

Chapter 500

Communications

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¶501 Introduction

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This chapter discusses ways research administrators can harness communication skills effectively for success both within and outside the institution.

Research administration encompasses a variety of skills, including, among others, cost accounting, interpretation of government regulations, the management of large quantities of data, and problem resolution. Kim Moreland of the University of Wisconsin, Madison and her colleague, Dr. Kennis Wessel, present a most compelling case for the fundamental importance of communication skills for everyone engaged in research administration, regardless of their specific duties and responsibilities. At the very beginning of their chapter, they come right to the point: “The tools of effective communication are essential to effective research administration.”

Moreland and Wessel provide a thorough overview of the essential principles of communication and an analysis of the principal media by which we communicate. If one were to take a close look at how most research administrators spend most of their days, one would find that they are engaged in communication. The particular variety of communication and the people with whom they are communicating vary greatly, but when all is said and done, communication is what most research administrators do most of the time. Given that fact, it’s quite remarkable that most research administrators have had to acquire their knowledge of communication and develop their communication skills without much formal training, i.e., on the job. For all of us, no matter what our specific role, this chapter is chock full of useful information that can be put to use very quickly.

This chapter will continue to respond to the information needs of research administrators through the addition of new material. Future updates will contain revisions, additions, and enhancements to ¶505, as appropriate. Content added to other sections of the chapter will provide readers additional discussions of related topics (at ¶520), practical tools (at ¶530), and case studies (¶540). A “knowledge check” containing Q&As and discussion topics is included at ¶590.

¶1505 **Communications in Research Administration: The Farmer, the Cowman, and the Liaison**

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The farmer and the cowman should be friends.
One man likes to push a plough, the other likes to chase a cow,
But that's no reason why they cain't be friends.
Territory folks should stick together,
Territory folks should all be pals.

—Oscar Hammerstein, *Oklahoma!*

A research administrator is a kind of middleman. As communicators, research administrators encounter a unique difficulty, a consequence of their position between two discrete, dynamic parties. They are liaisons, and this role produces a unique communication challenge.

The key function of research administrators is to bridge differences between constituencies who are driven by different goals and different working models, yet who are essential to each other's very existence. These constituencies have different vocabularies, different calendars, and different motives. Research administrators must serve the needs of all. They must find tools of communication that suit the needs of each constituency. They must also promote their own cause, a role of service, and explain policies and procedures that are often determined by others.

These conditions inevitably create stress. Just as inevitably, the burden can be lightened by understanding the nature of communication. *The tools of effective communication are essential to effective research administration.*

The musical *Oklahoma!* depicts challenges facing two natural enemies, farmers and cowmen. In Oklahoma, a wild new territory, they inevitably compete over ways to achieve growth. Farmers and cowmen have different goals. They utilize resources differently. They are stretched to find common ground. But the territory is unforgiving, and their chances of survival improve dramatically through collaboration. Wise communication makes the difference between perishing alone or surviving together.

Similarly, wise communication can enhance the collaboration of faculty with sponsors and administrators. Research administrators stand at a communications nexus with those parties. They must assume leadership to enable interaction among constituencies. Effective communication by and through research administrators is the network by which folks stick together, by which they become "pals," in the territory of research support.

The Territory Ahead

General principles underlie all communication in research administration. Although contextual differences influence communication choices, the principles have a broad reach, embracing all contexts.

This chapter explores some communication principles, drawing many examples from research administration. At the outset, an essential, inclusive model serves as a basis for discussing the communication needs of research administrators. Next, the chapter discusses media by which professionals communicate, with special attention to media used by research administrators. Third, the chapter lists key constituencies with whom research administrators collaborate, discussing attributes of each relationship and their influences on the character of communication. Fourth, the chapter delves into elements of strong communication, listing several effective tools and making recommendations. Finally, there is a discussion of essential purposes that guide effective professional communication.

¶505.1 Principles of Communication

Basic principles of communication underlie the most sophisticated professional interactions. By identifying these principles, research administrators are able to improve communications at every level, from each simple, spoken word and each instinctive gesture to complex, formal systems of information exchange. By considering these principles, research administrators acquire tools to improve their professional communications.

Communication involves several factors, shown below in a communications model. Communicators should recognize a few basic components that are always present. They should also recognize the communications feedback cycle, the nature of symbols, and impediments that make communication difficult.

A Model of Communication

Communication models identify discrete, interrelated components of communicative acts. A simple model identifies

- ◆ a sender,
- ◆ a message,
- ◆ the medium (or media),
- ◆ the receiver, and
- ◆ impediments to effective communication.

Even a simple communication act is complex. In any single instant, the following factors are involved:

- ◆ The *sender* is the originator of a communication event. The sender may be a person, institution, organization, or other.

Example

Penelope, a research administrator, is a sender.

In any communication event, each contributor is a sender at some point in time. A sender may be active or passive; passivity itself is a message.

- ◆ The *message* is the content of communication. This content may be ideas, attitudes, or feelings. It may be intended or unintended. It may be explicitly stated, implied, or (sometimes erroneously) inferred. Ideally the sender knows what she intends to communicate.

Example

Penelope: "Professor Adams, your proposal doesn't include full indirect costs."

Usually the sender intends that a communication occur, but from time to time, unintended messages are sent.

Example

Penelope puts the proposal in a folder, straightens up, and glares at the researcher.

In this case, and in many professional situations, nuances can betray communications. For instance, regardless of what one is saying, body language can support the message or completely contradict it. When someone is speaking to the boss but she's shuffling papers, the speaker feels a disconnect. Penelope's actions and the boss's shuffling of papers send messages that are probably unintended.

- ◆ The *medium* is the vehicle by which a message is transported from sender to receiver. In daily communications, research administrators have opportunities to select from a variety of media. Our most essential communicative medium is language, which may be written or spoken. Other visual and audible media also communicate, such as charts, graphs, props, and electronic media. Many factors contribute to the complete communication, such as body language, clothing, font choice, paper quality, screen size, and others.

Examples

Words:

- "You might wish to revise the budget to include indirect costs," or
- "There is a university policy on indirect costs," or
- "If you want to submit this proposal, you'll have to get it right," or
- "Look, dim-bulb, you don't have a choice."

Deeds:

Penelope —

- explains "indirect costs" (again), or
- refers the researcher to explanations on the Web site, or
- provides an example of a funded proposal.

Gestures, physical and verbal:

Penelope —

- speaks softly and slowly, or
- comes from behind her desk for less formality, more openness, or
- slams her fist on the desk.

- ◆ The *receiver* is the person who hears, reads, or otherwise perceives the message. Here, again, receivers become senders, exchanging roles with the original sender.

Example

Professor Adams, a researcher, is a receiver.

Impediments to Communications. Communications impediments are factors that prevent the message from being fully received or understood. They may be present in any communication setting. An impediment may occur if the speaker has a different vocabulary from the intended audience. Sometimes inefficiency in the medium such as a bad microphone (that causes “noise”), interruptions in a meeting, or an unfocused presentation intrude. Sometimes a difference of goals or attitude intrudes, causing the audience to “tune out” the speaker’s message.

Sometimes receivers stop hearing. For example, when the *Oklahoma!* farmer erects fences to keep cattle away from his crops but the rancher wants free-range grazing rights, the polar opposition may seem irreconcilable. Research administrators face an extraordinary challenge whenever they convey dense regulatory information, because the material is daunting and uninviting. In each situation, receivers may stop listening. Simple examples of communication impediments are included below.

Examples

Verbal: Language barriers, such as the jargon of research proposals.

Circumstances: The proposal deadline is this afternoon, which creates stress.

Physical setting: The furniture arrangement favors one person more than another.

Sounds: A new construction project is underway right outside your window.

Other Characteristics of Communication

Communication models give the impression that communication consists of discrete components that behave in predictable ways. That impression is faulty. Words mean different things to different people. Communicators often don’t take turns in polite ways. The ground shifts during communication as attitudes change and new information opens new challenges.

