

Speaking Across the Curriculum at R-MC

Resources for Faculty

We are dividing speech communication into five areas: (1) listening; (2) interpersonal communication; (3) discussion groups; (4) task groups; and (5) presentational communication. Below, for each of these areas, you will find the following:

A Primer – Each of these areas might be a course unto itself. In fact, in university communication programs, each of these areas would be a course. The primer offers, in abbreviated form, what one might learn in these communication courses.

Sample Assignments – Just a few. More -- from R-MC and other institutions -- are on file in Speaking Center.

A Handout You Might Give Students, deliberately kept to a single page.

Evaluation Advice and Instruments – Again, more is available in Speaking Center.

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Listening

A Primer

College instructors are “comfortable” teaching writing and speaking. By that I mean, they believe that these are activities that it is appropriate to address in a Higher Education classroom. Reading, a skill many college students needs a great deal of assistance with, is sometimes viewed as beneath the Higher Education level, although that attitude is changing as faculty realize that “critical reading” skills are not what K-12 classes stress and, because these skills may be to some extent discipline-specific and, therefore, there is much the science instructor or the social science instructor might be able to contribute that presupposes a level of sophistication that college students will reach at some point during the four years of their undergraduate career. If reading is paired with writing, then listening is paired with speaking. Listening, however, is neither taught at the college level nor ignored as too basic. Listening is simply ignored.

Why is listening ignored? Probably for two reasons: first, since we have been listening since birth, we presuppose that this is a skill necessarily learned long ago; second, since we have never been taught listening in a classroom setting, we don't have a clue as to what instruction in listening might be like. It is unfortunate, however, that listening is ignored because it is very important. Ask yourself the following question: of the four activities of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, which one do we do the most of in academe? The answer is listening, with speaking second and reading third. We should wonder then at a typical college curriculum that spends its time on these skills in the exact opposite order, privileging the least frequent one, writing, over reading and speaking and spending almost no time at all on the most frequent one, listening.

What is Listening?

Listening is really not one “activity” but five. First, we must **hear**. The relevant sound waves must strike our hearing apparati. Those who sit in the far corner of a lecture hall or those whose ears are being bombarded with sound waves other than the relevant ones may well not hear. Second, we must **attend** to what we hear. We must choose to process the sound waves as a meaningful message. Third, we must **understand** this message. If one reaches this third step, then one is accomplishing what many people think of as listening. However, listening as an academic skill should go two steps beyond just understanding the message. Fourth, we should **evaluate** the message. Is it important or unimportant? Is it connected to other information I have or disconnected? Fifth, we should **know** the message, and knowing it means more than being able to repeat it. Knowing it means that, based on critical evaluation of worth and relevance, we can use the information.

Imagine a literature class. The instructor says the Old English poetry used a four-beat line. A student must hear this message, not allowing himself/herself to be distracted by the group of students who are talking in the hall outside the classroom. A student must choose to process this message not as noise but as a meaningful group of sounds. A student then must understand what that meaning is. A student must, however, do more. He/she must figure out if this is a trivial fact or an important characteristic of Old English verse. If the latter, a student must connect the fact with what he/she knows about verse in general. Is Old English verse different from verse encountered in other periods of English literature? From that in other literatures? A student might then imagine how the message might become part of a longer discussion of versification or a tool helpful in interpreting (or enacting) Old English verse or a clue as to whether poetry encountered later is from the Old English period or some other period. If the verse's language has been modernized but the rhythm preserved (which is frequently the case), the presence of four beats

might help the student place a passage in the correct time frame. All of these are ways the message that has been heard, attended to, understood, and evaluated might be used. When it can be so used, it is known.

Barriers to Effective Listening

Effective listening, as described above, may sound as if it's just a matter of doing the work. Those who aren't effective don't work sufficiently hard to understand or don't push beyond understanding the information. Actually, there are many factors that can thwart the process that have little if anything to do with how much effort the student expends. Let me review some of the barriers thrown up by students **and** some of the barriers that students have no control over.

Student listeners—as well as other listeners—are often **impatient**. They want “the facts” or “what’s on the test” and, as a result, tune-out material they judge to be irrelevant. Well, that material is oftentimes quite valuable. It may, in fact, be necessary if one is to understand “the facts.” These listeners are engaging in one kind of **selective listening**. There are many. For example, listeners oftentimes only listen to information that confirms their existing beliefs or their current opinions.

Listeners are, of course, not always at odds with those who are speaking. But sometimes they are. In such a case, listeners’ defensiveness can lead to selective listening. The listeners only hear what they want to hear. Another phenomenon can occur when speaker and listener are opposed: the listener will start preparing his/her response, and, while doing that, not listen to what else the speaker might be saying. Those who write about listening refer to this metaphorically as **“reloading.”**

Listeners also can get into trouble if they are not in the habit of monitoring their listening behavior. Listening, as we will discuss in a minute, is an active process: there are behaviors one should enact while listening. Listeners who are high in **self-monitoring** will be consciously aware that they are performing these tasks and ready to resume them should they find they’ve faded away for a moment.

A number of things can cause this “fade.” If the listener **lacks the context** for understanding what is being presented, he/she will be inclined to fade. If the listener holds **values or assumptions** different from those of the speaker, she/he will be inclined to fade. The listener may, in a case such as this one, not value the information being shared because he/she doesn’t share the values and assumptions it is premised on. For example, students may come to a first-year writing class expecting to learn how to write creatively. These students may not value academic writing much. Should the writing class be one that focuses on academic writing because this writing is what students will be asked to do for the remainder of their college career, these students might not listen much or well. The lack of shared assumptions and values in such a case will result in a great deal of non-listening.

And, of course, students and other listeners may fade if they are **tired**.

A number of **environmental factors** can also affect listening. If the seats are too comfortable or too uncomfortable. If the room is too dark or too bright. If the room is too hot or too cold. All of these factors can impede effective listening. So can not being able to see the person speaking or see that person well.

“Noise” can also affect listening. I put “noise” in quotation marks because I am using the term in two senses. Literally, noise can interfere—noise from outside the room; noise because others in the room are carrying on a private conversation. However, “noise” is used in communication studies to mean anything that interferes in the message getting from the speaker to the listener. If, for example, the listener is emotionally upset and occasionally thinking about whatever it is that has him/her upset, that is “noise.” So might be the attire of the speaker if it is — let’s say — too

loud or too revealing. In other words, if it draws attention to itself and, as a result, away from the message.

The difficulty of the information can impose an increasing barrier to effective listening. Initially, the task will burden the listener, but, as he/she encounters new information that presupposes what was just heard but not fully understood, the burden becomes greater. Listeners will almost inevitably tune-out. Something similar occurs if **the amount of information** is too high for comfortable processing.

One last barrier is well worth noting—because it is important and because it is not one of the barriers that readily comes to mind. There is a **thought-speech differential**. We can think more rapidly than speakers speak. As a result, we may feel we have “extra time” to do something with while listening. That extra time can be used to enhance listening. We’ll discuss how in a minute. However, that extra time can be spent thinking about matters extraneous to the subject matter at-hand. Many people, once they begin using this extra time for something extraneous, begin to fade from the listening task.

Strategies to Improve Listening

The thought-speech differential just mentioned is a crucial concept because it means that the listener has available to him/her time to do other things. The key to improving listening then is to use this time to do other things related to listening. The literature on listening suggests three possibilities.

First, students might be asked to engage in vocalized listening. This strategy has students talk (silently, of course) along with the person they are listening to. Students don’t repeat what they’re hearing; rather, they put the information into their own words, pose quick questions, and perhaps guess where the speaker may be going next. This last possibility is especially powerful. Rhetorician Kenneth Burke talks about how writers and speaker can enhance the persuasiveness of what they write and speak by making the audience participants in the articulation of the discourse structure. What this “fancy” phrasing means is making the audience feel truly with you as you move from part to part through a piece of writing or a speech. To the extent the audience feels with you, the audience identifies with you, and, according to Burke, identification is at the core of persuasiveness. Should listeners try to get with writers and speakers in this manner, they would be meeting the rhetor halfway. The discourse would be shared, and, as such, much less of it would potentially escape the listener.

Second, students might take notes effectively. “Effectively” is the key word. There are any number of note-taking strategies one might suggest to students. One popular strategy is to use two columns per page: one side for the notes; the other for comments on, questions about, or even an outline of the notes. This second column is filled in after listening as part of an attempt to move the information from listened to heard, attended to, and understood to evaluated and known. Also useful in effecting this transition would be summary writing. Through summary writing, information is chunked and logical connections are more strongly forged. Students might also profit from advice on both how to recognize the hierarchical arrangement of information they’re hearing and how to reflect this in their notes. Recognizing information hierarchy makes it much easier to chunk information and make logical connections.

Third, students might engage in critical listening activities. Critical listening has the audience testing what they’re hearing, not just passively taking it all in. If a speaker uses evidence to support a claim, listeners can use some of that extra time to ask if the authorities cited are qualified and without bias, to ask if examples offered are numerically sufficient and representative, to ask if statistics used are used responsibly. Listeners can also test causal claims, asking if there are multiple causes or if a claimed causal relationship is really just a correlation. Listeners can in addition use some of the extra time to identify emotional appeals that are being made or to identify biases and stereotypes in the speaker’s presentation. Listeners who

do work in these ways as they listen are staying focused and are using the extra time they have to move the information along the path to evaluated and known.

Listening Styles

Not all people listen the same way, and it is valuable to know your listening style because it means that there are certain things you're more likely to hear than another in an audience and because it means that there are certain things you're inclined to miss. Those who study listening empirically and teach listening skills suggest that there are four basic styles. Some listeners are *people-focused*. They will remember who spoke and any interesting characteristic of these speakers. Some listeners are *action-focused*. They will remember what was done or what was called for. Other listeners are *content-focused*. They will remember the information that was presented. Still other listeners are *time-focused*. They will be watching the clock and will remember how long speakers spoke and how long the lecture or the conversation or the meeting took.

Imagine, if you will, a classroom lecture on and discussion of isolationism in U.S. foreign policy early in the 20th Century. A people-focused listener will remember that a particular student argued for isolationism now as a good strategy; an action-focused listener will recall what U.S. foreign policy actions isolationists opposed; a content-focused listener will recall who back then was on which side and how isolationism differed from WWI to WWII; and a time-oriented listener will recall that the lecturer spent 8 minutes talking about the Woodrow Wilson Museum in Staunton, VA. Each listener needs to try to become a bit of the other three in order to maximize how much he/she gets out of such a lecture/discussion.

Sample Assignments

More to come, but here are three basic assignments:

1. When lecturing, stop periodically and ask students to predict where lecture is going next. [Doing so will encourage students to listen carefully, especially to clues you give as to the lecture's overall shape and its direction.]
2. Have students take notes on a lecture or a part of a lecture on pages they then submit to you for critique. Critique the accuracy of their notes, the fullness (too full? Not full enough? Not selectively full?). Also critique the layout of their notes.
3. Tell students that, in your lecture, there's a claim you fail to support as well as a claim you support with weak evidence. After lecture, ask students to identify these two claims. You might want to have them write their answers out and, maybe, give them extra points for using critical listening skills to discover the weak claims.

