

Oral vs. Written Communication

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will explore the similarities and differences between oral and written communication. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Shared Communication Elements

The written word often stands in place of the spoken word. People often say "it was good to hear from you" when they receive an email or a letter, when in fact they didn't hear the message— they read it. Still, if they know you well, they may mentally "hear" your voice in your written words.

Writing a message to friends or colleagues can be as natural as talking to them. Yet when we are asked to write something, we often feel anxious and view writing as a more effortful, exacting process than talking would be.

Oral and written forms of communication are similar in many ways. They both rely on the basic communication process, which consists of eight essential elements:

- Source
- Receiver
- Message
- Channel
- Feedback
- Environment
- Context
- Interference

The table below summarizes these elements and provides examples of how each element might be applied in oral and written communication.

| Element of Communication | Definition | Oral Application | Written Application |
|--------------------------|--|--|---------------------------------|
| Source | A source creates and communicates a message. | Jay makes a telephone call to Heather. | Jay writes an email to Heather. |
| | A receiver receives the | | |

| | | | |
|--------------|--|---|---|
| Receiver | message from the source. | Heather listens to Jay. | Heather reads Jay's email. |
| Message | The message is the stimulus or meaning produced by the source for the receiver. | Jay asks Heather to participate in a conference call at 3:15. | Jay's email asks Heather to participate in a conference call at 3:15. |
| Channel | A channel is the way a message travels between source and receiver. | The channel is the telephone. | The channel is email. |
| Feedback | Feedback is the message the receiver sends in response to the source. | Heather says yes. | Heather replies with an email saying yes. |
| Environment | The environment is the physical atmosphere where the communication occurs. | Heather is traveling by train on a business trip when she receives Jay's phone call. | Heather is at her desk when she receives Jay's email. |
| Context | The context involves the psychological expectations of the source and receiver. | Heather expects Jay to send an email with the call-in information for the call. Jay expects to do so, and does. | Heather expects Jay to dial and connect the call. Jay expects Heather to check her email for the call-in information so that she can join the call. |
| Interference | Also known as noise, interference is anything that blocks or distorts the communication process. | Heather calls in at 3:15, but she has missed the call because she forgot that she is in a different time zone from Jay. | Heather waits for a phone call from Jay at 3:15, but he doesn't call. |

As you can see from the applications in this example, at least two different kinds of interference have the potential to ruin a conference call, and the interference can exist regardless of whether the communication to plan the call is oral or written.



THINK ABOUT IT

Try switching the "Context" and "Interference" examples from "Oral" to "Written," and you will see that mismatched expectations and time zone confusion can happen by phone or by email. While this example has an unfavorable outcome, it points out a way in which oral and written communication processes are similar.

2. Similar Verbal and Nonverbal Categories

Another way in which oral and written forms of communication are similar is that they can be divided into verbal and nonverbal categories.

Verbal communication involves the words you say, and **nonverbal communication** involves how you say them: your tone of voice, your facial expression, your body language, and so forth.

Written communication also involves verbal and nonverbal dimensions. The words you choose are the verbal dimension. How you portray or display them is the nonverbal dimension, which can include the medium (email or a printed document), the typeface or font, or the appearance of your signature on a letter.

When you send and/or receive nonverbal communication, it is important you use your **self and social**

awareness skill to be aware of those actions and what they can mean.

In this sense, oral and written communication are similar in their approach, even as they are quite different in their application.



TERMS TO KNOW

Verbal Communication

Communication using spoken or written language; what a person says or writes.

Nonverbal Communication

Communication using physical gestures or visual displays; the portrayal of a person's words.

3. Difference in Timing of Communication

The written word allows for a dynamic communication process between source and receiver, but is often **asynchronous**, meaning that it occurs at different times.

When we communicate face-to-face, we get immediate feedback, but our written words stand in place of that interpersonal interaction and we lack that immediate response. Since we are often not physically present when someone reads what we have written, it is important that we anticipate the reader's needs, interpretation, and likely response to our written messages.



THINK ABOUT IT

Suppose you are asked to write a message telling clients about a new product or service your company is about to offer. If you were speaking to one of them in a relaxed setting over coffee, what would you say?

What words would you choose to describe the product or service and how it may fulfill the client's needs?

As the business communicator, you must focus on the words you use and how you use them. Short, simple sentences, in themselves composed of words, also communicate a business style. In your previous English classes, you may have learned to write eloquently, but in a business context, your goal is clear, direct communication. One strategy to achieve this goal is to write with the same words and phrases you use when you talk.

However, since written communication lacks the immediate feedback that is present in an oral conversation, you need to choose words and phrases even more carefully to promote accuracy, clarity, and understanding.



TERM TO KNOW

Asynchronous

Occurring at different times; often used to describe written communication in which the exchange between sender and receiver is not immediate.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that written and oral communication have **shared communication elements**, including the eight essential elements of communication and **similar verbal and nonverbal categories**. One of their more notable differences is their **timing of communication**. Written communication typically happens asynchronously and feedback to the source is less immediate, so

written messages must be even more carefully considered than oral ones.

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 with permission from FlatWorld.



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