Interpersonal Communication

THE WHOLE STORY

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Why do people communicate?

How does communication affect our relationships with others?

What makes someone a competent interpersonal communicator?

CHAPTER OUTLINE

1. Why Do We Communicate?
2. The Nature of Communication
3. How Do We Communicate Interpersonally?
4. Building Your Communication Competence
Amiya and Natalie

Amiya’s boyfriend, Tyler, had been drinking a lot lately, even for him. Amiya was worried about him but was afraid to say something because he got angry so easily. She tried talking to her sister Sara about it, but Sara was completely self-absorbed and never seemed to listen. On top of that, Amiya’s dad had just been diagnosed with lung cancer, and she suspected he was downplaying how serious it was. One day when Amiya was feeling completely overwhelmed, she called her best friend, Natalie, and broke down on the phone. During their two-hour conversation, Natalie listened to her problems and said, “I’m so sorry to hear about what you’re going through.” Even though they’d had many such conversations over the years, Amiya was still amazed at how much better she felt after talking with Natalie. No matter what was going badly in her life, she could always count on Natalie to lift her spirits and help her put her problems in perspective. Natalie didn’t necessarily solve Amiya’s problems for her, but she always listened nonjudgmentally, provided feedback, and allowed Amiya to talk through her feelings and frustrations with someone who cared. “Thank goodness for friends,” Amiya thought.

We all have relationships, and we all know how challenging they can be. Sometimes even our closest friends can get under our skin. Sometimes our family members aren’t completely honest with us. Sometimes we don’t quite know how to reach out to others when they need our help.

At the same time, relationships are wonderful, amazing things. Our friends can make us laugh, keep us sane, and pick us up when we’re feeling down. Our relatives can give us the kind of unconditional love that lets us know we’ll never be alone. Our romantic partners can make us feel as though we’re the only person in the world who really matters.

When you think about it, it’s quite remarkable that human relationships can be the source of such heartache and such joy. What makes the difference between a relationship that’s going well and one that’s going poorly? One of the biggest factors is how we communicate. Many of Amiya’s relational problems involved communication: She was unsure of how to talk to Tyler, Sara didn’t really listen to her, and she felt her dad wasn’t being forthright about his condition. By contrast, the open, supportive communication she had with Natalie made that friendship very positive. It’s tough to
have good relationships without good communication—and because relationships are so important to us, learning about communication can greatly benefit our lives.

In this chapter, you’ll learn:

1. What types of needs communication helps us meet
2. How communication functions in our relationships
3. What makes communication interpersonal
4. How we can become more competent communicators

**Why Do We Communicate?**

Asking why we communicate may seem about as useful as asking why we breathe. After all, could you imagine your life without communication? We all have times, of course, when we prefer to be alone. Nevertheless, most of us would find it nearly impossible—and very unsatisfying—to go through life without the chance to interact with others. As we’ll see in this section, communication touches many aspects of our lives, from our physical and other everyday needs to our experiences with relationships, spirituality, and identity.

**Communication Meets Physical Needs**

You might be surprised to hear it, but communication keeps us healthy. Humans are such inherently social beings that when we are denied the opportunity for interaction, our mental and physical health can suffer as a result. This is a major reason why solitary confinement is considered such a harsh punishment. Several studies have shown that when people are cut off from others for an extended period of time, their health can quickly deteriorate.1 Similarly, individuals who feel socially isolated because of poverty, homelessness, mental illness, or other stigmatizing situations can also suffer from a lack of quality interaction with others.2

It may sound like an exaggeration to say that we can’t survive without human contact, but that statement isn’t far from the truth, as a bizarre experiment in the thirteenth century helped to show. German emperor Frederick II wanted to know what language humans would
CHAPTER 1 ABOUT COMMUNICATION

You’re likely to encounter a number of intuitive research findings as you study interpersonal communication, and your intuition is probably right most of the time. Intuition fails us on occasion, however, which is one reason why the systematic study of communication is so useful. In the “Fact or Fiction?” boxes, we’ll take a look at some common ideas about communication to determine whether they’re as true as we think they are.

For instance, you’ve probably heard of the “nature versus nurture” debate. This is an ongoing discussion about why people are the way they are and why they do the things they do. Is it because of the way they were raised—the nurture side—or because of factors such as genes or hormones—the nature side? It’s easy to see how communication might be affected by nurture. For example, when children are raised in different cultures or different religions, they often communicate differently. Is communication also influenced by genetic or biological factors?

As we’ll note throughout this book, the answer is a resounding yes. Research shows us, for instance, that communication traits such as shyness or argumentativeness are largely inherited genetically. There is also evidence that changes in the balance of hormones or other chemicals in a person’s body can greatly alter the way that person behaves. Communication behavior in turn seems to affect biology. For example, when we express affection to a loved one, the levels of our stress hormones are reduced.

As we talk about the relationship between biology and communication in this book, it’s important to keep one thing in mind: Saying that a behavior is influenced by biology doesn’t mean that the behavior is uncontrollable. People may inherit a tendency toward shyness, for example, but that doesn’t mean they can’t learn to become more outgoing. By understanding how the body affects—and is affected by—our communication behaviors, we can gain a better appreciation of the roles that both nature and nurture play in shaping who we are.

Ask Yourself:

- Which aspects of communication do you think are primarily learned? Which do you think are primarily biological?
- In what ways might people use communication behaviors to improve their health?


speak naturally if they weren’t taught any particular language. To find out, he placed 50 newborns in the care of nurses who were instructed only to feed and bathe them but not to speak to them or hold them. The emperor never discovered the answer to his question because all the infants died.3 This experiment was clearly unethical and, fortunately, wouldn’t be repeated today, but more recent studies conducted in
orphanages and adoption centers have convincingly shown that human interaction, especially touch, is critical for infants’ survival and healthy development.4

Social interaction keeps adults healthy too. Research shows that people without strong social ties, such as close friendships and family relationships, are more likely to suffer major ailments, such as heart disease and high blood pressure, and to die prematurely than people who have close, satisfying relationships.5 They are also more likely to suffer basic ailments, such as colds, and they often take longer to recover from illnesses or injuries.6 As Anne Morrow Lindbergh noted in the quote at the start of this section, good communication stimulates us and makes us feel alive.

The importance of social interaction is often particularly evident to people who are stigmatized. A stigma is a characteristic that discredits a person, causing him or her to be seen as abnormal or undesirable.7 It isn’t the attribute itself that stigmatizes a person, however, but the way that attribute is viewed by others in that person’s society. In the United States, for instance, being HIV-positive is widely stigmatized because of its association with two marginalized populations—gay men and intravenous drug users—even though many people with the disease do not belong to either group.8 Note that U.S. Americans don’t tend to stigmatize people with asthma or diabetes or even cancer to the same extent as they do people with HIV, even though these other illnesses can also be serious or even life-threatening.

Being stigmatized leads people in many marginalized groups to feel disrespected and shamed about their conditions. In U.S. American society, there are stigmas associated with being homeless, poor, old, disabled, lesbian or gay, alcoholic, mentally ill, and, in some circles, divorced, even though a person may have no choice about belonging to any of these groups.9

People who are stigmatized might say they frequently feel like outsiders who “don’t fit in” with those around them. As a result, they may be more likely to suffer the negative physical effects of limited social interaction. Going further, the less social interaction they have, the more they are likely to continue feeling stigmatized. Although not everyone needs the same amount of interaction to stay healthy, communication plays an important role in maintaining our health and well-being. To understand more about how communication and biology are interrelated, take a look at the “Fact or Fiction” box on page 6.

