

Internal and External Filters

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss some obstacles that we may encounter in the process of communication.

In particular, we'll focus on:

1. Filters in Communication
 - a. External Filters
 - b. Internal Filters
2. Miscommunication and How to Avoid It

1. Filters in Communication

Communication is the process of moving information from person to person using symbolic codes. As you learned previously, these codes are usually words that have been put together using letters, or symbols, to create information.

This information then becomes a **message**, or a packet of information which has been encoded and is moving from sender to receiver.

While the communication process sounds simple, there is a lot of room for misinterpretation.

This is caused by filters, of which there are two types:

- External
- Internal

When communication doesn't work the way we expect it to because of these filters, we can find ourselves frustrated and possibly in conflict.



TERMS TO KNOW

Communication

The process of moving information from person to person using symbolic codes.

Message

A "packet" of information which has been encoded and is moved from sender to receiver.

1a. External Filters

An **external filter** is an impediment to a message being received or interpreted as intended originating outside the mind of the receiver.

Whatever is getting in the way of this message is not internal because the receiver is not thinking it in their mind. Rather, this is an outside force which we can refer to as “static.”

➞ **EXAMPLE** You call your friend on the phone. She picks up her phone, but she can't hear you because there's static on the line. You move around, continually asking if she can hear you better. We've all had that experience, probably on a cell phone.

However, we don't need technology to encounter external filters.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You could be in a restaurant, and your dinner partner can't hear you because it's very noisy. Or you're outside, and there is a wind blowing, so you can't hear one another. That noise is an external force that's getting in the way.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Sometimes the external force can be caused by something else the receiver is doing. Your friend is talking to you, but she's cooking dinner at the same time. Or she's answering what her kids are asking her, or maybe checking her email. Those kinds of activities take the receiver's attention away from the conversation or the message that the sender is trying to communicate.

If you're not sure that someone is going to be getting your message because of certain external filters, it's best to think of sending the message a different way.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You might leave a voicemail and send an email so that you know the person will receive the message in two different places. Or you might text somebody and say, “Check your email,” or “When you have a moment, listen to the voicemail I left you.” The text is just a short little message letting the person know that there's something that you want to communicate.

Sending messages through a variety of different mediums can sometimes be a way to avoid the external static that can happen during the communication process.



TERM TO KNOW

External Filter

An impediment to a message being received or being interpreted as intended originating outside the mind of the receiver.

1b. Internal Filters

In contrast, internal filters are an impediment to a message being received or interpreted as intended originating inside the mind of the receiver.

In other words, this type of filter is something related to how the receiver is understanding or interpreting the message that the sender is trying to communicate.

There could be a misunderstanding of a particular word or phrase, either in context or just in general.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Let's take some of the phrases that we might throw around thinking everybody understands them: “That was a real bitter pill to swallow.” You're not talking about taking a literal pill here; rather, people often use this expression to mean that it was very difficult to get a particular piece of news.

Perhaps you lose a contract at work, and you say to some coworkers that it was a bitter pill to swallow.

There might be someone in the group who doesn't understand the meaning of that phrase. Or you say to someone, "Stop beating around the bush." These are called idioms and are expressions in English that a lot of people might not understand if they aren't very familiar with the language.

➦ **EXAMPLE** This type of misunderstanding related to internal filters can also happen outside of using idioms. A very commonly misunderstood phrase is "as soon as possible." People use it all the time, usually abbreviated as "ASAP."

A lot of people interpret ASAP to mean "When I get around to it." Other people think, "I better do it right away." The person sending the message could have meant that he or she wants the receiver to drop everything and do it now, or to do it whenever there's time.

If you don't know the meaning, and you simply act on what you think the intention is, there could be a misunderstanding, or ineffective communication. The way you're internally filtering that expression can get in the way, leading to a conflict.

This is why in the instance of a phrase like "ASAP," it could be good to check. In an earlier lesson, we talked about using a confirmation message to make sure your interpretation was correct.

➦ **EXAMPLE** If someone tells you to do something ASAP, you could reply, "What did you mean by that? Is it OK if I get it to you by Wednesday, or do you need it by the end of today?"

Asking questions in order to clarify that the understanding is correct is very helpful whether you're the sender or the receiver of the message.



TERM TO KNOW

Internal Filter

An impediment to a message being received or being interpreted as intended originating inside the mind of the receiver.

2. Miscommunication and How to Avoid It

If we think there could be a misunderstanding in a message we want to send, it might be good to rethink how we code and send this message.

➦ **EXAMPLE** At work, you have to write a report that you're dreading because it has to be sent to a variety of people in different areas and departments of the organization. This report is about some changes that will affect the whole company and includes some announcements about decisions. You know this report is going to raise a lot of questions, so you're hesitant to write it even though you know you have to send it soon.

You decide to talk to a colleague about this issue. Your colleague suggests waiting on the status report and scheduling a conference call instead. You schedule the conference call, in which you are able to speak with people, receive their questions, answer the questions, and summarize what it is that you need them to know. You can then follow up with the report.

The conference call is a more strategic way of communicating this message when the goal is to avoid what

might have been any number of internal filters on the part of the people reading this report. If they simply read the report without any other context, they may not quite have understood, and had questions, or maybe some negative feelings, about what they were reading.

That's the other thing that can get in the way: people may think you have a certain attitude about something. They may be internally feeling a little out of sorts because they get your message, and it hits them wrong.



BIG IDEA

When it comes to sending and receiving messages, it's always good to:

- Ask questions for clarification
- Think about who is going to be receiving your message
- Consider ways of communicating that can avoid both types of filters

When you do these things, you have a better chance of avoiding unnecessary conflicts.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **filters affect communication** by altering the way we either receive or interpret a message. While external filters come from outside of ourselves, internal filters come from the perceptions we create in our minds. You now understand that asking questions to clarify a message and considering alternative ways of sending the message to **avoid miscommunication** are good ways of reducing the possibility of a potential conflict. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



TERMS TO KNOW

Communication

The process of moving information from person to person using symbolic codes.

External Filter

An impediment to a message being received or being interpreted as intended originating outside the mind of the receiver.

Internal Filter

An impediment to a message being received or being interpreted as intended originating inside the mind of the receiver.

Message

A "packet" of information which has been encoded and is moved from sender to receiver.