Communication Cycles. Communication cycles occur in even simple dialogue. A communication event generally continues beyond receipt of the message. A receiver may respond to the communication with the twitch of an eyebrow or a fully developed e-mail — and the response is itself a new message. These responses, both overt and

intuitive, communicate to the original sender. In turn, these may provoke some adjustment in the sender, stimulating a new message.

In this way, a receiver becomes a sender, and the original sender becomes a receiver. Such a “feedback loop” enhances communication effectiveness, since both sender and receiver adjust the message (and sometimes the medium) to meet the changing communication needs. Like the feedback loop in a thermostat, the communicators monitor the environment (air temperature), then adjust the message (turn on the heater) until some equilibrium is achieved (a new temperature). Ideally that equilibrium suggests that the message is understood, or that some level of agreement has been reached. In the example below, note that each response stimulates a new message.

Example

Penelope: “This proposal is excellent, but the indirect cost calculations are incomplete.”

Professor Adams: “What is missing?”

Penelope: “You need to charge indirects on the two subawards to other universities.”

Professor Adams: “But, wait. Isn’t that double-dipping?”

Penelope: “Good question. Here, let me show you. ...”

Successful communication is the result of care in crafting the message and selecting the right medium for the specific receiver. Most successful communication depends on careful use of the feedback model. From the moment a message is set in motion, a good communicator monitors responses and adapts appropriately. Good communication is rarely one-directional, but involves sensitivity to the other communicator(s) and adapts to meet changing conditions. Communicators should recognize the virtual inevitability that conditions will change.

Particularly in sensitive exchanges, research administrators should consciously, continually evaluate the feedback they receive. For example, attitude and emotion often intrude during contract negotiations or dialogue about problems with a grant. An administrator should be ready to alter communications strategies. By doing so, one improves, for example, the likelihood of achieving a productive compromise on a contract. By adapting, for example, one may find creative approaches to cost overruns. Flexible, agile communication is a powerful tool.

Symbols and Symbol Systems. Symbols and symbol systems mediate communication. Although one sometimes speaks of “direct” communication, as when two communicators speak face-to-face, directness is an illusion. The degree of indirectness may vary, such as the difference between lovers’ whispers and an overseas “snail mail” letter. But an inevitable gulf sits between two communicators who, after all, have different minds with different thoughts. No “Vulcan mind meld” provides direct access from one mind to another.

Instead, communication is accomplished by means of symbols. The sender chooses a word (a symbol), with an intended meaning. But communicators must always be aware of the potential for differences in meaning. The intended meaning may or may

not coincide with the receiver's idea for the same word. All communication is mediated by a symbol and by the mental activities of cognition and interpretation. Communication depends on an act of perception and an act of interpretation.

The set of symbols that pass between sender and receiver is the medium. Symbols permit us to refer to things and actions *in absentia*. For example, the words "elephant," "grant," "travel," and "research" are symbols that permit us to conceptualize phenomena without being in their presence.

The referent of the word — the real elephant, real grant, real research, etc. — is the word's most essential meaning. The most powerful symbol systems — languages and mathematics — obtain their power by an extensive vocabulary (the essential referential tool) and by their flexibility. The sophistication of language brings challenges to the user: word choice, syntax selection, clear enunciation, attitudes in speaking, and others.

Different Kinds of 'Meaning.' To communicate effectively, it is critical to understand the implications of mediation. One must be aware that meanings are both *conventional* and *personal*. Thus, meanings are held in common (by convention) and are also unique to the individual (personal), based on social circumstance and experience. Meanings are not just those agreed upon, as in a dictionary. Meanings are in people. We have a dictionary definition of the word "flood," but a resident of Phoenix will likely respond to that word differently than a resident of New Orleans. Consider that many words and concepts stimulate emotional interpretations. Possible reactions to "audit," "FEMA," "feminism," or "misconduct" are simply examples of words that provoke divergence in meaning and/or feelings.

For the most part, physical gestures have personal meanings, but few have conventional meanings, as in a dictionary. One may infer meaning in someone's body language, but inference is often faulty. In some cases, personal meanings may find cultural agreement. The head waggles of a subculture group may express attitude and group identity, but have limited meaning beyond the group. Still, some gestures form a vocabulary. Almost everyone in our culture recognizes nodding for "yes," head shaking for "no," "V for victory," "V for peace," and "thumbs up" for approval. In a different culture, the same gestures may have other meanings. Depending on the culture of the receiver, they may or may not be interpreted in a way that supports the intended message.

Social Aspects of Communication. Communication is inherently a social act. It may involve all aspects of social environments, including social status, power, and goals. Any communication either grows out of, or is grounded in, such social matters as perceptions of competency, experience, gender, race, age, and all other traits to which humans respond. Senders and receivers often have preconceptions of the "other" and the motives of this other. Good communicators are aware of — or intuit — the diverse social implications of every communication act. This awareness is the basis for crafting the medium (and possibly the message itself) to achieve the desired impact.

The best communicators try to identify their own preconceptions. For instance, a manager should at least be aware of how he or she responds to a speaker's clothing, body language, and word choice. A research administrator may hold opinions of a researcher based on past interactions. Recognition of those biases is critical in crafting

effective communication, whether one is the sender or receiver of the communication. All parties should respond to the *actual* message in a communication, rather than to factors that may be irrelevant to the current situation.

A receiver is usually not passive. Humans *instinctively* create or derive meaning from a situation. Even when the receiver encounters a medium that is not laden with meaning, the receiver often infers meaning. A gesture or expression might be perceived variously as support for the message, as ironic denial of it, or as ambiguous. Good communicators modulate their messages, trimming out excess that can lead to misunderstanding.

¶505.2 Delivering the Message: Selecting the Best Medium

Selection of the medium affects the character of the communication. Modern communications are often technologically sophisticated, providing new media with new solutions and new challenges. Research administrators, working under pressure with immediate deadlines, still have considerable resources.

Time is a factor in selecting a medium. On the one hand, one may have time to reflect on the best medium, as is usually the case with a policy change or a question about a cost transfer. But sometimes one must act immediately, as in the case of an impending application deadline, when a proposal must be changed prior to submission. With time, a host of alternatives is available, from e-mail to face-to-face meetings to express mail. In haste, one's selection may be limited to the telephone or face-to-face dialogue.

Given time to select a medium, the communicator should *suit the medium to the message and the context*. The matrix included in Figure 1 offers some quick tips about selecting the appropriate communication medium.

Figure 1: Tips on Selecting the Right Communication Medium

Medium	Advantages	Examples
Spoken	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immediate • Spontaneous • Adaptive opportunities • Personality factors are vivid • Expressive vocal effects can be used 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversations • Meetings • Phone calls • Speeches <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussions • Debates • Interviews
Written	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permanent • Retrievable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-mails • Letters • Reports • Notes • Memoranda • Agendas <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minutes • Planning documents • Summaries • Contracts • Proposals
Visual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subliminal influence • Humans respond strongly to visuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Body language and gestures • Photographs • Graphs • Charts • Illustrations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cartoons • Logos • Flyers • Catalogs • Posters • Magazines
Multimedia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can deliver a complex message • Can be used to reinforce message • Receiver "selects" medium 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Television • Internet • Video and film • CDs and DVDs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Radio (when music/text overlap) • MP3 players (when music/text overlap)

At a minimum, decisions about which media to use should be based on considering the factors included in Figure 2.

Speech and e-mail are generally the most accessible forms of office communications, and therefore the easiest to use. Multimedia, on the other hand, generally has a low ease-of-use and high costs. Confidentiality is of concern with all e-mail and, of course, when using any broadcast publication.

It is easiest to protect confidentiality in private dialogue and with various kinds of mail, such as certified mail. Conversation and e-mail are often highly informal; letters tend to be more formal, as do published documents in official formats and bearing official letterheads and logos. Complexity can be inherent in any communication medium. Written materials may be long (complex) or short (less complex), and multimedia is inherently complex because of its ability to engage our minds at various levels simultaneously. Whatever other presentation strategies one employs, visual information is best communicated by visual means. It is much more effective to show a pie chart or molecular structure diagram than it is to describe and explain one verbally.