A Handout You Might Give Students

LISTENING

Barriers to Effective Listening

- Selective Listening
- "Reloading" (i.e. preparing what you'll say next instead of listening)
- Poor Listening Environment
- Literal Noise
- Emotional "Noise"

Strategies to Improve Listening

- Vocalized Listening
- Note-taking
- Critical Listening (e.g. listening for and testing evidence for claims)

Evaluation Advice and Instruments

Many of the assignments listed under “Sample Assignments” are, in essence, evaluation tools. You might also want to consider short-answer listening quizzes. These can be administered at the end of a lecture; they can also be administered mid-lecture. Mid-lecture administration might prove more effective because, if students discover how they are not “getting” the information that you deem important, they might immediately change their listening behavior. If there’s a time gap between the quiz and the next time you lecture, you may find that students have settled back into old patterns.

Interpersonal Communication

A Primer

Interpersonal communication, as the discipline of speech communication usually defines it, is one-on-one communication. Most research on interpersonal communication deals with non-academic situations: communication between friends, between spouses, between a healthcare provider and a patient. However, interpersonal communication does occur in academe—for example, when a student talks with his or her adviser; when a student talks with a tutor; or when a student seeks academic information by interviewing someone.

Factors That Complicate Interpersonal Communication

At first glance, this one-on-one communication might strike you as fairly simple. There are, however, numerous factors that make it quite the opposite. I will talk about ten.

- 1. The Six People Involved in Dyadic Communication.** What I've called one-on-one is really three-on-three. Each person has a self, a projected self, and a perceived self. For example, a brand new instructor suffering from nervousness in a conversation with a department chair might think she/he is projecting confidence whereas the chair is perceiving this person as arrogant and cocky. There are three different people here. And the same is true on the other side of the conversation: there's the real chair, the person the chair is trying to project, and the person the chair is being perceived as.
- 2. Content Dimension vs. Relational Dimension.** All conversations exist on two levels—what is said about the subject under discussion and what is “said” about the relationship between the two people talking. Some communicators seem to pay more attention to the content dimension; others to the relational.
- 3. Gender.** There are many differences between the communication behavior of those gendered female and those gendered male. For example, those gendered male tend to pay more attention to the content dimension of a conversation than the relational dimension; those gendered female, the opposite. In conjunction with this difference, those gendered male see communication in instrumental terms—i.e. as a means to get a job done—as well as in power terms—i.e. as a means of sustaining or wresting control. Those gendered female see communication in relational terms—i.e. as a means of sustaining and developing relationships—and enjoy communication for its own sake.
- 4. Power Distribution.** A dyad—i.e. two people in conversation—may have equal power. However, quite frequently, one is “up” and the other “down.” This imbalance affects their interpersonal communication, for one speaks differently to one higher and one lower.
- 5. Cultural Differences.** A dyad may be from the same culture. However, if not, cultural differences will affect their interpersonal communication. *Proxemics* is the study of how space is used in communication. Some cultures—e.g. the Arab world, Latin America, southern Europe—expect there to be very little space between those engaged in interpersonal whereas other cultures—e.g. Asia, India, Pakistan, and northern Europe—expect there to be a lot of space. If an Arab is speaking with a Swede, they will have to negotiate their very different senses of what amount of space is appropriate between them.

Oculics is the study of how the eyes are used in communication. Again, there are cultures that heavily use the eyes while speaking—e.g. the Arab world, Latin America, Greece; and there are cultures that do not—e.g. northern Europe and the United States.

Cultures can also be sorted into “**High Context**” and “**Low Context**” categories. In a high-context culture, a great deal is communicated non-verbally. Latin America, Africa, southern Europe, the Arab world, and Asia fall into this category. In a low context culture, non-verbal communication is not that important. The message is in the words themselves. Australia, the United States, Scandinavia, Germany, and Switzerland are low-context cultures.

Finally, cultures can be distinguished by which how high they are on certain core **values**. Those who study such matters often cite four such values: masculinity; uncertainty avoidance; authority; and individualism. The U.S. culture, for example, is neither high nor low in masculinity; is relatively low in uncertainty avoidance; is neither high nor low in authority; and is extremely high in individualism. This portrait is, of course, a generalization about the mainstream U.S. culture. Not all members of it fit the generalization, and there are several sub-cultures within the U.S. that do not fit the generalization at all. The important thing for students is that they be sensitive to the cultural differences that might characterize a particular dyad.

Two examples should illustrate this point. Let’s assume a member of the U.S. culture is in conversation with a German. The U.S. speaker would be slightly more willing to speak about a matter even if uncertain, and the U.S. speaker would place much more value on the individual. If the conversation were occurring in a business context, these differences might result in some dissonance when the U.S. speaker seems more concerned about his/her success than the company’s and when the U.S. speaker makes assertions in areas where, perhaps, he/she ought to be less sure of things. Let’s assume a member of the U.S. culture is in conversation with a Japanese person. The two speakers would value authority in much the same way; however, the Japanese person would value masculinity much more and would avoid uncertainty much more. The Japanese person would also value individualism somewhat less. The Japanese speaker then would be inclined to offer some views (in areas of certainty) strongly and others views (in areas of uncertainty) very hesitantly. This speaker might be difficult for someone from the U.S. culture to “read.”

6. Personality Differences. It probably goes without saying that people are different for reasons other than the culture they come from. Again, students need to be sensitive to these differences: the person they are communicating with, even if he/she “looks” the same, may be quite different in personality. A way to encourage students to develop this sensitivity is by having them take the Myers-Briggs personality inventory. This time-honored instrument will tell them where they stand on four continua: extroversion vs. introversion; sensing vs. intuition; thinking vs. feeling; judging vs. perceiving. The definitions of these eight terms are not as self-evident as one might think, so anyone who uses or takes the Myers-Briggs Inventory needs to look carefully at how the developers have operationalized each term. If a student, for example, knows that he/she is extroverted, sensing, thinking, and judging, that student will know that he/she will have communication “problems” one-on-one with someone who is, on any of those counts, opposite. For example, the “judging” student would tend to make decisions rapidly whereas the “perceiving” student would tend to delay decisions. Or, the “sensing” student would think through a problem sequentially whereas the “intuitive” would proceed in a more roundabout manner. The keys are for a student to (1) know his/her profile, (2) know that others are different, and (3) be flexible as a communicator in one-on-one situations with people who, because of personality differences, converse and think differently.

7. Processing Errors. Even in a one-on-one conversation, a great deal of “information” is coming at a listener—verbal information as well as non-verbal information. Processing this information is not always easy. To facilitate processing, we tend to focus on some pieces of information and ignore others. What drives this process is our desire for simplicity and consistency. We try to put together a “neat” package that agrees with whatever else we think we know about either the subject matter of the conversation or the person we’re conversing with. Well, things aren’t always that “neat.” As a result, the desire for simplicity and consistency can cause us to misunderstand the person we are talking with.

8. Willingness to Communicate. Research suggests that a person's willingness to communicate varies from context to context: a person willing to engage in public speaking may not be a person willing to engage in interpersonal communication; a person willing to engage in interpersonal communication with an acquaintance may not be a person willing to engage in such communication with a stranger. An easy-to-use assessment instrument developed by James C. McCroskey and Virginia P. Richmond (both of West Virginia University) can provide students with seven contextual scores. (Copies of this instrument will be on file in the Speaking Center.) Rather obviously, a person's willingness to communicate interpersonally will affect how successfully a student undertakes such a task. Also affected would be the more willing person who is trying to engage the less willing in a conversation.

9. Assertiveness and Responsiveness. McCroskey and Richmond have also developed an easy to use instrument (available in Speaking Center) to measure how assertive a person is and how responsive a person is. These are not polar opposites: one could be high (or low) in both. For the purposes of one-on-one communication, a high score in responsiveness would be a real plus. However, a high score in assertiveness might forecast problems. The assertive communicator might dominate the conversation so much that the back-and-forth that characterizes most interpersonal communication is reduced.

10. Talkativeness. A similar reduction in back-and-forth communication can result when one of the two people in the conversing dyad is something of a "talkaholic." McCroskey and Richmond have (again) developed an instrument (available in Speaking Center) to measure how talkative a person is.

Characteristics of Effective Interpersonal Communication

All of these are factors that can complicate or interfere with interpersonal communication. All of them can interfere with communication. Given how many factors there are, you might think successful interpersonal communication is unlikely. Well, it's not unlikely. It requires more work than one might think. When it's successful, it's characterized by at least the following six behaviors. Students can be profitably alerted to these behaviors.

First, effective interpersonal communication is characterized by **empathetic listening**. Communicators tend to signal that they are listening non-verbally. Among the non-verbal signals an empathetic listener sends are head nods, calm yet expressive facial movements, and spontaneous eye contact. An empathetic listener will also—to the extent appropriate—engage in frequent touching behavior and sit close to the person with whom he/she is conversing. The empathetic listener sends non-verbal signals with the whole body: a relaxed but alert posture send the desired signal, as does positioning one's body toward the other.

Second, effective interpersonal communication is characterized by **decentering**. Basically, the listener is able to cease listening with his or her needs in mind and focus more on what the other is saying and why. The listener thereby ceases being the center of the communication act as far as that listener is concerned.

Third, effective interpersonal communication is characterized by **self-disclosure**. Whether we're talking about the non-academic context of friends or the academic context of student and adviser, there should be increasing amounts of self-disclosure the more the two converse. There are a number of ways of visualizing what happens as a dyad speaks. One could, for example, graph disclosure (on the y axis) against time (on the x). You would see the line representing disclosure hug the x axis for a while and then begin to shoot upward. After a while, it would fall again and, then, level off. This graph suggests that there is, initially, a hesitancy to self-disclose. Then, the floodgates open. Then, self-disclosure falls back to a moderate level.

Or one could draw a pie with pieces representing different areas of one's life. You would color in a piece moving toward the pie's center based on amount of self-disclosure. A dyad who know each other superficially would be illustrated by a little bit of coloring-in in all pieces. A dyad where there has been some self-disclosure would be illustrated by a fair amount of coloring-in, probably more in some pieces than in others depending on the nature of the relationship. Communication between friends would not look the same as communication between a professor and a student, although both would feature a fair amount of self-disclosure.

Fourth, effective interpersonal communication would **meet the inclusion, control, and affection needs** of the communicators. The members of a dyad will not likely have the exact same needs in these areas, but rare is the human being who does not need to feel included, who does not want to feel in control of his/her life and the direction of a conversation, and who does not want to feel liked. Interpersonal communication would be deemed ineffective, for example, if a participant felt that he/she was "other," was being dictated to, or was disliked.

Fifth, effective interpersonal communication is characterized by frequent **perception checking**. A good communicator will make sure he/she truly understands what he/she is being told or what he/she is extracting from the non-verbal dimensions of a conversation. A good communicator will sometimes explicitly check perception by asking questions. A good communicator will sometimes be more subtle—for example, by making a comment that presupposes his/her perception and then gauging the accuracy of that perception based on the other person's verbal or non-verbal reaction.

