

Communicate at Your Best!



Communicate at Your Best

A Mind Tools Workbook

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Communicate at Your Best

Introduced by Mind Tools CEO, James Manktelow



Welcome to our **Communicate at Your Best** Workbook!

Communication is a critical skill for almost everything we do. Whether you're speaking to another person or to a group, giving a formal presentation,

chairing a meeting, or writing emails or reports, you're putting your communication skills to work. And rightly or wrongly, your arguments and ideas have a much greater impact if they're presented well than if they're presented poorly.

You can probably think of many examples of ineffective communication: a mumbled presentation, where you left the room thoroughly confused; a rambling meeting; a long email containing multiple, unclear messages; or a badly written report, where spelling and punctuation were so annoyingly poor that you found it hard to make out the underlying message.

Poor communication makes an impact – but not the impact that was hoped for!

So, what impact are YOU making when you communicate? How good are YOUR communication skills?

No matter how good we are – or think we are – at communicating, most of us can benefit from paying regular attention to this. When we keep our communication skills in absolutely tip top condition, we see improvements in the effectiveness of almost everything we do. So, which aspects of communications would you benefit from working on, and how can you improve those skills?

Our workbook helps you answer these questions: First, it explains key issues in several important communication skill areas. Then it guides you through an assessment of your current communication skills, helping you identify areas for improvement.

It then gives tips and tools helping you improve each aspect of communication, and finally points you towards further Mind Tools resources that help you boost your skills. With all of this, this workbook helps you bring your communications skills up to full effectiveness, so that you can communicate at your very best, every day.

Enjoy it!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James Manktelow". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

James Manktelow, CEO,
MindTools.com

How Do We Communicate?

When we think about communicating, we often focus on one side of the communication process – *what* and *how* we're communicating, and on the impression we're creating. But communication is, of course, a two-way process. It involves much more than simply writing or speaking; it also involves reading, watching or listening – by the audience with whom you are communicating.

When you communicate, what are you trying to achieve? Speaking, writing and presenting are ways of helping someone else to understand the information and ideas that are in your mind. It sounds obvious, but it's well worth reminding yourself of this regularly!

The path of an idea from your mind to someone else's is known as the Communications Process, and it's shown in the diagram below:

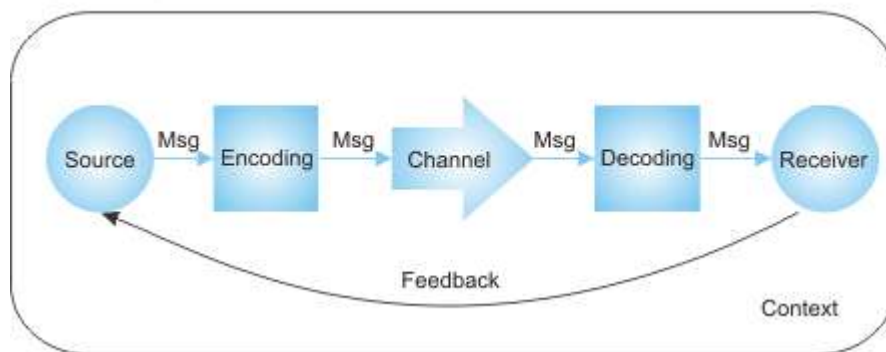
You can read more about the communications process, in our "Introduction to Communication" article here: www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/CommunicationIntro.htm

When communications are ineffective, it means something has gone wrong at one or more of

the stages in this process. Effective communications means thinking through every stage and so reducing the chances of this happening. For example, are your ideas clear, well-structured and supported by good data? Have you done everything you can to communicate them clearly? Have you checked that your channel is working correctly, from a technical perspective? Have you done everything you can so that your recipient can pay attention to your message? And have you checked the level to pitch your message at, so that you're confident that your receiver has the knowledge and experience needed to understand and use your message?

The rest of this workbook looks at five key forms of communication and helps you think through what you can do to make the communication process work effectively. We look in turn at listening, report-writing, presentations, writing email, and managing meetings. The first of these – listening – involves decoding, while the remaining four belong in the encoding part of the overall process.

The Communications Process



1. Listening Skills

When you listen, do you really HEAR what the other person is saying?

Because listening involves decoding what someone else is saying, it's a great place to start improving your communication skills. We know that communication can break down at any point in the Communications Process but, particularly in one-to-one discussions, problems often arise in this decoding stage. By thinking about and working on our listening, not only do we improve our own listening skills, but also we get an appreciation of the challenges we face as speakers.

