The OCR Guide to **Communications**

Version 1

OCR

This guide on communication has been produced by OCR to help you understand the skills and techniques you will need to develop, practise and use in studying for your chosen qualification. This guide has not been written to accompany a specific qualification but focuses on communication skills that relate to many areas of both education and work environments. Other skills guides are available at www.ocr.org.uk.

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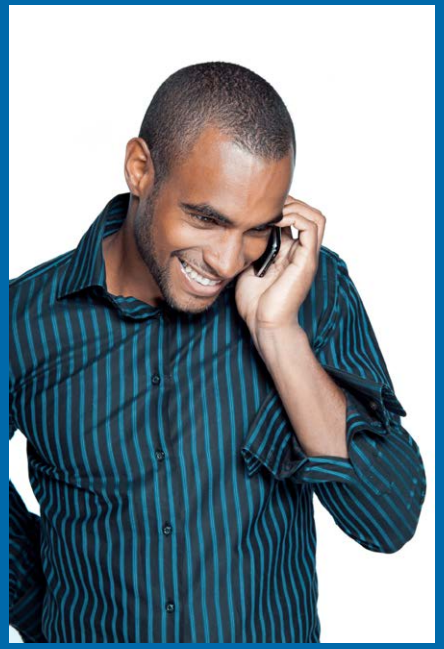
Getting started

You may find it useful, when reading this guide, to think about the different ways that you use communication at the moment and how you might use different communication tools to achieve your goals. The following questions might help you do this.

Communication questions

1. Do you think you are a good communicator? If so, why do you think you are a good communicator?
2. What kinds of communication do you think you'd need to use in your dream job?
3. How does the way you speak to your family differ from the way you speak to your teachers or your friends?
4. How does the language you write in differ from the way you speak? Write down a few lines of conversation you've recently had with someone else and see how it looks compared to your normal writing style.
5. When you're working with someone to achieve a task, what information do you think it's important to share? Try instructing someone to pick up a pen when they can only accept the most basic commands, e.g. forwards 5 centimetres, right 20 centimetres, close forefinger and thumb together. Given the high level of detailed communication that this task requires, what does this tell you about the assumptions you make when completing a task with someone else? How do you know that your co-workers are aware of the things that you assume and do not communicate to them?
6. How would you determine what style of communication to use. For example complexity of language and formality to use in speaking to someone you've not met before? What about if you are not aware of their context, i.e. they could be a friend's parent, a reality TV star or your local MP?



What is communication?

We are all capable of communication and use a range of different skills to achieve this everyday. Good communication plays a key part in the success of everything we do and in the successful performance of individuals and teams. Effective two-way communication generates good relationships between individuals, enabling a better understanding of objectives and easier resolution of problems. Good communication can streamline activities, getting things done on time, on budget and to the required standard.

Different types of communication?

Communication is about sending and receiving messages using different methods, such as speech, text (in hard or soft copy), signals, signs and body language.

Receiving communication requires not only good listening skills but use of our other senses to understand the non-verbal information that is being given. Can we see that the communicator is upset or calm for example? Are they frowning or smiling?

› **Communication within groups**
Everyone who undertakes activities together regularly, from sports to study to work, communicates with each other and develops ways of communicating that are acceptable to all group members. Each group has its own accepted norms which are unique to the group. For example, text, Twitter, social media sites, email or face to face, use of acronyms, slang or shorthand terminology.

Do you have in-jokes or words that you use with your friends that other people don't understand?

This type of communication can often be easier due to the knowledge that is developed and shared within the group. This can lead to an accurate assumption of how the person you are seeking to communicate with likes to receive information and their potential reaction. However this is not always true, can you think of an example of miscommunication that has led to disharmony or upset in a group? This can occur when the assumptions that we make about someone else are not correct.

› **Communication outside groups**
It is unlikely that the groups you belong to operate in isolation, without any interaction with other individuals or groups. Your sports team will interact with other teams, your class will interact with different teachers and people outside your group and, in a work context, you will engage with lots of different people in completing your work. The knowledge and assumptions that we make in respect of our friends and regular colleagues do not help us when interacting with people we are not as familiar with, and who may not share our normal style of communication.

You need to consider your audience and their needs and motivators when communicating in this way, so you can convey your message in a way that is most likely to receive a positive response..

› **Technical**
You may need to use technical language when communicating with others. It is especially important to ensure that you understand the information enough to be able to convey it and also the context that it is being presented in. This will enable you to communicate it clearly and ensure that the recipient understands the message.