Our principal communicative media are spoken, written, visual, or multimedia. In practical terms, these are available to research administrators in such forms as person-to-person communication, e-mail, Web sites, letters, and electronic conferencing. Each of these offers advantages and has disadvantages. The medium should be selected for appropriateness to circumstances and needs. Below are discussions of and suggestions for effective use of different communication media.

Person-to-Person Communication

Most communication is interpersonal. The standards for interpersonal meetings vary. If the meeting is spontaneous, it is probably informal. If scheduled, it tends to be more formal. For relatively formal meetings, some guidelines should be clearly stated in advance, such as expectations for participation and standards of preparation. Advance information helps participants contribute efficiently or merely process content effectively. Research administrators often feel that the workday consists of meeting after meeting after meeting — a common malady that prompted Patrick Lencioni, a management consultant, to produce a book called *Death by Meeting*.¹ Frustration increases when time is wasted in meetings that are poorly planned or badly managed.

Managers often schedule formal staff meetings on a regular basis. In such meetings, a published agenda helps maintain efficient use of time. Ideally every participant will be consulted in advance about topics for discussion at the meeting.

Figure 2: Factors in Selecting the Right Communication Medium

- Ease of use for sender and receiver
- Cost of production
- Degree of confidentiality required
- Degree of formality required
- Complexity of material
- Nature of material

¹Patrick M. Lencioni, *Death by Meeting: A Leadership Fable ... About Solving the Most Painful Problem in Business*, Jossey-Bass, 2004.

Free Flow of Ideas. In formal meetings, regardless of the number of participants, efficient communication is achieved by keeping to the agenda, diving quickly to the gist of each topic, and keeping meeting goals in sight. Summaries help keep attendees focused on decisions and actions. Such summaries typically restate essential points discussed, agreements made, and possibly also minority opinions expressed. Summaries could come at the end of each agenda item or at the end of the meeting.

Standards of conduct should be stated in advance. When differing opinions are expressed in person-to-person meetings, rules of fairness and respect come into play. It is important to listen carefully to an opposing view. If summaries of the discussion are written and published, those who hold minority opinions should have an opportunity to contribute, such as a chance to review the summary before it is published. Often the tone of a meeting shifts when opposing views are aired. Meeting facilitators or leaders should keep discussions rational, content-based, and free from personal remarks. They should aim for civility in all discourse.

On the other hand, disagreement is inevitable. All participants should be encouraged — overtly, if necessary — to respect differing points of view. They should be cautioned to avoid dominating the meeting with their opinions. Good leaders ensure that all participants respond to content without becoming defensive. This is done by overt compliments and expressed appreciation. Whether a meeting is full of agreement or conflict, a good manager will frequently say “thank you for your ideas,” or “this was a good discussion; I appreciate your contributions.”

Listening Skills. Research administrators should cultivate listening skills. Ideally half of a communication cycle is receiving the other’s input. Listening well expresses respect for the other communicator and for the principle of effective communication.

Communicators should place themselves in the shoes of the “other.” They should remember the bumper sticker: “I know you believe that you understand what you think I said, but I’m not sure that you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.” Each speaker is responsible for clarifying the message, and conversely, each listener

Figure 3: Tips for Developing Good Listening Skills

- For a substantial period of time, talk little and listen carefully.
- Provide encouragement to the other person with body language and words.
- Draw out the thoughts of the other person: ask questions, and elicit opinions and values.
- Restate ideas expressed by the other person, and ask them to confirm whether you have heard correctly.
- Be careful to avoid correcting every inaccurate interpretation of your own remarks; keep dialogue positive.
- When points of view are expressed with emotion, use analytical questions to get beyond emotion to the reasons behind viewpoints.
- Be careful to hear what is actually said and not what you want to hear.

must take pains to hear what the other communicator actually says. Care in listening is critical in effective communication.

To develop good listening skills, research administrators may wish to practice the tips shown in Figure 3.

Body Language and Vocal Tone. When two people meet face-to-face, the degree of complexity increases because many aspects of personality, dress, and gesture enter into the equation. Nuances of body language and vocal tone are tangible factors in the communication.

Figure 4 shows some tips for using body language effectively.

Figure 4: Tips for Using Body Language

- Be careful to convey honesty, since the body may send signals that contradict spoken language.
- To imply support for a speaker, make eye contact, lean forward slightly, or nod.
- Be aware of looking away or down, which conveys lack of confidence or disinterest in the other communicator.
- Be aware of wrapping your arms around your body or covering your eyes, which convey conflict.
- Observe your body language in a mirror, or request feedback from a trusted friend (*not* a co-worker).

E-Mail

E-mail is user-friendly, offering tremendous power in speed and flexibility. E-mail is often more efficient than personal dialogue, since users can focus exclusively on the written context. Since the message is written, e-mail offers the advantage that it can be stored, re-examined, and re-sent as needed. E-mail is particularly useful for notes to staff and other colleagues.

E-mail is sometimes counter-productive, however. Occasionally e-mail is abused by those who mix personal and professional messages, or who use professional settings for private messaging. The speed advantage of e-mail is sometimes a disadvantage, since e-mail is often written hastily, without the checks one normally makes in more formal correspondence.

When to Use – and Not Use – E-Mail. E-mails are risky in some contexts. When the topic is emotional, sensitive, or complex, one should consider using other media instead of e-mail. For instance, avoid e-mail for personal critiques or evaluations. For confidential exchanges, face-to-face meetings or protected mail is much more secure.

When the topic calls for thoughtful discussion, e-mail often results in long, repetitive strings — and these tend to exacerbate rather than relieve the problem. This problem is shown in the example below, the final transmission of a long string of e-mail exchanges. This example, discussing a contract negotiation, came to be known as the “Dry Cleaning Theory of Research Administration.” Throughout the correspondence, a

steady deterioration of tone evolved with each e-mail, causing a shoot-out mentality and hurtful accusations. At the endpoint of the exchange, the pot boiled over, leading to an impasse between the writers. This exemplifies knee-jerk spontaneity, the result of e-mailing without the restraints usually used in direct speech. Haste caused unwise and unthinking liberties, unkind accusations, short-sighted analysis, and a superficial recommendation. Notice the hasty, ill-considered style and content.

Example

Kevin – Please read the trail of E-mail exchange below. I will really appreciate if someone can explain as to why things going for review and disposal to Eleanor sits on her desk for a long time. May be she is over worked by handling too many things. If you recall I voiced this concern long time ago and at time I was assured by Maggie B., who was new to the job, that she will take care of this issue. Why RSP can not set “in and out” schedule? Dry cleaning shops have it: in by 11 AM out by 4 PM. I understand that tight schedule will not work here. Thus, why not: In by “Tuesday — out by Friday.” As far as I could see or understand most of the things don’t get done until several reminders. In this process don’t you think someone’s time is wasted. The worst part of the whole system is that if there is an issue then the PI is not kept informed. In short, I fail to understand why signature of a simple amendment should take so long? [Names have been changed]

This e-mail expresses unveiled hostility. But even neutral e-mails are subject to communication error, such as misinterpreted meaning or tone. Neutral intentions are often misconstrued as conveying a negative tone. A suggestion is often misconstrued as an instruction or command. A deadline reminder is often taken as personal criticism. A humorous remark is often read as sarcasm. The research administrator should compensate for the brevity of e-mail and haste in writing and try to anticipate the spirit of the receiver in reading it.

Figure 5: Tips for Using E-Mail

- Message titles should be specific, meaningful, and relevant.
- E-mail should be brief.
- Slow down to proofread for clarity and accuracy, to reduce misinterpretations.
- Carefully select recipients; remember an entire address book opens at a single keystroke.
- Distinguish between “respond” and “respond to all.”
- Remember, e-mail is not secure; encryptions are easily broken.
- Avoid attaching large files when you’re sending to many recipients.
- Distribute large files over multiple e-mails, or place in a common file or on a Web site.
- Overuse of fonts and graphics can be annoying, particularly when viewed by users using various systems.

