

Section 5

INTRODUCTION TO EFFECTIVE ARMY COMMUNICATION

Key Points

- 1 The Communication Process
- 2 Five Tips for Effective Communication
- 3 Four Tips for Effective Writing
- 4 Three Tips for Effective Speaking

... an order that *can* be misunderstood *will* be misunderstood.

Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke

Introduction

Your success as a military leader depends on your ability to think critically and creatively and to communicate your intention and decision to others. The ability to communicate clearly—to get your intent and ideas across so that others understand your message and act on it—is one of the primary qualities of leadership.

While you are a college student, your channels of communication include presentations and term papers. When you become an Army officer, these channels will expand to include training meetings, briefings, and operations orders. As you will see, the means to effective Army communication is to develop your speaking and writing skills so that you can deliver any message to any audience effectively. Keep in mind that communication also includes receiving messages from others through reading and listening.

Early in your Army career, much of your communication is *direct*. For example, coaching your Soldiers often requires communication that is one-on-one, immediate, and spoken. Later in your Army career, as your leadership responsibilities increase, you will inform subordinates and leaders through written orders, procedures, memos, and e-mail. This form of communication is *indirect*—it goes through other people or processes, is time-delayed, and written.

Your ability to communicate—to write, speak, and listen—affects your ability to inform, teach, coach, and motivate those around you. The good news is that you can develop these essential skills. This section will discuss the communication process and then provide you tips for effective writing and speaking.

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of these skills. In military operations, as elsewhere, the inability to write and speak well can have tremendous costs. History is replete with examples of misunderstood messages. For example, many Civil War scholars believe that victory at Gettysburg may have depended on how a subordinate interpreted Confederate GEN Robert E. Lee's use of the word "practicable."



GEN Robert E. Lee

Day One at Gettysburg: Vague Orders Have Significant Consequences

[On the first day of the battle of Gettysburg, Pa., Confederate attacks drove Union troops through the town to the top of Cemetery Hill, a half-mile south.] The battle so far appeared to be another great Confederate victory.

But Lee could see that so long as the enemy held the high ground south of town, the battle was not over. He knew that the rest of the [Union] Army of the Potomac must be hurrying toward Gettysburg; his best chance to clinch the victory was to seize those hills and ridges before they arrived. So Lee gave [LTG Richard S.] Ewell discretionary orders to attack Cemetery Hill “if practicable.” Had [LTG Thomas J. (Stonewall)] Jackson still lived, he undoubtedly would have found it practicable. But Ewell was not Jackson. Thinking the enemy position too strong, he did not attack—thereby creating one of the controversial “ifs” of Gettysburg that have echoed down the years.

James M. McPherson

sender

the person who originates and sends a message

receiver

the person who receives the sender's message, or for whom the sender intends it

noise

whatever interferes with communication between the sender and receiver, from the wording used to audience distractions to bad handwriting

feedback

the receiver's response to the sender's message, which can indicate understanding, lack of understanding, misunderstanding, agreement, disagreement, desire for more information, and so on

The Communication Process

As you will see, the Gettysburg vignette illustrates the parts of the communications process. Lee was the **sender**. He sent the message: Attack Cemetery Hill. Ewell, the **receiver**, read the words “if practicable,” decided that Union artillery on the hill made an attack not “practicable,” and did not attack.

The words “if practicable” made the message vague. (Who and what should define “if practicable”?) Obstacles to communication, such as this lack of clarity—along with other considerations, such as the demands of time, the ease of understanding the sender’s speech, the ability to read the sender’s handwriting, or the distractions in the area—make up what communications theorists call **noise**. Noise works against the clarity of communication.

Looking again at the vignette above, you find that Lee never checked with Ewell to see if he understood Lee’s intent: “What do you intend to do?” Ewell never checked with Lee to clarify the message: “What do you mean by ‘if practicable?’” The communication process included no **feedback**. Assume for a moment, as some historians do, that Lee intended that Ewell attack Cemetery Hill immediately and decisively. (These historians argue that Lee was used to issuing such vague orders to the aggressive Stonewall Jackson, who had died a few months earlier.) Throwing Billy Yank off the hilltop might well have allowed Lee to command the battlefield, perhaps even forcing the advancing Union armies to withdraw. That might have led to Lee’s domination of southern Pennsylvania, choking off Washington from the North and ending the war on the Confederacy’s terms.

If that *were* Lee’s intent, the message failed. Ewell did not attack. The Union held onto the high ground and won the battle two days later—the beginning of the end for the Confederacy.

There’s an important lesson in all this: *Effective communication occurs when the receiver’s perceived idea matches the sender’s intended idea.* The receiver understands what the sender *means*, not just what the sender says or writes. But how do you ensure that occurs?