Too often, we don't really listen to what the other person is saying. Perhaps we've come to the conversation with pre-conceived notions of what they're going to say, and we occupy ourselves with formulating our response while they're talking. Or perhaps we think we understand what they're saying, but in fact we've mis-interpreted the words they've used. Equally, the other person may think you haven't listened, because your body language has indicated disinterest. If they think this, even if you were actually listening attentively, they may go away from the conversation feeling dissatisfied.

Being a good listener is just as important a skill as speaking, writing, and giving presentations. Good listening, supplemented by asking good follow-up questions, plays a key part in building rapport and avoiding misunderstandings,

particularly if the other person isn't expressing him- or herself all that clearly.

The higher the stakes in a conversation, the more critical it is that you're certain you have understood the other person's point of view correctly and fully. So it's particularly important to think about listening well when you're negotiating, taking instructions or dealing with a key customer or contact.

Top Tips for Effective Listening

- Devote all your attention to listening – don't try to think about your response at the same time.
- Use attentive body language to make sure that the other person realizes that you are listening to what they are saying.
- Repeat back what you think the other person has said, using your own words, and use checking questions to ensure you really understand what the other person means.
- "Listen" to *their* body language too. What feedback do you have about how the conversation is going?
- Be comfortable about saying that you will respond later once you've had a chance to think about what the other person has said. It is often better to wait and give a well-considered response than to rush in with immediate thoughts, just because the other person wants a quick answer.

Listening Skills Self-Assessment

Find out how effective you are at listening now by going through the skills listed in the table below, and checking the appropriate box. Are you already listening well, or is this something you could improve upon?

| Listening Skill | I do this well already (✓) | I could improve on this (✓) |
|--|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Concentrating 100% on what the other person is saying. | | |
| Using your own body language to show them that you are listening with your full attention. | | |
| Making sure you understand what the speaker means by any jargon words they have used. | | |
| Using questions appropriately to ensure that you have understood the situation fully. | | |
| Making sure that the speaker knows you have listened to their message. | | |
| Waiting until the speaker has finished what they have to say before you start preparing your response mentally. | | |
| Only responding when you are in a position to give a considered response. | | |
| Making sure you really understand what the speaker means by repeating the other person's key messages in your own words. | | |
| Actively seeking feedback. | | |
| Avoiding getting into a debate when you are receiving feedback. | | |

Use the space below to make notes about these or other listening-related skills you'd like to improve.

Improving Your Listening Skills

Here are some more resources to help you work on the areas for improvement in your listening skills:

Active Listening: Hear what people are really saying

Do you really listen to other people or do you just hear what you want to hear? Find out the benefits of being an active listener, and how to develop this skill.

www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/ActiveListening.htm

Empathic Listening: Going beyond active listening

Make sure you really understand what someone else is telling you, and that you've drawn the full story out of them, by using this powerful listening technique.

www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/EmphaticListening.htm

Questioning Techniques: Asking questions effectively

How you ask a question has a massive impact on the answer that the other person gives you. Learn what type of question to use when, from open and closed questions, to funnel questions, probing questions, leading question and rhetorical questions.

www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC_88.htm

Body Language: Understanding non-verbal communication

Recognizing and understanding non-verbal language is key to effective communication. You can lead, inspire and motivate others more effectively by understanding and acting upon their non-verbal language. Learn how in this article.

www.mindtools.com/pages/article/Body_Language.htm

Giving and Receiving Feedback: Keeping team member performance high, and well-integrated

Feedback is designed to help improve things next time round, but if you go about it the wrong way, it can make things worse rather than better. Find out how to give – and receive – feedback effectively.

www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMM_98.htm

2. Report-Writing Skills

Written reports are an essential form of communication in many areas of business. Whether you're reporting on team progress, writing up a client meeting, or describing how your project is going, your objective is to express all of the relevant information in such a way that the reader can understand it quickly and easily.

The exact format of your report depends on several factors. These include its purpose, the level of detail required and the formality needed. For example, if your report is a detailed 50 page document, it will benefit from extra structure such as a table of contents and numbered sections. But such additions would clutter up a two-pager about yesterday's brainstorm session.

Whatever the length of your report, structure is still an essential feature of a business report (you're not writing a novel here!) Include summaries, and use headings, bullets, tables and charts to break up the text and present information as concisely as possible. This will help make your report more effective for its readers, and you'll reduce the chance of them skipping a key point.

