Spoken vs. Written Communication

Inquire: Which is Better: Writing or Talking?

Overview
Every day we choose between written and spoken communication to get our messages across. Sometimes a text or an email is more convenient, but a phone call or face-to-face conversation might get results faster. Knowing which choice is the better option will put you on track to better, more effective communication in the workplace.

In this lesson you will learn the differences between spoken and written communication, see the influence written communication has on spoken communication, identify effective written messages, and explain the impact of written communication.

Big Question: How do you decide between spoken and written communication?

Watch: You Decide! Spoken or Written?
Spoken communication includes the words we say aloud, while written communication includes the words we write down. These two types of communication serve different purposes and each have benefits. You choose every day between spoken and written communication; but have you ever thought about what influences that choice? Because the two are so different, they can be used in many ways! The decisions we make about which form of communication to use influence how effective the message we send will be. Finding the proper channel to most effectively send a message is one of the most important skills you can develop today.

Spoken communication is sometimes used by salespeople to encourage an impulse buy. If a customer receives an offer in the mail that “only lasts 24 hours,” they probably will not act as quickly as if they were standing right in front of a salesperson. In comparison, written communication is used by poets and authors. If a poet could not write down his work, he surely would not remember all the poems he had written.

In your professional life, you might have to provide information to your boss about a problem at work. Think about how you might decide between writing an email or conducting a presentation in order to send this message. An email might not be appropriate if the problem is time-sensitive. Likewise, an in-person conversation might not be appropriate if it is a very detailed or nuanced problem. You might even have to do a combination of both. Additionally, sometimes a spoken conversation is asked to be recorded officially as a written conversation. Having the skills to be flexible in your communication will surely be a valuable asset in any workplace. It is up to you to decide what is the best way to communicate a problem, because it might have some important consequences.
To make the best choice, you need to understand the purpose and benefits of spoken and written communication. It is also important to know when spoken communication is more appropriate than written communication, and vice versa.

**Read: Spoken vs. Written Communication**

**Overview**

Think about the last time you invited a friend over to hang out. You might have called them on the phone or sent them a text. Do you remember what impacted your choice between these two types of communication — spoken or written? Spoken and written communication have obvious similarities, but they also have some not-so-obvious differences. In this lesson, we will learn about the differences between written and spoken communication, and how the types of communication interact with each other.

**The Differences Between Spoken and Written**

There are three main differences between *spoken communication* and *written communication*.

First, spoken communication is usually informal or unplanned, while written communication is usually formal and planned. When you write an email to a coworker, it probably sounds much more formal than when you see them for a quick moment in the hallway. If you begin an informal conversation at the watercooler with, “Dear Alicia,” that would sound a little silly! But, if you begin a written email with those same words, it would be completely acceptable.

Second, spoken communication is *synchronous*; it happens in real time, like when you talk back and forth to a classmate. Written communication is *asynchronous*; it happens over a longer period of time. If you are walking your dog, and your neighbor says hello, you will probably immediately respond, instead of waiting to write them a letter saying hello. Using asynchronous written communication can be helpful when you want to give the receiver time to craft a response, rather than putting them on the spot with synchronous spoken communication.

Third, spoken communication coveys nonverbal communication. When you speak, you use tone, hand gestures, facial movements, etc. to convey meaning. Written communication lacks these supplemental nonverbal pieces. You have probably experienced a miscommunication when written communication was not received as intended. For example, if a coworker says they just got fired, and you respond in a sarcastic tone, “That’s great,” it will convey a very different meaning than if you texted them, “That’s great!” When they hear you say that message verbally, they know you are being sarcastic, but if they read it in a text, they might not understand the sarcasm. Recently, with the use of emojis, we have tried to implement some nonverbal messages into written communication.

**How Written Communication Impacts Spoken Communication**

Even though spoken communication existed long before written communication, spoken communication has been changed by written communication in many ways.

Written communication sometimes guides our spoken communication. Not all speaking is completely informal and unplanned. For example, if you have prepared a presentation, you may have created a PowerPoint to guide your speech. If not a PowerPoint, maybe you have some lecture notes jotted down to ensure you stay on topic.
Written communication has grammatical rules that have greatly impacted the way we speak. For example, using a comma in writing indicates a separation between the sentence. However, when you read a sentence aloud, the comma becomes a pause in your speaking.

Written communication can reinforce our spoken communication. When your boss comes up with a business plan to increase sales, she might create an acronym to reinforce that plan. She might even print out flyers to display around the office to further reinforce the new business plan. By doing this, she is using written communication to reinforce her spoken communication.

What is Effective Written Communication?
Written communication should be two things in order to be effective: clear and concise.

Clarity is key when it comes to written communication, primarily because there are no nonverbal aids to supplement meaning. If your friend writes you a text without any previous communication that says “Go over there and pick it up,” that probably will not make much sense. A clearer text might say, “Go over to Target and pick up a gallon of milk.”