Communication Meets Relational Needs

Besides our physical needs, we have several relational needs, such as needs for companionship and affection, relaxation, and escape.10 We don’t necessarily have the same needs in all our relationships—you probably value your friends for somewhat different reasons than you value your relatives, for instance. The bottom line, though, is that we need relationships, and communication is a large part of how we build and keep those relationships.11

Think about how many structures in our lives are designed to promote social interaction. Neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, malls, theaters, and restaurants are all social experiences in which we almost always interact with people in some way. In addition, the Internet has opened up multiple ways of connecting with others, and many people have met new friends or romantic partners online.12 Imagine how challenging it would be to form and maintain strong social relationships if you lacked the ability to communicate with others. This is a common experience for many immigrants, who often struggle to acculturate and learn the language of their new environments and may feel lonely or overlooked by others during that process.13

A more extreme example of the challenges of forming relationships without the ability to communicate involves Victor of Aveyron, a child found in France in the late eighteenth century after apparently spending his entire childhood alone in the woods.
After twice being captured and escaping, he eventually emerged from the forest on his own and was cared for by a local biologist and later by a young medical student. Because he had not acquired language, however, it was quite challenging for Victor—who later became known as “the Wild Boy of Aveyron”—to form strong emotional relationships with his caretakers.

Some scholars believe our need for relationships is so fundamental that we can hardly get by without them. For example, research has shown that having a rich social life is one of the most powerful predictors of a person’s overall happiness. In fact, the most important predictor of happiness in life—by far—is how happy you are in your marriage. Marital happiness is more important than income, job status, education, leisure time, or anything else in accounting for how happy people are with their lives. On the negative side, people in distressed marriages are much more likely to suffer major depression, and they even report being in worse physical health than their happily married counterparts.

Of course, the cause-and-effect relationship between marriage and happiness isn’t a simple one. It may be that strong marriages promote happiness and well-being, or it may be that happy, healthy people are more likely than others to be married. Whatever the association, personal relationships clearly play an important role in our lives, and communication helps us form and maintain them.

Communication Fills Identity Needs

Are you energetic? trustworthy? intelligent? withdrawn? Each of us can probably come up with a long list of adjectives to describe ourselves, but here’s the critical question: How do you know you are these things? In other words, how do you form an identity?

The ways we communicate with others—and the ways others communicate with us—play a major role in shaping the way we see ourselves. As you’ll learn in Chapter 3, people form their identities partly by comparing themselves with others. If you consider yourself intelligent, for instance, what that really means is that you see yourself as more intelligent than most other people. If you think you’re shy, you see most other people as more outgoing than you are. If you think of yourself as attractive, it’s because you think you’re better looking than most other people.

One way we learn how we compare with others is through our communication with those around us. If people treat you as intelligent, shy, or attractive, chances are you’ll begin to believe you are those things. In other words, those qualities will become part of how you see yourself. As you’ll see in Chapter 3, your identity develops over the course of your life, and communication plays a critical role in driving that process. Good communicators also have the ability to emphasize different aspects of their identities in different situations. For example, during a job interview it might be
WHY DO WE COMMUNICATE?

Communication enables many people to express their faith and spirituality. It is most important for you to portray your organized, efficient side, whereas when you're on a date you might choose to emphasize your fun-loving nature and sense of humor.

**Communication Meets Spiritual Needs**

An important aspect of identity for many people is their spirituality. Spirituality includes the principles someone values in life (for example, “I value loyalty” or “I value equal treatment for all people”). It also encompasses people’s morals, or their notions about right and wrong (for instance, “It’s never okay to steal, no matter what the circumstances” or “I would lie in order to save a life, because life is more important than honesty”). Finally, spirituality involves people’s beliefs about the meaning of life, which often include personal philosophies, an awe of nature, a belief in a higher purpose, and religious beliefs and practices (such as “I believe in God” or “I believe I will reap what I sow in life”).

A recent survey of more than 112,000 U.S. college students found that many students consider some form of spirituality to be an important part of their identity. About 75% of those surveyed said they search for meaning and purpose in life and have discussions about the meaning of life with their friends. In addition, more than 60% claimed their spirituality was a source of joy in their lives, and almost 50% affirmed that they seek out opportunities to grow spiritually. For people who include spirituality as a part of their identity, communication provides a means of expressing and sharing spiritual ideas and practices with one another.

**Communication Serves Instrumental Needs**

Finally, people communicate to meet their practical, everyday needs. Researchers refer to these needs as **instrumental needs**. Instrumental needs include short-term tasks such as ordering a drink in a bar, scheduling a haircut on the telephone, filling

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Communication enables many people to express their faith and spirituality.
out a rebate card, and raising your hand when you want to speak in class. They also include longer-term goals such as getting a job and earning a promotion. These communicative behaviors may not always contribute much to our health, our relationships, our identity, or our spirituality. Each behavior is valuable, however, because it serves a need that helps us get through our daily lives.

Meeting instrumental needs probably doesn’t seem as interesting as forging new relationships or as meaningful as expressing spiritual beliefs. It’s important for two reasons, though. The first reason is simply that we have many instrumental needs. In fact, most of the communication you engage in on a day-to-day basis is probably mundane and routine—not heavy, emotionally charged conversation, but instrumental interaction such as talking to professors about assignments or taking orders from customers at work. A second reason meeting instrumental needs is so important is that many of them—such as buying food at the store or ordering clothes online—really have to be met before other needs—such as maintaining quality relationships or finding career fulfillment—become relevant.21

The “At a Glance” box above provides a quick look at five types of needs that communication helps to meet.

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Learn It: How is communication related to our physical well-being? What relational needs does communication help us fill? In what ways do communication behaviors meet our identity needs? How does communication help us express spirituality? What are some of the instrumental needs served by communication?

Try It: Recall a recent conversation you had, and identify how your communication behavior contributed to your physical, relational, identity, spiritual, and instrumental needs, if at all. Which need or needs took precedence? Why?

Reflect on It: Can you identify ways in which your own communication meets your relational or spiritual needs? Do you communicate for any reasons that are not discussed in this section?
The Nature of Communication

Communication is so much a part of life that it’s easy to take it for granted. In one way or another, you’ve communicated practically every day you’ve been alive, so you may be wondering what you could possibly have left to learn about communication. In fact, researchers still have many questions about how people communicate, how we make sense of one another’s behaviors, and what effects communication has on our lives and our relationships.

We begin this section by looking at different ways to understand the communication process. Next, we’ll look at some important characteristics of communication, and we’ll discuss various ways to think about communication in social interaction. Finally, we’ll tackle some common myths about communication. Even though you communicate all the time, you’ll probably find there are still many interesting things to learn about the role of communication in our lives.

Three Models of Human Communication

How would you describe the process of communicating? It’s not as easy as it might seem, and even researchers have answered this question in different ways over the years. A formal description of a process such as communication is called a model. In this section we’ll look at three models that communication scholars have developed: the action, interaction, and transaction models. The action model was developed first, then the interaction model, and finally the transaction model. In this sense, these models represent the evolution of how communication researchers have defined and described communication over the years.