Unless one tempers the advantage of e-mail — speed — by care and thoughtfulness, e-mails can create as many headaches as they cure. Reasonable guidelines can make e-mail effective and ethical. Figure 5 offers some tips for e-mail users.

Research administrators often communicate in jargon and acronyms. Although jargon is central to the work, it is not always understood by the receiver. Even within the “in group,” such terms change quickly. A new shorthand will not be equally understood by everyone. Consider the example below of an e-mail written in a shorthand commonly used for instant messaging and social exchanges. The translation of the e-mail follows the example.

Example

E-mail: JW Pls gimme a cll l8tr wen ur fre. I lft the ppw and 411 @ home. I'm OOO at 5pm. AFAICT U R right, we nd sig b4 acct. SWDYT? if you need help, call 2nite @ home B4 10p or SMEM BCOZ i'm bZ nw. Stil nd to RTM and upd FAQL. NUFF. I'll BCNU. FTTB HAGD. POOF.

Translation: Just wondering. Please give me a call later when you are free. I left the paperwork and information at home. I'm out of the office at 5pm. As far as I can tell, you are right, and we need the signature before an account can be set up. So, what do you think? If you need help, call tonight at home before 10p or send me e-mail because I'm busy now. Still need to read the manual and update the frequently asked questions list. Enough said. I'll be seeing you. For the time being have a good day. Bye.

Business Letters

Effective letters are clear and interesting. They keep to the point. They are economical and complete. These attributes are all achieved best by thinking before writing, then revising the written word doggedly.

Good writing has a purpose, and the purpose should be vivid. Professional correspondence, which is inherently purposeful, should be targeted to the recipient. The purpose should be stated unambiguously in the letter. The best placement for a statement of purpose is in the first or second sentence. For instance, the first sentence of a cover letter for a job opening within the office of sponsored projects might be “This letter is an application for the position of Grants Specialist.”

Another example is the clear, strong statement of intent that opens this 1963 letter from President John Kennedy to Alabama Governor George Wallace —

In response to the question raised in your telegram of last night, *Federal troops would be sent into Birmingham*, if necessary, under the authority of Title 10, Section 333, Paragraph 1 of the United States Code relating to the suppression of domestic violence. [Emphasis added]

Good writing is user-friendly. All good communication is about the receiver, and good letter writing keeps the reader's mind free of distraction, so the reader remains attentive and the journey is clear.

Good letter writing is based on solid information. The reader should be given enough information to understand the writer's claims. On the other hand, excessive

length is a serious handicap, since it obscures essential concepts. A writer should think in terms of “take-away” value: what essential ideas should the reader take away from the letter? A research administrator should trim away any excess material that detracts from the essentials.

Coherent Structure. Good letter writing has structure. Generally that structure is implicit in the central point of the letter, but should be coaxed into view by the writer. Some common structures are

- ◆ chronological,
- ◆ cause-effect,
- ◆ comparison-contrast,
- ◆ claim-evidence, and
- ◆ topical.

Within these, ideas may flow in a sequence, such as

- ◆ best to worst,
- ◆ early to late,
- ◆ simple to complex, or
- ◆ weak to strong.

On the other hand, the sequence of ideas may be the reverse of any of these, or based on other coordinates entirely. In a single letter, a writer may use multiple structures. For example, a *chronological format* was used in Dr. Henry Kissinger’s 2005 letter to Master Sergeant Broussard on the fall of Saigon.² The letter followed Kissinger’s time line of the 1975 event, indicated here in a summary of key phrases —

The Pentagon’s plan for implementing the final evacuation were [*sic*]
far from precise ...

As Americans were being lifted from the roof ...

By now it was early afternoon in Washington ...

As soon as I thought the last helicopter had left ...

Two hours later, North Vietnamese tanks rolled into Saigon ...

And now it was too late to alter the course of events ...

In his 1963 “Letter from the Birmingham Jail,” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used multiple structures, shown below in summaries of key phrases. In one section, he varied the standard *cause-effect* structure, giving it the form of *effect-from-cause* —

I think I should indicate why I am in Birmingham. ... I ... am here
because I was invited here and because I have organizational ties here.
... But more basically, I am here because injustice is here. ... I must
respond to the ... call for aid.

²Association of Former Intelligence Officers, *Periscope* (newsletter), 2005, pages 29-30.

In another section of the letter, he used a *chronological approach* —

... Negro leaders sought to negotiate. ...

Then, last September, came the opportunity to talk to leaders. ...

As in so many past experiences, our hopes had been blasted. ...

Then it occurred to us. ...

And in yet another section, Dr. King structured the letter by using *comparison-contrast* —

Now, what is the difference between [just and unjust laws]?

Let us consider a more concrete example. ...

Let me give another explanation. ...

Sometimes a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. ...

I hope you are able to face the distinction I am trying to point out. ...

Rhythm and Flow. Good writing has a rhythm. The elements of an idea should sometimes flow and dance, or sometimes hit the reader like a brick. Rhythm helps a reader follow the thrust of ideas, bringing focus to the key idea at the best possible moment.

In a letter to Native Americans who visited the White House, President Thomas Jefferson emphasized his central idea with a rhythm of phrases. He used relatively small word groups to build complex thoughts. He also varied sentence length for interest and emphasis, as follows:

Brothers and friends of the Miamis, Powtewatamies, and Weeauks:

I receive with great satisfaction the visit you have been so kind as to make at this place, and I thank the Great Spirit who has conducted you to us in health and safety. It is well that friends should sometimes meet, open their minds mutually, and renew the chain of affection. Made by the same Great Spirit, and living in the same land with our brothers, the red men, we consider ourselves as of the same family; we wish to live with them as one people, and to cherish their interests as our own. The evils which of necessity encompass the life of man are sufficiently numerous. Why should we add to them by voluntarily distressing and destroying one another? Peace, brothers, is better than war. In a long and bloody war, we lose many friends, and gain nothing. Let us then live in peace and brotherhood together, doing to each other all the good we can.

Good writing varies the sentence type and length. Some sentences should be simple. Some sentences should be compound, having at least two main clauses. Others should be complex, pulling multiple elements together in a sophisticated way and drawing the reader's eye to a compelling point. In the example above, notice the force of "Peace, brothers, is better than war." Jefferson achieves his effect by a series of complex sentences followed by this simple, direct punch.

Good writing uses the active voice. It is more compelling to write “the committee decided” than “it was decided by the committee.” It is more compelling to write “please decide and advise” than “the decision should be reached and I need to be advised.”

Good writing trims out excess. Good writing concludes with a memorable point. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s advice for public speakers is equally apt for writers: “Be sincere; be brief; be seated.” Figure 6 offers some tips for effective letter writing.

Figure 6: Simple Dos and Don'ts of Letter Writing	
Do this:	Avoid:
• Use short words	• Complex words
• Use short sentences	• Long-winded sentences
• Vary the kind of sentences	• Repetition of the same type of sentences
• Write in a style similar to your speech	• Careless grammar, spelling, or punctuation
• Make notes before you write	• Jargon
• Draft first version completely before revising	• Stuffy diction
• Revise relentlessly	• Too many pages (keep it to one!)
• Get a second opinion for an important letter	• A vague address (e.g., Dear Madam)
• State your purpose early and clearly	• A page without margins
• Build credibility: use evidence and references	• Depending on spell-check alone
• Name the action: tell the reader what you want him or her to do	• Depending on grammar-check alone
• Be optimistic and affirming	
• Use humor when possible	

Web Sites

Web sites are communication tools. In designing them, research administrators should use the same standards that apply to any communication. Most importantly, the design should be user-friendly.

Offices of sponsored projects (OSP) will find different communication preferences among their constituencies. Many who use OSP services prefer to speak directly to a live person. Others prefer to read. The variety in preference reflects common differences in the way people communicate and process information. If an OSP has a useful Web site — a site that is navigable, thorough, systematic, and user-friendly — customers will be able to solve many of their problems independently. This provides two advantages: the consumer who prefers to read may find the answer online, and the burden on OSP staff will be reduced.

