Communication skills are vitally important in any environment where teamwork is important. Simply put, communication enables us to come together to accomplish things better than we can accomplish as individuals.

AFH 33-337, The Tongue and Quill
Almost all living things communicate in some way. Whether it’s male and female fireflies flirting with each other on the lawn on a summer evening or a pack of wolves working together in a hunt, creatures communicate as part of living. Humans, however, are nature’s communication specialists.

**Senders and Receivers**

So what is communication? Communication is the creation and sending of information, thoughts, and feelings from one person to another. All communication takes at least two people: a sender and a receiver. The **sender** is the person who originates and sends a message. The **receiver** is the person who receives the sender’s message. The best kind of communication is two-way: both people send and receive messages and give each other feedback. Feedback is the receiver’s response to the sender’s message. Feedback can indicate understanding or misunderstanding. It can show agreement or disagreement. Feedback can also be in the form of a question, such as a request for more information.
Based on the feedback you receive, you make decisions about your actions and about further communication. You decide, for example, whether the receiver interpreted your meaning correctly. Does this conversation sound familiar?

Did you do your homework?
—Not yet.
But you promised you’d do it. Why are you watching a video?
—I thought you meant to do it sometime tonight, not this minute.

Would both these communicators feel frustrated? Why?

**Knowing Your Audience**

Before you can communicate, you need to know some things about your receiver, or audience. In fact, the more you know about your receiver, the better your chances for successful communication. Is your receiver or audience a friend? A parent? A guardian? A teacher?

What are the receiver’s key characteristics—age, race, gender, education level, status, or role in the community? Marketers, who are experts in communication, call these characteristics **audience demographics**. Understanding audience demographics is necessary for good communication. The more you know about your receiver, the better you can craft your message to hit the mark.

What’s more, if you know your receiver, you’ll be able to better anticipate his or her response. A teacher you are trying to communicate with might have a reputation for being stubborn. Or you know that an adult you are close to objects to a certain kind of music. These issues can be barriers.
to communication if you’re asking the teacher for an extension of a deadline or asking for money to download a new tune. Thinking about barriers in advance can help you decide how to communicate with your audience most effectively. That will increase the chance that you’ll get the result you want.

**Being Clear Is the Key**

Being clear and specific when you communicate is one way of ensuring positive feedback from your receivers. Another method is not to wait for feedback. Ask the receiver if you’ve communicated clearly. Then use the feedback to fine-tune your next message.

Try to state your request for feedback in such a way that your receiver will have to show his or her understanding of your message.

*You know that we’re going to meet up at the basketball game Friday night, right?*

— *This coming Friday, or next Friday?*

*This Friday—the day after tomorrow.*

— *OK, got it. See you then.*

**Encoding and Decoding**

How does the communication process work? People who study this subject say that communication among humans takes place through a process known as encoding-channeling-decoding.

Let’s say a soccer coach is standing on the sideline and wants to tell the team on the field to execute a certain play. He quickly tells an assistant coach, “Execute Play Topeka.” By putting his message into spoken words, he’s encoded the message he wants to send. **Encoding** is *turning a message into symbols that will have meaning for the receiver.*

But how does the assistant coach get the message to the team? The players are on the other end of the field and can’t hear her over the cheering crowd. So she touches her right elbow, then the top of her head, with her left hand. The coaches and team agreed on this signal before the game. This is called channeling. **Channeling** is *putting an encoded message into a medium of delivery.* In this case, the medium is the hand signal.

Down near the opponents’ goal, the team captain sees the assistant coach’s signal. He yells to the rest of the team, “Topeka!” The captain has decoded the message. **Decoding** is *turning the channeled, encoded message into meaning for you.* To anyone else watching the assistant coach, the signals are meaningless. They’ll have to find out about the play when the team executes it.
When you text a friend on your cellphone, you’re doing basically the same thing the coaches did. You type out your text—encoding it. You hit the Send button and the message is transmitted—channeled—through the data network to your friend. Your friend reads the message—decoding it.

**Communication Cues**

Communication isn’t just about the messages that you encode and send. Poker players, police detectives, and psychologists all know about the unconscious ways in which people communicate their true intentions and meaning, regardless of what they are actually saying. These ways of nonverbal communication, or communication without words, are called “tells” or cues. Some receivers can interpret these cues very well. Other receivers have trouble understanding them. Depending on how well the receiver understands these cues, they can be helpful or harmful to the communication process.

Some people are experts at hiding their intentions. This can make communication harder. Maybe you’ve heard someone described as having a “poker face” or “game face” on. You can’t tell what such people are really thinking. They are deliberately hiding or controlling their nonverbal signals or cues.

