

**Chapter I:  
Intro to the  
Communication Process**



**Contributed by  
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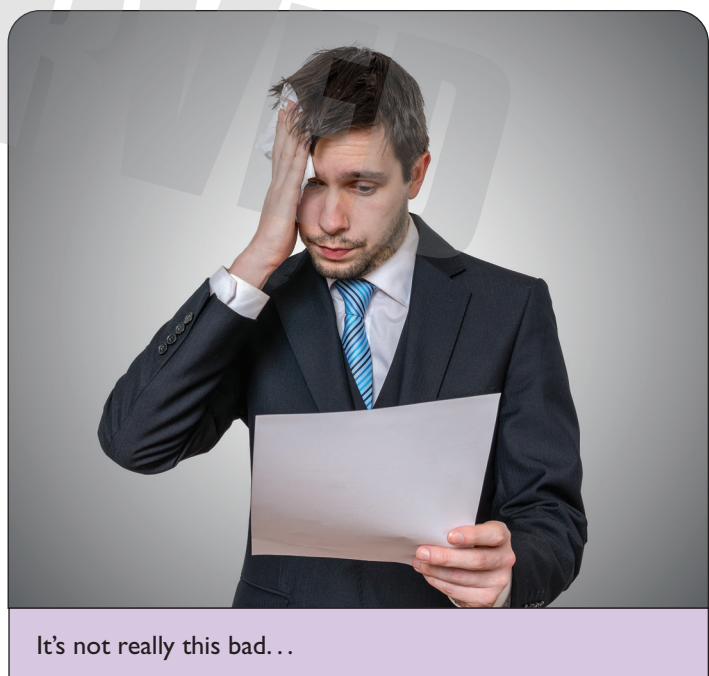
## **Communication Is More Complex and Important than You Think**

Whenever you tell someone you're taking a communication class, they most likely think you're just learning about giving speeches (which admittedly is something we cover in this text). But, communication is so much more! Communication is something we oftentimes take for granted. Unfortunately, we usually don't recognize how important and complex it can be until we mess it up. And, miscommunication happens all the time. Think about your everyday life and various situations you've been in; chances are that even in this last week you've had some form of miscommunication, or at the very least, ineffective communication. Did your roommate misunderstand your text message? Were you not able to convince your parents to loan you \$20? Don't worry . . . you're not alone. Because there are so many complexities to communication, there are many places for things to go wrong. And, in this era of ever- and so rapidly-changing technology, our communication is even more challenged. So, learning more about the complexities of communication will help you unlock a superpower you never knew you had!

Although superpowers are cool, if you're reading this text, most likely it is NOT because you want to take an Intro to Communication course but rather because it's required. The reason many universities, and even some U.S. states, require you to take a communication course is because of the always-present nature of communication in our lives. This dramatic impact communication has on us and the importance of taking a communication course can be explained by six key factors: practice, development of self, well-being, relational development, career enhancement, and community engagement.

### **Practice**

The first reason an Intro to Communication course is important has to do with the idea of practice. Believe it or not, public speaking is considered one of the greatest fears of Americans' lives. In fact, some people report public speaking as a fear even more frequently than they report fearing death (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012)! Colleges and your professors hope taking a communication course will give you opportunities to engage in public speaking and practice such a scary skill in a safe and comfortable environment. Undoubtedly, you'll still feel nervous, but take comfort knowing your classmates probably feel



It's not really this bad. . .

the same way (and likely are more concerned about their own nerves than paying attention to you). And remember, your instructor *wants* to see you succeed.

We also hope as you communicate in your course and with your instructors and classmates, you get to practice interpersonal and small group communication skills. A good communication classroom should be a safe place of practice and experimentation because there's no safer place to practice your skills than around others learning at the same time—all before you get to situations with greater consequences, such as your workplace. Most of us would rather mess up in front of our classmates, where the worst thing that might happen is a poor grade versus your boss firing you. We want good communication skills to become second-nature to you. A communication course is a great place to start to help you overcome some of those fears you might have, whether it be public speaking or even overcoming a bit of shyness in your daily life. When you practice a skill to the point where you do it without even thinking, it's called **overlearning**. In time, you become so proficient at a particular skill, it can reach the level where you seem communicatively omnipotent, omniscient, and exceptional—all features of a real-life superpower!

## Understanding Our Sense of Self

Beyond being a safe place for you to practice your communication skills, a communication course is also a great place to understand how and why we see ourselves the way we do—our superhero “origin” story, so to speak—and how this influences how we communicate with others. When we're born, we have no singular identity. Instead, our identity is constructed through our communication with others (Stryker, 1994). From birth, a baby hears messages like “Oh, you're such a good girl!” or “You're such a strong boy!” and is often dressed in certain colors according to their presumed sex/gender to reinforce parents' gender expectations for their babies (Pearson & VanHorn, 2004). These very words and communication toward us help us develop our sense of who we are. Are we a boy? Are we a girl? Are we smart? Are we funny? All this communication with our family, friends, and even strangers is the main thing that affects how we see ourselves. While this has the most dramatic impact on us during our formative years, the way others communicate with and about us continues to shape our view of ourselves throughout our lives (see Chapter 6 for more).

## Physical and Mental Well-Being

One often-overlooked benefit of becoming a better communicator is how it helps us become mentally and physically healthier individuals (Tardy, 2000). Have you ever really wanted to tell a friend about something that happened to you or a secret that someone shared with you, but you couldn't? This desire to share that information is a natural human response, but by keeping it private, we often experience a feeling of stress. You might find yourself only being able to focus on that one thing. Your muscles and chest might even feel a bit tight as you sense anxiety building. But, once you're able to share that information, you often feel a mental and physical release—what we call **catharsis** (Pennebaker, 1989). Good communication can make you feel better in many ways.



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Catharsis can be amazing!

Researchers have found those individuals who are better at communication tend to have better health overall—both mentally and physically (Floyd & Deiss, 2012). Good communicators, like mutants or superheroes, are above average in several aspects; they often have greater levels of connection with family and friends and lower rates of depression. Because our mental health is interwoven with our physical health, competent communicators also tend to have better

overall physical health, including lower rates of diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic health conditions (Pennebaker, 1993; Schwartz & Russek, 1998). If you're still trying to justify taking a communication course, simply remember that you're doing it for your health.