Additionally, written communication needs to be concise. There is a limited amount of text that can be understood when reading; this is why we break text into sentences. Even then, if a sentence is too long, the reader will probably lose the intended meaning.

The Impact of Written Communication
Can you imagine a world without written communication? No grocery lists, no instruction manuals, no tweets, no recipes written in your ancestors’ handwriting. A world without written communication is a much less uniform and accessible world.

Written communication provides uniformity because it is consistent. This lesson, for example, is able to be read by many different students. They will all read the same words and gather the same information. Another example of written uniformity could be a cookbook. If we were not able to write direct instructions, people would probably get completely different results every time they tried to cook the same lasagna recipe.

Written communication also makes our world more accessible. For example, every single person in the world does not need to be individually taught how to change a tire. One person might read a book on how to change a tire, while another person might have been taught by a family member. Because we have written communication, you don’t need 800 people that can teach how to change a tire. Instead, one person could write a book about how to change a tire and then everyone in the world, even you, could read that book to learn that skill.

Reflect: Big Decision

Poll
Imagine you are planning on resigning from your current job; what do you think is most professional in a business setting?

- Send a formal email to your boss.
- Type out a formal letter, and send it to your boss in the mail.
- Schedule a meeting with your boss to announce your resignation in person.
Expand: A Real Scenario

Overview
Let’s imagine you need to file a complaint with your boss about a coworker’s behavior in the workplace. You have the choice to either send an email or schedule an appointment in-person. In this example, you need to choose the best route.

Filing a Complaint
You have worked at this company for several years. Recently, a new hire was brought in who is very loud, disrespectful, and distracting. To make it worse, his desk is right next to yours. After asking him to quiet down and stop distracting you, nothing has changed. It is now time to decide if you are going to email your boss or schedule a meeting in person. You know a meeting with your boss could happen the same day, but that she is usually very busy and can’t pay much attention to people who just drop in her office. On the other hand, an in-person meeting will get a solution resolved faster and you know that your boss is very good at picking up on nonverbal cues to know if you are exaggerating a problem or if it is genuinely a concern that needs to be fixed. If you send the complaint as an email she may take a few days to check and respond. However, an email will allow you to more thoroughly document your complaint in a way that will show your boss how severe the problem has become. Should you choose to write an email or schedule an appointment?

Write an Email
You decide an email would be most appropriate. You have documented several interactions with your coworker, noting the days and times when issues occurred, and how long it took before you were able to get back to work. You put this information in the email, as well as a message explaining that something needs to change because you cannot handle working with this person anymore. You hope that your message is concise enough for your boss to find a time to look it over, yet thorough enough to detail the problems you are facing.

The next morning you check your email and find that you have a response from your boss. She has looked over your evidence and feels that the most appropriate course of action is to have the new employee move desks to the opposite side of the floor. After thinking it over you decide this is a good solution to your problem and you will hopefully be able to return to work without any more interruptions.

Schedule an Appointment
You decide to knock on your boss’ door to see if she has time for a quick meeting. You mention that this is important, so she makes time to listen. You sit down and begin giving the details you can remember about the problem. Unfortunately you haven’t brought any written notes, so you try to recall the bad behavior by your new coworker off the top of your head. Because of the severity of the situation, you get flustered and frustrated while you are talking about your coworker, and your boss is able to tell.

After the meeting, you end up reflecting and realizing that you were not able to say many of the things you wanted to, but rather, you were overcome with frustration. This did make it clear how much this coworker is affecting you, but you know you were not as professional as you usually are. Your boss decides to have a Professional Development Day to engage all employees in some team bonding. While the team-building activities were fun, and you know more about the coworker than you did before, you feel the core problem wasn’t addressed as well as you were hoping.
Reflecting on Your Choice

After reading through the different scenarios, do you feel you made the right choice? What benefits were there to writing an email? How about having a meeting? Do you think that either path could have been handled better? How? Were there any downsides to sending an email or to having a meeting? Both options have benefits and drawbacks, but knowing what those are ahead of time will help you make the best decision.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Concise Communication

- A short video explaining the importance of concise, effective communication
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DLWN97VcZ4

Clear Communication in the Workplace

- A short video explaining the importance of clear communication in a work environment
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCGJvL41ECY

10 tips for effective business writing

- An article providing ten tips on how to write efficiently in a business environment

Lesson Glossary

**spoken communication**: communication that relies on spoken words to convey a message from a sender to a receiver  
**written communication**: communication that relies on written messages as the primary method of conveying information to a receiver or receivers  
**synchronous**: happens in real time  
**asynchronous**: happens over a longer period of time

Check Your Knowledge

1. Spoken communication makes use of nonverbal communication.
   A. True  
   B. False

2. Written communication is an unconscious action we do without thinking about it.
   A. True  
   B. False

3. The _____________ protected the rights of freed people. Written communication has no impact on spoken communication.
   A. True  
   B. False
Answer Key:

Citations

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