If you think there is anything important in your life that does not involve communication, leaf idly through this book and see if it makes you challenge your first thought. It will take only a couple of minutes, and then you can put the book back on the shelf. In reality we do not think you will be able to come up with any aspect of life that does not involve communication and that would not be made better by your ability to understand communication more thoroughly. We are passionate about the study of communication, and we believe very strongly that you can benefit from knowing more about how communication works. We wrote this book partly because we believe that everyone needs to know something about communication. *The Basics of Communication: A Relational Perspective* will help you better understand—and even improve—your life through better understanding communication.

### The Relational Perspective and Everyday Communication

What makes this book different from other communication textbooks is the *relational perspective* taken when considering communication. The constant guide in understanding communication will be the relationships that you have with other people. The relational perspective is based on the belief that communication and relationships are intertwined processes. Any type of communication you ever participate in has a relationship assumed underneath it.

The relationship shared by people will influence what is communicated, how it is shared, and the meanings that develop. People generally talk with friends in a different
way than with their parents. Coworkers generally talk with one another in a different way than with their supervisor. The meanings of communication also change depending on the relationships. For instance, saying “I love you” will take on different meaning if said to a romantic partner, a friend, a family member, a supervisor, or someone you just met. In turn, communication creates, reinforces, and modifies all relationships.

Saying “I love you” can do many things. It can lead to the creation of a new relationship, strengthen a relationship, maintain a relationship, or result in the realization that people do not view a relationship in the same way. Ultimately, the link between relationships and communication is undeniable, and it can be used to study all communicative activity.

Something else that sets this book apart from other basic course textbooks is its focus on everyday communication. The discipline of communication has traditionally focused on the “big” moments or seemingly extraordinary events of human interaction. These instances include initial encounters, betrayals, disclosure of secret information, family upheavals, and other dramatic experiences you may occasionally encounter during your lifetime. These events may be memorable, but they do not make up much of a person’s lived experiences. For instance, romantic relationships only rarely feature moments in which partners hold hands, gaze into one another’s eyes, and share their deepest darkest secrets and declarations of unending love.

Most interactions of romantic partners include brief conversations as they get ready for work or school, a quick phone call or text between classes or during a break, talking in the car while in traffic, or chatting while watching television. The content of these conversations is seemingly mundane and may include topics such as schedules, weather, what to eat, what to watch on television, what bills need paying, or the source of a foul odor.

Everyday communication may not always be memorable, but it does constitute (i.e., compose) a person’s life, and it happens to be incredibly important. It is through routine, seemingly mundane everyday communication (more than through extraordinary events) that major portions of a person’s life take shape.

Everyday communication creates, maintains, challenges, and alters relationships and identities as well as culture, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, meaning, and even reality. When discussing all types of communication, we will continuously interconnect them with your everyday life and experiences.

We sincerely believe that your life as a student, friend, romantic partner, colleague, and family member can be improved through the study of communication from a relational perspective.

Whatever your purpose in reading this book, and whatever your ultimate goal in life, we hope that it will

- enrich your experience,
- sharpen your abilities to observe and analyze communication activity,
- make your life a little bit more interesting, and
- help you understand the processes going on around you.

Before fully jumping into our exploration of communication, let’s take a look at some of the features of this book.
Because we are convinced of the importance of the topic and because we are passionate about helping people learn about it, we have used some special features designed to make it particularly interesting and relevant to you.

First of all, the tone of this book is somewhat different from that of other textbooks you may have come across. We have deliberately adopted an informal and conversational tone in our writing, and we even throw in a few jokes. We are not attempting to be hip or cool: Trust us; we are far from either, so much so that we are not even sure if the words *hip* and *cool* are used anymore. Instead, we use a conversational voice because we believe that it makes this book more engaging to read. Plus, we genuinely enjoy talking about this material. We want to share our enthusiasm in a way that we hope is infectious. We have become used to seeing the significance of communication as if it speaks for itself, but we realize that not everybody sees communication that way. Because we are also deeply committed to the importance of studying communication, we want to discuss it all in such a way that is clear, understandable, and applicable to your life. We hope that this will make it as exciting to you as it is to us.

Everything that appears in this book—even every picture—does so for a reason. That reason centers on increasing your understanding, your application, and even your enjoyment of the material. For example, the pictures do not have standard captions, but each asks a question that you can answer for yourself (although we provide a possible answer at the end of each chapter). The pictures are here not just to make the book look pretty, but they serve the purpose of teaching you something and making you think for yourself.

Instead of beginning each chapter with questions to focus on before you know what the chapter is about, our **Focus Questions** follow an opening narrative for each chapter. They are so positioned because we want to ensure that you read them after you have seen the basic issues with which the chapter deals. We personally skipped Focus Questions when we were in school because they were not any help to our learning: They appeared at the very beginning of the chapter, and we did not yet know what they were about.