## Relationship Development

Communication is obviously instrumental to our inherent need for relationships with family, friends, romantic partners, co-workers, and even your classmates and instructors (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Our relationships are built, maintained, and destroyed by communication or lack thereof. Relationships can't exist without communication. Period. Many students end up enjoying their communication course because it provides them with a better understanding of how and why they and others behave and communicate the way that they do. It's great to come away from a class or reading a chapter being able to immediately apply the material to your own life. It's our hope that by the end of the course, you'll have developed your communication skills in ways that help you build stronger relationships throughout your own life.



Be a superstar in your relationships!

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## Career Enhancement

Perhaps the main reason many places require an Intro to Communication course is because it plays an instrumental role in your career. No matter what your job is, you'll use communication. For example, think of a career as a mortician, where the primary individuals you deal with are not even alive. Even there, being able to listen with empathy and communicate appropriately with family members who may be experiencing the worst moments of their lives can make a significant difference not only for those grieving but also the success of the mortician in their career. Even the mortician's interaction with the deceased body relies on the communication skill of listening because they have to learn where and when to use particular tools or chemicals in the right ways. We're sure you've heard about the many career opportunities open to those with great communication skills. In the box on the next page, we've provided a modern-day list of some unique, fun, and currently in-demand careers you may not have yet considered.

Research has shown the number one reason people get hired to and promoted within a job is because they have effective communication skills (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2018). Have you ever met someone who is incredibly brilliant (maybe even a college professor) who you simply cannot understand? If so, they've failed in getting their idea across to you; they have failed in communicating. You can have all the knowledge in the world, but if you can't communicate it effectively and appropriately, it's basically worthless (Hayakawa, 1972). Thousands of dollars on an education, down the drain! We hope this book and course will help you develop both the *effectiveness* and *appropriateness* of your communication skills in ways that help you achieve success in and out of the college classroom.



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## Community Engagement and Activism

Finally, one of our goals in creating this textbook was to promote the key role communication can play in helping you become an informed and involved citizen. In other words, communication skills shouldn't just help you—you should be able to use them to make a difference in the world around you. We'll keep referring to the fact that communication skills are like superpowers—they allow you to rise above typical life-challenges, struggle against oppression, and ultimately, help yourself *while* helping those around you. We'll get dorky with this analogy at times, but we will never exaggerate the immense power of communication. If understood and actually practiced (i.e., *overlearning*), these skills *will* set you above most people. Then, it's your own burden of responsibility to use the powers for good and not evil.

## HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT ABOUT BEING A/N:

**Animal Trainer**  
**Auctioneer**  
**Bereavement Coordinator**  
**Brand/ing Consultant/Ambassador**  
**Cancer Registrar**  
**CIA/FBI Analyst/Agent**  
**Community Organizer**  
**Concert Promoter/Booker**  
**Copywriter/editor**  
**Cruise Director**  
**Culture Director/Officer**  
**Divorce Mediator**  
**Doula**  
**Environmental Activist**  
**Entertainment Reporter**  
**Event/Party Planner**  
**Fantasy Broker**  
**Fashion Writer/Blogger**  
**Food Critic/Blogger**  
**Funeral Service Manager**  
**Gender Equality Consultant**  
**Headhunter/Recruiter**  
**Hospitality Manager**  
**Imagineer**  
**Motivational Speaker**  
**Art/Museum/Music Curator**  
**Negotiator**  
**Park Ranger**  
**Police Officer**  
**Politician, Local or National**  
**Publicist/Image Consultant**  
**Purchasing Agent**  
**Retirement Home Director**  
**Social Media Specialist/Content Strategist**  
**Sustainability Coordinator**  
**Travel Writer/Blogger**  
**User Experience Designer**  
**Voice-Over Worker/Actor**

### Professional:

- Apologizer
- Baby-Proofing
- Bridesmaid
- Coach, Life or Weight-Loss
- Conservationist
- Cuddler/Comforter
- Dating Profile Ghostwriter
- Decoy Corporate Executive
- Design Consultant
- Facebooker, Real or Fake
- Fundraiser
- Greeting Card Writer
- Interviewer
- Matchmaker
- Mourner
- Mystery Shopper
- Nail-Polish Namer
- Nanny
- Online Reviewer
- Party Guest
- Personal Historian
- Personal Shopper
- Podcaster
- Product Tester
- Storyteller
- Taster, Food or Beverage
- Tour Guide
- TV Watcher (scanner)
- Vacation Tester
- Video Gamer or Tester
- Wardrobe Stylist

Yes, ALL of these are REAL, current, full-time jobs in-demand as freelance, corporate, *and* nonprofit options for those skilled in the Communication Studies basics covered in this text. Search each title online to learn more!

Some of the more *interesting* careers communication skills allow you to pursue.

If there's something in the world you care deeply about, becoming a competent communicator will give you the abilities to express your ideas, have others listen to you, and perhaps even persuade others to become involved with your cause/interest. For example, we (Drs. Ribarsky and Eckstein) both have a passion for animals and volunteer with our local humane societies. Because of her persuasive communication skills, Dr. Ribarsky plays a key role in helping construe the importance of animal welfare to others and in getting businesses to help financially support the organization. Dr. Eckstein also uses her ability to listen and adapt her style of communication to interact with diverse (e.g., personalities, moods, backgrounds, opinions) people and animals who've experienced abusive relationships from their partners/owners. Neither of us would be so successful at these things were it not for our communication skills. Thus, even in "little" or local ways, communication skills can help you make a difference in the world around you.



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### Activism Hero: Make Your Speech Work for You

In your course, you'll most likely be asked to give a persuasive speech. As much as you might dread giving speeches, this is an invaluable opportunity to share your knowledge and experience with others. How many other times in your life will you have a captive audience? When selecting your speech topic, we encourage you to pick a topic you're truly passionate about—not just what you think will make a "good" speech topic. Do you love animals like us? Does nothing infuriate you more than when you see someone littering? Are you fanatical about a political candidate or a law? When you talk about something that *matters* to you, your passion shows in your delivery and *that* is what starts the process of creating change and inspiration in others. In the chapters to follow, you'll learn more about how to adapt *your* passions to your audience. For example, research shows that getting someone to see what they have in common with you in at least one social or cultural group makes them more likely to be persuaded on moral or ethical issues (Teng, Poon, & Yang, 2016). So use that skill: **What group commonality can you emphasize when talking to your audience?** Use this connection pro-tip to effectively share your passion with others!

