activity, first clearly set out your purpose. Once you have done that, selecting the best and most powerful words becomes easier. You will find that a nuanced understanding of English will enable you to choose the right words. Apart from the rules and conventions of English and the need for a strong critical foundation, you will also need to consider the following elements to ensure that you avoid alienating your audience:

- *Denotation and connotation.* As mentioned above, English has considerable complexities. Among the elements of complexity is the fact that words often have both a dictionary meaning (denotation) and a set of associations (connotation). This means, for example, that the word 'green' is a colour and also associated with particular political and environmental views, sometimes in a negative sense. Another example is the possible differing interpretations of the word 'politics'. This can be a straightforward word describing the organisation of a society or it can have a negative connotation as in 'he is only playing politics'.
- *Inclusive language.* Reading public documents from a generation or more ago could well be a shock to a modern audience. The language used then routinely excluded or insulted women as well as people with disabilities or those from various ethnic backgrounds. Now, words

Develop a sense of communication purpose so that you can use language effectively in your business activities

such as 'spinster', 'manageress', 'housewife', 'Mongoloid', 'lunatic' or 'Negro' are no longer in common use. Nor is the default use of male pronouns such as 'he' or 'his' and gender-specific terms such as 'chairman' or 'mankind'. Instead, language has become more inclusive to account for the greater diversity in the workplace and in society more generally.

- *Tone.* Among the choices you must make are the moods you can apply to your writing or speaking. These might include anger, warmth, friendliness, sarcasm, abusiveness or defensiveness. Your tone can also be casual or formal. In most business communication activities, your tone will be formal as well as open and positive without being overly personal. For example, you might write: 'Parking spaces next to the entrance are reserved for visitors and we would prefer that you parked elsewhere' instead of 'Obviously you have failed to understand the simple rule that those spots are for visitors and have mucked a lot of people around because of your idiocy'.

The role of grammar, punctuation, usage and style

This textbook advocates the rather old-fashioned view that good communicators are careful with their basic language rules and take pains to make their work as technically correct and stylistically polished as possible. This approach arises not from empty and proscriptive pedantry but from a conviction that good language use amounts to good quality control of your product, and good quality control leads to greater success. Taking the technical side of writing seriously



also relates to all three elements of our proposed new approach to business communication: logic, clarity and courtesy (discussed below). While instant messaging and social media have changed the way we speak to each other—as has the natural evolution of language—the ways business people communicate have tended to retain the more formal and traditional characteristics.

Business communication generally does not encourage slang, vernacular, incorrect grammar and punctuation, poor spelling, convoluted sentences, inconsistent written style or impenetrable technical terminology or jargon. While all of these things can and do appear in the wide world of business communication, we would like to encourage you to adopt better practices. Your work should reach the highest standards. Therefore, it should not be awkward, ungainly, incorrectly worded and likely to irritate or offend the recipient. The role of correct grammar, punctuation, usage and style is to ensure that your work is always seen as fully professional. Good English usage is a means to an end—it is your way of demonstrating a desire to meet the communication needs of your audiences and ensuring that you achieve your communication goals.

The interconnectedness of writing and thinking

Writing is part of thinking. Part of working out challenging problems and tasks we encounter in our business lives involves finding the words to describe them and arranging those words in such a way that our meaning becomes clear. We cannot communicate to others our mental understandings of problems and solutions unless we use precise, sequential words. This may seem obvious when stating it so bluntly, but in practice it can be difficult to articulate exactly what we know internally about a topic or problem. In the end, if we can't find the words, then we don't truly know something, at least not in sense that leads to the sharing of knowledge and ideas.

Think through your words carefully because they are the means by which you convey your ideas. Move words around on the screen or page. Redraft and refine them. Find new meanings by working through a drafting process, as described in Chapter 2. Look up words that are unfamiliar to you and never use a word you don't understand. You truly come to know what you mean when you write about it, and writing becomes more natural and enjoyable the more you do it. In the words of the Dutch Renaissance scholar Erasmus: 'The desire to write grows with writing.'

