

Ten steps to help you communicate

TN2 Training Notes series: Communication

These notes were first published on the website in January 2001 and last updated in July 2023. They are copyright © John Truscott. You may download this file and/or print up to 30 copies without charge provided no part of the heading or text is altered or omitted.

These notes give a checklist of issues to consider when preparing any item of communication. They apply to speech, print, design, drama, mime, social media and the internet. They are followed by a diagram to help you understand what is happening when you try to put a message across.

Here is an outline of one section I include in several of my training events on communication. This can be defined, in simple form, as getting your message across so that your receivers understand you and take the action you intend.

The steps apply equally to speakers, preachers, writers, editors, those seeking to improve communication channels within churches, and those aiming to get through to those outside the Christian faith.

1 Pray for every aspect

If it is worth communicating, it is worth praying about.

2 Write the headline

- Reduce the whole message to one short sentence.
- Check this headline has punch.
- Distinguish the core from the detail.

It is essential to know the heart of what you are trying to put across. One way to check this is to write it out as a headline or as one crisp sentence. Then check whether this is a message that is worth putting across in the first place, and that you have at this stage left out everything that could be counted as detail.

3 Identify your receivers

- Put yourself in their shoes.
- Assess how the message will appear to them.
- Consider how they decode what they hear/see you saying.

Now you know the core of the message, consider your receivers (listeners, readers). If they are different from you (whether in age, background, personality, exposure to the message, expectations, etc.) they may take what you are seeking to put across in quite a different way from what you intend. Any message you send will have been coded (into words, design, movement, etc.) and the way they decode this will determine the message for them.

4 Define the actions you hope to see

- Clarify your purpose.
- Assess their likely understanding.
- Consider their motivation.

Presumably you want your message to result in action or change (in deed, thought, attitude). So why are you giving the message, and what motivation will your receivers have to do anything about it? Unless you have an idea of what should happen you are unlikely to move people to do anything. How do you want what you say or write to change these people? No change? No point!

5 Structure the message appropriately

- List all the information to include.
- Break the message into simple stages.
- Put it all in the best order.

Now, and not before, you can think about all you want to put across, the detail that backs up the core of your message. Some will be information, some will be background. Seek to structure it so that it falls into sections so that people can follow where you are going. Then, and only then, put it into a logical order. Remember that most of us try to put detailed information in too early.

6 Anticipate what may distract

- Try your own 'risk assessment'.
- Plan your counter-offensive.
- Consider possible negative reactions to the message.

All kinds of things may be working against getting the message to your receivers. Some will be physical: background noise, poor print quality, visible distractions, uncomfortable surroundings. Some will be issues of attitude: for example, an expectation that this message will be uninteresting because of previous experience. List likely ones; then consider how to overcome them.

7 **List all available means**

- Bring in others to extend your limited ideas.
- Aim for different and out-of-the-ordinary approaches.
- Consider any who will miss the presentation.

Most successful communication uses many different means because no one method gets through to everyone; most people need to hear it more than once anyway. But you need help if you are to think of different ways of putting something across when you are accustomed to one particular method, so this is the point to bring in others.

8 **Ask whether you are the right sender**

- Assess your gifts / style.
- Consider your relationship with the receivers.
- Check your own enthusiasm for the message.

You are now far enough through the process to consider whether you should be the person doing this at all! This message may need someone with authority to put it across, or someone with special communication skills, or someone the receivers know well, or someone who can really enthuse. Is this you?

9 **Consider technique**

- Identify the best time/place.
- Consider presentation: body language, illustrations, visuals, humour, etc.
- Use all the variables: speed, pauses, tone, sub-headings, bold/italic, etc.

Now, and only now, to technique. In a training event this would command its own section as there is much to consider both for print (ie. presentation) and for speech (voice and body control). Read Article A19 on this website, *Speaking so that people listen*, for more detail on spoken communication here.