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## **Defining Communication**

Hopefully, you can now see some practical reasons for and benefits to taking this course—other than you're just required to. Better yet, maybe you're now even a bit excited about digging into the actual ways to become a better communicator. So, let's get a bit more into the meat of what you're actually studying. **Communication** is a symbolic process in which we construct meaning together. Although this definition seems quite simple at first glance, it involves numerous important aspects, the individual parts of which can be traced all the way back to Aristotle (1853)! First, we need to recognize communication uses symbols and/or is symbolic. A **symbol** is anything that represents something else. Symbols can be both verbal and nonverbal. Words themselves don't mean anything; they're just a bunch of shapes we happen to call letters (Salsbury, 2013). For example, if you see or hear the word "cat," chances are you'll think of a furry feline that might say meow. By having a word (or even just a letter) be a symbol for an **artifact**, or the thing it represents to both you (called the **reference**) and to other people (called the **referent**), we can talk about a cat without actually having to physically drag in a poor, screaming, clawing kitty to a classroom.

Nonverbal communication also involves symbols (see Chapter 8). When you see someone smile, you might interpret this as them being happy. When asked how many slices of pizza you want, you can hold up two fingers without saying anything else, and the receiver is able to understand you'd like two glorious pieces of gastronomical delight presented to you. In these cases, the smile and the two fingers are the symbols, and the happiness and the pizza are the artifacts, respectively. And, like any college student . . . or frankly, sane human, you should be smiling because you're getting two pieces of pizza.

A second important part of our definition of communication is process. **Process** acknowledges communication involves varying steps that senders and receivers must undergo when exchanging messages. However, as clear as we like to think a process might be, it's not. Oftentimes, communication doesn't have a distinct beginning or ending. Think about a class you've taken. Just because you're no longer in that class, is the communication process truly over? If you ever still think about that class or use any of the material you learned, we'd argue that the communication process hasn't really ended. Every interaction we engage in somehow influences how we see and interact in the world.

The last part of the definition focuses on constructing meaning together. We are, in fact, studying humans in this textbook. This is not to say bees, dogs, giraffes, and wookies don't communicate with each other and with us—they do! And, if you're anything like Drs. Eckstein and Ribarsky, you're also guilty of talking (OK, fine, having long, in-depth, extended conversations) with your pets. But, for the purposes of this textbook and course, we'll largely study how humans interact with one another. So, that brings us to the **constructing meaning together** part, where we try to generate shared understandings through our exchange of messages. Think back to when we mentioned the word "cat." Depending upon your experiences, you might picture a beautiful Siamese cat. Maybe you

envision a classic cartoon-like Garfield cat. Dr. Ribarsky probably thinks of this cantankerous Russian Blue stray she feeds and lets live on her deck, who is affectionately known as A-Hole the Cat. What we do through the process of communication is construct these meanings together in ways that hopefully bring us to some sort of shared understanding—helping move our definitions and visions of “cat” closer to one another.



A-Hole the Cat: Cute but cranky!

Source: Elizabeth Ribarsky

## There Is No “S” in Communication

Now that we’ve defined communication, it’s also important for us to define what communication is NOT. You may hear students or even faculty from other disciplines refer to what we study as “communications.” You will never hear any of our authors refer to communication as communications. Simply put, there is NO “S” in communication. Communications involve the technical aspects of communication transmissions like telephones, running cable wires, setting up electronics, generating computer programs, designing webpages, and many IT-related jobs. Undoubtedly, all of these skills require and facilitate communication, but they focus only on the use of channels (we’ll touch on this in a bit). In contrast, *communication* is the study of what happens between and among individuals and the world around them. What YOU do with others on a daily basis—building/forming/maintaining relationships; coordinating identities; managing cultural interactions; navigating power exchanges, attractions, disparities, conflicts—all involve communication. Give yourself a bit of credit for the immense task you undertake on a daily basis. So again, for future reference, we’re just going to leave the “s” off of communication—and if you want to look like you know what you’re talking about in front of your instructor, you will too.

## The Communication Process

As mentioned in our definition of communication, we recognize communication is a process. When researchers began trying to study and understand the communication process, they began to dissect the various components and, over time, the discipline progressed through three increasingly complex models of communication.

### Simple Linear Model

Back in the day (as in, 2000s BC), when communication was first studied as an art form (rather than as a science), the emphasis was largely on public speeches (Hallo, 2004). People

got their entertainment and news from public forums where orators would deliver speeches to make people laugh and cry, be informed and persuaded. As a result of that history, the first model we used in our field was also based on direct speech-making and is known as the **Simple Linear Model of Communication**. Despite its name, there are numerous components that make up the model. But, all subsequent models use these components too, so learning the basics of this preliminary model is essential for understanding our current model of communication.

The first three parts we're going to focus on are the sender, message, and encoding. First, the **sender** is the individual who wants to convey (i.e., send) or relay some form of a message. The **message** is whatever idea or thought the sender relays. Sometimes our messages are intentional, but sometimes they're unintentional. For example, as we're writing this text, we are intentionally sending you messages. Or, if you tell your friend, "I'm mad," it's clear you're intentionally sending them a message that you are mad. However, have you ever had a case of "the yawns" where you may not even be tired, but you can't stop yawning? Even though you're not intentionally yawning, you're still sending a message for others to receive. Or, do you or someone you know suffer from RBF ("resting bitch face")? An RBF sufferer might be a perfectly wonderful, sweet, and caring individual, but his or her face might be unintentionally sending a different message. The third part of this beginning sequence is **encoding**, which is the process of the sender choosing which verbal and nonverbal cues to use to relay their message (Schramm, 1954). So, for example, if you want to let someone know that you love them, you may choose verbal symbols (i.e., words) such as "I love you." But, there's also a nonverbal element that goes along with that. If you say "I love you," but you simultaneously roll your eyes, it's a different message than if you say "I love you" while gazing into the person's eyes and smiling.