Barriers to communication

A quirk of evolution has given humans the capacity for language and we have made full use of it ever since. That same quirk has enabled our brains to read and interpret a variety of other signs, including nonverbal communication and visual imagery of various kinds, so that humans have unrivalled capacity for sending and receiving messages, either face to face or via various channels. If only this wondrous capacity worked perfectly every time! Of course, it does not. Barriers to

communication are inevitable and require negotiating. In the business context, many bumps on the communication continuum can cause a breakdown in communication. Here are just a few, adapted and expanded from Dwyer (2005) and Tymson, Lazar and Lazar (2002):

- *poor or unclear choice of words*—for example, using slang when formal language is required or producing writing that is filled with grammar and spelling errors
- *incorrect communication channel*—for example, using email when the audience is not computer literate or producing a printed newsletter for people who only read online materials
- *unclear or incomplete message*—for example, leaving out crucial information about relevant dates or times for a series of briefings with retail outlets on a new product line
- *receiver inattention*—for example, sending a message to a person who has just been made redundant and so is not fully engaged with the work
- *lack of courtesy*—for example, using sexist or insensitive language or spelling the recipient's name incorrectly
- *inconsistent verbal and nonverbal messages*—for example, wearing a clown suit while presenting the budget report at your company's annual general meeting or smirking when making an excuse for not turning up to work on time
- *poor layout and presentation*—for example, using an ornate and hard-to-read font in a company brochure
- *bad timing*—for example, issuing a media release at 5 p.m. on a Friday afternoon
- *inadequate feedback*—for example, not letting the publication editor know when you notice an error in the draft annual report before it is printed
- *use of assumptions that may not be shared by sender and receiver*—for example, assuming that the receiver of the information shares similar political or social views to your own
- *lack of respect for the sender*—for example, staff members dismissing an important message from the Chief Executive Officer because people don't like him
- *language barriers*—for example, not providing a translation of an important company policy for locally engaged workers in the Abu Dhabi branch
- *cultural barriers*—for example, scheduling a presentation for prospective investors in Malaysia during Chinese New Year.

Devise strategies for overcoming common communication barriers

A new approach to business communication

Adopt logic, clarity and courtesy as your business communication principles

In this textbook, we would like to propose that you look at business communication in a new way, using the concepts we outline below: *logic*, *clarity* and *courtesy*. Communication is an essential human characteristic, and business is largely made up of communication in its various broadly interpreted forms. Therefore, we have to be sure that we have reliable ways of taming the potential chaos inherent to a system that is capable of generating a variety of meanings though many different channels and is subject to so many potential communication barriers. Adopting some basic principles will assist in overcoming these challenges.

Logic as a business communication principle

As you will see in Chapter 7, careful logical reasoning will help to make your business case. In our use of the word ‘logic’, we are not being highly technical in the way a mathematician or philosopher may use the word. Instead, we see the logic of business communication as a process of step-by-step reasoning intended to reach a definite, valid conclusion, and in so doing give solidity and authority to your work—and also, if you need to, persuade the recipient of the communication. This means developing a deep understanding of your topic, including understanding any negative or contrary information that might potentially interfere with your plans. Logic in business communication makes your writing honest, factual and well grounded in reality. These are timeless qualities that will help contribute to a sustainable business.

Part of this involves understanding the problem of logical fallacies and being able to identify them in your own and other people’s work. Effective business writing draws heavily on the sort of logic we outline in this book. You can maximise the power of your writing by employing some simple techniques, such as the use of **sylogisms**, or by considering classical principles of **rhetoric** and reasoning. As Chapter 7 indicates, many of these techniques have been passed down from ancient times, but they still have a lot to say about how communication can be conducted in a modern business.