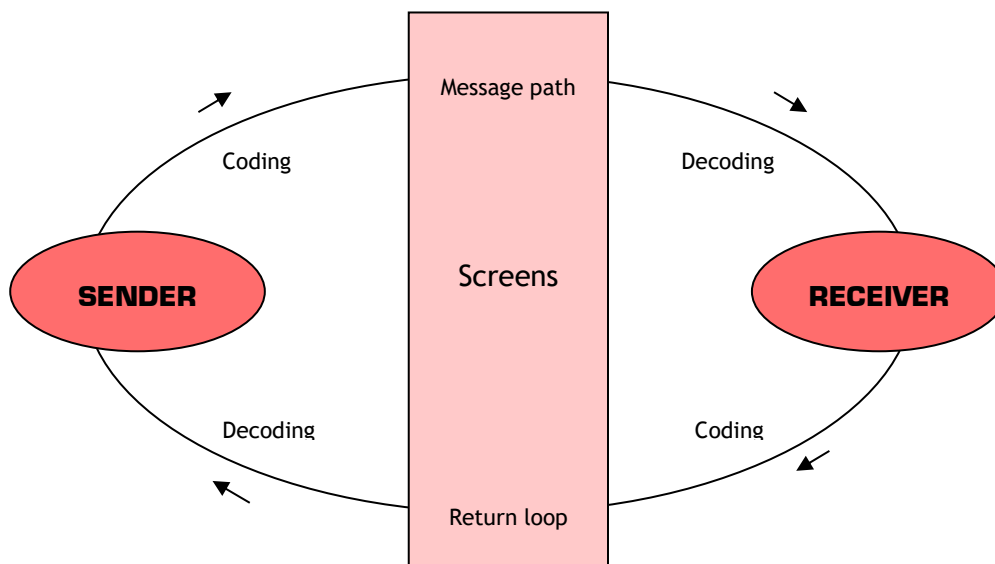
10 **Aim for constant improvement**

- Be alert for feedback.
- Review with others afterwards.
- Check the response to assess 'success'.

However experienced you are, review afterwards. Good speech communicators also watch feedback taking place as they communicate and adapt their style in the light of this. The audience will be giving plenty of body feedback which can encourage or which demands instant action to correct. In print it is not so obvious so you need to see how people responded in the days and weeks that followed.

A simple diagram to keep in mind

I have found that this simple (and quite well-known) diagram helps many people understand what is going on when they try to put a message across. It applies to messages that are spoken, written or demonstrated. You can use it for chatting to a neighbour or for dealing with a visitor at a church service; for writing a church newsletter or preaching a sermon.



Sender

Every message has a sender, the one who is seeking to put something across.

Receiver

This is the person or people they want to pass the message on to.

Message path

The means being used. Speech, words, website, gesticulations, facial expressions, and so on.

Coding

The process of taking the actual message and putting it onto the message path. So one message may be coded into written words in all kinds of different ways (language used, type of words, print design, etc.). Another may be coded into speech but here there are options of language, volume, tone, and other possibilities. Note that what the receiver reads, sees or experiences is the coded message, not the actual message.

Decoding

The receiver has to decode the coding to understand the real message. If it is in print, the receiver needs to be able to read and understand the words. If in speech, the receiver has to hear and understand what is being said. But misunderstandings frequently occur because of inaccurate decoding, or poor coding in the first place.

Screens

Sometimes known as 'noise'. Anything that gets in the way of the coding being accurately decoded. For print this could be too small a font, for speech there might be all kinds of distractions, but the screen might easily be the receiver's tiredness or the sender's lack of passion.

Return loop

While this is going on the receiver is also sending messages back to the sender. This might be in conversation or an email reply, but may also be a yawn to say the message as coded lacks interest or walking out of a church service to express anger.

The successful communicator knows what the real message is, can code it up in such a way that this receiver can decode it accurately, seeks to clear away the screens or minimise the noise, and observes the return messages and adapts theirs accordingly.

You might now like to go back to the ten principles and rethink them in the light of this diagram. For greater detail about it, read Article A54, *How to get a message across*, on this website.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN2. They cover one aspect of a range of possible training events on communication. There are many other items on the website that illustrate the principles in these notes but see in particular Articles A19, *Speaking so that people listen*, A29, *A basic guide to paper and print* A48, *How to read the Bible out loud*, and especially A54, *How to get a message across*. Also Training Notes TN38/TN39, *We've got news for us/you!*, TN63, *How not to write a newsletter*, TN75, *Writing for the media*, TN93, *and now for the notices*, TN105, *Recording a voicemail message*, TN113, *What to avoid on your website*, and TN123, *Speaking-to-camera tips*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of his running an event for you on how to put messages across in print or speech.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File TN2 under Communication.

John Truscott, 24 High Grove, St Albans, AL3 5SU

Tel: 01727 568325 Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>