

# Communication in Context

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the different contexts in which communication can take place and how they influence the communication process. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

## 1. Intrapersonal Communication



### THINK ABOUT IT

Have you ever listened to a speech or lecture and gotten caught up in your thoughts so that, while the speaker continued, you were no longer listening? During a phone conversation, have you ever been thinking about what you are going to say, or what question you might ask, instead of listening to the other person? Finally, have you ever told yourself how you did after you wrote a document or gave a presentation?

As you “talk with yourself,” you are engaged in **intrapersonal communication**, or communication that involves one person. A 1994 book by Donna Vocate on intrapersonal communication explains how, as we use language to reflect on our own experiences, we talk ourselves through situations.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Intrapersonal communication can be the voice within you that tells you, “Keep on going! I can do it!” when you are putting your all into completing a five-mile race, or that says, “This report I’ve written is pretty good.”

Your intrapersonal communication can be positive or negative, and directly influences how you perceive and react to situations and communication with others.

Whether you are talking to yourself or others, you bring your own personal experiences to the conversation. What you perceive in communication is influenced by your culture, native language, and your worldview. Improving your **self and social awareness skill** can help you craft the right message for the right audience at the right time.

### IN CONTEXT

You may have certain expectations of time and punctuality. You weren’t born with them, so where did you learn them? From those around you as you grew up. What was normal for them became normal for you, but not everyone’s idea of normal is the same.

When your supervisor invites you to a meeting and says it will start at 3 p.m., does that mean 3:00

sharp, 3-ish, or even 3:30? In the business context, when a meeting is supposed to start at 9 a.m., is it promptly at 9 a.m.? Variations in time expectations depend on regional and national culture as well as individual corporate cultures. In some companies, everyone may be expected to arrive 10 to 15 minutes before the announced start time to take their seats and be ready to commence business at 9:00 sharp.

In other companies, "meeting and greeting" from about 9 to 9:05 or even 9:10 is the norm. When you are unfamiliar with the expectations for a business event, it is always wise to err on the side of being punctual, regardless of what your internal assumptions about time and punctuality may be.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Intrapersonal Communication**

Communication that involves one person, often occurring in the form of self-dialogue or internalized expectations.

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## 2. Interpersonal Communication

The second major context within the field of communication is **interpersonal communication**. Interpersonal communication normally involves two people, and can range from intimate and very personal to formal and impersonal.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You may carry on a conversation with a loved one, sharing a serious concern. Later, at work, you may have a brief conversation about plans for the weekend with the security guard on your way home.

What's the difference? Both scenarios involve interpersonal communication, but are different in levels of intimacy. The first example implies a trusting relationship established over time between two caring individuals.

The second example implies some previous familiarity, and is really more about acknowledging each other than any actual exchange of information, much like saying hello or goodbye.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Interpersonal Communication**

Communication that typically involves two people and can be either formal or informal depending on the relationship between the parties.

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## 3. Group Communication

**Group communication** is an interaction or conversation between a small number of people. This type of communication generally involves three to eight people. The larger the group, the more likely it is to break down into smaller groups.

Understanding the importance of group communication in business settings is essential to connecting with your audience.

## IN CONTEXT

To take a page from marketing, does your audience have segments or any points of convergence/divergence? You could consider factors like age, education, sex, and location to learn more about groups and their general preferences as well as dislikes.

You may find several groups within the larger audience, such as specific areas of education, and use this knowledge to increase your effectiveness as a business communicator.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Group Communication

Communication that occurs between a small number of people (typically three to eight).

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## 4. Public Communication

In **public communication**, one person speaks to a group of people; the same is true of public written communication, where one person writes a message to be read by a small or large group.

The speaker or writer may ask questions, and engage the audience in a discussion (in writing, examples are an email discussion or a point-counter-point series of letters to the editor), but the dynamics of the conversation are distinct from group communication, where different rules apply.

In a public speaking situation, the group normally defers to the speaker.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The boss speaks to everyone, and the sales team quietly listens without interruption.

This generalization is changing as norms and expectations change, and many cultures have a tradition of "call outs" or interjections that are not to be interpreted as interruptions or competition for the floor, but instead as affirmations.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The boss may say, as part of a charged-up motivational speech, "Do you hear me?" and the sales team is expected to call back "Yes, sir!" The boss, as a public speaker, recognizes that intrapersonal communication (thoughts of the individual members) or interpersonal communication (communication between team members) may interfere with this classic public speaking dynamic of all to one, or the audience devoting all its attention to the speaker, and incorporate attention-getting and engagement strategies to keep the sales team focused on the message.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Public Communication

Communication in which one person speaks or writes to a group of people; unlike in group communication, the audience typically defers to the speaker.

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## 5. Mass Communication



## THINK ABOUT IT

How would you tell everyone on a campus where and when all the classes are held? Would a speech from the front steps work? Perhaps it might meet the need if your school is a very small one. A written schedule that lists all classes would be a better alternative. How do you let everyone know there is a sale in your store, or that your new product will meet their needs, or that your position on a political issue is the same as that of your constituents?

To send a message to as many people as you can, you would use **mass communication**.

Does everyone receive mass communication the same way they might receive a personal phone call? Not likely.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Some people who receive mass mailings assume that they are "junk mail" (i.e., that they do not meet the recipients' needs) and throw them away unopened. People may tune out a television advertisement with a click of the mute button, delete tweets or ignore friend requests on Facebook by the hundreds, or send all unsolicited email straight to the spam folder unread.

Mass media is a powerful force in modern society and our daily lives, and is adapting rapidly to new technologies. Mass communication involves sending a single message to a group. While it allows for a message to be communicated to a large number of people, it also limits the ability to tailor that message to specific audiences, groups, or individuals.

Still, there are techniques you can use to connect with your audience.

➞ **EXAMPLE** As a business communicator, you can use multimedia as a visual aid or reference common programs, films, or other images that your audience finds familiar yet engaging. You can tweet a picture that is worth far more than 140 characters, and you are just as likely to elicit a significant response.

By choosing messages or references that many audience members will recognize or can identify with, you can develop common ground and increase the appeal of your message.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Mass Communication

Communication with the goal of delivering a single message to as many people as possible.



## SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about five different contexts for communication, which differ based on the number of people involved and the level of exchange between senders and receivers. **Intrapersonal communication**, **interpersonal communication**, and **group communication** take place among a small number of participants, whereas **public communication** and **mass communication** involve large audiences.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This tutorial has been adapted from "Business Communication for Success" Version 1.0 by Scott McLean. Copyright 2010. ISBN 978-1-4533-2742-5 (Licensee Product: Workplace Communication), reprinted



## TERMS TO KNOW

**Group Communication**

Communication that occurs between a small number of people (typically three to eight).

**Interpersonal Communication**

Communication that typically involves two people and can be either formal or informal depending on the relationship between the parties.

**Intrapersonal Communication**

Communication that involves one person, often occurring in the form of self-dialogue or internalized expectations.

**Mass Communication**

Communication with the goal of delivering a single message to as many people as possible.

**Public Communication**

Communication in which one person speaks or writes to a group of people; unlike in group communication, the audience typically defers to the speaker.