Sixth, effective interpersonal communication is characterized by the use of **confirming responses** and the avoidance of disconfirming ones. Confirming responses include acknowledging what the other has said, clarifying it so that the conversation can progress, agreeing with it, and supporting it or the person. Disconfirming responses include being impervious to what is being said or interrupting it, bringing up irrelevant ideas or going off on tangents, and acting impersonally toward the other person.

Interviewing

Much of this information on interpersonal communication is very useful in managing one's personal life, and you may well see how it is relevant to the relationships that exist in academe between professor and student, advisor and advisee, tutor and tutee. But you may be wondering how interpersonal communication might play a role in our classes.

One application is in interviewing, which can be used as an informal or a very formal technique for gathering information. If students are writing a paper on the '60's, they might find it useful to interview people who were their age in that decade. If students are engaged in a research project on the effect on television crime dramas on audience members' perception of such matters as urban safety, police competence, and the availability of justice, they might interview both a group that rarely watches such shows and a group they have exposed to hours of such shows. In all likelihood, the interviewing in the latter case will be more structured, more formal.

Almost all of the information on the complexity of one-on-one conversation and on the characteristics of effective interpersonal communication is relevant to these interviewing situations. For example, the interviewer needs to be aware of cultural differences should a subject not be from the United States, and the interviewer needs to make sure he/she meets the subject's control needs and uses non-verbal communication that suggests empathy. Some more specific advice can be offered on interviewing, however.

It is important to establish a good climate for the interview. Non-verbal communication will play a major role in establishing such a climate. So will what an interviewer says. A shrewd interviewer will use what might be seen as "chit chat" to relax the person being interviewed as well as to establish some kind of connection between the two people involved in this dyad. If the interviewer

is being friendly, the normal tension of the situation will almost certainly diminish. The interviewer can, in addition, reduce the tension by sharing the purpose of the interview and assuring the subject that any information he/she provides will be treated professionally.

This period of seeming “chit chat” cannot go on too long, for the interviewer does have a job to do. Having a list of planned questions (not too few; not too many) should help the interviewer along. However, the interviewer needs to be flexible in how he/she proceeds through the list. One needs to “go with the flow,” but, at the same time, keep the planned questions in mind.

Questions should be neither too “open” nor too “closed.” An “open” question invites the person being interviewed to talk. That’s good. However, if the question is too “open,” then this person might proceed to offer a lecture of only limited usefulness. A “closed” question invites a very brief answer. Such a question will not instigate a good conversation; such a question will not elicit much beyond just that very brief answer. A few “closed” questions may well be useful in the interviewer’s overall plan. However, most questions should not be too “closed” just as they should not be too “open.”

An interviewer needs to manage time effectively. You want to get through all of the planned questions: you may need to do so to have the data you need. You also want to leave a little bit of time to summarize the interview. You want to end the interview by saying something like, “So, let me get all this straight. You’re saying that....” Such a summary serves two important purposes. First, it checks your perception of the communication that has occurred. Second, it assures the person you’ve interviewed that you’ve understood him/her correctly and are, as a result, not going to inadvertently misrepresent him/her.

Sample Assignments

This is probably the most difficult of the five areas of communication to come up with academic assignments for—because we tend not to think of interpersonal communication as being academic.

You might want to consider, however, an interviewing assignment that asks students to role play. For example, let’s say you’re teaching a social science class that deals with problems—juvenile crime; anti-Arab prejudice; indifference toward voting; marketing a Mercedes mini-car. For such problems, you could devise a handful of roles. For the first, you might generate the following list:

- The juvenile offender
- The social worker who has been assigned him/her
- A psychologist
- The juvenile court judge who heard her/his case
- The victim of his/her crime
- The juvenile’s single parent
- The juvenile’s younger sibling
- The juvenile’s teacher

In a class of 16, students 1-8 could role-play while students 9-16 serve as interviewers. Then, the roles could be shuffled and students 9-16 could enact them with 1-8 being the interviewers.

In a humanities class, students could role-play the characters in a novel or a Biblical narrative. The interviewing activity could be structured much the same way as with the juvenile criminal and those connected in some way to him/her.

A Handout You Might Give Students

Factors that Complicate Interpersonal Communication

- **Communication has a *content dimension* and a *relational dimension*; both are important.**
- **Gender: those gendered male tend to see communication in instrumental and power terms.**
- **Culture: *proxemics* (i.e. the use of space) vary from culture to culture; in addition, some cultures are “high-context” and communicated a great deal non-verbally whereas others are “low-context” and rely more on words.**
- **Personality differences (which the Myers-Briggs inventory can be give you a sense of) can create interpersonal tension.**
- **As listeners process information, they strive for simplicity and consistency; they thereby may distort messages.**
- **Willingness to communicate varies from person to person.**
- **Some people are simply more talkative than others.**

Characteristics of Effective Interpersonal Communication

- **Emphathetic listening**
- **Meeting the Inclusion, Control, and Affection Needs of the Two People Communicating**
- **Perception Checking**
- **Confirming Responses**

Interviewing Tips

- **Establish a good climate. (Keep in mind how important non-verbal communication is in doing so!)**
- **Have a list of planned questions (not too many, not too few).**
- **Ask questions that are neither too open nor too closed.**
- **Summarize the interview at its conclusion.**

Evaluation Advice and Instruments

Interpersonal communication can be assessed using a two-column checklist. One that features space for brief comments is especially useful—so that you're not just making checks or assigning points. The following questions would be ones you might want to include on such a list, with the last several relevant only if the interpersonal communication "event" is an interview:

1. Do the participants attend to the relational dimension of communication as well as the content dimension?
2. Do the participants strike a good balance between communication as instrumental and communication as relational?
3. Do the participants refrain from trying to control the communication?
4. If cultural dimensions are relevant, do the participants appropriately adjust their non-verbal communication behavior to accommodate the cultural expectations of the other person ?
5. Do the participants seem aware of their personality characteristics? Do they seem alert to the possibility that the other person may proceed differently as a communicator (as well as a problem-solver)?
6. Do the participants process what they are hearing well?
7. Do the participants seem willing to communicate?
8. Are the participants assertive but not overly so?
9. Are the participants talkative but not overly so?
10. Do the participants exhibit empathy towards each other as they listen?
11. Do the participants seem to listen without being unduly focused on their own needs?
12. Do the participants exhibit an appropriate degree of self-disclosure?
13. Do the participants try to meet the inclusion, control, and affection needs of the other person?
14. Do the participants engage in effective perception-checking behavior?
15. Do the participants offer appropriate confirming responses to the other person as he/she speaks?
16. Does the interviewer establish a good climate for a productive interview?
17. Does the interviewer have an appropriate number of questions planned?
18. Are the interviewer's questions neither too open not too closed?
19. Does the interviewer summarize the interview at its conclusion so as to check the accuracy of her/his notes and assure the interviewed that he/she was understood?

Discussion Groups

A Primer

A discussion group is defined by its goal: to discuss. Note that “to discuss” is not the same thing as “to debate,” although it is possible that some debating of ideas might occur during a discussion. Note also that “to discuss” is not the same thing as “to resolve,” although it is possible that a discussion group might come close to resolving a question that has been put to it. A group that is asked to resolve an issue is really a task group. From a communication perspective, task groups are different from discussion groups: the dynamics are different. However, there are many groups that fall somewhere in between the two and, as a result, have characteristics of both. For the sake of this primer, however, we’re going to assume that discussion groups represent a separable communication situation.

The differences between debates and discussion groups and between task groups and discussion groups are not academic niceties. Students need to know that, when asked to discuss an issue, they are not necessarily being asked to engage in an adversarial situation. Discussion groups can be communities in which all members are committed to exploring. Students also need to know that they are not necessarily being asked to come up with an answer. If a discussion group comes up with multiple answers to a question, that’s fine. The group has discussed. It wasn’t given the task of arriving at “the answer” or “an answer.”

Individual Differences

Discussion group members need to be alert to how they may differ from each other. There are many ways in which they might differ. Six are perhaps especially useful to note.

First, discussion group members may differ in their **approach to group work**. Those in the discipline of communication who study groups have identified five different approaches. Some group members are very **procedural**. It is as if these people have their focus primarily on **how** the group will proceed in discussing an issue. These group members are similar to those who are very **pragmatic** in their approach. These people want to focus on the matter at-hand. On the positive side, they will keep the group on-task; on the negative, they may push the group toward resolution either prematurely or when a “neat” resolution isn’t possible. These people, basically, want to come up with an answer.

Some people enjoy discussing ideas: their approach is said to be **conceptual**. Others like to explore the deeper issues that may lurk behind the matters under discussion. Their approach is said to be **philosophical**. As one might imagine, there can be some tension between people who are either conceptual or philosophical and people who are either procedural or pragmatic. The fifth approach focuses on the group’s processes, not to keep them on-track, but to keep them going. This approach is said to be **energizing**.

One might think that this last approach is essential. Actually, all five approaches are important if not essential. Yes, tension can emerge between people with different approaches to group work. However, a discussion group can be weakened if any one of these approaches is lacking. The group can proceed, and the group can succeed. However, the group might be better if all five approaches were represented.

Second, group members will differ in their needs. They all need inclusion, control, and affection; however, they may need different levels. As far as inclusion is concerned, there may be group members who are undersocial or oversocial as opposed to just plain social. As far as control is

concerned, there may be group members who are abdicratic or autocratic as opposed to democratic. As far as affection is concerned, there may be group members who are underpersonal or overpersonal, as opposed to just plain personal. In general, any of the extremes can cause problems in a discussion group. An oversocial person, for example, might keep the group from staying on-task; an autocratic person, for example, might try to take charge of the group and dictate to it. An overpersonal person, for example, might confess all of his/her problems that are just tangentially connected to the matter at-hand and seek expressions of the group members' concern.

Third, group members are likely to differ somewhat along gendered lines. Those gendered male tend to be more instrumental in their approach to communicate. As a result, they see communication as a means to an end and focus on (1) getting "the job" done and (2) obtaining or maintaining power. Those gendered female, on the other hand, tend to be more focused on the relational dimension of communication and are, as a result, more focused on creating or sustaining good interpersonal relationships among the group members. This matter is not as simple as the "mars" and "venus" books make it out to be, but there clearly is a difference in how communication is viewed based on gender.

Fourth, group members will have different personalities. The Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory is a useful way to categorize personality types. The inventory offers one scores along four continua: extroversion to introversion; sensing to intuitive; thinking to feeling; judging to perceiving. A person, for example, might be "extroverted," meaning that she/he would likely talk more and talk enthusiastically; "sensing," meaning that she/he thought sequentially and spoke straightforwardly; "feeling," meaning that she/he was friendly and sensitive; and "judging," meaning that she/he liked structure and made decisions quickly. This person might find it difficult to work with someone who, for example, was "thinking" and "perceiving," a cool, business-like person who tended to delay decisions and was very tentative in her/his views.

Some who study groups encourage teachers to administer the Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory and assemble assign students to work together based on their personality types. That approach is too regulatory for most. The key then becomes getting those who will work in a group to recognize that others in the group may have very different personalities and, as a result, work in different ways. Once the existence of these differences are recognized, then all group members have to both be tolerant and adapt.