Five Tips for Effective Communication

These five tips will help you eliminate noise and ensure that your receiver understands your message.

1. Focus your message

Every academic, business, or military message you will ever produce will fit into one of two categories:

- *Action-and-information messages* ask the receiver to do something: Schedule a make-up exam; prepare a marketing report; attack a hilltop.
- *Information-only messages* tell the receiver something: The primary cause of the American Civil War was states' rights; Estelle LaMonica is the new Vice President of Human Resources; Alpha Company has one vehicle down for battle damage.

You must focus—*clarify*—your message so your receiver is certain—*clear*—on what he or she is supposed to do or know. Too many action-and-information messages fail because the receiver mistakes them for information-only messages:

“I need a make-up exam,” you send. “*You sure do,*” thinks the receiver.

“If we knew the market better, we could increase our share.” “*That’s a good idea.*”

“The bad guys have a company-sized element on Hill 442.” “*That’s right. I saw the intelligence reports as well.*”

Decide *before you communicate* if 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*.

2. Break through the noise

As the sender, as the one trying to communicate, you have the responsibility to communicate clearly—to break through the noise. Think in terms of your receiver. Use your receiver’s terms of reference. If a military objective is to your front but to your receiver’s flank, refer

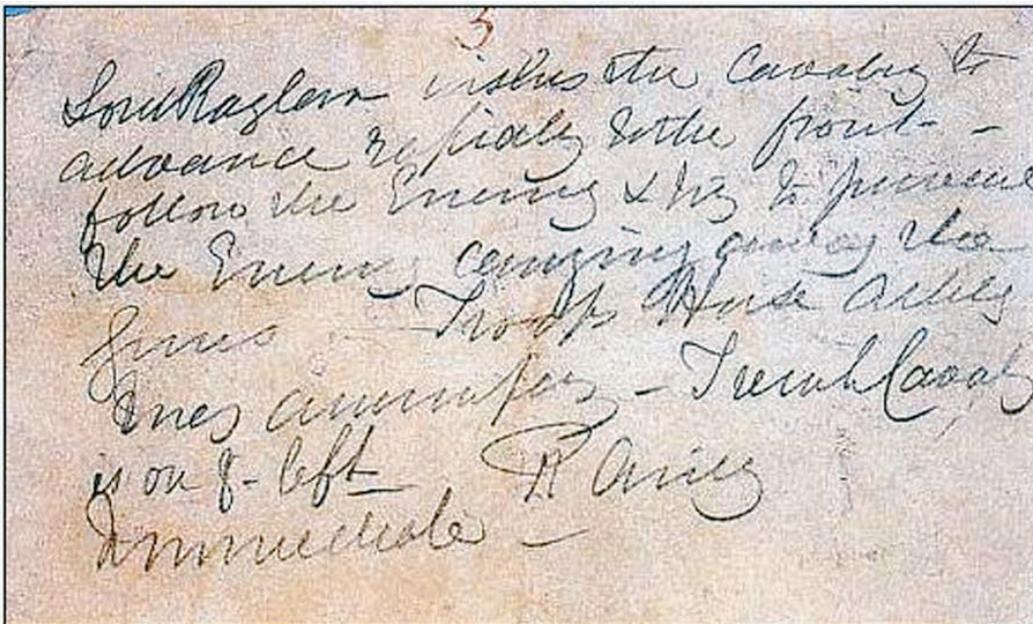


Figure 5.1 The Battle of Balaklava, 25 October 1854—Lord Raglan’s reference to his front, rather than the cavalry’s flank, sent the Light Brigade to its death: “Lord Raglan wishes the cavalry to advance rapidly to the front, follow the enemy and try to prevent the enemy carrying away the guns. Troop Horse Artillery may accompany. French cavalry is on your left. Immediate.”

Critical Thinking

What action requests in the messages under “Focus Your Message” on page 103 were lost in transmission?

to the objective as to the flank. (This very mistake—*front* rather than *flank*—resulted in the deaths of 550 British cavalry troops at the Battle of Balaklava in the Crimean War.)

- *Use descriptive language.* Use visualization and analogies. Instead of saying, “The motor pool is big,” say, “The motor pool is the size of a football field.” Instead of saying, “I want you to snap that salute,” say, “I want you to snap that salute as if you were saluting a Normandy veteran.”
- *Ask for feedback.* It is not enough to ask, “Do you understand me?” The obvious answer is “Yes. Absolutely. Sure I do,” *no matter what the understanding may be.* Lee’s intent may have been “Take Cemetery Hill.” Ewell’s understanding may have been “Take Cemetery Hill only if I can do it without casualties.” If Lee had asked, “Do you understand me?” Ewell’s response—no matter the difference between intent and understanding—would have been “Yes. Absolutely. Sure I do.” Craft your request for feedback so your receiver will have to demonstrate his or her understanding of the message. “What—specifically—do I want you to do?” “What—specifically—will you do now?” “How will you do it?”
- *Revise as you need to.* You may have to repeat your message several times before you communicate successfully. Use the feedback you get to adjust your message to the needs of your receiver.