For this book, we strongly encourage you to read them. Because they come after the narrative that sets up the questions in each chapter, they will guide you through the chapter and provide you with insight as to what you should focus on as you read. Because they are important, we will also revisit and answer them at the end of each chapter so that you can see if your answers match ours. In fact, we do this instead of summarizing the chapter in the conventional way. The end of every chapter is therefore directly connected to the beginning.

We did not want to include boxes in support of material just to break up the text or just because they are generally included in other textbooks. We thought very carefully about what types of boxes would be most beneficial to your understanding of the material and to applying the material in your life. Ultimately, each chapter includes the following six types of boxes: (1) Make Your Case, (2) Strategic Communication, (3) Listen in on Your Life, (4) Contrarian Challenge, (5) Case in Point, and (6) College Experience.

**Make Your Case** boxes provide you with opportunities to develop your own positions or to perform an exercise about the material that might be used during class
discussion. In the verbal chapter, for example, you are asked to find out the secret languages that you and your friends speak without realizing it.

**Strategic Communication** boxes help you integrate the material into your life when influencing others. For instance, the technology chapter asks you to consider how the purpose of a message and the technological preferences of the person you are contacting will determine the appropriateness of face-to-face, telephone, or computer-mediated interaction.

**Listen in on Your Life** boxes ask you to consider the material in relation to your own life and lived experiences. We want you to start recognizing communication in your life and how the material addressed within this book applies. For example, the listening chapter asks you to consider friends, family members, classmates, or coworkers you would label as good and bad listeners. You are then asked to analyze what behaviors led to these evaluations and to determine measures to enhance the listening skills of others. These exercises, therefore, will also serve to further your understanding and comprehension of the material.

**Contrarian Challenge** boxes invite you to think more carefully about what you have read and see if we have persuaded you or if you can see another side to what we have written. For example, in the chapter on delivering a public presentation, we encourage you to use manuscript delivery only when careful wording is required and maintain that novice speakers, especially, should avoid this delivery style. However, through the Contrarian Challenge box, we ask if you can make an argument for why a novice speaker would benefit from manuscript delivery. In many instances, such as that one, we think you will come to agree with us. However, we want to encourage you to critically examine all that is discussed in the book and not just take what we say without evaluation.

**Case in Point** boxes encourage you to apply what you have learned in the analysis of everyday life situations. For instance, the culture chapter asks you to find a public space where members of a unique cultural group are gathered and observe the ways they communicate. Doing so and answering questions posed within the box will help you better understand the ways in which culture and communication are connected.

**College Experience** boxes encourage you to apply the material discussed to better understand and perhaps manage situations encountered in academic contexts. The majority of people reading this book are students (or our relatives). Whether you are navigating your first-year experiences or still figuring things out after a few semesters or terms, these boxes will help you evaluate and handle academic life and relationships. For example, this chapter will ask you to consider the ways in which academic-based relationships such as those between instructors and students frame interactions, influencing what is said and how communication is interpreted.

Also included in each chapter are **margin notes**, which provide additional information about the material or open-ended questions to ponder as you study it. Accordingly, some margin notes provide unique information, such as when the first “smiley face” emoticon was sent, who invented the Internet, or what percentage of people believe that they are shy enough to need treatment. Other margin notes urge you to reflect on the material by posing questions, such as whether or not families would be considered “groups.”
The very end of each chapter includes features to further enhance your mastery and comprehension of the material. Once again, we thought very carefully about what to include here. We did not want questions that ask you to merely memorize and repeat what you read in this book. Parrots can do that; rather we wanted you to think about the material outside of class as you carry out the rest of your life. We wanted to include features that ask you to go beyond each chapter’s content and engage in higher levels of thinking.

Accordingly, each chapter also includes the following features: (a) Ethical Issues, (b) Media Links, and (c) Questions to Ask Your Friends.

**Ethical Issues** urge you to contemplate and develop a position regarding ethical quandaries that arise in communication. For example, the technology chapter asks you to consider whether employers should use material on social networking sites, such as Facebook, when making hiring decisions, and the relationships chapter asks if it is ever ethical to have two romantic relationships going on at the same time and why (or why not).

**Media Links** ask you to draw from media in order to further explore the issues discussed in each chapter. You are asked to watch a TV newscast and discover ways in which the newscasters establish a relationship with the audience, for example, and to read a newspaper article looking for examples of logical fallacies. The relationships chapter invites you to examine the Sunday newspaper section of marriages, engagements, and commitment ceremonies for similarities in attractiveness. Believe it or not, romantic partners often look alike!

**Questions to Ask Your Friends** provide you with questions to ask your friends in order to further increase your awareness of the material and integrate it into your life. In the chapter on preparing for a public presentation, for example, you are urged to ask your friends about two people whom they consider to be very different. If they wanted to try to convince each person of the same idea, how would they have to adjust their strategy with each one? Examining this issue will help you—and your friends—better understand the need to adapt presentations to particular audiences. Plus, these activities will help underscore the significance of relationships in your life. As with the boxes, we are serious about having you try out these instructional tools to improve your study of the material.