Designing the Home Page. The first page a visitor encounters at a Web site is the home page. It should be clean and simple. Ideally it will fit on the screen without the need to scroll in any direction. It should include the following:

- ◆ Name of the institution
- ◆ Name of the office
- ◆ Links to relevant pages, designed for quick access

Figure 7: Tips for Basic Web Page Design

Web page designers, at a minimum, should adhere to the following standards:

- Use few words: limit the page to a 1,500-word maximum.
- Use categories or headers that are obvious and intuitive.
- Sprinkle the page with considerable “negative space,” i.e., unfilled “white” space around words.
- Employ a design that directs the eye to key elements.
- Use few font types, ideally no more than two.
- Avoid redundancy of content.

- ◆ A design in compliance with institutional standards, e.g., that incorporates a prescribed masthead or format

The home page also typically offers the following:

- ◆ Contact information for the office and other appropriate officials
- ◆ Mission statement of the office, stated briefly
- ◆ Some featured element, e.g., “What’s New,” “Hot Topics,” or highlighted research
- ◆ Graphics or imagery, usually of researchers or research

The home page should be designed so a user unfamiliar with the site can scan the page and select a link quickly — ideally within fifteen seconds, or thirty seconds at most. Titles of the links must be accurate and familiar to a first-time user. Such eloquence calls for considerable organizational skill, such as finding obvious categories for content offered. Some tips for basic Web page design are provided in Figure 7.

To keep words to a minimum, use key words only. Avoid long narrative statements. If a title will suffice, use it. If a paragraph-length statement must be used, such as part of a press release to spotlight research, keep the sentence number to a minimum and add a “Read more ...” link.

To find categories that are obvious, think as a reader. View the site not as an administrator giving information, but as a researcher looking for information. A research administrator will certainly want to provide critical information, but it should be organized for the unfamiliar reader. For example, many university Web sites include a guide for principal investigators to use in the preparation and submission of proposals.

Additional Design Considerations. “Negative space” is a design term. Given some featured visual element, the negative space is whatever “empty” space surrounds it. On this page in the *Guide*, the negative space is the “uncolored” part of the page or paper (sometimes called “white” space) where there is no printing or design element, most prominently the margin that surrounds this text. The margin is a negative frame, bringing the eye to the text. In advertising, designers use negative space to feature their particular widget. Effective use of negative space, which holds inherently less interest

than the widget, helps focus the reader's eye on the product. As negative space increases, clutter decreases. Web designers use negative space to direct the reader's eye to useful points — such as links — more quickly.

The Web page should be designed using other tools that also direct the user's eye. Some standard tools are lines or boxes that help categorize their contents. It is useful to feature information by font selection, color, and arrangement.

Visual redundancy is often synonymous with clutter. In practical terms, it is often an issue of misdirection. Many sites show multiple routes to the same or similar content. For instance, there may be multiple links to "policies and procedures." If so the user must search through one link, then also examine another link to verify that he has read all relevant information. On the other hand, if all relevant information is contained under one link, the user saves time by conducting a single search. (The burden then shifts to the Web designer, who must structure the second page in a way that subdivides "policies and procedures" productively.)

Electronic Conferencing

Electronic conferencing is changing the way people work and share information. It offers a low-cost, efficient tool to communicate simultaneously with multiple locations. For instance, on September 11, 2001, the chief operating officer of a large research institute found herself stranded 3,000 miles from home. On a four-day bus ride back, she realized that electronic conferencing could have circumvented the expensive trip altogether. The meeting was indispensable; the trip was not. Returning home, she urged her facilities planners to equip more meeting rooms for electronic conferencing.

Electronic conferencing is commonly used to conduct meetings or carry out negotiations. It can also deliver inexpensive training programs such as online broadcasts. The National Council of University Research Administrators (NCURA) enjoys tremendous success with these programs. They reach a wide audience who keep current on information, but remain at their home institutions as they do so. Electronic conferencing has been well received, particularly as a tool of direct, timely communication.

Television adds to communication complexity. When public speech is mediated by television, the communicator must adapt. The new challenges come partly from the visual component, partly from the auditory. Tips for electronic conferencing are included in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Tips for Effective Electronic Conferencing

In electronic conferencing, the camera is most often static. It does not follow the speaker. The speaker must either step into the camera's frame of view, or the speaker will be off camera. Alternatively, the camera may show a group of speakers, perhaps seated at a table. The speaker should be aware of the camera's position at all times.

Tip #1: As a presenter, know where the camera's frame is, i.e., where the edges of the visual image are. Whenever possible, move into the camera's frame before making a comment.

continued

Figure 8: Tips for Effective Electronic Conferencing (continued)

Viewers prefer to look at the person who is speaking. There is a visual aspect of “hearing” spoken language. (Ever notice in a theatre performance how often you turn your head to look at the speaker?) If someone is speaking off camera, a viewer, who instinctively wants to see the speaker, may find it difficult to follow the conversation. A viewer’s understanding improves dramatically when the speaker is visible. Also, when the speaker is visible, the viewer will associate values and attitudes with the speaker. As a presenter, be certain you know what the camera can “see.”

Tip #2: On camera, speakers should remember to speak directly to the live audience and to the “viewer in the camera.”

Any speaker enhances communication by making eye contact with audience members. On television, communication with the viewer is enhanced when the speaker makes comments directly into the camera. Political candidates, for example, often look directly into the camera when making a critical point. Since it feels impersonal to speak to a camera (an inanimate object), speakers should imagine a real-life person sitting inside the camera, listening to the speech — someone who is friendly, but who needs to hear the message you have to offer. Look directly at the camera, just as if you were making eye contact with someone physically present.

Tip #3: Viewers respond strongly to visual stimuli.

Movement draws attention. When the camera shows a group, rather than an individual, the relative size of each person appears smaller. In such cases, movement is less visible. When you begin speaking, make sure you draw attention to yourself by moving in some obvious way. If movement occurs at the beginning of a statement, it improves the viewer’s chance of figuring out who’s talking, which improves understanding. Otherwise, the viewer may hear a disembodied voice and not be certain who is talking.

Tip #4: A microphone is easily misused. Remember to always speak into the microphone.

Know where your microphone is. A lapel microphone that snaps on to clothing can affect clothing choices. Select buttoned garments and garments with collars; they provide more places to attach the microphone. With a lapel microphone, be careful to avoid striking it with a hand or pressing it against a lectern, both of which cause distracting noises.

If, on the other hand, the microphone is mounted on an arm or pedestal, be sure to keep it in front of your mouth. If the microphone is static and you turn your head away from it, the sound will be lost to the viewer. In such cases, if you must turn your head to the side, lean away from the object you’re looking at and keep your mouth pointed at the microphone. For instance, if you must turn left to see a PowerPoint slide, lean back to the right, twist, *and* lean forward when you do, so the microphone is still in front of your mouth. The bottom line is to always speak into the microphone.

Tip #5: Clothing and accessory choices are important in teleconferencing.

In choosing clothing and accessories, consider your background. If you are speaking in front of a PowerPoint screen, try to wear clothing that contrasts with the slides. If your slides are mostly light, dark clothing will help make you more visible. If your slides are mostly dark, the reverse is true. Accessories should generally not be highly reflective, because the lighting will make them stand out and distract the audience.

Figure 8: Tips for Effective Electronic Conferencing (continued)**Tip #6: Lighting is a crucial component.**

Standard room lighting casts awkward shadows in a teleconference. If possible make sure light shows directly on your face; you will see the glow in your eyelashes. In general it is more important for you to be seen than it is for you to see the live audience. If your presentation is accompanied by PowerPoint slides, make sure room lights are low, because the camera will have more difficulty rendering the projected slides if *any* room light is up. On the other hand, make sure your face is illuminated — by a small spotlight, for example — so viewers can see your face and lips.

Tip #7: Build sharp contrasts into slide design.