Communication as action. In the action model, we think of communication as a one-way process. Let’s say you want to leave work early one day to attend a parent-teacher conference at your daughter’s school, and you’re getting ready to ask your supervisor for permission. The action model starts with a source—you—who comes up with a thought or an idea you wish to communicate. To convey the idea that you’d like to leave early, you must encode it; that is, you must put your idea into the form of language or a gesture that your supervisor can understand. Through this process, you create a message, which consists of the verbal and/or nonverbal elements of communication to which people give meaning. In

FIGURE 1.1 The Action Model In the action model of communication, a sender encodes a message and conveys it through a communication channel for a receiver to decode. Leaving someone a voice mail message illustrates the one-way process of the action model.
this example, your message might be the question “Would it be all right if I left work a couple of hours early today?”

According to the action model, you then send your message through a communication channel, which is a type of pathway. For example, you can pose your question to your supervisor face-to-face. Alternatively, you can send your question by e-mail, through a text message, or by calling your supervisor on the phone. These are all channels of communication. Your supervisor acts as the receiver of the message; that is, the person who will decode or interpret it.

During the communication process, there is also likely to be some noise, which is anything that interferes with a receiver’s ability to attend to your message. The major types of noise are physical noise (such as background conversation in the classroom or static on the telephone line), psychological noise (such as other concerns your supervisor is dealing with that day), and physiological noise (such as fatigue or hunger). Experiencing any of these forms of noise could prevent your supervisor from paying full attention to your question.

You can see that the action model is very linear: A source sends a message through some channel to a receiver, and noise interferes with the message somehow. Many people talk and think about the communication process in this linear manner. For example, when you ask someone “Did you get my message?” you are implying that communication is a one-way process. The problem is that human communication is rarely that simple. It is usually more of a back-and-forth exchange than a one-way process—more similar to tennis than to bowling. Over time, this criticism of the action model of communication gave rise to an updated model known as the interaction model.

Communication as interaction. The interaction model takes up where the action model leaves off. It includes all the same elements: source, message, channel, receiver, noise, encoding, and decoding. However, it differs from the action model in two basic ways. First, it recognizes that communication is a two-way process. Second, it adds two elements to the mix: feedback and context.

If you’ve ever taken a physics class, you probably learned that every action has a reaction. That rule also applies to communication. Let’s say you’re telling your friend Julio about a person you find attractive at the hospital where you volunteer. As you tell your story, Julio probably nods and says “uh-huh” to show you he’s listening (or maybe he yawns because he worked late the night before). He might also ask you questions about how you met this person or tell you that he or she sounds nice. In other words, Julio reacts to your story by giving you feedback, or various verbal and nonverbal responses to your message. In this way, Julio is not just a passive receiver of your message. Instead, he is actively involved in creating your conversation.

Now let’s imagine you’re sharing your story with Julio while you’re having coffee in a crowded employee cafe. Would you tell your story any differently if you were alone? How about if you were in a classroom at school? What if your parents were in the same room?

All these situations are part of the context, or the environment that you’re in. This environment includes both the physical and the psychological context. The physical context is where you are physically interacting with each other. In contrast, the psychological context involves factors that influence people’s states of mind, such as how formal the situation is, how much privacy you have, and how emotionally charged the situation is. According to the interaction model, we take context into account when we engage in conversation. That is, we realize that what is appropriate in certain contexts may be inappropriate in others, so we adapt our behaviors accordingly.

By taking account of feedback and context, the interaction model presents the communication process more realistically than the action model does. In the case of your tell-
ing Julio about your new romantic interest, for instance, your story and Julio’s feedback would probably be affected by where you were speaking, how many other people could overhear you (if any), and whether those people were co-workers, classmates, family members, or strangers.

Although the interaction model is more realistic than the action model, it still has limitations. One drawback is that it doesn’t really represent how complex communication can be. Often during conversations, it seems as though two people are sending and receiving information at the same time rather than simply communicating back and forth one message at a time. The interaction model doesn’t really account for that process, however. To understand this aspect of communication, we turn to the transaction model, currently the most complete and widely used of the three models discussed in this chapter.

**Communication as transaction.** Unlike the action and interaction models, the transaction model of communication doesn’t distinguish between the roles of source and receiver. Nor does it represent communication as a series of messages going back and forth. Rather, it maintains that both people in a conversation are simultaneously sources and receivers. In addition, it argues that the conversation flows in both directions at the same time.

To understand the transaction model, imagine you’re a medical technician at a community clinic and you’re explaining to an elderly patient how to apply a prescription cream to his skin. You notice a confused look on his face, and perhaps a worried one as well. According to the interaction model, those facial expressions constitute feedback to your message. In contrast, the transaction model recognizes that you will interpret those expressions as a message in and of itself, making the patient a source and you a receiver. Note that this process occurs while you’re giving the patient your instructions. In other words, you are both sending messages to and receiving messages from the other at the same time.

Not only does the transaction model reflect the complex nature of communication, but it also leads us to think about context a little more broadly. It suggests that our communication is affected not only by the physical or psychological environment but also
by our culture, experience, gender, and social class, and even the history of our relationship with the person to whom we’re talking.

Let’s go back to our previous example. If you have a history with the elderly patient, you might help him understand your directions by referring back to products you have prescribed for him in the past. If he isn’t a native English speaker, you might have to demonstrate the use of the cream, rather than just describing it verbally. If he comes from a markedly different socioeconomic class from yours, then your instructions might take for granted that he can afford the medication. Sometimes it’s harder to consider how these aspects of context might affect how we communicate. According to the transaction model, however, they are always with us.

Clearly, then, researchers have many different ways of understanding the communication process. Instead of debating which model is right, it’s often more helpful to look at the useful ideas each model offers. When we do that, we find that each model fits certain situations better than others. For instance, sending a text message to your professor is a good example of the action model. You’re the source, and you convey your message through a written channel to a receiver (your professor). Noise includes any difficulty your professor experiences in opening up the message or understanding the intent of your message because of the language you have used.

A good example of the interaction model occurs when you submit a report at your job and the co-workers on your team comment on your recommendations in writing. You (the source) have conveyed your message through your report, and your co-workers (the receivers) have provided written feedback within the context of the activity. Noise in this example includes any difficulties either you or your co-workers experience in understanding what the other has said.

As we’ve seen, most conversations are good examples of the transaction model, because both parties are sending and receiving messages simultaneously. This process occurs, for instance, when you strike up a conversation with someone while standing in an airport security line. You might make small talk about where each of you is traveling that day or how annoying but necessary the security screening process is. As you do so, each of you is sending verbal and nonverbal messages to the other and is simultaneously receiving and interpreting such messages from the other. Your conversation is affected by the context, in that you may be communicating only

**FIGURE 1.3 The Transaction Model** The transaction model recognizes that both people in a conversation are simultaneously senders and receivers. The doctor encodes messages that her patient decodes, but the patient also encodes messages for the doctor to decode.

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to pass the time until one of you passes through the screening. It is also affected by 
noise, including the sound of the screeners’ instructions.

Each model, then, is useful in some situations but not in others. The action model is too simplistic to describe a face-to-face conversation, for instance, but when you’re just leaving a note for someone, it describes the situation quite well. As you come across examples of different communication situations in this book, you might ask yourself how well each model fits them.