A **Student Study Site** is also available to improve your study of the material. It includes electronic flash cards to check your knowledge of key terms and concepts, study quizzes, Internet activities and resources, links to video and audio clips, and a link to the Facebook group created for the book. You can access the site for free at www.sagepub.com/boc2e.

Ultimately, we want to invite you into the conversation about the issues we present as basics of communication. As part of that, we are trying to stretch your capacity to think about a problem and work through it with us, leaving you with a greater sense of having mastered the material by thinking through it for yourself, under guidance.

Within this initial chapter, we invite you to start thinking more carefully about communication and how it works. In doing so, we will examine what makes communication more complex than many people may believe. We will also explore what communication entails by discussing a few of its key characteristics. So, with that in mind, let’s get started with those focus questions we mentioned above.
What Is Communication Anyway?

In introductory chapters such as this one, you might expect the primary subject to be defined. In this case, you might be looking for an authoritative definition of communication that may very well show up on an examination you will take in the near future. Well, here is one you might like: Communication is the transactional use of symbols, influenced, guided, and understood in the context of relationships. Actually, that definition is not half bad, but it does not really do justice to what communication really entails. Your instructor may provide you with a better one.

There are a number of definitions of communication out there, and many of those definitions are very acceptable. Communication scholars Frank Dance and Carl Larson (1976) once compiled a list of 126 definitions of communication appearing in communication scholarship. Imagine the number of definitions that must have emerged in the four decades since then! Of course, education should go beyond memorizing a definition and rather should explore deeper issues or characteristics of an issue or a topic, so that is exactly what will be done in this chapter.

You will notice that when we refer to someone else’s work or ideas, we will list the surname of the author(s), a date, and a page number when quoting the author(s) directly. The date gives the year in which the original paper or book was published, and the page number is where the original quote can be located. This format is used in most social science textbooks and professional writing, with the full reference at the end of each chapter or at the end of the book. You may also be asked to use this format when you write your own papers or speeches.

One fact that makes the study of communication unique, as opposed to, say, chemistry, is that you have been communicating your entire life. Previous experience with this topic can be very beneficial, since you will be able to draw from relationships and events in your own life when studying the material. You will even be able to apply the material, hopefully improving your communication abilities and life in general along the way.
The drawback to previous experience is that people may not see the value in studying something that is such a common part of life. You may even be asking the “big deal” questions: What is so problematic about everyday communication? Why bother to explain it? Don’t people know what it is about and how it works? Communication is just about sending messages, right?

True: Most of the time, people communicate without thinking, and it is not usually awkward. But if communicating is so easy, why do people have misunderstandings, conflicts, arguments, disputes, and disagreements? Why do people get embarrassed because they have said something thoughtless? Why are people misunderstood, and why do people misunderstand others?

If communication is simple, how do people know when others are lying (if all that matters is listening to their words as a straightforward representation of a situation)? Why would anyone be agitated or anxious about giving a public talk if talk is just saying what you think? Why is communication via e-mail or text message so easy to misinterpret?

People would never disagree about what happened in a conversation if the students who asked the above “big deal” questions were right. Why, then, are allegations of sexual harassment sometimes denied vigorously, and how can there ever be doubt whether one person intentionally touched another person inappropriately? Why are coworkers so often a problem for many people, and what is it about their communication that makes them difficult?

When first coming to the study of communication, many students assume that communication simply involves the sending of messages from one person to another through e-mails, phone calls, gestures, instant messages, text messages, or spoken word. That basic view has some truth to it, but communication involves a lot more than merely transmitting information from Person A to Person B.

As you read this chapter, you will likely start to recognize that communication is more complex than it initially appears. Let’s begin by examining a common situation, a restaurant server speaking to customers:

“Hi! My name is Alice, and I’ll be your server today. Our special is witchety grub stewed in yak fat with broccoli sautéed in mushroom sauce for $24.95. If you have any questions about the menu, let me know.”
What you may already suppose about communication before studying it formally may be somewhat obvious in this example. Words are being used to convey information from one person to another person. Upon closer inspection, however, much more activity is taking place in this basic exchange.

The message is made up of words or symbols, which are used to allow one idea or representation to stand for something else. Taken-for-granted cultural assumptions are being made when these symbols are selected. “Menu” rather than “a list of all the food that we prepare, cook, and serve in this restaurant for you to choose for your meal” is said because it is assumed the customer will know the code word menu and its meaning in a restaurant as opposed to its meaning on a computer screen. If you do not recognize “witchety grub,” it may be because you are not an Australian for whom this is a food delicacy, but the rest probably makes sense even if you do not know that a yak is a species of livestock cattle in China.

The server’s message may also make sense because you know how to “perform/speak/do restaurant.” The comments are appropriate only in some places and at some times. If Alice was standing in the middle of a park screaming them at everyone who passed by, you would likely think she was nuts. They also make sense only at the beginning of the interaction, not during the meal or when the customer is leaving the restaurant.