Any projected image needs contrast between elements to make important features stand out. But contrast diminishes when viewed by a camera. Plan ahead by building sharp contrast into your slide design. Use simple graphics with “negative space” around them. Make sure that contrasts of light and dark are built into the slide design. Also be aware that font sizes need to be larger when a camera must “see” them. Remember that on camera, words at the margins of the screen are difficult to read.

Using Multimedia and Multiple Forums

Marketing strategists reach their targets by multiple approaches, using different types of media including multimedia. A multimedia presentation typically features spoken, video, musical, and other media blended together. Each of these elements may reinforce the message by repeating it in various media. For example, in a television commercial, the spoken words might say “our trucks are tough as bulls,” while simultaneously displaying the image of a bull breaking through barriers and playing bold, martial music. The image and the music reinforce the truck’s major selling point. Similarly the standard PowerPoint presentation used by a speaker is inherently multimedia.

Multimedia tools enhance communication in four ways:

- ◆ First, the message is expressed in more than one way, reaching the audience intellectually *and* subliminally.
- ◆ Second, the visual element is potentially more compelling for many people.
- ◆ Third, because more senses are engaged, one is more likely to pay attention.
- ◆ Fourth, multimedia is so common in our culture that audiences have come to expect it.

Multimedia Presentations. In professional America today, many multimedia presentations use Microsoft PowerPoint. This program has the potential to include even more extensive media than most presenters actually select. But its versatility and wide use do not necessarily imply maximum effectiveness.

For all its advantages, PowerPoint is arguably overused. Its appeal has made it ubiquitous. But PowerPoint presentations have common problems. Speakers get lost next to the screen. Speakers often put their entire text in the program, and they end up

reading aloud from the slide on the screen. Speakers often use far too many slides, with far too many words. An exception to this may be when speaking to nonnative speakers of English, who may have better comprehension when reading, rather than hearing, the presentation. In general, however, PowerPoint is most effective when the speaker uses it to reinforce and amplify a presentation, rather than to become the primary medium.

Using Various Methods. The term “multimedia” implies a single presentation using overlapping media. But any communication can be enhanced by using a variety of media. A research administrator should identify two or three media that most appeal to a specific target audience. One says “I love you” by words, flowers, gestures, and many other means. Similarly there are many ways a research administrator can say “meet this deadline” to principal investigators. One should vary the communication resources.

For example, modern political campaigns are extraordinarily diverse. They reach their constituencies through direct address (in-person speeches), news sound bites, television ads, print ads (magazines, newspapers), mailers, posters and billboards, flyers, door-to-door canvassing, telephone solicitation, and the Internet. Their campaigns are *positive* (affirming the candidate) and *negative* (belittling the opponent). They are *complex* (presidential debates) and *simple* (sound bites). The images are *warm* (kissing babies) and *forceful* (pounding lecterns). They are *humorous* (anecdotes mocking opponents) and *serious* (policy documents). Such diversity is effective because it reaches multiple constituencies. More to the point, it reaches the same constituency in multiple ways.

Repeating the Message. To maximize learning and comprehension, the administrator should spread communications out over time, reinforcing by repetition. When various media are used, the administrator should unify the message across media. A communications campaign, which reaches the constituency via several media, should be unified by consistency: repeated use of the same fonts, the same language, and the same graphics. If possible, the “look” of the message should be consistent across e-mails, flyers, mailers, and letters. In other words, “brand” the message. Consistency, reinforcement, and repetition are powerful tools.

For research administrators, communicating change is central to the job. Whether it’s a change in policy, a change in procedures, or a change in electronic systems, the administrator devotes significant time to informing constituencies about new events that affect their research projects. For example, the use of Grants.gov for proposal submission requires multiple approaches to transmitting complex information to faculty and staff. Institutions need a complete arsenal of communications tools — from small group discussions to formal presentations to Web sites — to reach the many people who have to learn new processes and systems. (For further discussion of Grants.gov, see Chapter 900.)

¶505.3 **Communicating with Differing Constituencies**

Understanding the “other” communicator is essential to good communications. In professional contexts, research administrators encounter categories of “others” whose relationships with the OSP have reasonably consistent patterns. There may be consistency with the farmer; there may be consistency with the cowman. But the farmer and the cowman are not the same constituency. To communicate effectively, a research administrator must understand the goals, needs, and working methods of each. This information will not be static; good working relationships are invented, revised, and reinvented.

Administrators

Research administrators serve the institution, whether they sit in a central office, a college, or a department. Often, particularly for departmental research administrators, this translates into support for a faculty investigator. The departmental administrator provides an effective bridge between central research administrators and investigators. Offices of research administration often find it easier to transfer information to departmental administrators than directly to faculty investigators. Administrators may intercede on behalf of faculty. This is particularly true in regard to complex regulatory or costing issues.

Communications between university administrators and the OSP frequently transfer information about either a specific grant or university policies and procedures for handling groups of grants. These policies are essential for coherent application of institutional plans. Whether the policies are created by the OSP or promulgated by the federal government, it is often the burden of the OSP to communicate these policies to the faculty and departmental constituencies.

This is done best through a variety of forums. Multiple media are often needed to reach a constituency effectively. For instance, a new policy for cost transfers, based on federal regulations, will be most effective if it is developed collaboratively with administrative representatives. The participation of research administrators who represent all parts of the campus helps distribute ownership. This often results in a plan for implementation across the campus that is more likely to serve the needs of faculty and the research infrastructure.

Often administrators raise problems for discussion and resolution. Frequently these situations require conversations with sponsoring agencies or other university administrative groups. In such discussions, the presence of faculty and administration, both departmental and central, allows for mutual problem solving and enhances the prospect for positive resolution.

Faculty

Conversations between faculty and research administrators are made complex by the dual nature of the relationship. The OSP exists to facilitate research. Conversely, the OSP is called upon to protect the institution’s interests and to influence faculty researchers. In particular the OSP may regulate faculty researchers on compliance issues.

This double bind inevitably confounds communication and elevates stress for both parties. All too often, it feels like “us vs. them” (for both parties).

In this relationship, research administrators are frequently seen more as gatekeepers than as facilitators. The pressures on faculty are extreme. They often are expected to write grant proposals, create new knowledge, support a research lab, and also teach and contribute to the university. Consider their frustration when, after spending long hours completing a proposal, they face an OSP staffer who insists on changes before a signature can be added. In that situation, the research administrator’s gatekeeper role is in the forefront.

The stresses on faculty, while very real and urgent, often are not well understood by research administrators. Conversely, the pressures on research administrators to perform, compounded by limitations on time and resources, often are not fully appreciated by faculty. Both groups have the same ultimate goal: securing funding to support research. But they hold different perspectives on what is necessary to obtain funding and to manage it responsibly. As much as possible, research administrators should take initiative to discuss this dilemma with the faculty. Although it is difficult, the job of research administration is customer service.

Customer-Service Focus. The advice for research administrators given below can apply in a variety of contexts. Research administrators should remember that they *serve the faculty* in the following three basic ways:

- ◆ They are present to help researchers identify, apply for, obtain, and administer funds from an outside agency or organization. As part of that mission, research administrators help maintain standards required by sponsors and their own institutions. Without those standards, both faculty and institutions are in serious jeopardy.
- ◆ They are not generally rule makers. Their responsibilities for rules enforcement must be moderated by a willingness to offer alternatives and guidance. They are liaisons between researchers and sponsors or between researchers and policy makers. They are facilitators whose purpose is to communicate the rules of others while making sure that faculty can still perform their research.
- ◆ In their role as helpmates, research administrators must convey support, understanding, and civility. They must take the high road in modeling communications ethics.

Dealing with Late Submissions. One of the most common issues facing research administrators is the problem of late submission of proposals. Researchers must understand that OSP offices face a volume of applications, and that submission to a sponsor is only the last step in a sequence. Inevitably pressure mounts on the researcher to meet the deadlines of the OSP, and on the OSP staff to forego review and just sign the proposal.