Use of logic may also play out in the way you organise your sentences into paragraphs and your paragraphs into sections or chapters. It will influence how you structure a large document and will encourage you to create summaries and dot-point listings of your main points to help the reader understand the essence of what you are telling them. This logical approach will fix your attention on your goals and on your audience, and help you to avoid wasting time on forms of words and documents that do not suit their purpose.

SYLLOGISM
a form of deductive reasoning in which a conclusion is drawn from two or more propositions (premises)

RHETORIC
the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing

Clarity as a business communication principle

Human communication is inherently imbued with the possibility of misunderstanding. We can’t change that fact, but we can minimise the possibility that miscommunication will stand in the way of our objectives. When communicating in your professional capacity, the key will always be *clarity*. Ideas of clarity inform the exact style of communication you adopt. The English writer Frank Lucas, in a book published more than 50 years ago, had this to say: ‘And how is clarity to be acquired? Mainly by taking trouble and by writing to serve people rather than impress them’ (Lucas 1995).

Here Lucas has found the essence. You must strive to avoid your written or spoken communication becoming pompous, wordy, convoluted and obscure. Make a stand and claim back clarity when communicating. Clarity does not mean dumbing down or over-simplifying. When you are dealing with complex ideas, exacting specifications or complicated instructions, the best tool to use is clear, strong and eloquent language, the better to make yourself understood. Therefore, we suggest that you make the receiver of your information the most important person in your particular communication transaction and work to aid their understanding through careful selection of words and the appropriate communication channel. When something is being introduced to the world of business—whether in the form of a report, proposal, announcement or profit statement—you have to be sure that there is no ambiguity of any kind.

While business people must certainly deal with many different topics, ranging from the routine to the exceptionally difficult, all are best dealt with in plain, clear prose in well-structured sentences. The great English writer George Orwell took a stern view of unclear writing, and tended to see ornate and obscure writing as something of a moral failing. Orwell taught us, using beautifully

crafted English, that a well-thought-through idea does not need elaborate language. All it needs is clarity. As aspiring business communicators, you should be familiar with Orwell's ideas on clear expression. His six timeless principles for writers remain true today and are still helping writers achieve clarity. They are found in his great essay 'Politics and the English Language' (Orwell 1946a):

1. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word when a short word will do.
3. If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive when you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, scientific word or jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

The various ways of following Orwell's exhortations are demonstrated in Chapter 2. In that chapter, you will see that the concept of clarity is foremost.

Courtesy as a business communication principle

The need for courtesy is implicit in most business communication activities. We would like to make it explicit. Courtesy is not just good old-fashioned manners, as desirable as they are. Courtesy also involves empathy, awareness of the needs of others, and willingness to compromise, evaluate differing opinions and adapt to the needs of various audiences, including those from other cultures or within the context of a professional group. Chapter 2 sets this theme in a practical sense by suggesting that effective professional writers adopt a reader-centric approach and have in mind the needs of the recipient of the information at all times. Later chapters, particularly those concerned with interpersonal communication, intercultural communication and ethics in communication, further develop these themes and provide considerable detail and relevant examples. This form of professional courtesy is the starting point for a broader ethos that considers the communication theories we talked about earlier and sees communication as a complex blend of transmission of information and transaction with the recipients. Courtesy makes these sometimes-difficult interactions more likely to succeed.

Professional courtesy also involves replying to all incoming business-related messages, whether emails, letters or telephone messages, in a timely manner and setting up systems for ensuring that messages do not 'slip through the net'. Your tone when writing to customers, colleagues, associates or employees should be friendly but not over-familiar, respectful but not fawning, and informative, straightforward and clear. Even if you are being provoked, you should keep these key words at the top of your mind. A lack of courtesy on the part of another person is not an invitation to let your own standards slip. You can be firm and steadfast in putting your case without ever being rude.