Notice also how the message makes the interaction work in a particular way, setting up one person (server) in a particular kind of relationship with the other person (customer) while setting that relationship up as friendly and casual (“Hi,” not “A thousand welcomes, my royal masters. Command me as you will, and I shall obey”).

You have built-in expectations about the relationship between a server and a customer. You already know and take for granted that these relational differences exist in restaurants and that restaurants have “servers” who generally carry out instructions of “customers.” Therefore, you expect the customer will be greeted, treated with some respect by the server, told what “the special” is, and asked to make choices. You know the customer will eventually pay for the food and that the server is there not only to bring food, water, the check, and change but also to help resolve any difficulties understanding the menu. Alice will answer any questions about the way the food is prepared or help if you need to find the restrooms. Both the customer and the server take this for granted; it is a cultural as well as relational element of communication.

This relatively brief encounter also demonstrates that communication is more than just the exchange of messages. It may appear as though a simple message involving the greeting, the speaker’s name and job, her relationship to you, and the nature of the special on the menu is being sent to the customer. Beyond the transmission of a simple message, however, something will take place as a result of the message exchange. Further, worlds of meaning are being created, and personal perspectives are being displayed.
Additional issues such as gender, status, power, and politeness are being negotiated. All of these things and much more are taking place within this simple exchange.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will introduce and begin our initial discussion of seven key characteristics of communication: (a) Communication involves symbols, (b) communication requires meaning, (c) communication is cultural, (d) communication is relational, (e) communication involves frames, (f) communication is both presentational and representational, and (g) communication is a transaction. Examining these characteristics will provide a better understanding of what communication and its study really entail.

**Communication Involves Symbols**

All communication is characterized by the use of symbols. A symbol is an arbitrary representation of something else. This may be an object, an idea, a place, a person, or a relationship—to name only a few. As we discuss in the upcoming chapters, symbols are either verbal or nonverbal. Verbal communication involves language, while nonverbal communication involves all other symbols. Accordingly, a symbol can be a word, a movement, a sound, a picture, a logo, a gesture, a mark, or anything else that represents something other than itself. For example, the shape of a heart is a symbol of love; a star on the shoulder is a symbol of rank and power; a touch on the arm could be a symbol of sympathy or love; a large car could be a symbol of wealth, power, and status.

The exact meaning of the representation or the best way to represent what we mean can be something that we can change or that a society (or partners in a relationship) can argue about, or it can be something where different cultures make different arbitrary choices.

To fully understand symbols, we can begin by discussing what they are not. Although the terms symbol and sign are sometimes used interchangeably, they do not represent the same thing. Signs are consequences or indicators of something specific, which human beings cannot change by their arbitrary actions or labels. For example, a weather vane is a sign of the direction of the wind; wet streets are a sign that it has rained; smoke is a sign of fire. However, we argue about it, we cannot make smoke not happen when there is a fire or make streets not get wet when it rains. There is a direct causal connection between smoke and fire and between wet streets and rain.

Symbols, on the other hand, have no direct connection with that which they represent. They have been arbitrarily selected. For instance, the word chair has been arbitrarily chosen to represent the objects on which we sit, and other languages present the same item in different symbolic ways (i.e., sella, chaise, stoel, and zetel). We call a chair a chair simply because the symbol made up of the letters c, h, a, i, and r has been chosen to represent that object. There is nothing inherent within that object that connects it to
the symbol chair. There is nothing about the symbol chair that connects it to that object. Once again, a symbol is an arbitrary representation.

It is sometimes difficult to recognize that symbols are just arbitrary representations. For English speakers, it is difficult to think of an object you sit on as anything but a chair. It seems as though there is a natural connection rather than an arbitrary connection. A stop sign—or more appropriately stop symbol—is another example of how people tend to see symbols as naturally linked to what they represent. It may seem natural that a red octagon with the capital letters S, T, O, and P written in the middle would compel you to cease forward movement when driving an automobile. However, there is no direct connection between that symbol and that particular behavior. A cow placed on a large pole could arbitrarily represent that same course of action just as naturally as the symbol people call a stop sign arbitrarily represents that action. There is no direct causal connection between a symbol and what it represents.

Because symbols are arbitrary, made-up conventions for representing something, they can be different in different cultures, and strangers need extra help. When Steve’s mother first came to the United States, for example, she could find directions not to “toilets” but only to “restrooms,” and she did not want a rest. Eventually, she had to ask someone. The euphemism restroom is not immediately obvious to cultural outsiders as a reference to toilet facilities. In other cultures—for example, in England—they may be referred to as “conveniences” or by a sign saying “WC” (meaning water closet). Even some indicators for restrooms within U.S. culture are quite confusing, as they very clearly require a shared understanding of cultural reference points (for example, we have seen indicators for “Does and Bucks,” “Pointers and Setters,” “Lads and Lasses,” and “Knights in Need and Damsels in Distress”).