Recall that these communication models were developed by communication researchers over time. As scholars came to appreciate the limitations of the action model, they developed the interaction model to take its place. Likewise, the shortcomings of the interaction model gave rise to the transaction model, which many researchers consider the most comprehensive description of communication. As our understanding of communication continues to grow, it is likely that researchers will develop new models that will represent the communication process even more accurately. Now that we’ve looked at some different ways of modeling the communication process, let’s consider some of communication’s most important characteristics.

**Six Characteristics of Communication**

Describing the communication process requires more than just mapping out how it takes place. We also need to catalog its important features. In this section, we’ll discover that:

- Communication relies on multiple channels
- Communication passes through perceptual filters
- People give communication its meaning
- Communication has literal meanings and relational implications
- Communication sends messages, whether intentional or unintentional
- Communication is governed by rules

**Communication relies on multiple channels.** In how many different ways do people communicate with one another? Facial expressions communicate how a person is feeling. A person’s gestures and tone of voice help others interpret his or her messages. Touch can signal feelings such as affection or aggression. Even a person’s clothing and physical appearance communicate messages about that person to others.

Some interpersonal communication contexts are channel-rich, such as a face-to-face conversation between friends. Other interpersonal communication contexts are channel-lean, such as sending and receiving text messages.
Some situations are **channel-rich contexts**, meaning that they involve many different communication channels at once. In face-to-face conversations, for instance, you can pay attention to your partners’ words, see their expressions and gestures, hear their tone of voice, and feel them touch you. That is, you experience multiple communication channels at once, and you can evaluate the information you receive from all the channels simultaneously. Other situations are **channel-lean contexts**, with a smaller number of channels.\(^2\) Text messaging, for example, relies almost entirely on text, so we don’t experience a person’s voice or gestures. As a consequence, we pay more attention to that person’s words, because that’s all we have to go on.

**Communication passes through perceptual filters.** Anything you put through a filter—such as air, water, or light—comes out a little differently from the way it went in. The same thing happens when we communicate: What one person says is not always exactly what the other person hears. We all “filter” incoming communication through our perceptions, experiences, biases, and beliefs.

Let’s say you’re listening to a senator speak on television. The way you process and make sense of the speech probably depends on how much you agree with the senator’s ideas or whether you belong to the same political party as he or she does. Two people with different political viewpoints may listen to the same speech but hear something very different. I may hear a set of logical, well thought-out ideas, whereas you may hear nothing but lies and empty promises.

Perceptual filters can also influence how two people understand their own words. In an episode of the television show *Friends*, Rachel (played by Jennifer Aniston) and her boyfriend, Ross (played by David Schwimmer), have a big fight and decide to go “on a break” from their relationship. They quickly learn that they perceive the meaning of being “on a break” quite differently. To Rachel, it simply means not seeing each other for a while but keeping their relationship intact in the meantime. To Ross, being on a break means his relationship with Rachel is over. Thus, in the wake of their conflict, Ross has sex with someone else. Rachel feels completely betrayed when she finds out. As a result, she and Ross end their relationship officially. It is important to note that Ross and Rachel agreed that they
were “on a break” when Ross slept with someone else but that they had very different perceptions of what “on a break” meant.

Many aspects of our lives can influence our perception of communication. Whether we’re aware of it or not, our ethnic and cultural background, gender, religious beliefs, socioeconomic status, intelligence and education, level of physical attractiveness, and experiences with illness, disease, and death can all act as filters, coloring the way we see the world and the way we make sense of communication. For example, you might listen sympathetically to someone describing her experiences of homelessness based on those and other characteristics. In contrast, other people might blame this person for her homelessness because they have different perceptual filters from yours.

**People give communication its meaning.** When we write or speak, we choose our words deliberately so we can say what we mean. Where does that meaning come from? By itself, a word has no meaning; it’s just a sound or a set of marks on a piece of paper or a monitor. A word is a symbol, or a representation of an idea, but the word itself isn’t the idea or the meaning. The meaning of words—and many other forms of communication—comes from the people and groups who use them.

Almost all language is arbitrary in the sense that words mean whatever groups of people decide they mean. As a result, we can’t assume that other people understand the meanings we intend to communicate just because we ourselves understand what we mean. For instance, what is a mouse? If you had asked that question 40 years ago, the obvious answer would have been that a mouse is a small rodent that likes cheese and is chased by cats. Today, however, many people know it as a pointing device for navigating within a computer screen. As another example, what is a robot? In the United States, it’s a humanlike machine that performs mechanical tasks. In South Africa, however, it’s a traffic light.

Those are just two examples of how the meaning of a word depends on who is using it and how meanings can vary over time and across cultures. How do you define each of the following words? What other meanings might they have, depending on who is using them?

- **pot**
- **crack**
- **flat**
- **gay**
- **cell**
- **biscuit**

You might know that in some countries a **flat** is an apartment and a **biscuit** is a cookie. How have the meanings of words such as **pot**, **cell**, **crack**, and **gay** changed within U.S. society over time?

**Communication has literal meanings and relational implications.** Nearly every verbal statement has a content dimension, which consists of the literal information being communicated about the subject of the message. When you say to your friend, “I’m kind of down today,” the content dimension of your message is that you’re feeling unhappy, bored, or depressed. When your roommate says, “We’re out of detergent again,” the content dimension of the message is that you have no detergent left.

There’s more to messages than their literal content, though. Many messages also carry signals about the nature of the relationship in which they’re shared. These signals are relational in nature, and they can vary depending on who is communicating and the context in which the communication takes place.
nals make up the relational dimension of the message. For example, by telling your friend you’re feeling down, you may also be sending the message “I feel comfortable enough with you to share my feelings”; or, you may be signaling “I want you to help me feel better.”

Likewise, you might interpret your roommate's statement that you're out of detergent as also saying “I'm sure you're aware of this but I'm just reminding you,” or you might take it as meaning “I'm irritated that you never replace household items when they are empty.” Even though these messages were never actually spoken, we often infer meanings about our relationships from the tone and manner in which the statements are made.

One way in which people distinguish between content and relational dimensions is through the use of meta-communication, which is communication about communication. Let’s say that Ethan asks his stepdad, Daniel, to read over his senior thesis before Ethan submits it to his undergraduate advisor. Daniel reads the manuscript and marks it up with critical comments such as “this argument isn’t convincing,” “awkward wording,” and “I can’t tell what you’re trying to say.” After reading Daniel’s comments, Ethan is crushed.

**Daniel:** I thought you wanted my feedback. I was just trying to help you make your thesis better; that’s what you asked for. Why are you taking my comments so personally?

**Ethan:** It’s not so much what you said, it’s how you said it.

By focusing his attention on Ethan’s request for feedback, Daniel is attending to the content dimension of their conversation. He can’t understand why Ethan is upset, because Ethan had asked him for his feedback. To Ethan, however, Daniel’s comments were overly harsh and insensitive, and they made him feel that Daniel didn’t care about his feelings. Therefore, Ethan’s focus is on the relational dimension of their conversation. To highlight this distinction, Ethan meta-communicates with Daniel by explaining that his hurt feelings were not caused by what Daniel said but by the way in which he said it. This phrase conveys Ethan’s thoughts about his communication with Daniel; thus it is meta-communicative.

**Communication sends a message, whether intentional or unintentional.** Much of what we communicate to others is deliberate. When you set up a job interview, for instance, you do so intentionally, having thought about why you want the job and how you will respond to the interviewer’s questions. Very rarely do you schedule an interview by accident.

