

Improving Verbal Communication

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the use of six strategies for improving verbal communication. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Defining Your Terms



Self and Social Awareness: Skill Tip

Practicing your self and social awareness skill will improve your verbal communication. If you know that you tend to speak quickly, for example, you will want to make an effort to slow down your speech so others can understand you. By thinking before you speak, you can ensure you're delivering the best message in the best way so you can keep moving towards your professional goals.

Even when you are careful to craft your message clearly and concisely, not everyone will understand every word you say or write. As an effective business communicator, you know it is your responsibility to give your audience every advantage in understanding your meaning. Yet your presentation would fall flat if you tried to define each and every term— you would end up sounding like a dictionary.

The solution is to be aware of any words you are using that may be unfamiliar to your audience. When you identify an unfamiliar word, your first decision is whether to use it or to substitute a more common, easily understood word. If you choose to use the unfamiliar word, then you need to decide how to convey its meaning to those in your audience who are not familiar with it. You may do this in a variety of ways.

The most obvious, of course, is to state the meaning directly or to rephrase the term in different words. But you may also convey the meaning in the process of making and supporting your points. Another way is to give examples to illustrate each concept, or use parallels from everyday life.

Overall, keep your audience in mind and imagine yourself in their place. This will help you to adjust your writing level and style to their needs, maximizing the likelihood that your message will be understood.

2. Choosing Precise Words

To increase understanding, choose precise words that paint as vivid and accurate a mental picture as possible for your audience.

If you use language that is vague or abstract, your meaning may be lost or misinterpreted. Your document or presentation will also be less dynamic and interesting than it could be.

The table below lists some examples of phrases that are imprecise and precise. Which one evokes a more dynamic image in your imagination?

Less Precise	More Precise
The famous writer William Safire died in 2009; he was over seventy.	The former Nixon speech writer, language authority, and <i>New York Times</i> columnist William Safire died of pancreatic cancer in 2009; he was seventy-nine.
Clumber spaniels are large dogs.	The Clumber Spaniel Club of America describes the breed as a “long, low, substantial dog,” standing 17 to 20 inches high and weighing 55 to 80 pounds.
It is important to eat a healthy diet during pregnancy.	Eating a diet rich in whole grains, fruits and vegetables, lean meats, low-fat dairy products can improve your health during pregnancy and boost your chances of having a healthy baby.
We are making good progress on the project.	In the two weeks since inception, our four-member team has achieved three of the six objectives we identified for project completion; we are on track to complete the project in another three to four weeks.
For the same amount spent, we expected more value added.	We have examined several proposals in the \$10,000 range, and they all offer more features than what we see in the \$12,500 system ABC Corp. is offering.
Officers were called to the scene.	Responding to a 911 call, State Police Officers Arellano and Chavez sped to the intersection of County Route 53 and State Highway 21.
Several different colors of the fabric are available.	The silk jacquard fabric is available in ivory, moss, cinnamon, and topaz.
This smartphone has more applications than customers can imagine.	At last count, the BlackBerry Tempest has more than 500 applications, many costing 99 cents or less; users can get real-time sports scores, upload videos to TwitVid, browse commuter train schedules, edit e-mails before forwarding, and find recipes — but so far, it doesn’t do the cooking for you.

3. Considering Your Audience

In addition to precise words and clear definitions, contextual clues are important to guide your audience as they read. If you are speaking to a general audience and choose to use a word in professional jargon that may be understood by many - but not all - of the people in your audience, follow it by a common reference that clearly relays its essential meaning.

With this positive strategy, you will be able to forge relationships with audience members from diverse backgrounds. Internal summaries tell us what we've heard and forecast what is to come. It's not just the words, but also how people hear them that counts.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you say the magic words "in conclusion," you set in motion a set of expectations that you are about to wrap up. If, however, you introduce a new point and continue to speak, the audience will perceive an expectancy violation and hold you accountable. You said the magic words, but didn't honor them.

One of the best ways to display respect for your audience is to not exceed the expected time in a presentation or length in a document. Your careful attention to contextual clues will demonstrate that you are clearly considering your audience.

4. Taking Control of Your Tone



THINK ABOUT IT

Does your writing or speech sound pleasant and agreeable? Simple or sophisticated? Or does it come across as stuffy, formal, bloated, ironic, sarcastic, flowery, rude, or inconsiderate? Recognizing our own tone is not always easy, as we tend to read or listen from our own viewpoint and make allowances accordingly.

Once we have characterized our tone, we need to decide whether and how it can be improved. Getting a handle on how to influence tone and to make your voice match your intentions takes time and skill.

One useful tip is to read your document out loud before you deliver it, just as you would practice a speech before you present it to an audience. Sometimes hearing your own words can reveal their tone, helping you decide whether it is correct or appropriate for the situation.

Another way is to listen to or watch others' presentations that have been described with terms associated with tone.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Martin Luther King Jr. had one style while President Barack Obama has another. The writing in *The Atlantic* is far more sophisticated than the simpler writing in *USA Today*, yet both are very successful with their respective audiences. What kind of tone is best for your intended audience?

Finally, seek out and be receptive to feedback from teachers, classmates, and coworkers. Don't just take the word of one critic, but if several critics point to a speech as an example of pompous eloquence, and you don't want to come across in your presentation as pompous, you may learn from that example speech what to avoid.

5. Checking for Understanding

When we talk to each other face-to-face, seeing if someone understood you isn't all that difficult. Even if they really didn't get it, you can see, ask questions, and clarify right away. That gives oral communication, particularly live interaction, a distinct advantage.

Use this immediacy for feedback to your advantage:

- Make time for feedback and plan for it.

- Ask clarifying questions.
- Share your presentation with more than one person, and choose people that have similar characteristics to your anticipated audience.

If you were going to present to a group that you knew in advance was of a certain age, sex, or professional background, it would only make sense to connect with someone from that group prior to your actual performance to check and see if what you have created and what they expect are similar.



BIG IDEA

In oral communication, feedback is a core component of the communication model. Because we can often see and hear it, assessing it takes less effort.

6. Being Results Oriented

At the end of the day, the assignment has to be complete. It can be a challenge to balance the need for attention to detail with the need to arrive at the end product— and its due date. Stephen Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989), suggests beginning with the end in mind as one strategy for success.

If you have done your preparation, know your assignment goals and desired results, and have learned about your audience and tailored the message to their expectations, then you are well on your way to completing the task. No document or presentation is perfect, but the goal itself is worthy of your continued effort for improvement.

Here, the key is to know when further revision will not benefit the presentation and to shift the focus to test marketing, asking for feedback, or simply sharing it with a mentor or coworker for a quick review.

Finding balance while engaging in an activity that requires a high level of attention to detail can be a challenge for any business communicator, but it is helpful to keep the end in mind.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about strategies for improving verbal communication that consider the relationship between speaker and audience. Effective communicators think carefully about **defining terms** that may be unfamiliar to their listeners or readers, and **choose precise words** to convey the intended meaning as clearly as possible. They also **consider their audience** by paying attention to contextual clues that tell them about the nature of their audience.

Another good strategy for improving verbal communication is **taking control of the tone**, which should be appropriate for the message, the purpose, and the audience. Finally, effective communicators **check for understanding** by scanning the audience for feedback. Preparing in this way shows that effective communicators are **results oriented**.

Best of luck in your learning!

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