The next important part of the Simple Linear Model is the transmission channel. The **channel** is the medium through which a message is relayed (Schramm, 1954). Channels nowadays come in so many different forms beyond just face-to-face. You can Tweet. You can text. Maybe you make a phone call, or you send an old-fashioned letter. As simple as the channel sounds,



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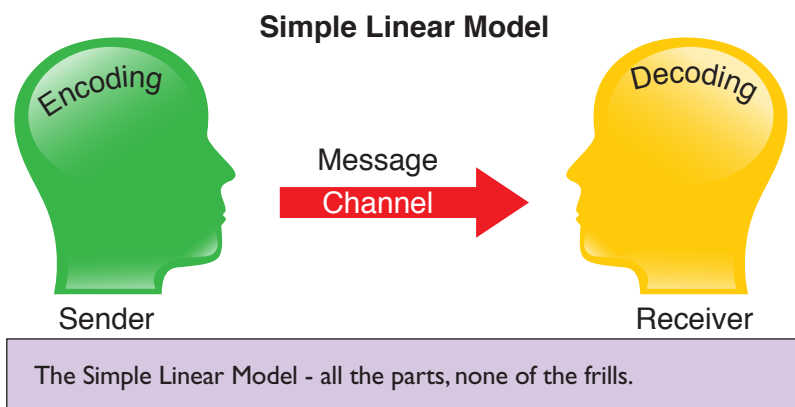
it's important to acknowledge the impact a channel choice can have. For example, if you're going to break up with someone, what channel are you going to use? Are you going to do it face-to-face or are you going to send a text? Or, will you simply leave a Post-It note like in the infamous *Sex and the City* episode? Channel choice can have a dramatic impact on the thought/meaning behind the message, and in turn, affects how the message is received.



In addition, the channel itself can also affect if the recipient even gets the message in the first place—like when you’re in a place with bad cell phone service and try unsuccessfully sending a text message.

Once you’ve chosen your channel, you then move to the final part of the Simple Linear Model. The first item on this end of the model is the **receiver**—anyone who notices your message. We assume we have *intentional* receivers. As we write this textbook, you are, in fact, our intentional receivers. But, just because you intend for someone to receive your message, that doesn’t guarantee they’ll get it. Have you ever sent an email, and it somehow gets lost in a SPAM folder? Ever waved at someone and felt a bit like a fool because they didn’t see you? Things like this happen all the time. Even though we have intentional receivers, we also have the possibility of *unintentional* receivers. Again, a receiver is ANYONE who notices your message. Dr. Eckstein’s most common embarrassment is when someone says hello and she enthusiastically smiles and says “Hi!” back to them before realizing (from their slightly scared look) they were talking to someone else—either behind her or on a tiny phone. So whereas Dr. Eckstein’s *intended* receiver of her “Hi” was the stranger talking to someone else, Dr. Eckstein was *their* *unintended* receiver.

With different types of channels, we run the risk of even more types of unintended communication. For instance, you probably often overhear one side of a cell phone conversation because somehow people forget others can hear them when on the phone. Even though you’re not their intended receiver, you nonetheless get to hear about all their gross medical procedures (candling, anyone?), awkward dates (it was your cousin!), or what they plan on having for dinner (canned cheese on cereal?!). You may even want to un-hear the messages you heard, but nonetheless, you are still a receiver. Once somebody receives your message, the final component of the Simple Linear Model falls into place: **decoding**—the process of dissecting the verbal and nonverbal elements of a message to decipher what they mean (Schramm, 1954). Going back to somebody saying “I love you” but rolling their eyes at the same time, a receiver might decode the combination of these elements to mean the sender was being sarcastic. But, even if a sender perfectly encoded and constructed their message, it does not guarantee the receiver will accurately decode the message. If you’ve ever been in a bad mood, you may have decoded something incorrectly or taken more offense to it simply because you had a negative framework from which you were viewing/receiving a message. All your friend said was, “Oh, you cut your hair!”. But because you were already in a bad mood as a receiver, you might infer that your friend hates your new haircut.



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Bad mood? Bad haircut?  
Or, just bad smell?

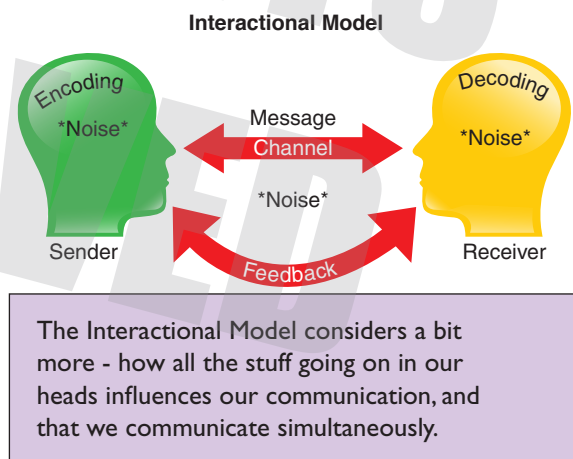
Now, despite all the components of this model, we still call it the Simple Linear Model because it is . . . simple. You have a message. You send the message. Someone receives the message. The end. But remember, it was originally created to explain speeches that focused on the orator, and even in interpersonal settings, the focus was on one person at a time (think of early telephones or walkie-talkies; Hartley, 1928; Wynter, 1854). Nowadays, however, we know that even a silent audience gives something in return.

### Interactional Model

As researchers looked at the Simple Linear Model, they decided it was just too simple. Scholars recognized that when we communicate, we're not *just* sending a message and waiting for a receiver to get it. But rather, communication is going on constantly—by all parties involved. Researchers thus noted our

communication is *concurrent*, or seems to happen all at once, and there are often many factors that disrupt our communication from being successful. Therefore, two additional factors (feedback and noise) were added in the 1950s to 1960s to create what we call the **Interactional Model of Communication**.