Don't be embarrassed to ask questions if you are not clear on the information presented, and a follow up communication with the other person to check their understanding can be helpful.

Effective communication

Effective communication will only happen if the message is sent, received and then understood, so there are several stages to think about.

Very often there is a difference between what we think we say and what we actually say. Also between how we think we have handled people, including customers, and how they think they have been treated. Communication is a two-way process with responsibilities on both sides.

Some examples of these responsibilities are given below.

1. Do you listen actively?
   Do you concentrate on what the person communicating with you is saying and ask questions to check your understanding and show that you're listening? This will make them feel that you have heard their message and empathise with their position, increasing the likelihood of a positive outcome.

2. Do you make the effort to use language, tone, volume and pace to suit your audience and make yourself seem approachable and receptive to communication?

Is the message clear?

Both parties have a responsibility to ensure that the outcomes of their communication are clear and mutually understood. This can be achieved by:

- asking questions
- discussion
- meetings
- undertaking research and sharing the results.

Barriers to effective communication

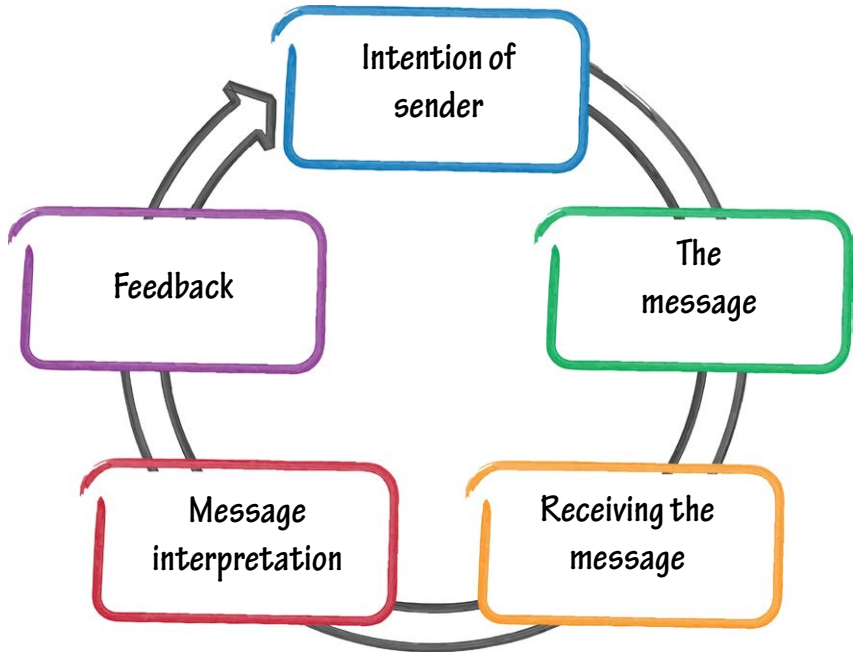
Effective communication is not always easy to achieve and there are sometimes obstacles in the way that have to be overcome in order to ensure that your message is sent and received as you intended.

Can you think of examples where barriers to communication have been an issue? You might like to think about:

- Choice of language – too complicated, technical or confrontational?
- Distraction – bad telephone line, background noise, other activities going on?
- Assumptions – assumed agreement or views?
- Lack of concentration or willingness to listen – not equally prioritising your communication or not being receptive to your message.
- Non-shared objectives - a common goal, or values – for example honesty or keeping to agreements.

The communication process

Communication can take many forms but the features of the process are often similar:



Intention of the sender - this could be a set of instructions or an idea that needs to be passed on. The information to be passed on has to be put together in a form that the recipient will understand. The outcome of this stage is the information that the sender would like to convey in a format that they think is most appropriate.

The message – this is about how the message is transmitted or sent to the intended receiver of the message. It is sometimes referred to as the method or channel of communication. This could be an email, telephone call, video-conference, face to face meeting, text message or similar.

Receiving the message – this is about the receptiveness of the person receiving the message. Have they got their phone switched on or logged into their email?

Message interpretation – this tests how competent the sender has been in transmitting the message and how well the receiver understands the message.

Feedback – has the message been understood, has the communication been successful?

An example of the communication process

Intention of the sender - a hotel manager has decided to have a meeting with the head receptionist.

The message – the request for a meeting between the hotel manager and the head receptionist could be transmitted verbally or by sending an email.

Receiving the message - the hotel manager phones the head receptionist and says "meeting now".