Fifth, group members will have different communication styles. Group members may have one or more of the following 10 styles: (1) animated; (2) attentive; (3) contentious; (4) dominant; (5) dramatic; (6) friendly; (7) impression leaving; (8) open; (9) precise; and (10) relaxed. And there's a instrument available through the Speaking Center that enables students—or faculty—to determine on a 0-16 scale how they rate in each style. Let's say, for example, that one scores high in (3) contentious and (9) precise. Recognizing this style might lead one to moderate it a bit—as well as to try to add other styles to the repertoire. Recognizing one's dominant styles will also lead to a general recognition that there are multiple styles in the group and that, therefore, others involved in a discussion may not communicate as he or she does.

"Bad" Discussion Group Behavior

A number of communication behaviors can significantly impede the work of a discussion group.

First, if any of the discussants enacts any of the following roles, there will likely be problems: **a blocker**—i.e. someone who tries to prevent the discussion from moving forward; **a dominator**—i.e. someone who either says too much or directs the group's work too much; **a recognition-seeker**—i.e. one who talks about his/her accomplishments or one who offers his/her ideas with the obvious expectation that they will be applauded; **a "confessor"**—i.e. one who shares personal experiences or personal problems, even ones related only tangentially to the topic under consideration; **a "clown"**—i.e. one who jokes around so much that the group cannot discuss; and

a withdrawer—i.e. one who sits back and does not at all engage in the group's activities. One might add to this list the role that in sexist small group communication texts of old was called **a playboy**—i.e. one who was more interested in "picking up" fellow group members than discussing.

Second, if any of the group members engages in non-verbal behavior that signals rejection, there will likely be problems. Raising one's eyes up or looking down can signal rejection, as can folding one's arms, tapping a pencil, or shuffling papers. These behaviors are, in addition, quite rude.

Third, a discussion can be impaired if any of those involved polarize any conflict that may emerge by exaggerating the opposed positions. Conflicting ideas are normal in the course of a discussion, and a good discussion profits from the conflict because it compels those on both sides to support what they are saying. Exaggerating does not support an idea; rather, it tends to take an idea that might be supported by good reasons and move it to a realm where it can only be supported by emotion-laden language.

Fourth, a discussion can be impaired if any of those involved practice "pseudo-listening." This behavior is one we've certainly seen in classrooms (and maybe even in faculty or committee meetings). A "pseudo-listener" has figured out all of the non-verbal behavior that suggests attentiveness, and she/he engages in them. However, there is little or no mental attending to the group's work. The person's mind is on some other matter, even though the non-verbal signals suggest engagement.

Fifth, a discussion can be impaired if any of those involved is overly aggressive. Dominic Infante and C. J. Wigley have developed and tested an instrument (available in Speaking Center) that measures "verbal aggressiveness." It's a twenty-item self-report questionnaire. You receive a score from 20 to 100, with a score in excess of 58 suggesting that you are highly verbally aggressive and, thus, a potential "problem" in a discussion group.

A few of these "bad" behaviors necessitate a detour here into a discussion of **conflict**. The first point to make is that conflict can be good. However, when the conflict focuses on people, not ideas, and when the conflict becomes charged with emotion, then it is no longer good. Discussants can prevent turning conflict from good to bad by, first, monitoring and controlling their emotional displays and, second, by using "I statements," not "You statements." Let's say someone says that those who live in the large cities of the Northeast tend to be rude and you're from one of those cities. A "you statement" would be "You're prejudiced"; an "I statement" would be "I'm offended by that comment." In general, "I statements" are less confrontational and, therefore, less likely to cause a conflict to escalate.

There are five strategies one might use in dealing with conflict. Some are better than others. Theorists suggest that a group member's behavioral inclinations result in a tendency to respond to conflict in predictable ways. The two inclinations that are relevant are the tendency to be assertive and the tendency to be cooperative. Those who are low in both practice **avoidance**; those who are low in cooperativeness but high in assertiveness practice **competition**. Neither avoidance nor competition are especially good ways of dealing with conflict. Those who are high in cooperativeness but low in assertiveness practice **accommodation**, which is also not a good strategy because often the person using this strategy gives away too much. The two better strategies are those practices by those moderate on both scales and those high on both scales. Those who are moderate in cooperativeness and assertion practice **compromise**; those who are high in both practice (if they let the cooperativeness dominate a bit) **collaboration**. Those group members inclined to the less effective strategies should try to practice compromise and collaboration. Theorists suggest that they may have to alter their measure of assertiveness and/or cooperativeness in order to practice the preferred strategies for dealing with conflict .

"Good" Discussion Group Behavior

There are several behaviors discussants might learn and practice that would help a discussion group do well.

First, discussants might practice **paraphrasing**. If they did so, they would occasionally put the ideas of others into their own words. This technique allows the discussion to move forward with the assurance that participants truly understand the ideas they are responding to. This technique is especially helpful when the issues under discussion are controversial or are eliciting emotion-laden responses.

Second, discussants might practice using **regulators** effectively. Now—you might ask—what is a regulator? These are non-verbal ways we have of signaling such matters as we're finished speaking and we want a turn speaking. For example, people signal the latter by leaning forward, nodding, establishing eye contact with the person speaking or the person leading, and—of course—raising one's hand. If these regulators are used well, a group runs smoothly: there are few interruptions and few times when people speak over each other. A smoothly-running group is more likely to produce ideas and then refine them than one that jerks forward.

Paraphrasing and using regulators are, perhaps, small things those participating in a discussion group might do. The third and fourth suggestions (below) deal with the larger picture—how the participants choose to interact with each other.

The third suggestion deals with the **interaction pattern**. A task group (as opposed to a discussion group) is likely to have a leader. As a result, many of the comments made by group members will be directed at that leader. That leader, on the other hand, will tend to direct his/her comments to the group as a whole. A discussion group will typically exhibit a different interaction pattern in which most group members' comments will be directed to the group as a whole. Sometimes, two members may engage in a back-and-forth exchange, with the rest of the group listening. That's fine, but, in general, those exchanges should be significantly fewer than comments addressed to the group as a whole. Side exchanges, where two members will talk without the rest of the group listening, are inevitable in any group of human beings. However, such exchanges should be minimal in both task groups and discussion groups, for, if they are too numerous, they can cause the group as a whole to cease working productively.

The fourth suggestion deal with balancing the amount of talk a person engages in, how much of it is task-oriented, and how much is social. Envision a graph with the x-axis being social talk and the y-axis being task talk. On such a graph, envision four quadrants: high in both in upper right; low in both in lower left; high task but low social in upper right; low task but high social in lower right. Now, represent each group member with a circle, the circle's size reflecting how much the person talks. Now, place these circles in the quadrants. The *ideal* group will have all of its members in (or near) the high-high quadrant; the *ideal* group will have none of its members represented by either very large or very small circles.

Such a diagram also can be used as a diagnostic tool. It can flag down not only imbalances in participation among group members, but also group atmospheres that lack the necessary mix of task talk and social talk.

The fifth and final suggestion concerns the roles group members might play. Those who study small groups suggest that there are **task roles**, **procedural roles**, and **emotional support roles**, all of which must be enacted if a group is to be successful. These roles may well be more important in a task group than in a discussion group; nonetheless, they are important.

Task roles include the following: initiating discussion; seeking and providing information; seeking and providing opinions; elaborating on someone else's idea; clarifying someone else's idea or where the group is on a question; evaluating an idea; effecting a compromise among ideas; and summarizing where the group is.

Procedural roles include regulating participation by keeping people from speaking too much and inviting those not speaking to do so; keeping the group on-task; and recording the group's ideas.

Emotional support roles include energizing the group; supporting those who participate, especially those who are either reluctant or have espoused controversial positions; harmonizing the group when excessive tension develops; and helping the group release tension through humor and other techniques.

Roles are not taken-on, one person to a role. Rather, a given person might take on several. And a role might be shared. The key is for participants to know what roles they're good at and, then, assume some of those. Ideally, all roles will thus be enacted. Since discussion groups do not have to reach a specific goal, they can proceed and be "successful" without all roles having been enacted. However, the more roles unfilled, the more likely a discussion group is to produce only a few ideas.

Sample Assignments

Group discussions need to be closely tied to the content of courses if they are to be the speaking to-learn activities they should be. Assignments tend to fall into two categories: 1) hypothetical cases followed by a number of questions the group should ask about that situation; 2) questions tied to a particular reading selection.

Several guidelines might well be kept in mind when crafting questions:

1. Questions should, if at all possible, be genuine—not ones for which there is a "right" answer that students must search for.
2. The multiple answers that might be offered should be equally defensible and equally rich in implications. Yes, the group may well decide that some answers, after discussion, are more defensible than others. But, before the group reaches this point, the group should feel awash in genuine possibilities.
3. The multiple answers should also be rich in implications so that the discussion does not come to a screeching halt after a few minutes.
4. Questions should *interest students*. What might be the subject of hours of debate among professional sociologists/historians/chemists/etc. might well not be fascinating to undergraduates.
5. Questions should, if at all possible, be sequenced, so that question 1 leads to 2, etc. The discussion then builds as opposed to have jerky transitions as they group reaches closure on 1 and then says, "ok, let's move on to #2."

A Handout You Might Give Students

Discussion Groups

As a general principle, be aware that the members of a group are *different*. There are countless ways in which they may be different. The following would seem to be particularly relevant to discussion groups:

Different in Approach to Group Work—e.g. procedural vs. philosophical
Different in Inclusion, Control, and Affection Needs
Different in Gender—males more instrumental, females more relational in focus
Different in Personality
Different in Communication Style—e.g. dominant or relaxed or contentious or open

Also, be aware of ***Bad Group Behaviors***:

- >Blocking Discussion
- >Dominating Discussion
- >Seeking Recognition
- >Offering Irrelevant Personal Disclosures
- >Clowning Around
- >Withdrawing from the Discussion
- >Flirting

And, finally, be aware of ***Good Group Behaviors***:

- >Paraphrasing What Others Have Said
- >Helping Regulate Discussion (to prevent domination and withdrawal)
- >An Interaction Pattern Featuring Most Comments Being Made to the Group
- >A “Good” Balance of Task-Talk and Social-Talk
- >The Performance of Necessary Task Roles*
- >The Performance of Necessary Procedural Roles**
- >The Performance of Necessary Emotional Support Roles***

*--Initiating, Information Seeking, Information Giving, Opinion Seeking, Opinion Giving, Elaborating, Clarifying, Evaluating, Compromising, Summarizing

**--Regulating Participation, Keeping Group Focused, Recording

***--Energizing, Supporting, Harmonizing, Tension Releasing

Evaluation Advice and Instruments

Three diagnostic charts might be useful in assessing how effectively a discussion group is working. (Copies are available in Speaking Center.)

The first charts the **interaction pattern**.

Draw a circle or rectangle to represent the table (or space) around which the group is working; then, draw a circle (or whatever shape) for each group member.