Professional courtesy also means keeping your word and doing what you say you are going to do. If you need to change your mind and adopt a different approach because conditions or your understanding of a situation have changed, you as a courteous business professional will provide a full explanation in straightforward language to anyone who might be affected. Keep people informed throughout a project and take special care to communicate effectively within a team and within your own organisation more broadly. Chapter 6 provides a practical guide to good ethical practice, which includes notions of courtesy. Apart from the key terms mentioned above, others that are proposed in Chapter 6 are fairness, truthfulness, care not to harm others and compassion. Since we are concerned with sustainable business practice and productivity, these qualities are not just good in themselves; from a purely pragmatic and hard-headed viewpoint they are actually a better way to operate because they lead to better business outcomes.

Sometimes the little things can make a big difference. Use salutations such as ‘Dear Joanna’ or ‘Dear Jonathan’ (instead of just ‘Hi’) in your emails and letters, and ‘Yours faithfully’ or ‘Yours sincerely’ to sign off your formal letters. Make sure you spell people’s names correctly and get all their current details right. People are likely to be offended and repelled if you don’t pay attention to the basics. Be proactive—don’t wait around for someone to get back to you but follow through to make sure they have everything they need. Don’t blame others for communication breakdowns, but take responsibility for the fact that a message did not get through to the right person or was not understood or acted upon to your satisfaction. If you plan for effective communication, hopefully these breakdowns will be less likely, but they can still happen. Part of dealing with communication breakdowns involves being aware of communication barriers. Recognise any potential barriers and try to pre-empt them when you are planning and implementing your communication.

Familiarising yourself with the interpersonal norms of other cultural groups will help achieve a high level of business communication courtesy; see Chapter 5 for information on how to interact most effectively with other cultural groups. Understanding how to communicate using various electronic means while maintaining professional courtesy is equally important, and is discussed in Chapter 10.

Jargon and weasel words

Apart from the large and rich vocabulary that English offers all of us, certain professions have developed specialist vocabularies that enable people within the specialties to communicate efficiently among themselves. Technical vocabularies may be found in many different realms, such as physics, philosophy, mechanical engineering, accountancy and swimming pool maintenance. Technical vocabularies are useful and legitimate. Communication problems arise, however, when your professional writing features *jargon* and *weasel words*. As McKenna and colleagues state, words become jargon ‘when they are unlikely to be used by the reader, and no attempt is made to explain the meaning’ (McKenna, Thomas & Waddell 2004, p. 141). Weasel words are somewhat more problematic, as they are often intended to obfuscate (when they could be described as ‘bullshit’ – see Chapter 6) or to cover up a deficiency on behalf of the person using them (such as laziness), but there is overlap between the two terms (see Chapter 2 for specific examples of both kinds of words, as well as a hypothetical weasel-word sentence below).

Context can determine whether words become jargon. Highly technical terminology used in a research paper on immunology and published in a scientific journal is perfectly acceptable; using the same words without explanation in an annual report or a company briefing document would constitute unacceptable jargon. Wilcox and Cameron (2006) describe jargon as ‘semantic noise’ that interrupts the channel of communication, thereby distorting the message, as described by the Shannon and Weaver transmission model. This amounts to a dereliction of communication duty: ‘A failure to understand the audience means a failure in communication’ (Wilcox and Cameron 2006, p. 183). If you use jargon, you have failed to understand your audience.

Detaching people from their cherished jargon can be a difficult task, but the job must be done. Some people are inordinately possessive of their trendy abstractions and may come up with all sorts of reasons why they just have to write a weasel sentence such as ‘facilitating twenty-first-century solutions for repositioning enhancement of strategic key indicators going forward by pushing the envelope of sustainable synergies’. While this is a made-up example, the world of business continually produces sentences that are similar and have the same effect on their