Making things even more difficult is the fact that the same symbol can mean a variety of different things even in the same culture. We talk more about meaning in the next section, but for now consider how the symbolic act of waving to someone can have multiple meanings (e.g., a greeting, a farewell gesture, or an attempt to gain attention). The word mouse can mean an animal scurrying across your kitchen floor or something attached to your computer. A police officer’s uniform is a symbol for “power,” “official,” “law and order,” or “corruption” depending upon a person’s perspective. The complexity of symbols is further evidence of the complexity of communication, but recognizing such complexities will enable you to begin constructing a more advanced understanding and appreciation of communication.
Communication Requires Meaning

Communication requires that symbols convey meaning: What a symbol represents is said to be its meaning. Particular meanings, however, are not tied to only one symbol but can be conveyed in multiple ways using different symbols. For example, happiness can be conveyed by saying “I’m happy,” by giving a thumbs-up sign, or by jumping up and down when your team scores. A friend may indicate “I’m happy” just by talking more frequently than otherwise. Over the course of the relationship, you have learned that frequency of talk is a meaningful indicator of his or her emotional state. Furthermore, because they are completely arbitrary, symbols have the potential for multiple meanings subject to change.

Social Construction of Meaning

Social construction involves the way in which symbols take on meaning in a social context or society as they are used over time. Communication scholars Hopper, Knapp, and Scott (1981) pointed out this context in personal relationships, such as when romantic couples develop code words and phrases (“personal idioms”). These are secret ways to refer to other people or to discreetly tell each other that, say, it is time to leave a party early. You could quite easily say openly to your partner, “My left foot itches” as a code phrase for “I’m very bored; let’s get out of here,” but the second phrase would be very impolite to say in front of others.

The meaning of symbols within a society or a relationship does not develop overnight but instead results from continued use and negotiation of meaning within that society or relationship, as shown by the yellow ribbon example in Figure 1.1. If such a change can occur, any meaning attached to a symbol has been arbitrarily constituted and socially constructed.

Meaning and Context

A single symbol or message can also have multiple meanings when used in different contexts. For example, the physical context, or the actual location in which a symbol is used, will impact its meaning. If you said, “There is a fire” while in a campground, it would mean something entirely different than if you said those exact same words while in a crowded movie theater.

The same symbols will also differ in meaning according to the relational context, or the relationship shared by the people interacting. Look again at the earlier example of saying “I love you.” It means something vastly different said to you by your mother, your brother, your friend, your priest, your instructor, the president of the United States, your physician, someone you have been dating for more than a year, or someone you have just met on a blind date.

![Figure 1.1](image_url)

**Figure 1.1** Symbols such as the yellow ribbon tied around a tree have held multiple meanings over time.

The situational context will also impact the meaning of a symbol. Consider the phrase “I love you” said by the same person (e.g., your mother) on your birthday, after a fight with her, as you leave home for school, on her deathbed, at Thanksgiving, or at the end of a phone call.

Verbal and Nonverbal Influence on Meaning

Accompanying verbal and nonverbal symbols will also impact meaning. For instance, the same words send different messages depending on how they are delivered. Officially beating the example to death, consider “I love you” said by your romantic partner in a short, sharp way; in a long, lingering way; with a frown; with a smile; with a hand on your arm as you get up to leave; or with a hesitant and questioning tone of voice.

Further, you know when someone is being sarcastic—and accordingly how to interpret his or her verbal message—based on nonverbal behavior such as tone of voice and facial expression. We discuss the interaction between verbal and nonverbal communication in greater detail in Chapter 3, but for now just recognize how determining meaning is more complex than it may originally seem.

Meaning and the Medium

The medium, or the means through which a message is conveyed, will also impact meanings of a message. A medium might include sound waves or sight—especially when interacting face-to-face with someone. It can also include cell phones, text messages, e-mail, instant messaging, chat rooms, social networking sites, a note placed on someone’s windshield, smoke signals, or many other methods of communication.

The topic is especially important in cases involving a medium. For instance, breaking up with a romantic partner can be accomplished using any of the means listed above, but some may be deemed more appropriate than others. Breaking up with someone face-to-face may be considered more appropriate than sending him or her a text message or changing your relational status on Facebook from “In a relationship” to “Single.” Beyond the message of wanting to break up, additional messages including how you viewed the romantic partner, the
relationship itself, and yourself are conveyed based on the medium used. We address relational technologies such as cell phones and the Internet in more detail in Chapter 9, but for now just recognize their potential impact on meaning.

Communication Is Cultural

Another characteristic of communication is that it is cultural. Different cultures make different assumptions and take different knowledge for granted. Each time you talk to someone, from your culture or another, you are taking knowledge for granted, doing what your culture expects, and treating people in ways the culture acknowledges. You are doing, performing, and enacting your culture through communication.

Ultimately, culture influences communication while communication creates and reinforces these cultural influences. Consider what took place during your most recent face-to-face conversation with someone. Did you greet this person with a kiss or a handshake? Was there additional touch or no touch at all? How far were you standing from one another? Did you maintain eye contact? What were you wearing? Did you take turns talking, or did you talk at the same time? How did you refer to one another? What did you talk about? The physical setting impact what was discussed? How was the conversation brought to a close? What happened at the end? Your answers to these questions are based in part on cultural expectations.