Then, for each statement, draw an arrow from the speaker to the audience. If the audience is another group member or two, it's easy to draw the arrow. If the audience is the group as a whole, draw the arrow so that it points either to the center or outside the group. Since arrows drawn to the center will cross with arrows going from person-to-person, you'll probably create a clearer diagram if you draw the person-to-entire group arrows pointing outside the group. Visually, such a diagram sends the "wrong" message; however, as long as everybody knows what those outward-pointing arrows mean, there shouldn't be a problem.

As noted earlier, in a discussion group, the overwhelming majority of the arrows should be person-to-group arrows.

The second charts the **balance between task talk and social talk**. It also charts the level of each member's contribution to the discussion.

Draw a diagram with intersecting x and y axes and, thus, four quadrants. The y axis measures the amount of social talk, with 0 at the chart's bottom, not at the axes' intersections; the x axis measures the amount of task talk, with 0 at the chart's far left, not at the axes' intersection.

Then, place on the chart circles for each participant with the size of the circle signaling how much that person contributed. Thus, a participant who spoke a fair amount but almost always about the task would have a moderate-size circle in the upper left quadrant; a participant who spoke a little and almost always about social matters would have a small circle in the lower right quadrant; and a participant who spoke a lot about both the task and social matters would have a BIG circle in the upper right quadrant.

Ideally, the circles, although certainly not identical in size, would not be at either extreme. Ideally, the circles should be in the upper right quadrant but almost hovering on the x axis, suggesting much task talk and a good bit of social talk.

The third charts **good and bad group behaviors**.

List the behaviors down the right hand side of a page. Then create columns for each group participant.

Then, without being unduly concerned about methodology (since this is not a research task), put tick marks on the appropriate line and in the appropriate column when you see an instance of a behavior.

The good behaviors are the following task, procedural, and social roles: initiating; information seeking, information giving, opinion seeking, opinion giving, elaborating, clarifying, evaluating, compromising, summarizing, regulating participation, keeping group focused, recording, energizing, supporting, harmonizing, tension releasing.

The bad behaviors would be blocking discussion, dominating discussion, seeking recognition, sharing irrelevant personal information, clowning-around, withdrawing from the discussion, and flirting.

After a discussion is over, you should be able to answer the following questions:

1. Were all of the necessary good behaviors practiced by the group members as a whole?
2. If not, which ones was the group deficient in?
3. Were any good behaviors minimally present?
4. Were the responsibilities shared fairly evenly among group members, or did some people do too much and others too little?
5. For each behavior, who seemed to be “the specialist”? (Keep in mind that a person is usually good at many behaviors and will choose which ones to exhibit in a given group based on who else is in the group and what these others seem to be good at. So, “the specialist” in summarizing in a group you observe on Tuesday may become “the specialist” in initiating in a different group on Thursday.)
6. Were any bad behaviors exhibited? If so, by whom?

These questions should allow you to offer the group as a whole and the individuals in it useful feedback.

Task Groups

A Primer

The Importance of Task Groups

Task group work is very important. It has long been the norm in scientific research; it has increasingly become the norm in business. Solitary scientists working quietly in their laboratories and solitary business people working diligently in their offices are anachronisms. Teams are much more common in both situations. And teams are used in many others.

Teams or task groups can indeed take longer to do the work at-hand. (We all know this if we just think of the committees we've served on.) This increased time might be considered a disadvantage. If so, it is offset by the advantage the multiple perspectives the group members bring to a task. Multiple perspectives mean more ideas and more people both critiquing and trying to improve possible solutions and answers.

Task groups are called such because they have a task to complete—an experiment to finish, a marketing plan to devise, a recommendation to make, etc. Because they have a task to complete, they are different from discussion groups, where the goal is simply to generate ideas. Group communication is perhaps best seen as a continuum from “pure” discussion groups at one extreme and “pure” task groups at the other. The reality is that many groups fall in between. That said, it is useful to think of groups you might set up in the classroom as primarily one or the other because the communication dynamics do vary from discussion groups to task groups.

The Stages a Task Group Moves Through

Task groups rarely get immediately to work on the task at-hand. We know that they typically move through five stages. Somebody years ago (somebody who liked to rhyme) labeled these stages (1) forming, (2) storming, (3) norming, (4) performing, and (5) adjourning. (And, yes, “adjourning” doesn't quite rhyme; the “somebody” wasn't particularly good at rhyming.)

The forming stage can be chaotic, and it can also be quiet. The group members at this stage are becoming accustomed to each other and to the idea of working in this particular group. Soon, the group members will start trying to figure out how they will work together. Typically, this **storming phase** will mix comments about the group's procedures with comments about the task. Group members will, during this stage, be trying to figure out what their role or roles in the group is going to be. Soon, the relative chaos of storming will settle into patterns. Group members will settle into roles; certain procedures will become normal. Once a group passes through this **norming phase**, it is ready to begin truly **performing** whatever tasks it has taken on or been assigned. After a group has performed that task, it is ready to adjourn. In most cases, **the adjourning stage** needs to entail more than saying, “We're out of here.” Plans often must be made to carry out a plan that has been developed and, later, assess whether it was as successful as the group thought it would be. Quite a few good plans have failed because a group rushed through the adjourning stage.

Instructors need to understand that a task group will move through these phases and that it may take some time to do so. Instructors might draw at least two implications from these facts: first, that they need to be patient and not get anxious when “the work” is not being immediately done by a group; second, that they might want to keep students in the same group throughout a course since we do know that, although groups will proceed through these stages every time they meet, they will proceed through them more and more quickly as their time together as a group

increases. A group that is meeting for a third or fourth time need not spend much time forming, storming, or norming.

Tension

As a task group moves through these phases, certain communication behaviors are noticeable.

First, there will be tension. There will be **primary tension** over such matters as who will do what. For example, in a task group, there may be a couple of members who want to “take charge.” There will be tension until the group norms its procedure and assigns leadership responsibilities as part of that norming. There will also be **secondary tension** over ideas. Group members, if considering a problem, will point to different causes and solutions. If engaged in scientific work, they will suggest different ways of explaining the data. Instructors and students both must understand that these two types of tension are normal and productive. Some students back away from tension and conflict; these students in particular need to understand that task groups cannot function well without some tension.

Different Types of Talk

Second, there will be different kinds of “talk” that occur. There will be **social talk**, especially during the forming phase. This talk has nothing to do with the task at-hand; therefore, it frequently makes instructors nervous. Instructors need to understand that it’s normal and necessary if the group is to move from forming onto storming. Once in the storming phase, **role talk** will begin to dominate. Group members will talk about how the group should proceed. Inevitably, this talk will be about who will do what. Only after the role talk subsides will **problem-solving talk** come to dominate the group’s work. If a group is together long enough or if a group works either very well or very poorly, a fourth kind of talk will emerge—**talk about the group**. Group members will talk about how good the group is, perhaps in comparison to others. Group members will talk—perhaps a bit reluctantly—about how the group is not succeeding and why.

Norms

Third, group members will behave in accordance with the norms that have emerged. Since different groups will develop different norms, the behavior may vary—even among four or five groups in the same classroom. One group, for example, might decide to “go around the table” for reactions to ideas; another might operate in a more free-wheeling manner. One group might allow members to pop in and out of the group at will whereas another might cast chilly stares at a member who stands up to leave for a minute or two. One group might acknowledge a “good” contribution effusively while another does not. No set of norms is ideal, although there may be norms at the rigid and loose extremes instructors might want to discourage as unproductive. The crucial thing is that group members behave in accordance with whatever norms have developed. Should a group member depart, the group will usually act in some way to compel conformity. Should there be many departures, the group will find itself in trouble.

Roles

Fourth, group members will assume certain roles and behave in accordance with those roles. Below I list roles that are necessary for a group to succeed under three headings: **task roles**; **procedural roles**; **emotional support roles**. There are far too many roles listed for each group member to choose just one. So, we’re not talking here about a one-to-one correspondence between group members and a roles. A given member will likely play several roles. Furthermore, a given role may be shared: one member may, for example, play the role of regulating participation early in a session with another member playing that role later.

Inevitably, group members will look at the lists below and impose some sort of hierarchical structure on them. Some roles are important; others not—that’s what the group members will

think. It is important for group members to realize that all roles are necessary and therefore important. A given group member might “like” one role over another, and perhaps this affinity will be based on his/her accurate assessment of his/her aptitude. Group members need, however, to identify several roles they are good at—and therefore “like”—so that they can play whatever one or ones are necessary in the group in question. Group members may accurately identify certain roles they are not good at. This is usually fine because, unless the group is extremely unlucky, there will be someone in the group to take on every role.

Here are the roles.

Task roles include (1) initiating discussion; (2) seeking information; (3) providing information; (4) seeking opinions; (5) providing opinions; (6) elaborating on what has been said; (7) clarifying what has been said; (8) evaluating what has been said; (9) seeking compromises between or among ideas; and (10) summarizing what the group has concluded. All are important. Experienced speech communication teachers will tell you that (7) is often the crucial role that goes begging. They will also tell you that group members can be readily taught to perform that role.

Procedural roles include (1) regulating participation; (2) keeping the group on task; and (3) recording the group’s conclusions. The first role includes both bringing the quieter members into the conversation and getting garrulous members to talk less.

Emotional Support roles include (1) energizing the group; (2) supporting members who take risks; (3) harmonizing the group when interpersonal tension develops; and (4) helping release tension using such tools as humor. Research shows that all of these roles are crucial. The first three tend to be performed by women more often than by men. As a result, in work environments one might term patriarchal, these roles are often viewed as unimportant. The truth is the opposite: without these roles being performed, a group can turn listless, inhibited, and unpleasant. Such a group will likely not be especially productive.

Leadership

In a typical task group, an individual or several individuals will likely assume a cluster of roles that we might place high on a hierarchical list. This cluster we might connect to the concept of leadership. Whereas strong leadership might be inappropriate in a discussion group, it is not at all inappropriate in a task group. Task groups do not necessarily have leaders; however, they frequently do.

As most probably know, there is a large body of writing on leadership. There are leadership studies programs at other colleges; there are even colleges of leadership at some universities. So, a few words on leadership only scratches the surface. But here are those few words—offered because they may help students decide if they are likely task group leaders and because they may help students shape their leadership style.

There are designated leaders and emergent leaders. Researchers disagree on what characterizes those leaders who emerge. One researcher says emerging leaders talk early and often, are knowledgeable, offer opinions, welcome disagreement, and volunteer for work. Another says emerging leaders withhold views and opinions, encourage participation, keep the group organized, develop harmony, and play the “devil’s advocate.” In the terms in which we discussed roles, the first description seems very task-oriented whereas the second seems much more procedural and emotional support oriented. A third description focuses more on personal characteristics as opposed to communication behaviors: according to it, emerging leaders have vision and credibility and exhibit composure, sociability, and extroversion. A fourth description is the simplest: emerging leaders, according to this researcher, are high in procedure, moderate in ideas, and low in opinions.

There are different descriptions; there are also different **styles**. A leader might be classified as autocratic, democratic, or laissez-faire, with the middle preferred. A leader might be placed somewhere along a continuum from task-focused to relation-focused, with an intermediate position desired.