Also, make sure that your language is appropriate for the audience you're writing it for. If you're a programmer and you're writing for other programmers, it may well be efficient to use highly technical jargon. But if there's any chance that your audience might include non-technical people, the use of jargon risks both misunderstandings and losing your reader's interest. And when that happens, you're perceived as a poor communicator.

With the right structure in the place and appropriate language, you'll be well on the road to creating a good report. However, make sure you don't spoil it with sloppy spelling or punctuation. While some people no longer find this important, there are still many who care deeply about this. Paying attention to spelling and punctuation continues to be good practice and makes for a professional report. Lower your

standards on these details and you again risk being perceived as sloppy, and a poor communicator.

Top Tips for Effective Report Writing

- Before you start writing the report, spend a few minutes thinking about how you'll structure it to present your ideas clearly and logically.
- On all but the shortest reports, include an Executive Summary at the beginning to make life easier for busy readers (this should be a maximum of one page long). Although it's at the beginning of the report, this will normally be the last part of the report that you'll write.
- Break your text up with clear sub-headings, and with bullets and numbered lists where appropriate. This also makes it easier for the reader to skim your reports quickly.
- Start a new paragraph for each new point or thought. If in doubt, start a new paragraph!
- When you're proof-reading your work, try reading it out loud. If you find yourself getting "tangled up" as you read, consider restructuring that sentence so that it's easy to read. And if you find yourself running out of breath in a sentence, consider breaking it into two or more separate sentences.
- Simple sentences are easy to understand. ~~Long, convoluted sentences, with a myriad of sub-clauses and extravagant or complex words, are challenging, and risk diverting and confusing the reader with their unwarranted complexity.~~ People are often confused by longer sentences.
- Also, make sure you check the headings too. It's easy to assume they must be error-free just because they're short, big and bold.

- Always include page numbers on documents that are likely to be printed – just in case the reader drops the pages.
- Don't write one ~~single~~ word more than you have to.

Report-Writing Self-Assessment

Find out how good your report writing skills are by going through the skills listed in the table on the next page. Check the appropriate box depending on whether you're already using the skill well, or whether it's something you could improve upon.

| Report-Writing Skill | I do this well already (✓) | I could improve on this (✓) |
|---|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Structuring your report. | | |
| Using an appropriate level of detail. | | |
| Pitching your language at an appropriate technical level for your audience. | | |
| Proof-reading your work. | | |
| Checking spelling and punctuation carefully. | | |
| Using bullet points and numbered lists effectively. | | |
| Presenting data clearly in tables, charts, graphs or diagrams. | | |

Use the space below to make notes about these or any other specific report-writing skills you'd like to improve.

Improving Your Report-Writing Skills

What areas of report writing are you going to work on? These articles and resources will help you improve your skills:

Writing Skills: Before you write it down, know this

Why shouldn't you write "we need 3 more project analysts"? Make use of this guide.

www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/WritingSkills.htm

Jargon Busting: Communicating without creating barriers

Actually, jargon has its place, but it can also spread beyond its usefulness very easily. Learn about common jargon traps, and how to avoid being caught out by them.

www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/JargonBusting.htm

Chunking: Grouping Information so it's more easily understood

Find out how you can structure information to make it easier to absorb and remember, and learn why you should never include more than nine bullet points in a list.

www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/Chunking.htm

Charts and Graphs: Choosing the right format

Spreadsheets offer several different formats of charts and diagrams, but it's not always obvious which one you should use. Learn the basics of charts and diagrams, and gain confidence in your visual presentation skills.

www.mindtools.com/pages/article/Charts_and_Diagrams.htm

3. Presentations Skills

We've probably all sat through a poor presentation. But what makes you leave the room thinking "That was a complete waste of my time"? There are several reasons, and if you can avoid them when you're planning a presentation, you've got a good chance of making YOUR next presentation effective and full of impact.

First of all, was the message pitched wrongly? At a sales conference, you need to tell sales people about the key points about your new products, so they can convince others to buy them. The sales people don't necessarily need to know about the clever new production process, or how product development is financed.

Next, the message may have been relevant, but was it badly delivered? Common communication barriers include a mumbling presenter who didn't look you in the eye, or one who spoke too fast. Equally, perhaps the presenter simply read from a terrifically detailed set of slides but you, sitting at the back of the room, couldn't read them because the text on the slides was so small.

Finally, was it ill-prepared? The material needs to be rehearsed, and the room and logistics need to be ready. The last thing any presenter wants to deal with is the fiasco of a projector not working, or of people being unable to hear at the back of a large room.