3. Put your Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF)

Get to your point in the first 10 seconds of your message; put your Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF).

BLUF

an acronym for Bottom Line Up Front, which reminds you to get to the point of your message within the first 10 seconds

- Your point—your *bottom line*—in an action-and-information message is what you want your receiver to do: “Attack, seize, and hold Cemetery Hill.”
- Your point—your bottom line—in an information-only message is what you want your receiver to know: “Alpha Company has one vehicle down for battle damage.”
- Audiences—receivers—are impatient. “Get to the point,” they say. “How does this affect me?” If you don’t get to your point, if you don’t explain how your message affects your receivers, they will tune out. They may be physically present during the rest of the message, but their minds are far away—thinking of food; thinking of home; thinking of other tasks and responsibilities they have to perform.

4. Use simple words

Great communicators use simple words.

Consider these examples:

“Carthage must be destroyed!” (Cato the Elder, an ancient Roman senator)

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” (Franklin D. Roosevelt)

“I have a dream.” (Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.)

“Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” (Ronald Reagan)

Look closely at the examples. Notice the overwhelming use of single-syllable words. (Of the 24 words, only five are two-syllable words.) Notice the absence of any long “impressive” words. Given the choice between a simple word and a long word—and given there’s no difference in the meaning of the two words—use the simple word. Your communication will be clearer.

5. Use concrete words

Concrete words draw pictures in your receiver’s brain.

Consider the difference between these two phrases:

“An old car.”

“A 1966 red Mustang convertible.”

Which phrase draws a picture in your brain? You can visualize the Mustang far more easily, far more quickly, than you can visualize an old car. You can visualize “15 enemy soldiers with small arms and shoulder-fired antitank weapons” far more quickly, far more easily, than you can visualize “a bunch of bad guys.”

Four Tips for Effective Writing

Writing takes special care. You can reread and study a written message, while a spoken message quickly vanishes into the air. As you saw above, an unclear written message can lead to disaster, especially if the receiver has no way to confirm his or her understanding of the message. These tips will help ensure your writing is as clear as possible.

1. Use the “Five Tips for Effective Communication”

The five tips—focus your message, break through the noise, put your Bottom Line Up Front, use simple words, and use concrete words—will make you a better writer. Because you don’t have an audience in front of you and because you have no immediate feedback, clarity becomes critical. You must not only be sure the receiver understands you, but you must also remove the opportunity to misunderstand.

2. Use active voice, short sentences, and conversational language

Use active voice. *Active voice* describes a sentence in which the subject of the sentence performs the action of the sentence: “Sergeant Torres wrote the report.” “Sergeant Torres” is the subject of the sentence; he is what the sentence is about. He does the action of the sentence: He writes the report.

Passive voice—the less-effective counterpart of active voice—describes a sentence in which the subject of the sentence receives the action: “The report was written by Sergeant Torres.” Now the subject is “The report”; it receives the action; it “was written.”

Active voice has three advantages over passive voice:

1. *It’s more concise.* “Sergeant Torres wrote the report” has five words. “The report was written by Sergeant Torres” has seven. Active voice will *almost always* be more concise than passive voice.
2. *It’s more direct.* It demands accountability. You cannot write in active voice unless you identify the doer of the action. Consider the ethical implications of “No action was taken.” Who didn’t take action? Why didn’t they take action? And why didn’t the writer name whoever didn’t take action?
3. *It’s more conversational.* It’s more natural. You grow up speaking in active voice. When you were little, you may have said, “I want to be a soldier.” You certainly didn’t say, “To be a soldier is wanted by me.”

A classic and valuable writing guide is The Elements of Style, by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White. The Fourth Edition is available online and in many bookstores. You can also find useful information and tips at Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab (OWL), www.english.purdue.edu.

active voice

in the active voice, the doer of the action is the subject of the verb

passive voice

in the passive voice, the subject of the verb receives the action—avoid this weak construction



A document that looks hard to read is hard to read.

Diane Brewster-Norman, communications-skills expert

Use short sentences. Short sentences are easier to read. They are easier to keep grammatically correct, and they are easier to punctuate. Keep your sentences to an average of 12 to 15 words per sentence.

Use conversational language. Use the language you use every day. As you are writing, ask yourself, “How would I say this?” In conversational language, you would never say “Upon completion of the above-entitled actions, forward the documents to the undersigned.” You would probably say, “When you are done with this, return the papers to me.” There is, however, a caution. Conversational written language does not exactly match the spoken language. It doesn’t include the “ums” and “uhs.” It doesn’t include the half-sentences people start, then change.