A leader might also be classified as either selling, telling, participating, or delegating. Interestingly, these styles can be mapped onto the task group members' level of readiness for the task and level of comfort with it. Depending on the combination of these two variables, a different style is preferred. For example, if the task group members are high in both, delegating is preferred, but if they are low in both, selling is necessary. If members are high in readiness but low in comfort, the leader should adopt a participatory style; if the opposite, a directive or "telling" style.

Behavior That Can Hurt a Group

A good leader can usually help a task group. There are, however, certain communication behaviors and a certain group mentality that can significantly impede the work of task groups.

There are certain roles that, if enacted, can impede a group's progress. Most group theorists list seven such roles: (1) blocking the group's progress—often to plead and re-plead a "special interest"; (2) acting aggressively toward others and/or their ideas; (3) dominating the group's work; (4) seeking recognition to an inappropriate extent; (5) "confessing" matters not relevant to the group's task; (6) playing the clown; and (7) withdrawing from the group's work. Some theorists also once listed "being a playboy," meaning flirting with members of the opposite sex. Perhaps, if we label this behavior" (8) inappropriately flirting," we can add it to the list.

There is also a kind of statement that can stop the flow of ideas that is necessary if a task group is to be as successful as possible. Many of these statements are drawn from the business world, not academe, but they should give you—and students—a sense of what kinds of statements can stop a discussion "cold":

We tried that before.
That will never work.
It won't work here.
Let's all sleep on it.
That's ridiculous.
Let's get back to reality.
Where'd you dig that one up.
We'll be the laughingstock of....

In general, such statements demean the idea and demean the person who offered it. No wonder they stop discussion.

Finally, there is a mentality known as "**groupthink**" that can characterize a task group's behavior. This phenomenon typically affects groups within rather hierarchical organizations where those lower in the hierarchy can easily feel "silenced" by those higher. The "classic" example is the decision-making that preceded the Challenger disaster. Researchers in communication studies, social psychology, and management science have all examined this decision-making and found that the task group did not do a very good job. Besides not attending to or suppressing information, the group allowed itself to be driven by external concerns as well as by its sense of its infallibility or invisibility.

"Groupthink" is probably more likely to occur in a college committee than in a student task group. However, it is a concept that might be shared with students: in general, the more they know about

task group's strengths and weaknesses, the better they will be able—now and in the future—to work in such groups.

Problem-Solving Procedures

Once task groups turn to their tasks, they do not necessarily know how to proceed. In many cases, the efficient procedure you might recommend is something you will have to extract from an examination of effective task groups in your discipline. There are, however, some general procedures you might recommend to students. Three are problem-solving procedures that would shape a task group's entire job; one can be used as needed at various points in the process.

Over the decades, beginning with famous educator John Dewey, people in several academic fields have developed problem-solving agendas. A generic version would have task group members proceed through eight steps: (1) define and analyze the problem; (2) determine the goals a solution needs to meet; (3) pinpoint any constraints that might prevent meeting those goals; (4) generate possible solutions; (5) evaluate possible solutions; (6) select the best solution; (7) discuss the implications of that selection; (8) confirm selection and develop a plan to implement it. This agenda has proven through the years to enhance problem-solving. Those who use it, however, should be aware that its linearity is deceptive. Sometimes, task group members need to loop back—for example, if step (7) causes members to doubt what was done at step (6). Also, task members sometimes need to step outside the process to gather or verify information. With these important caveats, the agenda is a sound general way to solve problems.

The Dewey agenda can only work if task group members fully participate. In some groups, full participation might be an issue. Maybe some group members are shy; maybe there is a hierarchy in the group that causes those lower to withhold their comments. In such cases, the task group might profitably use the “nominal group technique” that several have developed over the years. These techniques combine writing, discussing, and voting to generate and then assess ideas. For example, if a task group were trying to decide how to market a new product, each member would be asked to generate three strategies and then to write them on a surface (“blackboard”; flip chart; etc.) that all could see. Then, each strategy is discussed. Then, each member votes for one or more “favorites.” Members might be given four blue dots to place after the ideas they prefer. Those strategies receiving the most dots would then be discussed further. After that discussion, there would be another vote, a vote that would determine the task group's choice. This technique is called “nominal” because, at crucial moments, the individuals are acting—generating ideas, evaluating ideas—more on their own than as part of a group. The theory is that, free from group pressure, people who are for some reason inhibited will more fully participate,

Increasingly, we find more and more people to be “visual.” A problem-solving procedure that capitalizes on how visual students (and others) are derives from the practice of flow-charting used by computer scientists. This procedure requires task group members to chart carefully the steps they will go through. Not only will such a chart feature a succession of rectangles representing the steps, it will have inputs coming in from elsewhere at appropriate points. So, for example, if a task group working on a science projects should not move forward until test results have been received from another laboratory, this needed input will be marked and will stop the group from prematurely moving on to the next step. The task group can add use multiple shapes and add all sorts of “bells and whistles” to a flow chart—as long as the level of detail doesn't begin to overwhelm group members. The important thing is that the chart be in front of the task group members, guiding their movement through the problem-solving process they designed. (Such a chart might also be designed by an instructor so that a group might follow the process he or she has designed.)

Sample Assignments

Any group **laboratory assignment** can probably function as a task group assignment. What the students do will probably not change. What will change is how you look at their work. Yes, you'll continue to look at their work from the perspective of the particular scientific discipline. However, you'll occasionally change lenses and look at their work from the perspective of group communication. If you choose to do so, you might want to talk with the students a bit about small groups so that, as you shift your perspective a bit, they're not totally thrown.

Case studies also make effective task group assignments. The cases can be hypothetical or real. For example, in a political communication class that deals with elections, a group might be assigned the campaign of a prospective presidential candidate. The "case" would outline, up to a certain point in time, what had happened, what went right, and what went wrong. The group's task becomes designing a communication strategy for the next few weeks based on this information and what the group members have learned in the course about political communication. This particular task might be just a classroom exercise, or it could be the springboard for a group-authored paper or a group presentation.

A Handout You Might Give Students

Task Group Communication

The Stages a Task Group Moves Through

Forming --- Storming --- Norming --- Performing --- Adjourning

Different Types of Talk

>Social Talk – ok, especially heavy during FORMING stage

>Role Talk – ok, especially heavy during STORMING and NORMING and ADJOURNING stages

>Problem-Solving Talk – especially heavy during PERFORMING stage

**>Talk About the Group – positive – when group is performing well
negative – when group is having performance problems**

Group Roles

**Task Roles: 1.Initiating; 2.Seeking Information; 3.Giving Information
4.Seeking Opinions; 5.Providing Opinions; 6.Elaborating;
7.Clarifying; 8.Seeking Compromise; 9.Summarizing**

**Procedural Roles: 1.Regulating Participation; 2.Keeping the Group on Task;
3.Recording**

**Emotional Support Roles: 1.Energizing; 2.Supporting; 3.Harmonizing;
4.Releasing Tension**

**Negative Roles: 1.Blocking Progress; 2.Acting Aggressively Toward Others
and/or Their Ideas; 3.Dominating the Group; 4.Seeking
Personal Recognition; 5.Bringing up Personal Matters
Irrelevant to the Group's Task; 6.Clowning Around;
7.Withdrawing from the Group; 8.Flirting**

A Problem-Solving Procedure

- 1. Define and Analyze the Problem**
- 2. Determine the Goals a Solution Must Meet**
- 3. Pinpoint Any Constraints that Might Prevent Meeting Those Goals**
- 4. Generate Possible Solutions**
- 5. Evaluate These Solutions**
- 6. Select the Best Solution/s**
- 7. Discuss the Implications of That Selection**
- 8. Confirm Selection and Develop a Plan to Implement It**

Evaluation Advice and Instruments

The tools discussed under **Discussion Groups** would be useful here as well. There would be one important difference in how the *interaction diagram*, the *social vs. task talk chart*, and the *positive and negative behaviors* list might look. The difference is tied to the fact that, whereas discussion groups usually proceed “loosely,” task groups tend to have leaders. Sometimes, there will be a leader designated before the group begins its work; sometimes, a leader will emerge during the groups “storming” phase.

The presence of leadership changes the likely interaction diagram in the following manner: many of the arrows will go from various group members to the chair. Thus, the ideal pattern would probably feature almost as many comments directed at the chair as comments directed at the group as a whole.

The presence of leadership changes the relative sizes of the circles in the social vs. task talk diagram. Ideally, the circles will still be in the same location, but the circles of those who are leading the group will typically be larger than they would be in a more non-hierarchical discussion group.

The presence of leadership changes the likely chart of the various group roles and who’s performing them in the following manner: a sizeable percentage of the task, procedural, and emotional support roles will be enacted heavily by the chair. Sometimes, you see the emergence of what the group communication literature refers to as a “lieutenant.” This person assists the chair or leader in performing these roles. If there is a “lieutenant,” she/he will also enact a sizeable percentage of the necessary roles, but probably not as sizeable a percentage as the chair/leader.

All of these evaluative tools, of course, require the instructor to be monitoring the group. Quite frequently, however, task groups will work outside the classroom and the instructor, as a result, cannot monitor group performance. In such a case, it may be useful to have group members evaluate each other. A long evaluation form will be taken less seriously than a short one, so my advice in designing such a form would be to go to the list of group roles, select the ones that are more crucial to the success of the particular group, and design a form such as the following:

role	Chris	Amy	Mike	Alison
Does the group member offer information?	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Does the group member voice opinions?	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Does the group member help clarify the ideas being considered?	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Does the group member assist the group in reach compromises?	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Does the group member help summarize where the group stands?	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Does the group member help keep the group on-task?	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Does the group member help energize the group?	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Does the group member support those who may offer controversial or very personal observations?	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5

Using such a chart, students have the opportunity to flag down those who may not be carrying their weight without having to say, explicitly, that so-and-so is a slacker.

So keep in mind that the seven questions here were ones / selected based on what was important to be in the task group's work. In designing your own form, you could choose different roles from the "standard" list of task, procedural, and emotional support roles. You could also go off that list and come up with other questions: e.g., "Did the group member contribute to the library/internet research pool the group drew from?"

Presentational Communication

A Primer

The speech communication activity that faculty are, of course, most familiar with is the presentation. It is also one of the most time-consuming. Therefore, we encourage faculty to build presentations into their classes only when the time is well-spent. And “well-spent” necessarily implies meeting the goals of their classes.

There are some ways of reducing the time demands of presentations somewhat. You might schedule mini-presentations that take no more than 3-4 minutes, or you might plan for panel presentations, where different students look at different aspects of an issue, or debates, where students offer different perspectives. Debates do, however, have to meet certain “standards” to be “good” debates. (I’ll talk about those later.) In general, no matter what format you choose or how long students’ speeches will be, the advice on presentational communication that follows is relevant.

Differences Between Speaking and Writing

A presentation is **very rarely** the reading aloud of a paper. At conferences in some humanities disciplines, people do indeed read papers; however, usually, what is spoken is very different from what is written. I would suggest that even humanities faculty who do not find the concept of “reading a paper” foreign recognize the difference, for they will more often than not write a text that is to be read aloud differently than a text that is to be read by a reader.

So, what are the differences between speaking and writing? There are differences in content, organization, style, and the author-audience relationship.