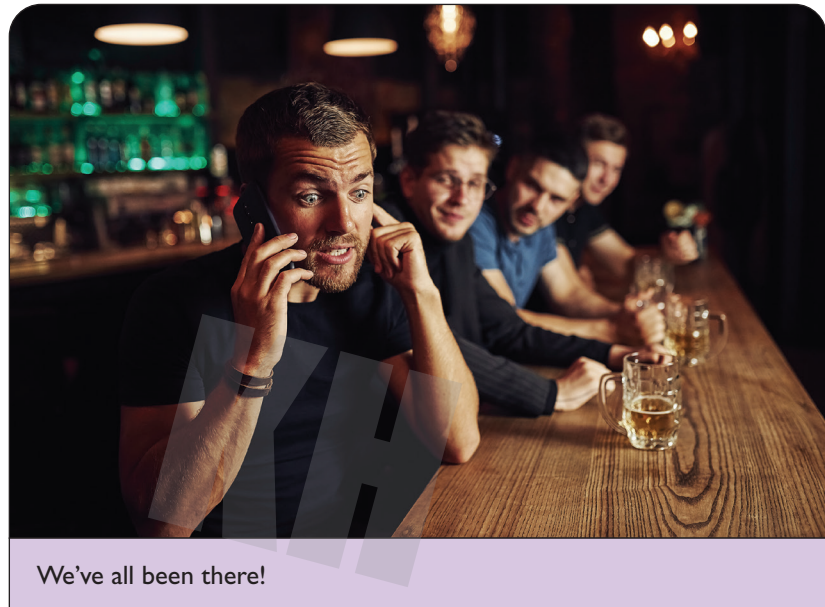
**Feedback** is both verbal and nonverbal exchanges between both the sender and receiver (Schramm, 1954). You don't just send a message and call that communication. Rather, feedback is ongoing, so the sender and receiver inherently play BOTH roles in the same encounter. For example, as your friend is telling you a story, you might find yourself nodding your head. You are receiving her message, but you're also sending a message back to her that you're listening and/or you want her to continue with her story. Your communication is concurrent; you're sending *and* receiving while the other person is also sending *and* receiving.



Source: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company

Beyond feedback, researchers also accounted for the presence of noise. **Noise** is anything that disrupts the communication process at any step along the way. There are three specific types of noise: physical, physiological, and psychological. **Physical noise** is anything happening in the physical environment, or even within the channel, that affects how/if a message is sent or received. For example, if you're trying to have a delicate conversation with your friend in a packed sports bar and there's a playoff game on TV, chances are the environment is going

to be too physically loud to effectively engage in a personal conversation. Similarly, if you've ever been on a cell phone and you randomly hit a dead spot with no signal, the person on the other end might think you're angry with them (believing you hung up on them) or think you aren't listening because you haven't responded. In this case, because the channel stopped the effective flow of messages, it, too, can become a form of physical noise.



We've all been there!

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**Physiological noise** deals with the body and might include something like a hearing deficit. This could be a congenital deficit, something that develops over time, or even a temporary situation, such as when your ears get plugged when you get a bad head cold. Nonetheless, because you have difficulty hearing a message, it makes it more difficult for you to receive a message exactly as it was encoded and sent. Another physiological noise is being really tired. Research has shown that driving while tired may be actually as dangerous, if not more so, than driving while intoxicated (Tefft, 2018). A similar thing can happen in the communication process. When you're really tired, it's unlikely you'll receive, or even send, messages as effectively as usual. Perhaps you're exhausted during your 8 a.m. class because you had a bit too much fun the night before; this then prevents you from catching everything the instructor says.

Finally, **psychological noise** is everything within the senders' and receivers' minds that disrupts the sending or receiving of messages. Whereas physiological noise would affect the direct functioning of your *brain* (i.e., physical organ), psychological noise affects your *mind* (i.e., cognitive, emotional thoughts your brain produces). For example, as you read this text, you might be simultaneously thinking about a quiz you have tomorrow in another class. It's similar to trying to convey a complex emotion to someone in-person while they're thinking about the super-hot girl/guy who just walked by. Mental distractions mean we may not be sending or receiving messages as effectively as we could, or should.



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It is also not unusual for noises to be interrelated. For example, Dr. Ribarsky, as a self-proclaimed foodie, gets unusually excited about food—which can become her Kryptonite. If Dr. Ribarsky missed breakfast, her hunger pangs might create physiological noise. But then, she’s likely to begin thinking about all of her lunch options, thus, creating psychological noise. The acknowledgement that both ongoing feedback and noise are always occurring in every communication encounter was a significant contribution of the Interactional Model.

### Transactional Model

The Interactional Model added some important components to the communication process, but it failed to account for the fact that our communication is unique and always changing. This third, most complex, and most current (as of this writing) model is referred to as the **Transactional Model of Communication**. What makes this model most comprehensive is that it accounts for the incredible complexity of communication by recognizing that every single interaction we ever have is unique and depends upon every interaction we’ve had before. This complexity can be described as context. **Context** includes everything that surrounds, embeds, and comes out of the communication process (Berlo, 1960). One way to consider the different types of context we might encounter is by breaking them into four categories: physical, social, chronological, and cultural.

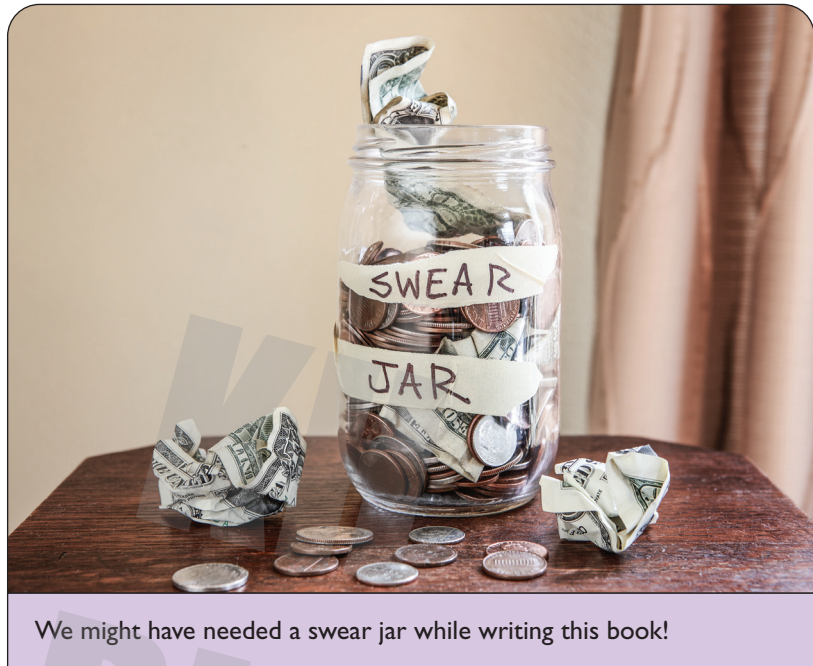
Like physical noise, **physical context** refers to the environment and how the environment might influence the type of messages sent or how a message is received. For example, if you’ve ever watched a football game, the physical context changes the way in which players interact with one another. You might see them pat each other’s butt as a way of saying “good job” or “way to go.” However, outside of that playing arena, it’s much less likely to happen between players. Over the years, we’ve taught thousands of students, including many athletes, and have never seen any of them leave our class patting one of their teammates’ or classmates’ rear ends, saying, “Way to go! Good class!” Just the thought might make you giggle because of how *weird* and inappropriate it would be. The physical context changes the very type of messages being sent or what is considered appropriate within a particular physical context. The physical context can also influence how a message is received. Hearing your first “I love you” from your romantic partner in a quiet, romantic restaurant will probably have a different impact on you than hearing it at a busy, loud, and boisterous football game.