You might, however, communicate a number of other things without meaning to. For example, have you ever tried hard to stay awake in an important meeting? Despite your efforts to look engaged and interested, you might not have been aware that your slouched posture and droopy eyelids were signaling the fatigue you were feeling, perhaps after a long day of working at a part-time job and attending several classes. In this instance, your behavior was sending unintentional messages.

Whether unintentional messages should qualify as communication has been a source of debate among communication scholars for many years. Some researchers believe that only deliberate, intentional messages are actually a part of communication, and that if you don’t intend to communicate, then you aren’t. Others subscribe to the belief that “you cannot not communicate,” meaning absolutely everything you do has communicative value.

My own position lies somewhere in between: Although I don’t believe every possible behavior is a form of communication, neither do I think behaviors must be intentional to have communicative value. I would suggest that even unintended messages—such as the ones you might have expressed while trying to stay awake during a meeting—are forms of communication, because even if they’re uninten-
tional, they still convey meaning. Many aspects of appearance illustrate this. For instance, seeing someone in a wheelchair probably leads you to different conclusions than seeing someone in a white lab coat or an orange prison jumpsuit, yet those messages might not be intentional on that person’s part.

**Communication is governed by rules.** Rules tell us what behaviors are required, preferred, or prohibited in various social contexts. Some rules for communication are explicit rules, meaning that someone has clearly articulated them. Perhaps your parents used to say, “Don’t talk with your mouth full.” Maybe the library or hospital posts a sign that reads “No cell phones allowed.” Many universities have explicit rules banning hate speech at campus events or in school publications. Social network applications such as Facebook and MySpace enforce specific guidelines regarding the content of text and photos. These are explicit communication rules because they express direct expectations for communicative behavior.

Explicit communication rules can also relate to personal appearance and modes of interacting with others in a group. In the 2004 movie *Mean Girls*, for instance, Cady Heron (played by Lindsay Lohan) enrolls in a public high school for the first time, where she meets a group of teenage girls known as “The Plastics.” One member, Gretchen Wieners (played by Lacey Chabert), instructs her on some of the group’s rules:

**Gretchen:** You can’t wear a tank top two days in a row and you can only wear your hair in a ponytail once a week, so I guess you picked today. Oh, and we only wear jeans or track pants on Fridays. If you break any of these rules, you can’t sit with us at lunch. I mean, not just you... any of us. Okay look, if I was wearing jeans today, I’d be sitting over there with the art freaks. Oh, we always vote before we ask someone to eat lunch with us, because you have to be considerate of the rest of the group. I mean, you wouldn’t buy a skirt without asking your friends first if it looks good on you.

**Cady:** I wouldn’t?

**Gretchen:** Right. Oh, and it’s the same with guys. I mean, you may think you like someone, but you could be wrong.
In this scene, Gretchen communicates explicit rules about how to dress and how to interact with others in the group that all members of The Plastics are expected to observe. Many communication rules, however, are implicit rules. These are rules that almost everyone in a certain social group knows and follows even though no one has formally articulated and expressed them.

In North American cultures, for instance, there are implicit rules about riding in an elevator, such as “Don’t get on if it’s already full” and “Don’t make eye contact with others while you’re riding.” There are also implicit rules about taking turns when you are waiting for some type of service, such as at a bank or a grocery store, including “Get into an orderly line” and “Don’t cut ahead of someone else.”

Most people seem to know and accept these rules, even though they usually aren’t posted anywhere—they’re just a part of everyone’s cultural knowledge. Because they’re implicit, though, they are likely to vary more from person to person than explicit rules do. For example, some people might believe it’s an implicit rule that you shouldn’t talk on your cell phone while in a crowded environment (for example, on a public bus during rush hour), whereas other people don’t see this behavior as inappropriate.

Now that we know more about the basic characteristics of communication, let’s take a look at some common beliefs about communication that are not as valid as they might seem.

**Dispelling Some Communication Myths**

Perhaps because communication is such an important part of life, people have many different ideas about it, some of which are not very accurate. We’ll take a look at five common communication myths in this section so that you’ll be better able to separate fact from fiction. These myths are:

- Everyone is an expert in communication.
- Communication will solve any problem.
- Communication can break down.
- Communication is inherently good.
- More communication is always better.

**Myth: Everyone is an expert in communication.** People communicate constantly in their day-to-day lives, so it’s easy to believe that just about everyone is an expert in communication. Indeed, in a nationwide survey of U.S. American adults conducted by the National Communication Association, fully 91% of participants rated their communication skills as above average. It’s important to remember, though, that having experience with something is not the same as having expertise in it. Many people drive, but that doesn’t make them expert drivers. Many people have children, but that doesn’t make them experts at parenting. Experience can be invaluable, but expertise requires the development of knowledge and ability that goes beyond personal experience. Thus, experts in driving, parenting, or communication have training in their fields and a level of understanding that most people who drive, parent, or communicate don’t have.

The information you’ll read in this book is based on expertise and scientific research, not just personal experience, and from time to time it may not match your own experiences as a communicator. That doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with your experience. At the same time, it also doesn’t mean that the research is wrong. Remember that all of us, even the experts, can learn more about communication if we keep an open mind. In fact, multiple studies in the U.S. workplace have shown that a large majority of workers could stand to improve their communication skills.
Myth: Communication will solve any problem. In 1967, the classic Paul Newman movie Cool Hand Luke featured a prison warden who had his own special way of dealing with inmates. Whenever things went wrong, he would say, “What we’ve got here is a failure to communicate,” after which he would beat the inmate unconscious and send him to solitary confinement. Sometimes it seems as though we could solve almost any problem, especially in our relationships, if only we could communicate better. It’s easy to blame a lack of communication when things go wrong. The fact is, however, that poor communication isn’t the cause of every problem.31

To understand why this is true, let’s go back to the opening vignette involving Amiya and her boyfriend, Tyler. Suppose they have been drifting apart for a while and Amiya decides they need to communicate better to save their relationship. When they finally sit down to talk, however, Tyler says very clearly that his feelings have changed and that he is no longer attracted to Amiya.

Did communication save their relationship? No; in fact it caused Amiya to realize that the relationship was probably already over. This might be better for both of them in the long run, so we could say that communication helped them come to that realization. Nevertheless, it didn’t solve the problem of their drifting apart in the first place. Therefore, we must be careful not to assume that better communication can resolve any problem we might face in our relationships.

Myth: Communication can break down. Just as we sometimes blame our problems on a lack of communication, many of us also point to a “breakdown in communication” as the cause of our relationship challenges. After months of trying to help his adult stepdaughter overcome her addiction to prescription painkillers, for instance, Justin feels that she is pushing him away. “Things were going fine for a while and she was really making progress,” he explains, “but then we had a complete communication breakdown.”

This metaphor makes intuitive sense to many of us. After all, our progress on a journey is halted if our car breaks down, so it’s easy to think that our progress in a relationship is halted because our communication has broken down. The problem is that communication isn’t a mechanical object like a car, or a dishwasher, or an iPod. Instead, communication is a process that unfolds between and among people over time.

It’s sometimes easy to blame a “breakdown” in communication for the problems we face in our relationships, as Justin did when he felt he was no longer getting through to his stepdaughter. What’s really happening in these situations is that we are no longer communicating effectively. In other words, the problem lies not with communication itself but with the way we’re using it. This is one reason why learning about communication—as you are doing in this class—can be of such benefit to your relationships.