When you follow these cultural expectations, you are also reinforcing them. Their position as the “proper” way to do things has been strengthened. Cultural expectations are also reinforced when someone violates them. Consider the most recent experience when you or someone else did something embarrassing. It was probably embarrassing because cultural expectations had been violated. Or, if there was no touch in your most recent face-to-face conversation, what would have happened if you had touched the other person? If touching would have been inappropriate, then the other person may have responded in a negative manner—enforcing cultural expectations.

Communication Is Relational

As mentioned previously, communication and relationships are intertwined. Communication impacts relationships, and relationships impact communication. The ways in which communication and relationships are interconnected are fully explored throughout the
book. For now, it is important to recognize that relationships are assumed each time you communicate with someone.

Paul Watzlawick and his colleagues (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967) put it a little differently, suggesting that whenever you communicate with someone, you relate to him or her at the same time. All communication contains both a content (message) level and a relational level, which means that, as well as conveying information, every message indicates how the sender of a message and the receiver of that message are socially and personally related.

Sometimes the relational connection between sender and receiver is obvious, such as when formal relational terms (e.g., dad) or terms unique to a relationship (e.g., sweetie or stinky) are included. Even when addressing a stranger, people are more likely to say “Excuse me” than “Hey, jerk.”

Sometimes the relational connection between sender and receiver is less obvious, but relational cues within communication would still enable you to determine, for instance, who is the boss and who is the employee, who is the professor and who is the student, who is the parent and who is the child, or who is the server and who is the customer. For example, yelling “Come into my office! Now!” indicates a status difference just through the style of the communication. Because the relationships between people most often are not openly expressed but subtly indicated or taken for granted in most communication, the content and relational components of messages are not always easy to separate.

Exploring the relational characteristic of communication a bit further, it can be maintained that relationships create worlds of meaning for people through communication, and communication produces the same result for people through relationships. Group decision making, for example, is accomplished not just by the logic of arguments, agenda setting, and solution evaluations but also by group members’ relationships with one another outside the group setting. Groups that meet to make decisions almost never come from nowhere, communicate, make a decision, and then go home. The members know one another, talk informally outside the group setting, and have personal likes and dislikes for one another that will affect their discussions about certain matters. Many decisions that appear to be made during an open discussion are actually sometimes tied up before the communication begins. Words have been dropped in ears, promises made, factions formed, and relationships displayed well in advance of any discussion.

Consider examples from your life. Is everyone equal in your family? How are your interactions with friends different from your interactions with enemies? When watching television, does it make a difference whether you like the newscaster? Have you ever felt a connection to a character in a movie? On your last job interview, did the employer treat you like a potential valued colleague or an interchangeable worker? Are you more likely to contact some people through text messages and less likely to contact other people through text messages? When you listen to a speech, what difference does it make feeling as if the speaker understands and cares about you? We examine these questions and more throughout the remainder of the book.
Communication Involves Frames

Communication is very complex, but the use of frames helps people make sense of things. **Frames** are basic forms of knowledge that provide a definition of a scenario, either because both people agree on the nature of the situation or because the cultural assumptions built into the interaction and the previous relational context of talk give them a clue (Wood & Duck, 2006). Think of the frame on a picture and how it pulls your attention into some elements (the picture) and excludes all the rest (the wall, the gallery, the furniture). In similar fashion, a communication frame draws a boundary around the conversation and pulls our attention toward certain things and away from others.

Frames help people understand their role in a conversation and what is expected of them. If you are being interviewed, for instance, your understanding of the interview frame lets you know that the interviewer will be asking questions and you will be expected to answer them. Likewise, your understanding of the restaurant frame helps you understand why one person is talking about “specials” and insisting that you make decisions based on a piece of laminated cardboard that lists costs of food. Your understanding of the classroom frame will inform you of what you should do as a student and how you should interact with your instructor and with your classmates. A shared understanding of these frames is what enables people to make sense of what is taking place to coordinate their symbolic activities.

People also use framing assumptions to make decisions about what symbols are used and how these symbols should be interpreted.

Your relationship with someone and your knowledge of that person, for instance, influence what can be taken for granted or left unsaid and what must be explained. Having both taught at the University of Iowa, when your authors talk with one another, we can include words or terms that presume knowledge of the university (such as *Hawkeyes*, *Pentacrest*, and *LR1-VAN*). These terms require a background of knowledge built into the interpretation of the words themselves, some of which depends specifically on knowing about the University of Iowa (e.g., that University of Iowa students are nicknamed “Hawkeyes,” that the Pentacrest is the administration...
center, and that LR1-VAN is a particular lecture hall). Each term would not need to be explained in our conversation because both of us know that the other one understands what those words, or symbols, mean. We talk more about how friends often talk in special codes, or conversational hypertext, in Chapter 2.