The **social context** focuses on the relationship between individuals and the ways that relationship affects their communication with each other. For example, the way you talk with your professor might be really different than how you communicate with your best friend. Around your friends, you might “swear like a sailor,” but in front of your grandmother, not a foul word will cross your lips. The social context will determine whether your swearing really serves an effective *and* appropriate function (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Because of the social context, based on the roles you each play in *that*

relationship in that particular moment, hearing “I want to see you” from your boss has a very different meaning than hearing the same thing from the attractive classmate you sit next to.

The third form of context is the **chronological**, or timing, context. There are numerous types of time that might influence the type of message you send or how your message is interpreted, such as the time of day, time of year, or even the timing within a relationship.

If you get an “I want to see you” text from your boss at 2 p.m., you’ll probably interpret it completely differently than if received at 2 a.m. Or, if you happened to get your friend a gift close to Valentine’s Day, they might construe your innocent gift as an expression of romantic interest, even if that’s not at all what you intended. What if you’re on a first date and at the end of the date, they told you, “I love you”? Chances are you might find this much too fast and way too soon (and yes, you should see this as a red flag—run away quickly)! These are just a few of the types of chronological contexts that can impact your communication.



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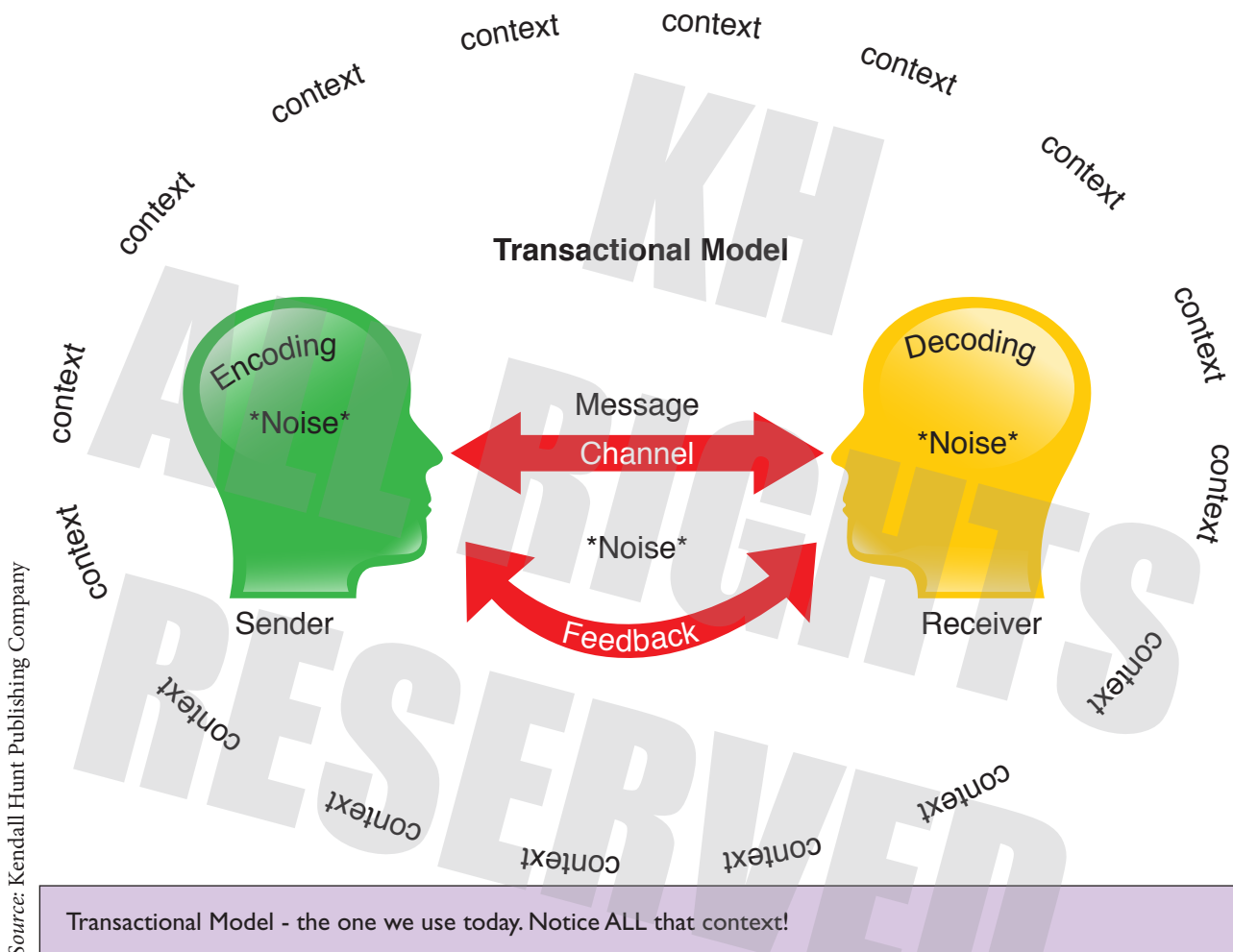


Dating red flags?!?! Run for your life!