Researchers must be educated to issues surrounding the review process, workload volume, and thoroughness in completing applications. The OSP staff must be trained and reminded to

- ◆ understand pressures on researchers;
- ◆ remember the OSP role as service provider; and
- ◆ communicate requirements for submission — clearly and accurately.

As stress mounts, OSP staff will inevitably feel the challenge of being “middle-men.” The OSP may find that workshops and communiqués to administrators will help defray the “kill the messenger syndrome” that rears up around deadline time.

Ongoing Communications. Once an award is received and the project under way, those same principles still hold true for interactions with faculty. Good stewardship of sponsor funds requires increasing accountability at the institutional level *and* at the faculty level. Although an OSP could once protect faculty from audit penalties, the current regulatory climate demands personal and institutional accountability. There are new pressures on research faculty to understand fully the complex regulatory issues. These forces have resulted in new tensions across the research community. Clear and effective communication is a powerful tool in forging partnerships for the research enterprise.

Sponsors

One purpose of research administrators is to advocate for the research community. But rules of the game are established by sponsors. They pay for the research, so they establish the guidelines.

Fortunately there are opportunities for research administrators to discuss policies and procedures with many sponsors, especially with federal agencies. Through informal, one-on-one conversations with agency representatives, research administrators have the floor to engage sponsors on topics of mutual interest. Through more formal mechanisms, such as the Federal Demonstration Partnership, there are structured discussions on ways to improve and streamline the processes. (For more on the Federal Demonstration Partnership, see www.thefdp.org.) When the researcher’s time is constrained, research itself is inhibited. In a number of instances, such discussions have resulted in changes that benefit both the university and the sponsoring agency.

In talking with sponsors about a specific project or with regard to agency policies, and to facilitate communication with sponsors, research administrators should consider the tips included in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Tips for Communicating with Sponsors

- Be well prepared before contacting the agency.
- Understand agency policies and standard practices.
- Formulate a case for the request, in keeping with agency standards.
- Build a relationship to whatever extent is possible.
- Take pains to understand the interplay between policies of the agency and policies of the institution.
- Exhibit civility and courtesy in all discourse.

¶1505.4 **Elements of Strong Communications**

Effective communication is tailored to the receiver, the “target” of the sender’s intentions. All good communication begins with understanding the target audience. Henry Ford once wrote that success in life comes from “the ability to put yourself in the other person’s place and to see things from his point of view — as well as your own.” In practical communication, this applies equally to the briefest e-mail and a meticulously prepared keynote address.

Before engaging in a communication act, a few fundamental questions should be asked:

- ◆ Who is the target?
- ◆ What does this target audience need/want to understand, and what’s in it for them?
- ◆ What are the characteristics of the target audience?

This last question is the most difficult to address. To start the process, consider these questions:

- ◆ What does the target audience know about this subject?
- ◆ What will be the target’s attitude about remarks presented?
- ◆ What will be the target’s attitude toward the presenter?
- ◆ What are the target’s agendas (apparent and hidden)?
- ◆ What are the target’s values?
- ◆ What will worry or assure this audience?

Word Choice

Communication choices should be affected by an analysis of the audience. Language should be, essentially, the receiver’s language. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato wrote that a communicator should match “the type of speech to each type of soul.” By this he meant the speaker should use the concepts of the person to whom he is speaking; when speaking to a carpenter, use language familiar to a carpenter, but use different language when talking to a priest. In discussing a technical area like research administration, it is particularly important to choose words that are accessible to the target audience.

Simple words tend to be most effective. Clarity is achieved by focus, and simplicity focuses best. Extra words can lead to mental clutter. Polysyllabic words and complex sentences also can be clutter. Outside academia, scholarly language often is ridiculed and spoofed. Regardless of who the target may be, the communicator should weed out complexity and stress key points.

Using Jargon. Among peers, professionals use discipline-specific language, or jargon. For example, some words are unique to *accountants*, some are specific to *sponsored program accountants*, and other words are specific to *sponsored program accountants who use PeopleSoft*. Each level of specificity involves a more narrow jargon than is used by the wider group. Jargon is a communication shortcut useful to the “in” group. Outside the immediate group, jargon inhibits understanding and impedes

communication. Even when a speaker takes time to define a jargon term, a new user of the term may have difficulty following it. A business administrator, for instance, may be challenged to understand the Higgs Field even after the physicist has defined it.

Evidence and Support

Professional communications generally identify problems and offer solutions. Research administrators of every stripe must develop skills in making and defending arguments or, more narrowly, skills in making assertions and providing evidence in their support. The most common kinds of support are discussed below.

- ◆ *Personal experience*, either that of others or one's own, has special credibility because it carries the force of direct, firsthand knowledge. For instance, in talking about errors in effort reporting, most research administrators could easily cite examples of heavy fines and penalties levied on research universities for failures to adequately manage this responsibility. The recent, dramatic instances of settlements with the government on effort reporting are convincing evidence of the need to provide appropriate accountability. Most research administrators know that "seeing is believing," and firsthand observations are respected by others — particularly when one observer's experience confirms another's. Personal anecdotes are very persuasive.
- ◆ *Authoritative sources* can be powerful support for one's position, but only if the audience acknowledges the authority of the source. Authority can come from expertise in a specialized field, from bureaucratic rank, from publications (manuals, policy documents, etc.), or from legal governance (e.g., contracts). When necessary, a research administrator should mention the reason for the authority's stature. For instance, in a letter to an institution's chief executive officer, a biochemist, one may find it necessary to explain "When Ted Kooser, the U.S. Poet Laureate, was awarded an NEA fellowship, he wrote that. ..."
- ◆ *Metaphor* implies a comparison between dissimilar ideas or things. By his famous caveat "God does not play dice with the universe," Einstein used a gambling metaphor to refute quantum theory. Edward O. Wilson wrote that for scientists, "it is better to have begun a great journey than to have finished it," depicting scientific inquiry as a voyage. In each of these examples, an economical metaphor condenses the idea, intensifying its impact.

Metaphor is essential when a communicator must explain highly specialized ideas. Many scientists face a public relations crisis outside their disciplines, because their research cannot be comprehended by a layperson. For example, details of a quantum physicist's daily research are counterintuitive and beyond the scope of human experience. To most people, it makes no sense that an electron can be in two locations simultaneously. Since humans cannot "see" strings folded in eleven dimensions, how can nonspecialists be stimulated to provide funding for string theory? To communicate with outsiders, which scientists must do to engage the public, they must find simple words, usually in metaphor, to express fundamental principles.

- ◆ *Analogy* is also a kind of comparison, but a comparison between things that have some essential similarity. Because of the similarity, the comparison is direct rather than implied, and analogy traditionally uses the words “like” or “as.” Carl Sagan used analogy when he wrote that “Biology is more like history than it is like physics; the accidents and errors and lucky happenstances of the past powerfully prefigure the present.” Forrest Gump quotes his mother’s analogy when he says “Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get.”
- ◆ *Example* communicates a class by identifying an instance of the class. Clark Kerr, former president of the University of California, is an example of a forward-thinking academic administrator. Administrative costs are often examples of indirect costs. The Indian Ocean tsunami of December 26, 2004, is an instance of the effects of plate tectonics. Each of the examples above illustrates exemplification.

Often the most effective example is a story. Narrative — storytelling — is an especially powerful tool because it engages the receiver’s mind in a chronological, structured sequence. This inherently provides a recognizable structure. The narrative typically leads to a pointed conclusion, the climax of the narrative, and it typically features some person with whom an audience can identify. Stories often have an inherent element of play.

Example

There is a creative, playful aspect to scientific discovery. In an interview for BBC2 Television, Richard Feynman told a story that after he left the Manhattan project, he wanted to “play” with physics — to look into things for the pleasure of learning, rather than for some pre-mandated purpose. One day, as he was eating in the Cornell University commons, a young man’s dinner plate flipped up in the air and crashed. As Feynman “played” with that image, he realized that the plate not only rotated, but that it also wobbled. Then through research, Feynman learned that the plate spun and wobbled in a mathematically predictable ratio. Building on that playful research, Richard Feynman developed the theories that won him a Nobel Prize for quantum electrodynamics.³

This anecdote exemplifies the potency of stories. Even when communicating difficult concepts, narrative commands attention and helps embody the idea in images.

