

Overcoming Barriers to Effective Communication

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn some tips for professional writing that can prevent wasted time, wasted effort, aggravation, and frustration. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Do Sweat the Small Stuff

Let's begin with a college student's email to a professor:

i am confused as to why they are not due until 11/10 i mean the calender said that they was due then so thats i did them do i still get credit for them or do i need to due them over on one tape? please let me know thanks. also when are you grading the stuff that we have done

What's wrong with this email? What do you observe that may act as a barrier to communication? Let's start with the lack of formality, including the fact that the student neglected to tell the professor her name, or which specific class the question referred to. Then there is the lack of adherence to basic vocabulary and syntax rules. And how about the lower case "i's" and the misspellings?

One significant barrier to effective written communication is a failure to sweat the small stuff. Spelling errors and incorrect grammar may be considered details, but they reflect poorly on you and, in a business context, on your company. They imply either that you are not educated enough to know you've made mistakes or that you are too careless to bother correcting them.

Making errors is human, but making a habit of producing error-filled written documents makes negative consequences far more likely to occur. When you write, you have a responsibility to self-edit and pay attention to detail. In the long run, correcting your mistakes before others see them will take less time and effort than trying to make up for mistakes after the fact.

2. Get the Target Meaning



THINK ABOUT IT

How would you interpret this message?

You must not let inventory build up. You must monitor carrying costs and keep them under control. Ship any job lots of more than 25 to us at once.

Bypassing involves the misunderstanding that occurs when the receiver completely misses the source's intended meaning. Words mean different things to different people in different contexts. All that difference allows for both source and receiver to completely miss one another's intended goal.

IN CONTEXT

Someone raised in a rural environment in the Pacific Northwest may have a very different interpretation of meaning from someone from New York City. Take, for instance, the word "downtown." To the rural resident, downtown refers to the center or urban area of any big city. To a New Yorker, however, downtown may be a direction, not a place. One can go uptown or downtown, but when asked, "Where are you from?" the answer may refer to a borough ("I grew up in Manhattan") or a neighborhood ("I'm from the East Village").

The above example involves two individuals who differ by geography, but we can further subdivide between people raised in the same state from two regions, two people of the opposite sex, or two people from different generations. The combinations are endless, as are the possibilities for bypassing. While you might think you understand, requesting feedback and asking for confirmation and clarification can help ensure that you get the target meaning.

As writers, we need to keep in mind that words are simply a means of communication, and that meanings are in people, not the words themselves. It is critical to use your **self and social awareness skill**. Knowing which words your audience understands and anticipating how they will interpret them will help you prevent bypassing.



TERM TO KNOW

Bypassing

In communication, the occurrence of a misunderstanding due to the receiver missing the source's intended meaning entirely.

3. Consider the Nonverbal Aspects of Your Message

Let's return to the example at the beginning of this section of an email from a student to an instructor. As we noted, the student neglected to identify herself and tell the instructor which class the question referred to. Format is important, including headers, contact information, and an informative subject line.

This is just one example of how the nonverbal aspects of a message can get in the way of understanding. Other nonverbal expressions in your writing may include symbols, design, font, and the timing of delivering your message.

IN CONTEXT

Suppose your supervisor has asked you to write to a group of clients announcing a new service or product that directly relates to a service or product that these clients have used over the years.

- What kind of communication will your document be?
- Will it be sent as an email or will it be a formal letter printed on quality paper and sent by postal mail?
- Or will it be a tweet or a targeted online ad that pops up when these particular clients access your company's website?

Each of these choices involves an aspect of written communication that is nonverbal. While the words may communicate a formal tone, the font may not. The paper chosen to represent your company influences the perception of it. An email may indicate that it is less than formal and be easily deleted.

IN CONTEXT

As another example, suppose you are a small business owner and have hired a new worker named Bryan. You need to provide written documentation of asking Bryan to fill out a set of forms that are required by law.

- Should you send an email to Bryan the night before he starts work, welcoming him aboard and attaching links to IRS form W-4 and Homeland Security form I-9?
- Or should you wait until he has been at work for a couple of hours, then bring him the forms in hard copy along with a printed memo stating that he needs to fill them out?

There are no right or wrong answers, but you will use your judgment, being aware that these nonverbal expressions are part of the message that gets communicated along with your words.

4. Review, Reflect, and Revise



THINK ABOUT IT

Do you review what you write? Do you reflect on whether it serves its purpose? Where does it miss the mark? If you can recognize those areas, then you have the opportunity to revise.

Writers are often under deadlines, and that can mean a rush job where not every last detail is reviewed. This means more mistakes, and there is always time to do it right the second time. Rather than go through the experience of seeing all the mistakes in your "final" product and rushing off to the next job, you may need to focus more on the task at hand and get it done correctly the first time. Go over each step in detail as you review.



Productivity: Why Employers Care

We often think of productive people as moving fast. At times, that speed can lead to errors. Employers don't like when this happens, as the revisions take away time that could be spent on other tasks. Sometimes, being more productive means slowing down and taking your time to ensure things are done right the first time.

A mental review of the task and your performance is often called reflection. Reflection is not procrastination. It involves looking at the available information and, as you review the key points in your mind, making sure each detail is present and perfect. Reflection also allows for another opportunity to consider the key elements and their relationship to each other.

When you revise your document, you change one word for another, make subtle changes, and improve it. Don't revise simply to change the good work you've completed, but instead look at it from the perspective of the reader.

When revising, ask yourself questions like:

- *How could this be clearer to readers?*
- *What would make it visually attractive while continuing to communicate the message?*
- *If I am limited to words only, then does each word serve a purpose in the text?*



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned how to increase your productivity by approaching professional writing with forethought and planning. "**Do sweat the small stuff**" means taking care to self-edit and fix even the smallest mistakes in your writing. "**Get the target meaning**" means choosing words with consideration for your audience and their background and experience, to avoid misunderstanding. You should also **consider the nonverbal aspects of your message**, such as tone and formatting. Finally, it is not possible to overestimate the value of **reviewing, reflecting, and revising** at every stage of the writing process to ensure that your message is as clear as possible.

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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