Message interpretation – the head receptionist may think that the manager is in a meeting at the present time and doesn't want to be disturbed and not what is intended, which is that the manager wants to meet with the head receptionist now. She asks a question of the manager to clarify his requirement and acts accordingly.

Feedback – the head receptionist meets with the manager at the required time and in the right place.

Methods of communication

There are a number of methods that can be used to communicate information in a business environment:

- Written
- Verbal
- Non-verbal.

Written communication

This method provides a written record and can be used to communicate with internal and external customers.

For example:

- Letters - often used for communication with external customers and suppliers
- Memos – used for internal communication
- Emails – can be used for both internal and external communication
- Reports - can be used for both internal and external communication
- Forms/questionnaires - often used for communication with customers
- Notice boards - often used for communication with employees
- Newsletters - can be used for both internal and external communication
- Internet - can be used for both internal and external communication.

Have a look at our guide on producing documents for more information on this.

The written word is a widely established form of communication. The accuracy of the written word is extremely important. Communications, both to internal and external customers, should be clear, accurate and legible.

It is very important that you proof read your messages before you send them. Try using the following checklist to help you.

1. Have you correctly addressed the message? Is the email or postal address correct? If you are replying to an email, make sure that you do not press 'Reply to All' if your message is not intended for everyone on the original email.
2. Try to re-read your message with fresh eyes. Does it make sense and clearly convey your requirement?
3. Check your spelling and grammar, not just using standard tools but by eye yourself as the tools do not always pick up non-standard spellings. Try reading the message out loud to make sure it sounds right.

Verbal communication

This method can be face-to-face, over the telephone or via video-conference.

All 3 methods are used very frequently in all environments and so it's important to get it right. Think about your audience and what type of language is most appropriate, e.g. formal or informal.

For example, what do you think is appropriate for the following conversations?

- A supervisor passing orders to operatives
- A waiter taking an order from a customer
- A mechanic using the telephone to order supplies for the workshop
- A receptionist using the public address system to try to contact a guest.

When communicating verbally, it is important to think about the following factors;

- Appropriate language – is the style of language that you are using right for your audience? Is it too complex or too simple? Too formal or too informal?
- Pace – are you speaking at the right pace to allow your audience to understand what you are saying, process the information and respond where necessary? Are you confusing them by going too fast or boring them by going too slow?
- Tone – does your tone of voice command attention while still being friendly? Do you aggressive or submissive? Your tone can give away what you're really thinking so be careful!
- Proximity – are you standing close enough to your audience to allow them to hear your message and read your body language? Are you intimidating them by being too close or showing disinterest by standing too far away? Bear in mind the needs of those who need to lip read or dislike intrusion into their personal space.

- Clarifying or repeating – are you presenting key points in different ways to ensure that your meaning is clear? Direct repetition is a simple way of doing this or you can clarify your meaning with an example or by making your point in a different way.

Non-verbal communication

The difference between the words people speak and actually understanding what they are saying comes from the non-verbal communication that is exchanged. By developing an awareness of the signs and signals of body language and other non-verbal communication, it is easier to understand other people, and communicate more effectively with them.

Care must be taken with assumed meaning, particularly when communicating with individuals from other cultures. There are sometimes subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, movements, gestures, facial expressions and even shifts in individuals' whole bodies that indicate something is not quite right.

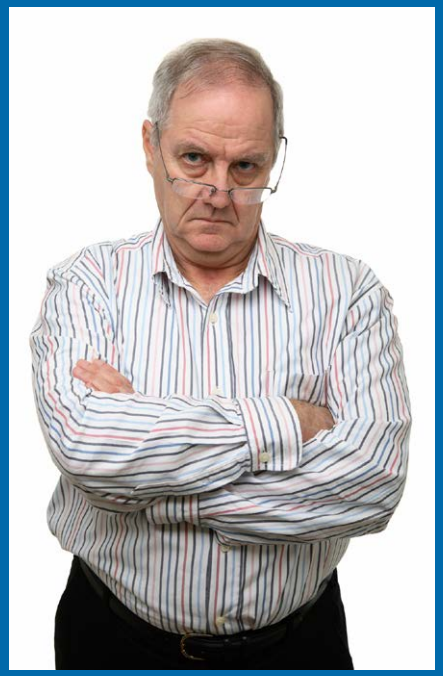
When talking to people, non–verbal signals as well as speech are often used, such as gestures, facial expressions, body positioning, and movement of the body, for example, smiling will convey friendliness. First impressions are often made from observing an individual's body language; they do not even have to say anything at all. A person can convey whether they are confident or not through their body language, which can have an impact on the effectiveness of the communication taking place.