Top Tips for Effective Presentations

- Start by understanding why your audience want to listen to you. Do they want to be informed, motivated or persuaded, or do they want to have something demonstrated to them?
- Use three to five main points. Many people in your audience won't remember any more, anyway.
- Use a three part structure: Tell them what you're going to tell them, then tell it to them, then tell them what they've just been told.
- Use notes, but don't read from them – they should just be reminders. If you rehearse enough, this won't be a problem. So...
- Be prepared, and practise, practise, practise!

Presentation Skills Self-Assessment

So, how good are your presentation skills? Find out now by going through the skills listed in the table below, and checking the appropriate box according to whether you think you're already performing the skill well, or whether you think it's something you could improve upon.

| Presentation Skill | I do this well already (✓) | I could improve on this (✓) |
|--|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Understanding the audience before you start working on your message. | | |
| Grabbing their attention with a powerful opener. | | |
| Not trying to include too much information. | | |
| Doing enough preparation. | | |
| Practicing your presentation out loud. | | |
| Creating PowerPoint (or other) slides that support your presentation rather than replace it. | | |
| Talking at the right speed. | | |
| Checking logistics and technical details thoroughly in advance. | | |

Use the space below to make notes about these or any other specific presentation skills you'd like to improve.

Improving Your Presentation Skills

It's now time to work on the areas for improvement in your presentation skills. These articles and resources will help:

Managing Presentation Nerves: Coping with the fear within

Delivering a presentation is common source of fear and nervous anticipation. Learn the tips and tricks that help you channel your fear and nervousness, and deliver cool, calm presentations that inspire and impress.

www.mindtools.com/pages/article/PresentationNerves.htm

Delivering Great Presentations: Communicating effectively with the right content, delivery and slides

Learn more about the four principles of great presentations, and ensure that yours are always engaging and memorable.

www.mindtools.com/pages/article/DeliveringGreatPresentations.htm

The Presentation Planning Checklist

There's a lot to remember when you're putting together a presentation, so make sure you don't overlook anything. Use our comprehensive checklist to do this.

www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/PresentationPlanningChecklist.htm

4. Email-Writing Skills

Emails have become one of the most common forms of written communication. Yet how much attention do we pay to writing them clearly and concisely? The easier you can make it for the readers of your emails to understand them and act on them quickly, the more effective you'll be. (If they're easy to process, you'll get your answer in minutes. If they're difficult, be prepared to wait for days... or weeks.)

Writing an email is, in some ways, no different from the old practice of writing a business letter. Email communication tends to be a little less formal, but it still usually works best when it's well-structured, and when writing is clear, well spelled, and well punctuated. For example, there's nothing necessarily wrong with starting a business email "Hi James", but if James is a senior partner in a law firm, and you've never met him in person, it might not be appropriate for this situation. If you start off on the wrong foot, your reader may well be irritated before he or she even starts to consider your message, making them less open to what you're saying.

The first barrier to communication by email is where the recipient does not receive, or does not read it. But why would this happen? First, it might not be delivered if the recipient's mail system decides that it's spam. For a legitimate message, the most likely reason for this to happen is that there is no subject line.

Even if a message without a subject line *is* delivered, there's still a chance that the recipient won't read it. He or she might decide that it is a "suspect" message, and delete it

without opening it, just in case it is carrying a virus. And even if they don't take such drastic action, a message without a subject is hardly going to be the one jumping out at them from a crowded Inbox saying "open me first".

Top Tips for Effective Email

- Always include a subject line, and make sure it's personalized to distinguish it from generic spam messages.
- Make the subject line work hard for you. If your message includes a deadline, put this in the subject line – "Agenda for 3 December meeting – please send items by 27 Nov." And if you send out a regular email, make sure you distinguish each one "Program report Nov 07" rather than "Latest Program Report".
- Stick to one topic per message. This makes your emails easier to handle by the recipient, who can delete or file each as it is read and actioned. (A great advantage of emails over old fashioned letters is that it costs no more to send several instead of one!)
- Only use Reply to All if everyone **really** needs to read your reply.
- Write your message clearly and concisely, and format it so that it's easy to read (using line spacing, bullets and so on). And make sure especially that any action or response required is very clearly explained.

Email-Writing Self-Assessment

Find out how effective you are at writing emails now by going through the skills listed in the table below, and checking the appropriate box according to whether you think you're already performing the skill well, or whether it's something you could improve upon.

| Email Skill | I do this well already (✓) | I could improve on this (✓) |
|--|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Taking the same care over the quality of language and punctuation as you would for a written letter. | | |
| Always including a subject line. | | |
| Using the subject line effectively. | | |
| Covering only one topic per message. | | |
| Addressing mails effectively and courteously. | | |
| Choosing when to Reply and when to Reply to All. | | |
| Clearly asking the recipient for the response or action required. | | |

Use the space below to make notes about these or any other specific email-writing issues you'd like sort out.