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Finally, the **cultural context** involves the culture that is surrounding the individuals, as well as the relationship. Culture (see Chapter 14) is any group of individuals who share beliefs, values, rights, rituals, and norms and can include aspects like age, race, religion, sexual orientation, or even sex/gender. Cultures are something so complex that they often influence all the other contexts as well. For example, in some churches, it’s considered rude to clap, sing, or do anything other than sit there somberly and quietly; if you grew up in a very loud church where people shouted, laughed, clapped, and even danced, you’d still be expected to adapt to the quiet church’s rules when you attended there—or

risk getting hauled out of there pretty quickly! In this example, the particular culture of a religious type also interacts with physical (e.g., type of church building and service), social (e.g., ministers have different “rules” than congregants/parishioners), and chronological (e.g., traditional Sunday morning services might differ in expectations from holiday pageants or weekday services) contexts.



Source: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company

The complexity of the Transactional Model (which also incorporates all components of the previous models) further illustrates numerous places where miscommunication can and does happen. When we recognize all these intricacies in the communication process, it’s no wonder we ALL make so many mistakes. Try not to be so hard on yourself. Even your authors and instructors who’ve been studying communication for years still make plenty of mistakes because we’re simply humans trying to navigate an incredibly complex process.

### **Principles of Communication**

Beyond these models of communication, it’s important to recognize there are numerous principles that help describe and explain the complexities of communication.



## Communication Is Unavoidable

Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) famously noted, “You cannot not communicate.” These scholars argued we’re unable to stop the communication process. Even if someone stops verbally communicating with you, they’re *still* communicating. Think about how much you can tell about a person simply from what they’re wearing (Expensive brand logos? Dirty overalls?), how they’re standing (Superhero-like posture? Slumping into the ground?), their hair (Springfield Illinois is home to the famous Chili Bowl Mullet Man . . . stay classy, Springfield), what their face is doing (Smiling? Creepily winking?), or any number of other aspects that nonverbally communicate to us. Even the timing of the messages or lack thereof communicates. Have you ever sent someone a text, saw a read receipt but *still* haven’t received a reply? Even their silence is communicating something to you (Are they plotting their revenge or the perfect witty comeback?). Even in the absence of words, we’re still engaging in communication whenever the receiver *perceives* it.



Business in the front; Party in the back!

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## Communication Is an Unrepeatable Process

This principle is linked to the transactional nature of communication. Because of the various contexts (relationships, environment, time, culture) we discussed, it’s impossible to *ever exactly* repeat communication. Every interaction we have is ultimately unique (Berlo, 1960). And, every single encounter influences our worldview and perspectives, and thus, all our current and future interactions. In other words, every interaction—the messages we send, how we receive them, and all the other parts of the model—depend on what happened before. This doesn’t mean you’ll come away from every single experience with an earth-shattering, grand epiphany. Sure, you could (but holy cow, would that be tiring!). Even our small and seemingly mundane interactions have an impact over time on how we see and interact in the world. Therefore, you could sit in the same room tomorrow and have the same conversation with the same person, but your communication would inherently be different because of all of the interactions you’ve had within the last 24 hours.

This concept is, admittedly, a bit obscure and requires some grand-scheme thinking of how it influences us day to day. So let's use an experience you've probably had. Perhaps you know a couple (or maybe you're part of one) whose partners have broken up and gotten back together numerous times. You might hear things from them such as: "Okay, let's start fresh. Let's forget about the past and move forward." Pretty simple, right? Does it ever work? Nope! As nice as it might be to wipe the slate clean in so many of our relationships and interactions, it's just not that simple. Everything that has happened in the past will continue—at least to some extent—to influence how each individual sees themselves, each other, and the relationship itself. And once it's out there, we can't take it back, which leads us to the next principle of communication.

### Communication Is Irreversible

Perhaps you grew up with the parent who was always telling you to "think before you speak." That's because mom or dad knew that once something is said or done, it can't be taken back. Communication is irreversible. If you're a fan of any TV courtroom dramas, chances are during a cross-examination, you've heard the judge say, "Strike



Any other SVU addicts out there?

that from the record." What the judge is telling the jury is that they cannot include any of that information that they just heard into their decision-making process. However, we (and so do the lawyers) know that communication is irreversible. So once it's out there, there's no taking it back. Can this information legally change the outcome of a trial? No. Does this information still remain in jurors' heads and have the potential to influence their decisions? Yes.

### Communication Has Two Levels of Meaning

Another overarching principle of the communication process is that there are two different levels of meaning in any message that we send: content level and relational level. The **content level** is the actual, usually intended *message* we send to another individual. The **relational level** reveals the type of relationship or connection we have with someone and influences how our message is perceived. If your friend told you, "I really like your shirt," the content level is expressing a feeling about your shirt, and because you are friends, the relational levels tells you this is a compliment, and your friend is being kind. Conversely, if your worst enemy told you, "I really like your shirt," the content level of



the message remains the same. However, because of the relationship with your enemy, you're much less likely to take their comment as a compliment; you might view their comment as sarcasm or an insult. Even though message content might remain the same, the relational level can have a dramatic impact on how the message is interpreted.

## Communication Does Not Solve All Problems

Of course, all the authors in this textbook are a bit biased in loving communication and recognizing just how powerful it is. We like to think of ourselves as superhero mentors or grizzled “old” sages. But, we also acknowledge communication isn't some magical cure-all. We, of course, encourage you to have open and civilized conversations, but just because you're engaging in clear and competent communication doesn't mean you're going to fix the problem. You've probably been in an argument where you keep rehashing the same thing over and over again but get nowhere. In fact, you might find the more you talk about the issue, the more frustrated you become. Sometimes the old saying of “agree to disagree” rings incredibly true. In fact, one of Drs. Eckstein and Ribarsky's pet peeves is when pop-culture counselors (yes, we're looking at you Dr. Phil!) tell couples they simply need to “communicate more”; many times, part of effective communication is knowing when to just shut up and/or listen.



More communication isn't the answer!

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## Communication Involves Ethical Issues

Like many things in life, communication involves ethics and good and bad practices to consider. Although the ethical issues surrounding communication can span a vast frontier, two factors we encounter frequently include lying and privacy. But what is “right” isn't always as clear cut as you might think.