Communication Is Both Presentational and Representational

Communication is both representational and presentational. Accordingly, although it normally describes facts or conveys information (representation), it also presents your particular version of the facts or events (presentation). Communication is never neutral. It always conveys the perspective or worldview of the person sending a message. Your communication with other people presents them with a way of looking at the world that is based on how you prefer them to see it. Communication is not a neutral descriptive representation; it is always presentational and potentially persuasive (Hauser, 1986).

At first glance, the notion of communication being both presentational and representational is difficult to grasp. Consider the following way of looking at this issue. When you speak to someone, you have a number of words—that can be used to construct your message. You will choose some words to construct the message and not choose other words. You will arrange those words chosen in certain ways and not in other ways. Your selection of words and the arrangement of those words are meaningful acts. What you do not say is often as important as what you do say. Your use of words and your construction of messages do not just represent ideas and information; these acts present your view of the world to others.

On some occasions, the presentation of these views is carefully developed. For example, imagine or recall a situation in which a friend has questioned something you have done, but you believe your actions were justified and want to explain this justification to your friend. In such cases you would likely select your words very carefully and thoughtfully, wanting your friend to view the situation from your perspective. Your message is conveying information (representational) while at the same time providing a glimpse into your perspective and how you want your friend to view the situation (presentational).

On other occasions, the selection of words may not be carefully planned but nevertheless presents your perspective to others. In fact, each time someone communicates, a worldview is being shared through the selection of terms, regardless of how much thought has gone into the construction of a message. Someone saying, “I suppose I should probably go to work now,” in a gloomy manner provides a glimpse into how...
that person views his or her job, presumably not favorably. Someone saying, “I get to go to my communication class now,” in an understandably excited manner provides a glimpse into how that person views the course, presumably very favorably.

The representational and presentational nature of communication is not limited to interactions between people but includes all types of communication. Consider the communication class example above. Our use of the descriptor *understandably excited* provides a glimpse into the worldview of your authors. When you give a persuasive speech, you do not just give the facts (representation); instead, you carefully select those facts that will make your presentation more persuasive. When the two sides in a court case tell their stories, they are not representing reality but presenting two different ways to think about an event. When a conservative news channel reports political events, it picks up on different aspects of the news than a liberal news channel does. Both channels explain, analyze, and evaluate events differently. Each channel presents reality in the way it wants you to understand it. In this sense, you might want to think of representation as “facts” and presentation as “spin.”

**Communication Is a Transaction**

The transactional nature of communication is the final characteristic we will address in this chapter. When addressing communication as a transaction, though, we first must address two other common ways of thinking about communication: communication as action and communication as interaction. Each way of thinking about communication assumes something different about how communication works, with communication as transaction being the more sophisticated and more fruitful way of thinking about communication.

**Communication as Action**

**Communication as action** is simply the act of a sender sending a message to a receiver. Communication as action occurs when someone leaves a message on your voice mail, posts a message on your desk, or puts a message in a bottle in the ocean—that is, when someone transmits a message. So if Carlos sends an e-mail to Melissa, communication has occurred. It is pretty simple, really. However, it is not too interesting. If action was all there was to communication, we would be studying something else and not writing books about it. Communication as action could be developed slightly by questioning whether someone must *receive* a message for it to be communication. What if Melissa does not read her e-mail? Has communication truly occurred? According to the definition of communication as action, the answer is yes, but really all you know is that there has been an attempt to communicate. If communication was only an action, this book would end here, and you would likely not be studying communication in a class.
Communication as Interaction

Communication as interaction counts something as communication only if there is an exchange of information between two (or more) individuals. Using the previous example, communication exists between Carlos and Melissa if Carlos sends Melissa an e-mail and Melissa replies. This exchange represents a much more typical perception of communication. Someone sends a message, which is received by someone who in turn sends a message back to the original receiver. While this view of communication is slightly more advanced than communication as action, it remains limited in its scope and fails to capture what truly happens when people communicate.

Communication as Transaction

An even more sophisticated way to see communication is communication as transaction, or the construction of shared meanings or understandings between two (or more) individuals. For example, communication exists between Carlos and Melissa if, through their e-mail messages, they both arrive at the shared realization that they understand/love/know/need each other. It is also transactive communication if an exchange of messages results in a deal, an agreement, or a contract. In other words, communication in this sense is more than the exchange of literal messages. The speakers get more out of it, and extra meanings (e.g., about the relationships between the people) are communicated above and beyond the content of the messages exchanged.

Communication is interesting and worthy of study not because it merely involves the exchange of messages but because something magical and extra happens in this process. Two people speak and trust is built (transacted); two people touch one another and love is realized (transacted); two people argue and power is exerted (transacted); someone calls a grown man “boy” and racial bigotry is transacted; a man holds the door open for a woman and either sexist stereotyping or politeness is transacted. In all cases, the communication message transacts or constitutes something above and beyond the symbols (words or nonverbal actions) being exchanged.