Develop a long-term and sustainable set of practices that are based upon ethical principles and that emphasise clear and truthful interactions with others

recipients—irritation at the least and potentially serious misunderstanding at worst. The hard fact is that no one likes to read or hear jargon and weasel words except the people who write or speak them. The Australian author and former political speechwriter Don Watson wrote a whole book on this subject—*Death Sentence*—and aspiring communicators should read it and heed its message (Watson 2003). Communicators may also find *Watsons's Dictionary of Weasel Words* (Watson 2004) a handy reference when trying to communicate clearly, since it sets out a whole range of trendy, abstract and clichéd terms that you would do well to avoid. Watson, in many ways, is the modern-day George Orwell. Orwell also detested trendy jargon and weasel words, particularly the political rhetoric of the 1930s and 1940s. Both Orwell and Watson call people to account for their language choices and say that these are moral choices as much as anything. Jargon and weasel words allow people to get away with things because no one can understand what they are saying. Never fall into the lazy habit of attempting to communicate in jargon and weasel words, then getting offended if people can't understand your intent, or misinterpret it or mock it. People who communicate have as their first responsibility to ensure that they use language that passes the tests of clarity and accuracy. Jargon and weasel words make passing these tests less likely.

CONCLUSION

A whole world of creativity and job satisfaction awaits you in the world of business, and much of that creativity and satisfaction will link directly to the way you communicate. In your professional position you will be expected to have a reasonably high level of communication ability as a minimum requirement to enter the profession. After that, you will build, develop and endlessly upgrade the various ways you interact with customers, clients, colleagues, managers and many others. Out of the vast, messy and unpredictable realm of human communication and language, business communicators need to construct ways to minimise barriers and maximise efficiencies. This can be a positive and rewarding process, and one that provides you with new ways to express yourself throughout your professional life. If you begin with strong foundations, there will be no limit to the heights you can climb.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- Business is a form of communication and involves many communication interactions, whether verbal, nonverbal or visual.
- The rise of new technology and the greater interconnectedness of the world generally, and the business world in particular, through globalisation and social media have altered the way we communicate.
- Failed communication can have serious consequences for the conduct of a business.
- Communication is interaction between individuals or groups for the purposes of conveying some kind of information or sharing experience.
- Communication studies burgeoned in the twentieth century, spurred on by the rise in communications technologies and mass media, particularly radio, television, satellites, computers and the internet.
- The two dominant forms of communication theory are the transmission models and the transaction models. The transmission model describes how a message is transmitted from one to the other in a simple linear manner. The transaction model places emphasis on the receiver of the information and gives greater consideration to the idea of meaning.
- The process of human information exchange is correctly labelled communication (without an 's'), while scientific and engineering issues connected with information technology (IT) is communications (with an 's').
- The main types of communication are intrapersonal, interpersonal, public and mass communication.
- You can tap into the power of English language by having a strong sense of purpose about what you want to achieve in your communication activity, so your purpose should be made clear first.
- Good communicators are careful with their basic language rules and take pains to make their work as technically correct and stylistically polished as possible.

- Writing is part of thinking. Part of working out challenging problems and tasks involves finding the words to describe them.
- Barriers to communication are inevitable and require negotiating.
- This textbook proposes that you look at business communication in a new way, using the concepts of logic, clarity and courtesy.
- Communication problems arise when language descends into jargon and weasel words.
- Effective communication is a long-term sustainable set of practices that are based upon ethical principles and that emphasise clear and truthful interactions with others.

REVISION QUESTIONS

1. Why is communication an important part of business? Give an example of a business activity that involves communication.
2. Choose from one of these globally successful and influential knowledge economy businesses: Google, eBay, Microsoft, Apple or Amazon. How does the business you selected depend upon communication for its success?
3. Why do 'flatter' business structures require more efficient communication processes?
4. Recall the concepts of transmission and transaction models of communication. How might these theories be used to interpret what happens when you issue a media release?
5. Imagine that you are seeking a communication internship with a major Australian company of your choice. Devise a statement of purpose for communication with the head of the area where you would like to be placed.
6. What barriers to communication might you encounter when trying to make your case to this person? How would you overcome them?
7. Draft an email in which you seek consideration for this internship, using the principles of logic, clarity and courtesy.

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