Because of our particular cultural values, you might be quick to think lying is automatically *unethical*, but chances are you've already told several lies this week . . . perhaps even today. Undoubtedly, there's a spectrum to the severity of lying (Bok, 1999). There's a significant difference between lying about cheating on your romantic partner



and lying that the meal they spent all day cooking tastes great (and not actually like a used shoe with hairy gum stuck to the bottom). Whether big or small, they are still lies. But, what makes one lie ethical and one not? Or, is all lying unethical? As much as we'd like to have an easy answer for you, unfortunately, like most ethical issues, there are many factors to consider and rarely simple answers (Dunbar et al., 2016). For example, does not telling your partner *everything* about your day mean you're lying through omission? Technically, yes. But, do they really need/want to hear about every time you've used the restroom during the day? Probably not . . .

The other significant ethical issue you're likely to experience frequently involves privacy. Privacy encompasses so many areas of our lives. Have you ever been told to keep a secret private but still ended up sharing it with your best friend or romantic partner (e.g., Dr. Eckstein considers even "don't tell anyone" secrets fair game to share with her partner Dave)? Or, if you've been to a doctor's office, you've had to sign an HIPAA (Health Information Portability and Accountability Act) form to protect your privacy by releasing your medical information only to individuals you approve. Do you ever feel like your cell phone or computer is spying on you? You were just chatting about having burgers for dinner, and now you're seeing ads for Red Robin on your social media. Again, like lying, there's not necessarily always a clear right or wrong answer when it comes to issues of privacy (Bok, 1984). Even if you think you're an open book, there're still probably some things you wouldn't share with everyone . . . or perhaps anyone (insert your personal embarrassing childhood memory here). It remains important for all of us to be aware of how privacy impacts how we communicate. Remember, a great communicator considers not only effectiveness but also appropriateness of their communication.

### Public Speaking Power: Ethics of Changing Minds & Behaviors

Because ethics come in all shapes, forms, and shades of gray, it shouldn't be surprising that giving speeches also requires significant ethical considerations, including how to change someone's mind or behavior through your speech. How do you feel when someone forces you to do something? Are you angry? Do you dig your heels in a little deeper? You're not alone. Humans inherently don't like change, and being forced to change is even worse. There's a big difference between **coercing** someone by threatening or manipulating them to make them do something and **persuading** or motivating someone to make a change or do something on their own. Research has shown if an individual makes a change on their own or personally commits to it rather than complying through pressure, not only will they be more satisfied with the change but also more likely to stick with change (Helmreich & Collins, 1968). To be effective *and* appropriate public speakers, we must consider how our own and our audience's ethics influence our content and delivery.

Contributed by J. Eckstein & B. Ribarsky

## Good Communication Takes Works

The final principle recognizes that effective *and* appropriate communication takes work. We mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that many people take good communication for granted. In fact, we typically don't realize how important communication is (or how unskilled we may be at it) until things start to go wrong. Whether it's communication with your romantic partner, your parent, your boss, or even presenting speeches for this class, all of it takes WORK. No one is born a great communicator. The best communicators continually put significant time, effort, and consideration into unlocking the not-so-secret superpowers of great communication. As we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, when you practice until it's habit, you'll begin to do it without thinking. Hopefully, you'll look at this textbook and this course as an invaluable opportunity to become your own version of a communication superhero!

## Communication Areas and Opportunities

One last factor that adds to the complexity of communication is the vast array of areas of study within communication. The National Communication Association (NCA) lists 48 different divisions or areas of study within the communication discipline (NCA, 2019). Luckily, all of them can be boiled down to six main areas. First, **interpersonal communication** examines communication that occurs between two or more parties viewed as unique and irreplaceable within the conversation (see Chapter 10). For example, it's doubtful we could simply replace your mom/dad or romantic partner (see Chapter 11) with another person and have it be the same type of conversation. **Small group communication** looks at how three or more people operate as a system (see Chapter 12). You've probably had group projects for a class more than once, so you understand how groups can be very beneficial but can also go incredibly wrong. **Organizational communication** often envelops the interworking of numerous small groups and interpersonal relationships—all within an organization's culture (Chapter 13). It can also involve the larger networks, systems, or structural communication aspects of an organized group. Whether it's a fraternity, sorority, a sports team, or even your workplace, each organization you're a part of has its own unique culture. **Mass media** looks at how technology is used to reach a large audience. It can include the study of media such as newspapers, television, radio, and even social media (see Chapter 15). Increasingly, researchers are examining how mass media influences all other areas of communication study. For example, if someone's social media feed has ever influenced how you perceive them, it could also affect your interpersonal communication with them. Next, **intercultural communication** examines how individuals from different cultures communicate with one another (see Chapter 14). The first type of culture you probably think of involves race and ethnicity. But as we mentioned earlier, a culture is any group of individuals who share a system of beliefs, values, rites, rituals, norms, or other similarities that shape their identities such as age, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and many others (Holliday, 2010). Finally, **public speaking** or **rhetoric** is the act (or art) of

performing or delivering (see Chapter 4) a speech to an audience. Although most people think of public speaking as being one-sided communication, we hope you'll begin to see public speaking as an enlarged conversation that involves careful listening and recognizing that your audience plays an important role in what and how you present.

Because there are so many different areas of communication, no one communication scholar can truly be an expert in all of them. Therefore, one of the key features that sets this textbook apart from others is the fact that we recruited experts from across the Communication Studies discipline (perhaps even your own instructor!) to write each chapter in this book. Every chapter is written by a professional scholar in his or her own area of expertise, giving you insight into the latest research and ideas in our discipline.

Although your authors admittedly are biased and think communication is pretty amazing, we hope you, too, will find at least something in this book that sparks your interest. Perhaps it's even a possibility to become a communication major or minor at your school. Then, you'd get a chance to explore some of these concepts even further, equipping you with what can be an incredibly marketable and flexible degree. Maybe you're interested in a career such as television, radio broadcasting, or public relations? Do you dream of being a social media mogul for yourself or another company? Or, maybe you're more interested in the personal side of communication? Some of the best sales reps and those who work in nonprofits are/were communication majors. They know how to connect with and adapt to their audience/clients. Communication also opens doors to jobs in human

resources and management. A simple search online will give you many lists of jobs like these—ones you can do if you specialize in communication. That's why instead, on page 6, we listed some of the more fun, unique jobs you may not have considered—ones that prioritize hiring people with excellent communication skills. Even though this is just a small selection of the numerous jobs for which a degree in communication can prepare you, remember, you can have all the knowledge in the world, but your ability to connect with others and effectively share your knowledge is what will set you up for success—in your own life and for making a difference in the world around you.





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