Myth: Communication is inherently good. Watch almost any talk show and you’ll hear people say they no longer communicate with their romantic partners, parents, or others who are important to them. “Sure, we talk all the time,” someone might say, “but we don’t really communicate anymore.” Reflected in this kind of statement is the idea that “talking” means just producing words, but “communicating” means sharing meaning with another person in an open, supportive, and inherently positive manner.32

Thinking that communication is inherently good is similar to thinking that money is inherently good. Sometimes money can be put to positive uses, such as providing
a home for your family or donating to a worthy charity. At other times it can be put to negative uses, such as providing funding for a terrorist group. In either case, however, it isn’t the money itself that’s good or bad—it’s how it is used.

We can make the same observation regarding communication. We can use communication for positive purposes, such as expressing love for our parents or providing comfort to a grieving friend. We can also use it for negative purposes, such as intimidating or deceiving people. Like money, communication itself is neither inherently good nor inherently bad; instead, it can most accurately be described as amoral. It’s how we use communication that makes it positive or negative.

Myth: More communication is always better. Antonio is the kind of person who thinks that if people don’t agree with him, it’s only because they don’t understand him. Therefore, he talks on and on, figuring that others will eventually see things his way if he just gives them enough information. Maybe you know someone like that. Is it really the case, though, that more communication always produces a better outcome?

When people have genuine disagreements, more talk doesn’t always help. In some cases it can just lead to frustration and anger. In fact, a recent study of consultations between doctors and patients found that the more doctors talked, the more likely they were to get off track and forget about the patients’ problems, which can translate into worse care for the patient.33

When spending time with people you care about, put your cell phone away. Give your energy and attention to the person you are with, and let that person know he or she is more important to you than your phone.
We've already pointed out that communication can't solve every problem, so it shouldn’t surprise you to learn that more communication isn’t always preferred. Indeed, sometimes it seems that the less said, the better. As you’ll learn in this book, it’s often the effectiveness of our communication, rather than the amount of communication, that matters, which is why learning to be a competent communicator is so advantageous.
One way to appreciate the difference between more communication and better communication is to examine communication technologies. For instance, cell phones and the Internet let us communicate with others almost whenever we want to. Does this actually make us happier, though? Take a look at the “Dark Side” box on page 23 to read about one study that has addressed this question.

Learn It: What are the primary differences among the actional, interactional, and transactional models of communication? What does it mean to say that communication has literal and relational implications? What is the difference between having experience and having expertise?

Try It: Talk with a friend or a classmate about a topic that is very important to you. Experiment with talking less and caring less about getting your point across than you usually would. What happens when you talk less than you normally would? How do the transactional features of the conversation change?

Reflect on It: What are some implicit communication rules that you can recall? Why do you suppose we so often think communication can solve any problem?

How Do We Communicate Interpersonally?

Communication takes place in many contexts. Sometimes it involves one person talking to a large audience, such as when the president gives a speech on TV or a reporter writes an article in the newspaper. At other times it involves a small group of people communicating with one another, as in a college seminar, a team of surgeons in an operating room, or a football huddle. Communication occurs in families, in business organizations, in political institutions, in schools, and through the media. And, as you are probably aware, it often differs from one context to another. For example, few of us would talk to a grandparent the same way we would to a television reporter or a group of customers.

We communicate in many ways—so how do we know whether we’re communicating *interpersonally*?

In this section, we’ll look at what makes communication interpersonal, and we’ll learn how interpersonal communication is unique among forms of communication in the effects it has on people and their relationships.

What Makes Communication Interpersonal?

After Jakob had finished taking part in his Alcoholics Anonymous group meeting, all he wanted to do was talk with his sponsor one-on-one. There was something about these person-to-person conversations that he found more comforting and more engaging than the group discussions. Without necessarily realizing it, Jakob was taking note of the uniqueness of interpersonal communication.

**Interpersonal communication** consists of *communication that occurs between two people within the context of their relationship and that, as it evolves, helps them to*
negotiate and define their relationship. The content of an interpersonal conversa-
tion is sometimes highly intimate, as when two ro-
mantic partners discuss the details of a sensitive health issue that one of them is experiencing. Interpersonal conversations can also focus on more mundane, impersonal content, as when the same romantic partners talk about what they need to buy at the grocery store. The content of yet other interpersonal conversations falls somewhere along the continuum between intimate and mundane topics. Each of these conversations is interpersonal, however, to the extent that it helps people negotiate and define their relationships.

As Jakob noticed, interpersonal communication is different from many other forms of communication. To understand how, let’s take a look at some of its most important characteristics.

**Interpersonal communication occurs between two people.** The word *interpersonal* means “between people,” and interpersonal communication involves interaction between two people at once. If only one is person involved—as when you talk to yourself—that is *intrapersonal communication*. Communication that is being transmitted to large numbers of people is known as *mass communication*. Most research on interpersonal communication, by contrast, focuses on interaction within a *dyad*, which is a pair of people. Communication that occurs in small groups of three or more people, as in a family, on a committee, or in a support group, is called *small group communication*.

**Interpersonal communication takes place within a relationship.** People who communicate interpersonally share some sort of relationship. To some people, the word *relationship* implies an intimate bond, such as between spouses or romantic partners. The truth, however, is that we have relationships with many different people in our lives. Some relationships, such as those with relatives or close friends, tend to be close, significant relationships that may last for many years. Others, such as those with classmates, acquaintances, and co-workers, may not be as close and may last only as long as people live or work near one another.

In general, we communicate with each person on the basis of the expectations we have for that relationship. For instance, we might reveal private information, such as news about a family member’s marital problems or serious health issues, to a friend but not to a co-worker, because we expect friendship to be a closer relationship.

**Interpersonal communication evolves within relationships.** Long-distance friends sometimes say that when they see each other, they pick up their conversation right where they left off, as if no time had passed. Interpersonal communication in these friendships, and in all relationships, unfolds over time as people get to know each other better and have new experiences. In fact, people in long-term relationships can
often recall how their communication has changed over the course of their relationship. In the early stages of a romantic relationship, for instance, people may spend hours at a time talking and disclosing facts about their lives, such as where they grew up or what their career goals are. As they get to know each other better, their communication might become more instrumental, focusing on tasks such as where they’re going to spend the holidays or who’s going to pick up the children, instead of sharing deep disclosures. They might even start to experience conflicts. In any case, interpersonal communication is something that occurs over time. It’s not a one-shot deal but something that is continually evolving within relationships.

Interpersonal communication negotiates and defines relationships. Every relationship has its own identity. When you think about all your friends, for example, you can probably group them into friendship “types,” such as very close friends, casual friends, work friends, and school friends. Within every group, each friendship is probably a little different from the others.

How does each relationship get its own “personality” like this? The answer is that you negotiate the relationship over time using interpersonal communication. The way you talk to people you know, the things you talk (or don’t talk) about, and the kinds of nonverbal behaviors you use around one another all help to define what kind of relationship you have with each person. You can also use interpersonal communication to change the nature of a relationship, as when friends disclose feelings of romantic interest in each other.