Communication does not just create meaning; it creates the stuff of life. This constitutive approach to communication maintains that communication creates or brings into existence something that has not been there before. From the transactional/constitutive point of view, communication does not just construct meaning. It is through communication that relationships are created, that culture is created, that gender is created, that ethnicity is created, that sexuality is created, and even that reality is created. These are not only created through communication but also maintained, negotiated, challenged, and altered through communication.
For instance, relationships are not locations that we suddenly jump into—even though people refer to being in a relationship. Instead, relationships are quite literally talked into existence. It is through communication—especially talk, but also nonverbal communication—that relationships are brought into being, and it is through communication that the maintenance, negotiation, challenges, and alterations of relationships occur.

**FOCUS QUESTIONS REVISITED**

1. **What are symbols?**
   Symbols are arbitrarily selected representations of something with no direct connection to that which they represent. Though sometimes used interchangeably, the terms *symbol* and *sign* do not describe the same thing. Signs are consequences or indicators of something specific, which human beings cannot change by their arbitrary actions or labels.

2. **How is meaning established?**
   Because they are completely arbitrary, symbols have the potential for multiple meanings subject to change. The meaning assigned to a symbol has been socially constructed and is contingent on the contexts (physical, relational, situational) in which the symbol is used and other symbolic activity (verbal and nonverbal), as well as the medium used to transmit it.

3. **Why should communication be considered cultural?**
   Culture influences communication while communication creates and reinforces these cultural influences. Each time someone communicates, he or she is taking knowledge for granted, doing what his or her culture expects, and treating people in ways the culture acknowledges. Culture is accomplished, performed, and enacted through communication.

4. **Why should communication be considered relational?**
   All communication contains both a content (message) level and a relational level, which means that, as well as conveying information, every message indicates how the sender of a message and the receiver of that message are socially and personally related. Communication and relationships are intertwined. Communication impacts relationships, and relationships impact communication.

5. **What are communication frames?**
   Communication frames are basic forms of knowledge that provide a definition of a scenario, either because both people agree on the nature of the situation or because the cultural assumptions built into the interaction and the previous relational context of talk give them a clue. A communication frame draws a boundary around the conversation and pulls our attention toward certain things and away from others. Frames help people understand their role in a conversation and what is expected of them. People also use framing assumptions to make decisions about what symbols are used and how these symbols should be interpreted.
6. What does it mean to view communication as both representational and presentational?
Communication describes facts or conveys information (representation) while conveying the perspective or worldview or slant of the person sending a message (presentation). Communication gives other people and audiences a way of looking at the world that is based on how the source of a message prefers them to see it.

7. What does it mean to view communication as a transaction?
Viewing communication as a transaction means understanding that communication is more than just the simple exchange of messages. Rather, communication involves the construction of shared meanings or understandings between two (or more) individuals. Moreover, communication constitutes, or creates, aspects of life such as relationships, culture, gender, and even reality.

KEY CONCEPTS

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medium 12
presentation 16
representation 16
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social construction 11
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QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR FRIENDS

1. Ask your friends to define communication. In what ways do their definitions align with the characteristics of communication discussed in this chapter? In what ways do their definitions counter these characteristics?
2. Ask your friends to consider the difference between signs and symbols. Do they find it difficult to view some symbols as being completely arbitrary?
3. Ask your friends whether a message must be received in order for communication to occur. What do their answers tell you about viewing communication as an action?

MEDIA LINKS

1. In what ways do song lyrics not merely entertain but also present particular ways of living, particular attitudes, and particular styles? Find examples that present relationships differently (e.g., from The Killers, Lady Gaga, Otis Redding, Toby Keith, Mel Tormé, The Beatles).
2. Watch a political discussion on C-SPAN, on a television news channel, or online. How are opposing positions being presented? Is the distinction between representation and presentation obvious or hidden?
3. Watch the audio and visual coverage of a live event on television or online. Then read about the same event in a newspaper the next day. How does the medium impact your understanding of the event and the meanings you assign to the event?
ETHICAL ISSUES

1. What assumptions appear to be built into people’s speech concerning race, gender, sexuality, and age? Are such assumptions justified, or should no assumptions be made concerning these aspects of a person?

2. Is communicating in a manner consistent with someone’s cultural expectations but inconsistent with your normal communication style unethical?

3. Your communication with someone may appeal to certain relational obligations. For instance, friends may be expected to do certain things (give someone a ride) if they are truly friends. Is it ethical to appeal to such obligations, or is it simply part of being a friend? Are there any limits to what a person may ask someone else to do based on their relationship?

ANSWERS TO PHOTO CAPTIONS

Photo 1.1  ■  No. Communication is actually quite complex.

Photo 1.2  ■  Traffic signs are really symbols rather than signs.

Photo 1.3  ■  Physical context entails the actual location in which a symbol is used.

Photo 1.4  ■  The women are probably close friends as demonstrated by obvious enjoyment of the conversation as well as their physical closeness and touch, which are signs of intimacy.

Photo 1.5  ■  Though it could result in an interaction or in the occurrence of a transaction, simply sending a text message would be considered an act.

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REFERENCES