**Cues Are Signals**

Communication cues, then, are the signals that a person sends in addition to the message that may affect how the receiver interprets your meaning.

For example, suppose that Mr. Brown, a teacher, is trying to explain a math problem to Maria. Maria is fiddling with her hair, looking out the window, and sneaking peeks at her phone. What is she signaling to Mr. Brown about her interest in the class or her desire to do well in math? Or suppose a friend yawns when you tell him about your date last Friday night. Does that mean he’s tired? Or completely not interested? And how would you feel if you joined a group of friends and one person kept his or her back to you while talking to the others? What’s this cue telling you?
In a perfect world, all communication would be instantly received and understood. But as the examples you've just read show, the process is full of opportunities for failure. One barrier to communication is noise. Noise is anything that interferes with communication. It can include the words the sender uses, receiver distractions, or even bad handwriting. Noise works against the clarity of communication. Cellphone users frequently have to cope with noise: A caller's voice might suddenly become garbled, or the call might be dropped.

Noise can interfere with face-to-face communication, too. Maria playing with her hair, your friend's yawning, and any of thousands of habits, intrusions, or filters are noise. Communication experts divide noise into two forms: external and internal.

**External noise** happens outside your own head. A siren, a phone ringing, a dog barking—all are sources of external noise if you are trying to communicate.

**Internal noise** is inside the receiver. Daydreaming, worrying, hunger, reminiscing, and strong emotions are examples of internal noise.

**Eliminating Noise**

Internal noise is one of the human factors in the communication cycle. As a sender, you have no way to eliminate it, but you can take some steps to reduce it.

Here are some suggestions.

**Know the Purpose of Your Message**

Most messages fit into one of two categories:

**Information-only messages.** These messages simply tell the receiver something: “I've got a bad cold.” “I lost my textbook yesterday.” “I'm going home now.”

**Action-and-information messages.** These messages may give information, but they also ask the receiver to do something: “Can you meet me at the mall tomorrow?” “Will you give me a ride to work this afternoon?” or “Can you help me with this homework tomorrow?”

Many action-and-information messages fail because the receiver mistakes them for information-only messages. For example, if you need a ride home from the mall but you say, “I don’t know how I’m going to get home from the mall,” you are providing an information message. You have left out the action you require. Your receiver wonders what your message really means. Better to say “Can you give me a ride home from the mall around 4:30 today?” This message is direct, clear, and specific. It gives your receiver enough information and the action request to respond.
Before you communicate, decide whether your message is action-and-information or information-only. If you’re communicating an action-and-information message, specify what your receiver must do and know. If you are communicating an information-only message, specify what your receiver needs to know.

In brief: You must focus your message so that your receiver understands what he or she is supposed to do and know.

**Break Through the Noise**

As the sender, you have the responsibility to communicate clearly. This requires breaking through the noise. To do this, think in terms of your receiver. Use your receiver’s point of view. Walk a few minutes in his or her shoes. Then after communicating, ask for feedback. Use the feedback to adjust your message to the needs of your receiver.

**Use Simple Words**

All great communicators use this trick. Consider these examples:

- “I came, I saw, I conquered.” (Julius Caesar, Roman emperor)
- “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” (President Franklin D. Roosevelt)
- “I have a dream.” (Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.)
- “To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war.” (Sir Winston Churchill, British prime minister)

Look at these examples. The words are short. Most have only one syllable. No long words are used simply to impress the receiver. Whenever you have the choice between a simple word and a long word that has the same meaning, use the simple word. It’ll help you be a great communicator, too.

**Use Concrete Words**

Constantly using words that are too abstract can be a sign of lazy writing and thinking. When you say “a plane flew over,” you haven’t really told the receiver what happened. Was the plane a Cessna? A Boeing 737? A B-2 bomber? When you use concrete words, you draw pictures in your receiver’s mind. Suppose you’re describing a concert. You might tell your friend, “The band was super awesome,” which tells her that you liked the music, but doesn’t tell her much else. On the other hand, if you say, “The band played a sweet mix of classic rock, jazz, and hip-hop from the 1980s and ‘90s, and the female lead singer had a range of four octaves,” you’ve communicated a lot more information.
The Importance of Feedback

As a sender, you can control the quality of your messages. You can also control how you respond to your receiver’s feedback. Remember that feedback is the receiver’s response to the sender’s message. This is sometimes called the feedback loop. It lets you know what happened on the other end of the conversation.

Feedback can be positive or negative. It can indicate that your receiver got the message and whether he or she understood it. It also indicates whether the receiver wants to respond to your message. Sounds like exchanging texts, doesn’t it?