So, what makes communication interpersonal? Interpersonal communication evolves over time between people in some type of dyadic relationship and helps to define the nature of their relationship. You might notice we haven’t said anything about how intimate the communication is. Some people think interpersonal communication means only sharing secrets and other private information, but that isn’t the case. It includes all communication behaviors, verbal as well as nonverbal, that unfold over time to form and maintain relationships, whether those relationships are casual or intimate.
As Jakob discovered, his interpersonal communication with his sponsor was different from—and in many ways better than—communication within his group. Now that we understand what interpersonal communication is, let’s look at some of the reasons why we often find it to be so important.

**Why Interpersonal Communication Matters**

You can probably think of many reasons why interpersonal communication is important to you. For example, you engage in it almost every day, you use it to maintain your current relationships and form new relationships, and you find it to be engaging and enjoyable. Those are only some of the many reasons why interpersonal communication matters to people. All those reasons fall within three general categories: pervasiveness, relational benefits, and health benefits. We’ll take a brief look at each of these categories in this section.

**Interpersonal communication is pervasive.** We all have relationships, so we all engage in interpersonal communication. For most of us, interpersonal communication is as much a part of everyday life as sleeping or eating or putting on clothes. Sometimes we take part in face-to-face interpersonal communication with the people with whom we live or work. At other times interpersonal communication takes place over the telephone, such as when we talk to relatives or friends we don’t see regularly. At still other times we communicate interpersonally via the Internet, as when we share e-mails or instant messages with people in our social circles. No matter how we do it, however, nearly all of us engage in some form of interpersonal communication almost every day.

**Interpersonal communication can improve our relationships.** We’ve seen that not every problem in relationships can be traced back to communication. Nevertheless, many of these problems stem from poor communication. In fact, in a nationwide survey conducted by the National Communication Association, respondents indicated that a “lack of effective communication” is the number one reason why relationships, including marriages, end. Therefore, improving our interpersonal communication skills will also help us to improve our relationships. Significantly, this observation is not true only for intimate relationships. Research shows that effective interpersonal communication can improve a host of relationships, including those between and among friends, physicians and patients, parents and children, and businesspeople and customers.

**Interpersonal communication can improve our health.** As we saw earlier in this chapter, we communicate partly to meet our physical needs for social contact. Close personal relationships are very important to our health. As we discussed, one of the best examples is marriage: Several studies have shown that married people live longer, healthier, and more satisfying lives than people who are single, divorced, or widowed. Even having close friendships and other supportive relationships helps us manage stress and stay healthy.

This finding is especially important for people who tend to be socially isolated. Among senior citizens, for instance, communication with close friends not only reduces feelings of loneliness and depression but also is actually associated with a longer life expectancy. (See the “How Do We Know” box on page 28.) As Mother Teresa’s quote suggests, kind words can have important and long-lasting benefits.
CHAPTER 1 ABOUT COMMUNICATION

Learn It: What are the features of communication that determine whether it is interpersonal? How and why is interpersonal communication important for health?

Try It: Compose an e-mail to a friend or a family member to whom you have been close for a long time, and tell him or her about your day: what you did, whom you saw, where you ate, and so on. Before sending your message, describe to yourself the personality of your relationship and how your e-mail reflects it by the information you reveal or don’t reveal and the kind of language you use.

Reflect on It: In what ways do your close relationships improve your life? What are some of the challenges involved in maintaining those relationships?

How Do We Know?

People with Friends Live Longer

Just in case you need another reason to hang onto your friends, research shows they may extend your life span. How do we know? The purpose of the “How Do We Know?” boxes is to introduce you to some of the research methods by which scholars learn about the processes and importance of interpersonal communication.

An Australian research team recently examined data from a 10-year survey of 1,477 senior citizens, each of whom reported on face-to-face and telephone contact with children, other relatives, casual friends, and confidants (closer friends with whom participants shared personal information). The researchers also measured several variables that they believed affect survival, including age, income, number of serious medical conditions, cognitive function, patterns of tobacco and alcohol use, and exercise behaviors. After controlling statistically for all these other factors, the researchers found that communication with friends and confidants increased participants’ life expectancies over the period of the study. Moreover, they found that communication with friends and confidants was more important for survival than communication with children or other relatives was. Friendships, the scientists explained, provide a level of social support that helps people deal effectively with stress and avoid depression, a common problem for many seniors.

Ask Yourself:

• Why do you think friends were more beneficial than family members to the seniors in the study?
• What communication difficulties do you think older people might face that could reduce the potential benefits of close friendships?

From Me to You:

• Using the Internet to help you, look up a friend you’ve lost touch with, and make contact with that person again. Even if you don’t communicate with long-term friends often, they are worth holding onto, because of the history and the good times you have shared with them.

No one is born a competent communicator. Rather, as with driving a car, playing a musical instrument, or writing a computer program, communicating competently requires skills that we have to learn and practice. That doesn't mean nature doesn't give some people a head start. Research shows that some of our communication traits—for example, how sociable, aggressive, or shy we are—are partly determined by our genes. No matter which traits we're born with, though, we still have to learn how to communicate competently. In this section, we'll look at what communication competence is, which skills are necessary for competent communication, and how we learn those skills.

What Does Communicating Competently Mean?

Think about five people you consider to be really good communicators. Who's on your list? Any of your friends or relatives? teachers? co-workers? politicians or celebrities? yourself? You probably recognize that identifying good communicators means first asking yourself what a good communicator is. Even communication scholars find that a tricky question. Nevertheless, most scholars seem to agree that communication competence means communicating in ways that are effective and appropriate in a given situation. Let's take a closer look at what it means to communicate effectively and appropriately.

Communicating effectively. Effectiveness describes how well your communication achieves its goals. Suppose you want to persuade your housemate to lend you $50. There are many ways you might go about achieving that goal. You could say you really need the money and will pay it back as soon as you get paid next month. You could remind your housemate of favors you've done for him or her in the past. You could even threaten to move out if you don't get the loan. Some of these strategies probably seem more ethical than others, and some may seem more realistic than others. Your choice of strategy may depend in part on what other goals you are trying to achieve at the same time. If maintaining a good relationship with your housemate is also important to you, then asking politely may be the most effective course of action. If all you want is the money, and your housemate's feelings are unimportant to you, then making your housemate feel guilty or threatening to leave may help you achieve your goal, even though it may not be as ethical.

The point here is that no single communication strategy will be effective in all situations. Because we often pursue more than one goal at a time, being an effective communicator means using behaviors that meet all the goals you have in the specific context in which you have them.

Communicating appropriately. Besides being effective, competent communication should also be appropriate. That means attending to the rules and expectations that apply in a social situation. As we saw earlier in this chapter, communication is governed by rules. A competent communicator takes those rules into account when deciding how to act. For instance, when an acquaintance asks, "How are you?" we know it's appropriate to say, "Fine, how are you?" in return. The acquaintance isn't expecting
a long, detailed description of how our day is going, so if you launch into one, he or she may find that response inappropriate. Similarly, it’s appropriate in most classrooms to raise your hand and wait to be called on before speaking, so it would be inappropriate in those cases simply to blurt out your comments.

Communicating appropriately can be especially challenging when you’re interacting with people from other cultures. As we noted earlier, many communication rules are culture-specific, so what might be perfectly appropriate in one culture could be seen as inappropriate or even offensive in another.42 As one example, if you’re visiting a Canadian household and your hosts offer you food, it’s appropriate to accept the food if you’re hungry. In many Japanese households, however, it is inappropriate to accept the food, even if you’re hungry, until you decline it twice and your hosts offer it a third time.

