

Encoding Information

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss how we encode the information we want to relay in our messages to one another. Three areas of focus include:

1. Information as Symbols and Codes
2. Verbal Communication
3. Nonverbal Communication

1. Information as Symbols and Codes

To review, **information** is a sequence of symbols that can be interpreted as a message. However, information is also an awareness of things inside and outside the self that must be encoded in symbols to be conveyed to another.

More simply, information is what you don't already know; therefore, you need to transmit it back and forth between yourself and another person.

Whenever we send someone information, we need to make sure that this communication is:

- Clear
- Meaningful
- Effective

Yet a lot of times, when we send information back and forth, the process is not as effective as we want it to be, and this can lead to conflicts.

As you learned in an earlier lesson, there are a variety of ways that we can send information, but each of these ways involves the use of symbols and codes.

Symbols are a representation of a concept in a tangible form, and a **code** is a set of symbols with consistent meanings used to hold and convey information.

➦ **EXAMPLE** When we drive, we use the traffic lights to let us know what action to take. Each of the colors in a traffic light is a symbol, and we determine whether to go, yield, or stop based on the color. When combined with other traffic signs, we have a code that informs us of automobile rules and protocols. Maybe a traffic light is red and there is a railroad sign activated; that lets us know to stop because a train is on or approaching the railroad crossing. The colors, pictures, and words on signs are the code, and we can

create universal information by using those same components across locations.

There are a variety of different codes from which we can choose when sending information. Words can be spoken or written, but we can also use gestures or pictures.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Let's say you're in another country, and you don't speak the same language as the people who live there. You can use gestures to try to act out your message. If you want something in a restaurant, you can make a motion as if you're pouring water. You can wave, or shake your head. This is how we use gestures as symbols to form a code that we hope the other party will understand.

➦ **EXAMPLE** The emojis of today are more detailed than the smiley faces of the early 1990s and 2000s. Emojis are picture symbols that represent various actions and emotions. Instead of sending a long text message with many words, someone may use a string of emojis as code to tell their friend something funny or important.

As you can see from these examples, there are two broad ways we can use symbols and codes to convey information:

- Verbally
- Nonverbally



TERMS TO KNOW

Information

A sequence of symbols that can be interpreted as a message; an awareness of things inside/outside the self that must be encoded in symbols to be conveyed to another; “what you don’t already know.”

Symbol

A representation of a concept in a tangible form.

Code

A set of symbols with consistent meanings used to hold and convey information.

2. Verbal Communication

Verbal communication is communication using the code commonly called spoken or written language.

So if we speak the same language as the person we’re trying to communicate with, we use words. When we use these words or this language to communicate in writing, whether it be through an email, a letter, or a book, this is written language.

In order for verbal communication to be effective, we have to make sure that we’re understanding it in the same way as the person we’re communicating with. There are some obstacles that can get in the way of this.

➦ **EXAMPLE** You're speaking to a coworker whose first language is not English. You say, “Wow, I'm so glad we've met the deadline on the project. I'm just going to go home and chill.”

This person thinks, “Chill? Why would you want to do that in the middle of winter?” Because the the literal meaning "chill" has to do with shivering and being cold, this person is confused. In the context you're using “chill,” you don't mean that at all. You mean “relax,” but that meaning in this context was not

communicated.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Or you could use a phrase that somebody doesn't understand: "Let's think outside the box." If someone hasn't heard that phrase before, this person will wonder, "What does it mean to think outside the box?"

You know that it means to think creatively, but that meaning might not come through if the other person doesn't have the same meanings for those words. We also often use acronyms or abbreviations without realizing that not everyone will understand them the way that we do.



TERM TO KNOW

Verbal Communication

Communication using the code commonly called spoken or written language.

3. Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is communication using a variety of physical codes, such as:

- Body language
- Eye contact
- Gestures
- Facial expressions

Interestingly, what we're doing nonverbally can sometimes contradict what we're doing verbally.

➦ **EXAMPLE** With body language, we're always sending signals in the way we present ourselves in front of someone; these signals don't always match our verbal communication. You might want to have a friendly conversation, but you are standing in a position that makes you look defensive.

Or you're in a meeting, and you're interested in what your coworker is saying. However, you're looking down in your seat, maybe texting. You're so used to sending text message that you don't realize you're sending a contradictory message to the person speaking in this meeting, who might be offended by your nonverbal behavior.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Often in American culture, we like to have direct eye contact because it means that we're listening and respecting the person speaking. But in some cultures, direct eye contact is considered a bit aggressive. This form of nonverbal communication can be interpreted differently, depending on the culture.

➦ **EXAMPLE** We already saw how we will rely on gestures if we're speaking to someone who doesn't share our same spoken language. But we also use gestures to help punctuate something. If we want to demonstrate how large or small something is, or how excited we are about something, we often use gestures to supplement our explanation of this.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Sometimes our facial expressions might give us away by communicating something we don't want to be communicating. Once again, let's say you're sitting in a meeting. Someone makes a

suggestion or shares an idea, and you roll your eyes.

Anybody who sees that—particularly the person speaking—is going to get the idea that you are perhaps ridiculing what they said. Maybe you didn't even know that anyone saw you roll your eyes, so you might say, “Yeah, I think that's a good idea.” But everything about your nonverbal communication seems to contradict what you're saying.

When the verbal and nonverbal contradict each other, communication is never effective. It's thus important to be aware that we use both types of communication to get our messages across.

However, when we're writing instead of speaking, there isn't any nonverbal communication. People can't hear us, and they can't see our facial expressions.

This is how written messages like emails can sometimes be misinterpreted. People might read something and think it sounds bossy, arrogant, or something other than the sender intended. In writing, this is called tone, and it's often easy to misinterpret because we don't have the other nonverbal signals there.



TERM TO KNOW

Nonverbal Communication

Communication using a variety of physical codes.



BIG IDEA

It's important to look at our communication and be aware of the variety of ways we code information and how it can be interpreted. When there are contradictory messages being sent, or we're sending messages that might be misinterpreted, we can have problems that could potentially lead to conflict.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that when we communicate with one another, we convey **information as a series of symbols and codes**. There are two broad ways in which we can communicate this information: **verbally** and **nonverbally**. You now understand that it's important to be aware that we communicate in both of these ways because conflict can often arise when what we're doing verbally contradicts what we're doing nonverbally. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



TERMS TO KNOW

Code

A set of symbols with consistent meanings used to hold and convey information.

Information

A sequence of symbols that can be interpreted as a message. An awareness of things inside/outside the self that must be encoded in symbols to be conveyed to another. "What you don't already know".

Non-Verbal Communication

Communication using a variety of physical codes.

Symbol

A representation of a concept in a tangible form.

Verbal Communication

Communication using the code commonly called spoken or written language.