Examples of non-verbal communication include:

- Gestures of hand or arm movements that can portray a message to another person. Usually gestures are used to enhance the understanding of what is being said verbally, however some gestures carry their own meaning and can be misinterpreted by others. Gestures can be used to convey both positive and negative responses. For example, putting a hand-up with the palm facing a person gives the meaning of 'stop that'. Shrugging shoulders can mean 'not sure'.

- Facial expressions are used to convey meaning in communication. They can be an indication of the emotional state of the person communicating. Facial expressions include smiling, frowning, or raising an eyebrow. A quizzical expression can show that the person has misunderstood or maybe has a question they want to ask. A sad expression can be an indication that the individual has something on their mind that may prevent them from being focussed on the matter under discussion.
- The position in which a person sits or stands can send out messages to those they are communicating with. Having crossed arms can mean 'I'm not taking any notice'. Leaning back can send out messages of boredom or being relaxed, whereas leaning slightly forward is seen as positive as it shows interest in what the other person is saying. Leaning too far forward can be seen as intrusive and intimidating. Standing turned away from another person can show a lack of interest.

The way an individual dresses and the clothes they wear play an important role in the way they are perceived by others. A person's physical appearance and dress creates a definite impact on the communication process. This is why many establishments have a uniform for employees to wear when at work and sometimes a strict code for hair styles, jewellery, makeup, and other body decoration such as tattoos. What assumptions do you make about people based on their appearance? Are they always accurate?



Formal and informal communication

You will already be used to using informal and formal styles of communication. In the first case, you communicate informally with friends, through text messages, conversation and on social networking sites. In the second case, you will speak to staff in your school or college formally, and also in professional contexts like a bank or when applying for a job.

Informal communication can be defined as a friendly, unplanned and unstructured exchange between two people without a specific objective in mind. For example, two strangers chatting about the weather at a bus stop. Formal communication has a specific objective and it is often important that the message conveyed is very clearly defined and delivered. This can be about the method in which the communication is delivered, a letter rather than an e-mail for example, and the style of language used, being more formal and structured than that used in informal conversation.

There are two factors to consider when deciding whether formal or informal communication is most appropriate.

How important is the message?
Will there be serious consequences if the message is not received and understood? Are there complicated or important pieces of information to convey? Does the recipient need to take urgent action as a result of the message?

Is a formal style of language necessary?
Is the content of the message only likely to be understood and taken seriously if suitably formal language is used, for example a bank overdraft letter? Does the recipient need to be convinced of the sender's expertise and importance through the use of formal language?

The most important thing to think about when deciding whether to use informal or formal communication is what method and style will best convey your message and achieve your desired outcome.

Team working

Most enterprises rely on team effort and co-operation to deliver the desired outcomes, whether that is a product, service or other outcome.

A team can be defined as two or more people who have set objectives, who communicate regularly to achieve the objectives and who determine the behaviour that is acceptable. Do you agree with this definition? Can you come up with an alternative?

Teams can have the following characteristics:

- A regular membership
- A sense of shared purpose
- Interdependence in getting their tasks done
- A need to communicate and interact to achieve their objectives
- The ability to act as a unit when required.

There are many things that an individual can do to help build positive relationships in teams, for example:

- Speaking to people. To work effectively in a team you must communicate.
- Smiling at people. Non verbal messages make up 93% of all communication and a smile communicates positive intentions in all languages and cultures.
- Calling people by name. The easiest way to remember a name is to look the person in the eye and repeat their name. The reason we forget names is because we don't really pay attention and are thinking about what we are going to say next.
- Being a good listener. Listening is not about waiting for your turn to talk.

- Being friendly and helpful. To make a friend, you have to be a friend. Don't wait for someone else to take action.
- Speaking and acting as if everything you do is a genuine pleasure.
- Becoming genuinely interested in people. You can like almost anybody if you try. Consider "difficult" people as a challenge or a puzzle.
- Being considerate about the feelings of others. There are always at least two sides to a story.
- Being alert and always giving a good service.
- Having a sense of humour, patience and humility.

Teams can be formal or informal. For example:

- Formal teams are created by an establishment to carry out certain tasks. In a hospital there will be a nursing team responsible for looking after patients.
- Informal teams are groups of people formed through friendship and/or common interest, or in a work context for less formal tasks like research or networking.

Communication Activities

Visit our website for some printable Communication Activities.

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