Even within a specific culture, expectations for appropriate communication can vary according to the social situation. For example, behavior that’s appropriate at home might not be appropriate at work, and vice versa. Moreover, behavior that’s appropriate for a powerful person is not necessarily appropriate for less powerful people. For this reason you might not consider it out of line for your boss to arrive late for a meeting, even though engaging in the same behavior yourself would be considered inappropriate.

Communication competence, then, implies both effectiveness and appropriateness. Note that these are aspects of communication, not aspects of people. Thus, the next question we need to consider is whether competent communicators share common characteristics. The answer is they share many traits. We’ll take a brief look at several of these characteristics in this section.

**Characteristics of Competent Communicators**

Look again at your list of five competent communicators. What do they have in common? Competence itself is situation-specific, so what works in one context may not work in another. Good communicators, however, tend to have certain characteristics that help them behave competently in most situations. Here we examine five of these characteristics, beginning with self-awareness.

**Self-awareness.** Good communicators are aware of their own behavior and how it affects others.43 Researchers call this awareness self-monitoring. People who are “high self-monitors” pay close attention to the way they look, sound, and act in social situations. By contrast, people who are “low self-monitors” often seem oblivious to both their own behaviors and how other people are reacting to them. For instance, you may know someone who never seems to notice that he dominates the conversation or who...
Empathy is an important part of any caregiving relationship, such as the relationship between a patient and a health care provider. An empathic health care provider will sense and respond to a patient’s emotional needs as well as his or her physical needs.

Self-monitoring usually makes people more competent communicators because it enables them to see how their behavior fits or doesn’t fit in a given social setting. In addition, high self-monitors often have high levels of social and emotional intelligence, which allow them to understand people’s emotions and social behaviors accurately.44

Adaptability. It’s one thing to be aware of your own behavior; it’s quite another to be able to adapt it to different situations. Competent communicators are able to assess what is going to be appropriate and effective in a given context and then modify their behaviors accordingly.45 This ability is important because what works in one situation might be ineffective in another. Part of delivering a good speech, for instance, is being aware of the audience and adapting your behavior accordingly. A competent communicator would speak differently to a group of senior executives than to a group of new hires, because what works with one audience would probably not work with the other.

Empathy. Good communicators practice empathy, or the ability to be “other-oriented” and understand other people’s thoughts and feelings.46 When people say “Put yourself in my shoes,” they are asking you to consider a situation from their perspective rather than your own. Empathy is an important skill because people often think and feel differently than you do about the same situation.

For example, suppose you want to ask your boss for a one-week extension on an assignment. You might think, “What’s the big deal? It’s only a week.” To your boss, though, the extension might mean that she would be unable to complete her work in time for the vacation she has planned with her family. If the situation were reversed, how would you feel? An empathic person would consider the situation from the boss’s perspective and would then choose his or her behaviors accordingly.

People who don’t practice empathy tend to assume everyone thinks and feels the same way they do, and they risk creating problems when that assumption isn’t accurate. How empathic are you? Take the quiz in “Getting to Know You” on page 32 to find out.

Empathy is a particular challenge for individuals with conditions such as autism and Asperger’s disorder, both of which impair a person’s ability to interpret other people’s nonverbal behaviors. For instance, you may have little difficulty judging when a friend is being sarcastic, because you infer that from his facial expres-
Cognitive complexity. Let’s say you see your friend Tony coming toward you in the hallway. You smile and get ready to say hi, but he walks right by as if you’re not even there. How would you explain that? Maybe he’s mad at you. Maybe he was concentrating on something and didn’t notice anyone around him. Maybe he actually did smile at you and you just didn’t see it. The ability to consider a variety of explanations and to understand a given situation in multiple ways is called cognitive complexity. Cognitive complexity is a valuable skill because it keeps you from jumping to the wrong

Getting to Know You

How Empathic Are You?

One of the ways to improve your communication ability is to think about how you communicate now. Each “Getting to Know You” box will help you do this by presenting one self-assessment of a communication skill or tendency. For instance, we have seen that empathy is one of the characteristics of competent communicators. How empathic are you? Read each of the following statements, and indicate how much it describes you by assigning a number between 1 (“not at all”) and 7 (“very strongly”).

1. ______ It makes me sad to see a lonely stranger in a group.
2. ______ I become nervous if others around me seem nervous.
3. ______ I tend to get emotionally involved with a friend’s problems.
4. ______ Sometimes the words of a love song can move me deeply.
5. ______ The people around me have a great influence on my moods.
6. ______ Seeing people cry upsets me.
7. ______ I get very angry when I see someone being ill-treated.
8. ______ I cannot continue to feel okay if people around me are depressed.
9. ______ I am very upset when I see an animal in pain.
10. ______ It upsets me to see helpless elderly people.

When you’re finished, add up your scores. Your total score should fall between 10 and 70. A score of 10–25 suggests that empathy is a skill you can work on. Learning more about empathy, as you are doing in this class, might help you become more empathic. If you scored between 25 and 55, you are already moderately empathic, and you have a good ability to understand other people’s emotions. Continued practice can improve this skill even more. If you scored above 55, you are a highly empathic person. Chances are that this ability helps you to communicate effectively in interpersonal situations.

Remember that your score on this quiz—and on all the “Getting to Know You” quizzes in this book—reflects only how you see yourself at this time. If your score surprised you, take the quiz again later in the course to see how studying interpersonal communication might have changed the way you assess your communication abilities.

Ethics. Finally, competent communicators are ethical communicators. Ethics guides us in judging whether something is morally right or wrong. Ethical communication, then, generally dictates treating people fairly, communicating honestly, and avoiding immoral or unethical behavior. This can be easier said than done, because people often have very different ideas about right and wrong. What may be morally justified to one person or one culture may be considered completely unethical to another.

Ethical considerations are often particularly important when we're engaged in compliance-gaining strategies, trying to change the way another person thinks or behaves. Referring back to a previous example, is it ethical to threaten to move out unless your housemate lends you $50? To many people, this compliance-gaining strategy would seem unduly harsh and potentially unfair, because it may give the housemate no choice but to make the loan. Depending on why you need the money, however, or how your housemate has treated you in the past, you might not consider this strategy to be unethical, even if others do. Competent communicators are aware that people's ideas about ethics vary. However, they are also aware of their own ethical beliefs, and they communicate in ways that are consistent with those beliefs.

Take one last look at your list of five good communicators. Are they generally aware of their own behaviors and able to adapt those behaviors to different contexts? Can they adopt other people's perspectives on things and consider various ways of explaining situations? Do they behave ethically? These aren't the only things that make someone a competent communicator, but they are among the most important. A brief review of these skills appears in the “At a Glance” box above. To the extent that we can develop and practice these skills, we can all become better at the process of communication.

**Learn It:** What is the difference between effectiveness and appropriateness? How is cognitive complexity defined?

**Try It:** Choose your favorite “reality TV” show, and think about the characters and their communication behaviors. On the basis of the things you've learned in this section, how would you rate each character in communication competence? What makes some characters more competent than others? Try to identify specific skills, such as empathy or cognitive complexity, that differentiate the characters from one another. Consider how each person might improve his or her communication competencies.

**Reflect on It:** How would you describe your own level of self-monitoring? Where do your ideas about ethics come from?