3. Use lots of white space

White space lets your reader breathe. Keep your paragraphs to no more than about six lines long. Use headings and lists. Open up your document.

Examine this textbook section. Notice the short paragraphs, the headings, and the lists. It should look easy to read. The writers wrote it that way. Make your documents easy to read.

4. Use correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation

Using incorrect grammar, spelling, and punctuation presents two problems.

It can be confusing. What happens when you read, “We saw a motor pool walking through the battalion area”? You are not sure what the writer intended: Motor pools don’t generally walk, let alone through battalion areas. Try “Walking through the battalion area, we saw a motor pool.”

It affects your credibility. Readers assume that if you cannot take care of the little things, you cannot take care of the big things. If you cannot write a simple sentence, they wonder, how can you lead troops? The assumption may not be fair (GEN Ulysses S. Grant was a horrible speller), but it’s real and has hampered many officers’ careers.

A complete discussion of grammar, spelling, and punctuation is beyond the scope of this lesson, but here are three ways to improve your language ability.

Read professionally written and published material. The subject doesn’t matter—as long as it is professionally written and published. Read good books. See the written word on the page. Get used to the standards of written English. As you become familiar with the standards, you will see your mistakes more easily.

Make writing skills a part of your professional development plan. Learn about grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Learn the principles. Learn the forms. Learn the expectations. Then coach your Soldiers.

Get someone to review your work. All too often, you will be too close to your document to see your errors. Your spell-checker won’t catch errors that are spelled correctly.

Critical Thinking

Assuming that Lee wanted Ewell to take Cemetery Hill, how might the commander have written his order to make it clearer to Ewell what he intended? If Lee wanted Ewell to be cautious, how might he have written it?

Three Tips for Effective Speaking

Public speaking and briefing also require a mastery of the language, but involve different skills than writing. These tips will help.

1. Use the “Five Tips for Effective Communication”

The five tips—focus your message, break through the noise, put your Bottom Line Up Front, use simple words, and use concrete words—will make you a better speaker. Consider that the four examples you read in “Use simple words” (from Cato, Roosevelt, King, and Reagan) were all originally spoken.

2. Mark the parts of your presentation

Look at the page in front of you. Besides the words, you’ll see headings, paragraphs, and lists. These mark the parts of the reading. As you move from one paragraph to another, you expect the ideas to transition or flow from one to the next. The page layout reinforces the ideas in the reading. The spoken word provides no such markers, however. There’s no white space, no indents, no bolded lists. So you provide the markers.

Use pauses to indicate changes in ideas. When you’ve finished with an idea, pause for a few seconds. Count the seconds in your head. *One. Two. Three. Four. Five.* Then pick up the conversation. The silence—the pause—represents the white space on a page. You’re moving to another point.

Use movement to indicate changes in ideas. If you’re standing on your audience’s left front while you’re explaining your first point, move to your audience’s right front to explain your second point.

“That concludes my first point.” (Stop. Step. Step. Step.) “My second point . . .” The physical movement represents the movement from your first point to your second.

Use gestures to indicate the parts of your presentation. You’ve worked very carefully to structure your presentation. Use your gestures as body language to complement that structure. “The first part of the five-paragraph field order . . .” (Hold up your thumb or index finger.) “. . . is ‘situation.’”

3. Listen actively

Speaking has certain advantages over writing. When you speak, you have your audience members in front of you. You get immediate feedback from them. You can observe their body language and determine how your message is going over.

Positive signs include audience members leaning forward, listening to what you say. They nod their heads in agreement. They make eye contact with you. They look at your slides.

Negative signs include closed body language: Audience members lean back in their chairs and fold their arms across their chests. They glance at their watches. (Some may check to see if their watches are still running.) They look around the room. The negative signs mean you need to change your approach or your delivery. Perhaps the best way is to pause and ask your audience for direct feedback: “I get the impression you’re not comfortable with this discussion. What are your concerns?” Better to address the issues than ignore them.



CONCLUSION

Think of the great communicators of the last century: Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Margaret Thatcher, Martin Luther King Jr., and Ronald Reagan. Would these men and women have *led* as well as they did if they didn't *communicate* as well as they did? You will soon lead young men and women. You cannot lead unless you can communicate.

Learning Assessment

1. How many parties does it take for communication to take place? Who are they?
2. Explain what BLUF means and why it is important.
3. How do you know if someone has understood you?
4. What are three reasons it is generally better to use active rather than passive voice?
5. Describe the five tips for effective communication.

Key Words

sender

receiver

noise

feedback

BLUF

active voice

passive voice

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