Never ignore the importance of feedback. It lets you—the sender—know that something happened: You got your message across loud and clear. Or maybe not so loud and clear, and you have to say or send it again.

Ask for Feedback

Feedback is important. So important, in fact, that if you don’t get it, you should ask for it. But be sure to ask the right kinds of questions. If you ask simply, “Did you understand me?” nine times out of ten the listener will say “Yes.” So don’t use yes-or-no questions. Instead, ask questions that let you verify that the listener really does understand. For example, if you are trying to teach your little brother how to cross the street safely and have just explained traffic lights, don’t ask, “Should you stop at a light?” Instead, ask, “What color on the traffic signal means you must stop?” You can also ask your listener to repeat what you just said or to say it in different words.

Feedback is so important that if you don’t get it, you should ask for it.

Jacob Lund/Shutterstock
Revise your message as needed to be sure that your listeners understand it. Use listener feedback to learn what they didn’t understand, and find a clearer way to explain it. Watch your listeners’ cues or body language for signs of distraction, boredom, or lack of interest. Then adjust your message as needed.

**Four Steps to Improve Communication**

If you are the sender, it’s your job to find ways to get through the noise that prevents communication. Following these four steps will help you do so:

- Focus your message
- Magnify the listener’s attention
- Penetrate barriers
- Listen actively

**Focus Your Message**

Focusing your message requires planning before you speak or write. Think about what you want to say and how you want to say it. Decide what your goal is: It may be, for example, to inform, to persuade, or to direct. Understand who your audience is. Make your message specific and concise. Present it politely. Be as objective as you can. If the listener perceives that you are one-sided, you may be creating a barrier to communication.

**Magnify the Listener’s Attention**

Think about your message from the receiver’s point of view instead of your own. Ask yourself: Why should my listener care about what I have to say? Try to create interest—make your message relevant to the listener. For example, if your teacher mentions that something will be on your next exam, you’re more likely to pay attention. Find something in your message that your listener can relate to and focus on that.

If you announce that what you’re about to say will save your listeners time or money, they will probably pay attention. Or if you say, “What I’m about to say could save your life,” before you discuss a safety issue, you’ll grab the listener’s interest.

A word of warning: Your ideas must really be important. Simply saying that they are won’t do it. You have to persuade your receiver through the clarity and logic of your argument that your message is significant.

**Penetrate Barriers**

As noted earlier, vagueness is a serious barrier to good communication. If you say, “There was a fire downtown last night,” you have communicated little. But if you say, “Twenty firefighters from three stations fought an inferno last night that nearly destroyed an entire city block, including the fireworks factory,” you have provided detailed information. The listener now understands that you’re talking about a major disaster, not a fire in a trashcan. Be as precise and concrete as you can.
Analogies and comparisons can help your message break communications barriers. “Like looking for a needle in a haystack” is a cliché, but it does give a concrete idea of how difficult a task is. Try to find an original way to say the same thing, such as “like trying to melt a glacier with a hair dryer” or “like trying to heat the moon.” Note that analogies work only if both the sender and the receiver understand the things you are comparing.

**Listen Actively**

Listen carefully to what your receiver says. The difference between *hearing* and *listening* is as important as the difference between seeing and examining. You can hear background noise but not think anything of it. Or you can listen and realize that what sounded a minute ago like an owl is really a person trying to imitate an owl.

Hearing is automatic. It happens when sound waves bounce off your eardrums and cause them to vibrate, sending messages to your brain. Listening is the active, voluntary effort to receive, understand, and respond to a message.

**A Valuable Life Skill**

Communication skills are essential any time people must work together—in the family, at school, in groups and teams, and at the workplace. Communication allows people to do more together than they could alone.

If you look at job ads online, you’ll see that many of them have the same requirement: *good communication skills*. Employers value workers who can communicate well for a simple reason: They save their organizations time and money. Good communication can prevent costly mistakes. The ability to communicate clearly—to get your intent and ideas across so that others understand your message and act on it—is also one of the primary qualities of a good student and a good leader.

Your ability to communicate—to write, speak, and listen—affects your ability to inform and influence those around you. And with a little effort, you can develop these essential skills, as you will see in the lessons to come.
Using complete sentences, answer the following questions on a sheet of paper.

1. What are the people in the communications process called?
2. What is one way of ensuring positive feedback?
3. What are the two types of noise as a barrier to effective communication?
4. What two categories do most messages fit into?
5. Why is feedback important to communication?
6. What are four steps to improve communication?

**APPLYING YOUR LEARNING**

7. Describe the responsibilities the receiver has in the communication process.