The content of a presentation is typically simpler. Content is cut. Key ideas are repeated more. Examples dominate over complex logic and statistics. Good presenters will often say things like “This matter is covered more fully in the paper” or “The precise statistics are in the paper.” Good presenters say such things because they understand that what will work with a speech audience, which must process information very quickly, is different than what will work with an article audience, which has the ability to slow down and speed up—even to reread—as it processes a text.

The organization of a presentation is typically both simpler and more explicit than that of a written document. The reason is, again, tied to the fact that a speech audience must pick up on a presentation’s organization quickly and keep it in mind as the speaker proceeds in order to be “on the same page” (so to speak) as the presenter. We know that “being on the same page” facilitates processing; we also know that it enhances persuasion. To keep the audience with the speaker, the speaker will usually offer more explicit organizational previews in an introduction, more explicit reviews in a conclusion, and more explicit transitions as he/she moves from part to part of a presentation than a writer would. This degree of organization would probably strike a reader as “mechanical,” but a reader’s situation and thus needs are very different from a listener’s.

The style of a presentation is typically more conversational than that of a written document. Written documents are more permanent: they are in many cases “the record.” Thus, they tend to be written using more formal language, language that adheres very strictly to conventions of grammar and usage as well as other conventions. For example, one probably would not use contractions in a formal written report, but would certainly use them when speaking. One probably would not write “a lot,” but would probably say it.

The author-audience relationship is an important difference between writing and speaking. A writer's audience is not present. This audience can process the writing as he/she wishes: that's an advantage of the writer-reader relationship. However, this audience cannot offer verbal or non-verbal feedback **as** the ideas are being presented. The speaker's audience can signal confusion, agreement, disagreement, and boredom. The speaker can, on the spot, adjust to the feedback in a number of ways. This capability is one of the speaker's advantages over the writer, an advantage that speakers unfortunately do not always avail themselves of when they stick to their "script" despite signals their audience is sending.

Organization

Students probably benefit the most from instruction concerning organization. Some students resist fitting what they have to say to a pattern; however, they need to be encouraged to do so because the use of easily discernible patterns make the audience's job so much easier.

Seven patterns might be suggested to students as ones that audiences can readily follow: 1) chronological; 2) spatial; 3) cause-effect; 4) pro-con; 5) problem-solution; 6) topical; 7) background-hypothesis-data-conclusion-discussion. The first five are, I think, self-explanatory. #6 requires an explanation; #7 a caveat.

Topical organization assumes that, whatever the big topic is, it can be easily divided into small ones. For example, if one were to talk about women's athletics, it would not be difficult for an audience to follow a structure that proceeded sport-by-sport. Or, if one were to talk about the discipline of biology, it would not be difficult for an audience to follow a structure that talked, in turn, about the different branches such as cell biology and botany.

The background-hypothesis-etc. pattern is, of course, how most research reports proceed. If the oral presentation is being offered to an audience familiar with this pattern, then the pattern can be an effective way to present one's research orally. If the audience is not familiar with this pattern, another pattern—for example, problem-solution—might be a better choice.

Within any of these structures, there are many times when a speaker will "make a point." It is important that the audience pick up on all of these points, and the way a speaker structures each and every point he/she makes can help the audience along. Speech communication texts sometimes offer an easy-to-recall formula of Signpost, State, Support, and Summarize for use in offering one's arguments. The following example proceeds through this "4S" formula:

Let's turn now to the question of teaching grammar in a writing class. Studies suggest that such teaching does not improve students' writing. Studies by White in 1965, Bateman and Zidonis in 1966, Gale in 1968, and Elley, Barham, Lamb, and Wylie in 1976 showed repeatedly that students who received grammar instruction of different sorts wrote no better than students who received no grammar instruction. These and other studies show that teaching grammar does not help improve writing.

This example is over-simplified, but sentence 1 is the signpost; sentence 2 is the statement of the point; sentence three is the supporting evidence; and sentence 4 is the summary.

Outlining

Most who teach writing discourage students from either outlining too early in the writing process or outlining too intricately. Outlining too early can freeze the thinking that goes on as one drafts; outlining too intricately can make one reluctant to depart from the plan since so much time has been invested in that plan. Most who teach writing encourage students to prepare nothing more than a list of the items that will be covered, with maybe some use of indentation to signal what falls under what.

Teaching presentational communication is different from teaching writing, however. Because a straightforward, explicit organization is so important when one presents, outlining is a useful strategy. One has to guard against putting a stop to idea generation prematurely. However, speakers can benefit from thinking about structure from very early in the process of preparing a presentation.

Besides encouraging speakers to offer well-organized presentations, outlining can help them discover problems with the prospective speech. Problems might be discovered in three areas.

Students might discover the problem of **imbalance** by studying their outlines. For example, let's say a student was going to give a presentation that introduced an audience to the nation of Canada. Let's say an outline revealed that the student had chosen a topical structure with "geography," "politics," and "culture" as the topics. Let's say this outline had seven sub-topics under "geography," five under "culture," and none under "politics." The outline ought to alert the student to the need to do more research on Canadian politics to address the obvious imbalance among the three topics.

Students might also discover the problem of **illogic** by studying their outlines. For example, let's say a student was going to talk about Australia's major cities. Again, he/she chose a topical structure with "Sydney," "Melbourne," and "Brisbane" being the topics. For "Sydney," the outline reveals sub-topics focused on population, geographical setting, and culture. Same for "Melbourne" except culture was treated at greater length with a discussion of the city's Anglo-Irish "feel," its love of sport, and its rivalry with Sydney. The last sub-topic might not be all that much about culture, a signal that the presentation is beginning to go off-course. The "Brisbane" section starts off with population, but then talks about the city's history, the resorts to its south, and the Great Barrier Reef to its north. This last topic is not treated with the same population, geography, and culture logic as the first two. The outline ought to alert the student to the need to revise the "Brisbane" section and maybe the last part of the "Melbourne," where the student began losing sight of each section's logic.

Students might also discover something that might strike you as just a stylistic matter: a **lack of grammatical parallelism**. It is useful if the major points students make are parallel because the parallelism reinforces for the audience that these are *the* major points. For example, if a student chooses to talk about South African politics from 1948 onward, his/her topics, arranged chronologically, would not be parallel if they were as follows:

1. The Ascendancy of the Afrikaner National Party
2. Enacting the Laws of Apartheid
3. Anti-Apartheid Activism Before the 1976 Soweto Riots
4. Campaigning Against Apartheid After the 1976 Soweto Riots
5. DeKlerk and Mandela
6. The Mandela Presidency
7. Mbeki's Problems as President

Items 2 and 4 are verbals; they should be revised so that they are noun phrases. Item 7 might also be revised since it is the only noun phrase that begins with a possessive adjective.

Introductions

Organization in general is important in oral presentations. Introductions are an especially important element of a presentation's organization.

I don't want to reduce organizations to a formula, but a good one to keep in mind is (1) attention, (2) statement, (3) importance, (4) credentials, and (5) preview.

A speaker needs to secure the attention of the audience. There are two different ways to answer the question, how does one get this attention. The first way focuses on what we know appeals to an audience: the novel, conflict, something vital, something very real, suspense, something beneficial. These are things to key on when crafting an introduction. The second way focuses on techniques a speaker might use. These would include asking a question, offering an anecdote, use a striking quotation, make a startling statement, posing a problem, and making promises.

Once the attention of the audience is secured, a speaker should state what his/her overall point is and then tell the audience why the topic is important. The speaker tells the audience this so that the audience becomes convinced that the presentation is worth attending to carefully. To secure this audience, a speaker should then establish why he/she should be listened to. A speaker might cite his/her credentials, talk about his/her background, or note the research that he/she has undertaken on the topic.

Finally, a speaker needs to preview the body of the presentation. Some students resist uttering a preview such as, "In this presentation, I will discuss the following three topics: a, b, and c." These students, perhaps under the influence of writing instructors in the humanities where such introductions are considered overly mechanical, are not thinking of the needs of the audience. That audience does not have a manuscript that they can flipped back through if they lose track of where the speaker is going. That audience is relying on the speaker to establish, **very clearly**, where the presentation is going.

Doing so has another advantage for the speaker. To the extent that the audience knows where a speaker is going, the audience becomes in a way a co-creator of the speech as it proceeds along that path. Rhetorician Kenneth Burke talks about how important it is for a speaker to make an audience **identify** with him or her. If the audience feels like a co-creator of the speech, then that audience will already be at least partially identifying with you.

Conclusions

Conclusions are also important. Unfortunately, many beginning speakers, perhaps because they see "the end" out there, rush through conclusions, sometimes offering none at all. Rhetoricians and cognitive psychologists both tell us that what we hear last will probably linger more in our minds than what we hear elsewhere in a speech. Speakers therefore should want to end with something *strong*.

An effective conclusion will (1) summarize, (2) activate, and (3) provide closure.

The summary should not repeat the language used in the preview in the introduction. To do so would be to suggest that not much has happened in between. So, the summary should be more substantive than the preview.

Having heard this summary, the audience will "ask" "so?" The speaker should answer this question by telling the audience what the audience should now think or do. Thus, the audience in some way becomes "activated."

The audience also needs to feel that it has reached a point of rest: that the topic or at least a part of the topic has been "fully" explored. Now, in eight or ten minutes, it's impossible to *fully* explore a topic: we all know that. Nonetheless, the audience needs to feel that all that can be reasonably expected or all that is essential has been discussed. If the audience feels this way, they will feel "closure." A well thought-through speech—one that has not omitted anything crucial to the topic—will in and of itself provide some "closure." However, sentences at a speech's end that suggest that the topic has been covered are usually necessary to guarantee that the audience feels this way. Consider the following sentences:

We've traced the history of the European presence in South Africa from the

earliest Dutch landings to life now, as a minority presence, in the ANC-led nation.

Television comedy has moved through many phases between its beginnings in the late '40's to today.

The social security system will have a difficult time remaining solvent as more and more baby boomers begin collecting benefits. None of the proposed solutions to this problem are entirely palatable. One, however, will probably have to be chosen.

All of them suggest that the end of a topic has been reached. Audiences, hearing such sentences, feel like affixing "The End" to the speech.

The Audience

Thus far, we've focused largely on the presentation itself—how it's different from a paper, how to organize it, how to introduce it, and how to conclude it. Several other aspects of giving an effective presentation need to be discussed: the audience, the speaker's *ethos*, the different types of delivery, the speaker's *non-verbals*, and the use of visual aids. We'll discuss each in turn.

It is important for the speaker to know who his/her audience is. Inevitably, the process of audience analysis requires some guesswork as well as amateur psychological analysis. Nonetheless, ready to qualify all statement, a speaker should consider **demographics** such as age and gender; the cluster of **attitudes, beliefs, and values**; and the audience's **needs**. Just one example: the Virginia House of Delegates. Demographics—predominantly white, male, and protestant; average age 54; almost all married with children; majority native Virginians. Attitudes, etc.—against taxes because they believe in a small government and value freedom. Needs—to be re-elected. Now that's not a complete analysis, but it should demonstrate how one would proceed.