Improving Your Email-Writing Skills

If you have identified areas for improvement in how you could be more efficient about using email, these articles and resources should help:

Effective Email: How to communicate powerfully by email

Ensure that your emails are read in the first place and stay useful to the recipient.

www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/EmailCommunication.htm

The Art of Filing: Managing your documents or inbox... and your time

While filing is boring, simple filing techniques can help you become much more efficient at work. Use these methods to save time – and help people quickly and efficiently.

www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_85.htm

5. Meeting Management Skills

The saying that meetings “take minutes but last hours” is all too true for most of us. But it doesn’t have to be this way. Provided that the right people are invited to meetings, that they are well planned, and that they try to achieve the right things, meetings are a powerful way of moving your team’s work ahead.

One important way of ensuring that you’re not wasting people’s time is to invite only people whose presence at the meeting is essential. Make sure that everyone invited is there because you need their input to the discussion, or need their agreement with its conclusions. In general, don’t invite people who simply “need to know”: You can tell them what has been decided after the meeting. (OK: if someone is an important “stakeholder” in the decision, albeit they may not have much to input or power to decide, it may make sense to at least invite them!)

Once your meetings develop a reputation for being effective, those you invite will make space in their diaries, if at all possible, to attend. But if your meetings are renowned for being long and ineffective, those key individuals you need may be reluctant to come along, and you’ll be left unable to achieve what you wanted without them.

Chairing a meeting successfully demands quite a lot of active work before and during the

meeting. If the meeting is a regular one, don’t just use last time’s agenda with new dates. Instead, always construct a new one from scratch, and only include the topics which *have* to be covered and discussed in a meeting. Other material can be distributed before or after as appropriate.

Top Tips for Managing Meetings Effectively

- Avoid using meetings simply to report things that just as effectively could be distributed by paper or via email.
- Put the most important items near the beginning on the Agenda, so that they get the time they need. Allow less important items to be cut at the end if you have to finish for a certain time.
- Step in quickly if the discussion starts going off-track.
- Don’t recap what you’ve already covered for latecomers – it just encourages them to be late next time.
- Limit participants to 12 at the most, to maximize the effectiveness of discussions.
- Issue minutes promptly after the meeting, and clearly mark actions that people had taken away from the meeting.

Meeting Management Self-Assessment

Do people look forward to your meetings or dread them? Find out how effective you are at managing meetings now by going through the skills listed in the table below. Check the appropriate box according to whether you think you're already performing the skill well, or whether it's something you could improve upon.

| Meeting Management Skill | I do this well already (✓) | I could improve on this (✓) |
|--|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Planning your agenda items. | | |
| Inviting only people who <i>have to</i> be there. | | |
| Starting punctually. | | |
| Stopping the discussion from wandering off-track. | | |
| Encouraging all participants to contribute and controlling those who try to dominate the discussion. | | |
| Ensuring that agreed actions are allocated to someone. | | |
| Promptly distributing minutes that include action items. | | |

Use the space below to make notes about any other specific meeting management skills you'd like to improve.

Improving Your Meeting Management Skills

If you have identified areas for improvement in how you manage meetings, these articles and resources will help:

Running Effective Meetings: Establishing an objective and sticking to it

Meetings can either be great time wasters or great ways to move objectives forward. By learning the key elements of effective meetings, you can ensure your meetings are well received and successful.

www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/RunningMeetings.htm

The Role of a Facilitator: Guiding an event through to a successful conclusion

Facilitation is the art of guiding a group or meeting, impartially, and towards a successful

outcome. Learn what it takes to be an effective facilitator, and how to develop the range of skills for the role.

www.mindtools.com/pages/article/RoleofAFacilitator.htm

Avoiding Groupthink: Avoiding sometimes-fatal flaws in group decision making

If you've ever held back from speaking out against an idea because everyone else present seemed to think it was a good idea, you've suffered from groupthink. Find out how to stop it taking hold, and how to avoid its potentially disastrous consequences.

www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_82.htm

Have you found this e-book useful?

If so, here are a few ideas for your next steps...

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I hope you enjoy exploring our training material – and I look forward to hearing about your progress!



James Manktelow, CEO, MindTools.com