Ethos

Aristotle in *The Rhetoric* says a speech may persuade because of its **logos** or logical arguments; its **pathos** or emotional appeal; and its **ethos** or the appeal that the speaker is able to make because of whom the audience thinks she or he is. Aristotle suggests that, of the three, **ethos** is the most powerful.

Researchers have suggested that **ethos** has three dimensions: competence, character, and dynamism. Thus, it is important that an audience see a speaker as being highly competent, having a good moral character, and being lively. Sometimes, a speaker will have a high **ethos** going in. Often, a speaker will be able to increase his/her **ethos** based on advanced publicity or her/his introduction. There are also things a speaker can do as he/she speaks to enhance **ethos**. Research indicates that having a strong organization, using evidence, and speaking well can all cause one's **ethos** to rise.

Types of Delivery

Speeches can be (1) memorized; (2) delivered from a manuscript; (3) delivered from notes; or (4) delivered off the top of one's head. The first two are rare in one's life; the fourth, although not uncommon, is not what instruction and practice in presentational communication usually focuses on. The usual focus is #3, what we term extemporaneous delivery.

There are a few "tricks" of extemporaneous delivery you might offer students.

First, use notecards, not sheets of paper. Sheets of paper will shake if a student is nervous, calling attention to the fact that he/she is nervous. Use 4" X 6" notecards too. 3" X 5" notecards are too small.

Second, try to keep note to the minimum. They are there to guide the speaker, not to be read.

Third, try to devote a card to each section. That way, the physical flipping of the card visually reinforces the transition a student is making using words.

Fourth, practice but don't over-practice. If a student over-practices, he or she will begin trying to use the exact same words every time she or she delivers the speech. The ideas should stay the same, as should the structure. But words can and should vary from time of delivery to the next time of delivery.

Non-Verbal Communication

Books are written about non-verbal communication. Entire courses in communication departments explore the subject. So, a paragraph or two barely scratches the surface.

Non-verbals can be conveniently divided into **paralinguistics** and **kinesics**. The first term refers to matters such as volume, rate, pitch, pauses, articulation, and the use of vocal interrupters; the second to uses of the body.

On the first five aspects of paralinguistics listed, two watchwords are **moderation** and **variety**. Speakers should avoid extremes when it comes volume, rate, pitch, pauses, and articulation. Don't speak too loudly or too softly; too fast or too slowly; at too high a pitch or at too low of one; with too many pauses or none at all, or with overly-precise articulation or words slurred. But also don't speak with elements constant throughout a speech. Vary your volume and your rate and your pitch. Use pauses of different lengths. Articulate some words carefully to stress them.

Vocal interrupters are the "uh"s, "er"s, and "um"s that every speaker interrupts the flow of words with—usually when she or he is thinking of how to formulate the next thing he or she will say. A speaker probably cannot eliminate these vocal interrupters. The key is making them largely unnoticeable, for, if an audience starts counting how many times a speaker says "um," that speaker's chances of being successful are minimal.

Kinesics typically focuses on posture, body movement, facial expressions, eye contact, and gestures. **Moderation** and **variety** are again key. A speaker doesn't want to be either stiff or overly relaxed; she or he doesn't want to be frozen in place or frenetically moving or gesturing. Eye contact is good, but staring is not; so a speaker should keep his/her eyes moving from one part of the audience to another. Facial expressions largely take care of themselves: how we express such feelings as anger, sympathy, and the like seems so natural that speakers need only to be told to relax. Anxiety can freeze the face, but, once the anxiety is back to a normal level (and a certain level *is* normal), the face will do what comes naturally to it.

Visual Aids

Rare today in the "real" world is a presentation that is not accompanied by some sort of visual aid. In fact, in certain contexts, you can reduce your effectiveness considerably if you don't have "visuals" because your audience will presume that you can't possibly be "on the mark" about your subject unless you've got visuals that, by their mere existence, indicate you've done your homework.

Three general principles should govern the use of visual aids. First, they should be **readable**. From the farthest corner of the room you're speaking in, an audience member should be able to read all of the words and numbers on your visual. Second, they should be **clear**. The point you want the visual to make should be immediately clear. Achieving this requisite clarity often requires simplifying visuals found in print. A graph, for example, with multiple lines may have to be revised so that there are fewer lines. A table with much data may have to be revised so that only the most

relevant data is present. A speaker does not want his/her audience to be studying a visual, trying to discern its point, instead of listening to what the speaker has to say. Third, visual aids should be **controlled**. Basically, this principle means that a speaker does not want a visual to be before the audience until it's relevant and, then, a speaker wants the visual gone when it's no longer relevant. So, if using an overhead projector, a speaker should cover the transparency up before and after she/he needs it. If using powerpoint, a speaker should build blank slides into the "show" for use at points when he/she doesn't want either the previous slide or the next slide in view.

There are many different types of visual aids a speaker might use. Here's a list students might profitably consult as well as some quick advice about each option:

1. *The chalk board* – easily controlled—you write; you erase, but not especially striking.
2. *Charts/posters* – can be made to look fairly professional, but stick with bold primary colors.
3. *Flip charts* – flexible: can mix posters with sheets on which you write as on a chalk board.
4. *Slides* – vivid, but requires darkened room. (Audiences can drift into sleep in a darkened room.)
5. *Transparencies* – if not careful, can be unreadable; so, don't put too much on a single sheet, and use larger enough letters and numbers. Powerpoint has made traditional transparencies look rather "lane"; therefore, consider making transparencies from printed powerpoint slides if you only have a traditional overhead projector to work with.
6. *Powerpoint* – stay away from heavy use of special effects—a few pieces of flying clip art go a long way; also don't overuse to the point that the powerpoint slides come close to being a script that you read to audience.
7. *Videos* – vivid, but tough to follow, so, if possible, end with videos.
8. *Handouts* – an outline of presentation is a useful one, so are graphs and tables that would difficult to read if projected. Danger is audience can study handout when you'd rather they were listening to you.

Sample Assignments

Presentational assignments are the most traditional type; therefore, examples of stand-alone presentations need not be offered. What is not as traditional are ways to group several presentations together in a coherent program.

Any topic can be divided into sub-topics. For example, in a sociology class studying disasters, a panel might be set-up that would have four speakers, in succession, discuss (1) background about the area where the disaster occurred; (2) what happened; (3) the effects the individuals experienced; and (4) the effects the community experienced. Research shows that students are more likely to learn from presentations so packaged. Therefore, to enhance learning, you might want to try to build coherent programs, not just have a string of students presenting.

A great deal of creativity can be exhibited in the design of presentational programs. A mock conference session can be staged with students other than the presenters assigned roles such as chief questioner or respondent. Mock trials can be staged, as can debates. The "drama" inherent in either one of these can help hold the students' attention and, thus, enhance learning.

Just a brief word on debates. They should be set-up so as to avoid a succession of "set" speeches. The format of the debate should be designed so as to produce *clash*. If you have a team of two debate a team of two, you could allow the initial speakers to have prepared remarks, but, after that, expect clash from the next two speakers as well as from whatever number of rebuttalists you permit each team. A typical format (in minutes) of 8-8-8-8-4-4-4-4 permits a fair amount of clash. "Bells and whistles" such as cross-examination, British-style points of information, and speeches by audience members can be added to this basic format.

But, if you should choose to have a sequence of students present, it is important to involve the audience members in some way. Otherwise, they will fade as the session progresses and learn less and less from the presentations. Two ways to keep the audience alert are (1) to require that some ask questions or (2) to ask students in the audience to critique and/or help evaluate presentations. For the first, you might even want to assign points based on the quality of the questions asked. Some instructors will tell four students in a group of 17 to be the questioners for presentation #1, another four for presentation #2, etc. Similarly, you might want to ask only four students in the audience to critique and/or help evaluate a given presentation. Since you, as instructor, need to look at the critiques/evaluations the students are offering, cycling the task through the class will reduce your paperwork a bit.

A Handout You Might Give Students

Presentational Communication

I. Writing vs. Speaking—A presentation is not a paper read aloud.

- *Presentations typically cover less material than parallel papers*
- *Presentations are typically more straightforwardly organized than parallel papers and feature rather blunt previews and explicit transitions*
- *Presentations are typically more conversational than parallel papers*
- *Presentations have a “real” audience, whose reactions can be seen and adjusted to*

II. Organization—Choose a strategy audience can easily follow.

- *Chronological*
- *Spatial*
- *Cause-Effect*
- *Pro-Con*
- *Problem-Solution*
- *Topical (e.g. medium, composition, style, iconography if discussing a painting)*
- *Background-Hypothesis-Data-Conclusion-Discussion*

Introductions?—(1) Gain Attention, (2) Make Statement, (3) Establish Importance, (4) Establish Credentials, (5) Offer Preview

Conclusions?—(1) Summarize, (2) Activate, (3) Provide Closure

III. Five Other Matters:

A. Audience Analysis

- *Demographics*
- *Attitudes, Beliefs, Values*

B. Ethos—character, competence, dynamism

C. Hints for Extemporaneous Presenting

- *Use note cards, not sheets of paper*
- *Use minimal notes, devoting a card to each section*
- *Don't under-practice; don't over-practice*

D. Non-Verbal Dimensions of Presentations

- *Paralinguistics – such things as volume, rate, pitch, pauses; **keys are MODERATION & VARIETY***
- *Kinesics—such things as gestures, movement, eye contact; **keys are MODERATION & VARIETY***

E. Visual Aids—readability + clarity + control

Evaluation Advice and Instruments

Just about every textbook written for use in a Principles of Public Speaking class offers forms/rubrics that one might use for presentations. Many of these texts are in the Speaking Center, and you might want to thumb through them.

Stephanie Thomson (Xavier University of Louisiana) and Mary L. Rucker (Wright State University) carefully developed and tested the following form. They present their work in *Communication Research Reports* 19.1 (2002). It's easy to use, and it strikes a good balance among such matters as content, structure, and delivery.

PUBLIC SPEAKING COMPETENCY INSTRUMENT

Student's Name _____ Evaluator's Name _____

Circle one of the numbers after each question based on whether you (5) strongly agree, (4) agree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (2) disagree, or (1) strongly disagree.

- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. The speech begins with a strong attention-getter | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 2. The purpose of the speech is clear in the introduction | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 3. I can identify the speech introduction | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 4. I can identify the main points in the speech body | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5. The pattern of organization is clear in the body | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 6. Supporting material in the speech is adequate | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 7. Supporting material adds interest to the speech | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 8. Supporting material aid my understanding of the topic | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 9. I can identify the speech conclusion | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 10. I can identify the purpose in the conclusion | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 11. I can identify a review of the main points in the conclusion | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 12. The closing of the speech is strong | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 13. The speaker's pace/speed made the speech understandable | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 14. The speaker's volume made the speech understandable | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 15. The speaker's behavior (i.e. gestures) is smooth | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 16. The speaker's eye contact adds to the speech's effect | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 17. The speaker is relaxed and comfortable when speaking | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 18. The speaker uses her/his voice expressively | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 19. The speaker uses his/her body expressively | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 20. The speaker is a competent speaker | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

TOTAL SCORE _____

COMMENTS