Explanation of Inconsistencies: Accommodating Different Viewpoints

Research administrators work in opposite domains: a world of policies and a world of liaisons. As the voice of policy, research administrators have little room for open-ended dialogue, for the nature of policies is to draw lines, to be definitive and authoritative. But as liaisons, research administrators must negotiate, find middle ground, and express sensitivity to alternative viewpoints. This latter role is particularly challenging in terms of communication.

³Summarized from “Horizon: The Pleasure of Finding Things Out,” replayed on *Nova*.

Dealing with Skepticism. We live in a skeptical time and a critical culture. Michael Shermer, publisher of *Skeptic* magazine and founder-director of the international Skeptics Society, defines skepticism as “a provisional approach to claims.” Since evidence of some “truth” is always tentative, almost any claim is subject to challenges. Humans refine claims, in part, by testing them. Ideas about research administration are tested in many arenas, such as between OSP staff members and faculty, in conference presentations, and in discussions with federal agencies. The presenter of an idea should be ever self-examining, skeptically checking one’s work for accuracy.

Audiences are skeptical, too. Research administrators, as communication senders, need special strategies to overcome a receiver’s instinctive skepticism. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* describes the impact of a speaker’s persona, which he called *ethos*. He describes *ethos* in terms of good will, good sense, and good moral character. For instance, when a sender communicates good will for the receiver — one kind of *ethos* — it can enhance the receiver’s willingness to listen. It is a tool to address skepticism.

Enhancing Credibility. Aristotle’s “good sense” is particularly important in professional interactions. A sender shows “good sense” by publicly identifying his own bias, by pointing out uncertainty in his own data or arguments, or by affirming an opponent. These strategies enhance *ethos* and credibility.

“Good sense” will help a sender disarm objectors, such as by qualifying conclusions. For instance, it is helpful to say, “I’ll point out some areas of concern about my concept,” or “there are two ways of thinking about this,” or “the old paradigm has merit, but new information should be considered.” In principle such disclaimers are effective tools in all communication. Bridging the gulf between farmers and cowmen, to use the earlier analogy from *Oklahoma!*, one must be careful to appeal to each without compromising either. Water diverted from the stream to irrigate crops should be supplanted by wells to nourish the cattle.

Socrates began his famous *Apology*, after which he was condemned to death, with the words: “I do not know what effect my accusers have had upon you, gentlemen, but for my own part I was almost carried away by them — their arguments were so convincing.”

In the U.S. Senate on July 29, 2005, Senator Bill Frist advocated a change in U.S. policy on stem cell research. Since his remarks represented a breach with the Bush Administration, he was careful to explain his reasoning and to express respect for President’s Bush’s viewpoint:

On August 9, 2001, shortly after I outlined my principles, ... President Bush announced his policy on embryonic stem cell research. His policy was fully consistent with my ten principles, so I strongly supported it. It federally funded embryonic stem cell research for the first time. It did so within an ethical framework. And it showed respect for human life.

But this policy restricted embryonic stem cell funding only to those cell lines that had been derived from embryos before the date of his announcement. In my policy I, too, proposed restricting the number of cell lines, but I did not propose a specific cutoff date. Over time, with a

limited number of cell lines, would we be able to realize the full promise of embryonic stem cell research? ...

While human embryonic stem cell research is still at a very early stage, the limitations put in place in 2001 will, over time, slow our ability to bring potential new treatments for certain diseases. Therefore, I believe the President's policy should be modified. We should expand federal funding (and thus NIH oversight) and current guidelines governing stem cell research, carefully and thoughtfully staying within ethical bounds.

In these remarks, Senator Frist was careful to demonstrate points of agreement between the administration and himself ("fully consistent," "strongly supported," "I, too, proposed restricting the number"), careful to use imagery consistent with the administration's view ("respect for human life," "staying within ethical bounds"), and careful to compliment the administration's prior actions ("federally funded embryonic stem cell research for the first time"). Even the word "modified" represents a soft landing on the hot topic of change.

Senator Frist went on to encourage diverse views on this subject, advocating "serious debate," and not only in Congress, "but across America — at our dining room tables, in our community centers, on our town squares." He remarked that "We simply cannot flinch from the need to talk with each other, again and again. ..." Such rhetorical strategies, advocating respect for diversity, are most useful when points of view are diverse and extreme.

In research administration, the sender may also need to address seeming inconsistencies that are based in institutional or sponsoring agency policy. For example, Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular A-110 allows universities to define "equipment" as an item with an acquisition cost of \$5,000 or more. But a university may choose to define equipment at a lower cost threshold as part of its institutional policy on property management. That decision is still in keeping with federal policy, but recognizes that certain institutions may need a broader definition. A research administrator "sending" a communication describing "equipment" may wish to specify the definitional policy in order to avoid misunderstandings.

The widespread cultural bias to "test" claims means that any communication is subject to scrutiny. Wise communicators express respect for alternative perspectives. Wise communicators assess their own claims, looking for evidentiary strengths and weaknesses, and stand ready to support their viewpoints.

Accommodating Give and Take

Effective communication is a two-way street. The most effective communication builds on a reciprocal relationship between sender and receiver. Different people learn and communicate in different ways. The most effective communicators take time to understand the target audience, to monitor feedback from the receiver, and to adapt to the receiver's preferred model.

Communication theory is closely related to theories of learning. Some people learn better alone, others through collaboration. Some learn better from verbal material,

others from visual material. Some prefer to deal with abstract ideas, while others prefer social-centered information. These same differences (and others) apply in the world of communication. They suggest that variety in communication strategies increases the probability of effective communication. Different constituencies will respond favorably to different media, so good communicators find diversity in the medium.

In particular, effective communicators know the value of asking questions and listening to responses. Raising questions and listening to the answers help guide the sender to creating effective messages. But they do more than that. Listening is an act of respect that also enhances the stature of all parties, building the interpersonal relationship between communicators.

Working in Groups. Groups are often more creative than individuals. Creativity theorists recognize that external stimuli, such as collaboration or friendly competition with partners, bring more ideas to the table. The adage that “two heads are better than one” is a demonstrable fact in many professional settings. Give and take between participants improves communications and enhances the likelihood of achieving positive outcomes.

Importance of Repetition

When “receivers” perceive the same message repeatedly, their minds move the information from short-term to long-term memory. Repetition of a message causes the brain to literally build new connections between synapses. The following old speech teachers’ adage applies to all communications:

- (1) Tell them what you’re *going to tell* them.
- (2) Then *tell* them.
- (3) Then tell them what you *told* them.

An effective communicator states the message, then repeats it, then repeats it with variation, then repeats it again for good measure. Remember the three principles of selling realty: “location, location, location.” In a famous address in the darkest days of World War II, Winston Churchill told the students of Harrow —

[T]his is the lesson: *never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never* — in *nothing*, great or small, large or petty — *never give in* except to convictions of honour and good sense. *Never yield* to force; *never yield* to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy. [Emphasis added]

Identifying Outcomes. One special kind of repetition is a fundamental tool in outcomes teaching. Students tend to respond positively when the outcomes of their lessons are made clear at the beginning of a learning session. Thus teachers often say to students “At the end of this class, you will be able to [list and explain the principal dynamic factors in the Gunpowder Plot] or [play a chord on the cello] or [determine the allowability of participant costs].”

In a similar way, communicators wisely identify the goals of a meeting. Thus one may hear “at the end of this meeting, we’ll have an action plan” or “I’d like us to name

some ways to ... “ or “before we break, everyone should know exactly what his or her responsibilities are for this project.” In essence, identifying outcomes for a meeting is the first step in a series of repeated statements. The most successful outcomes tend to be statements of behaviors, of physical actions. They function for meetings like a salesman closing the deal: they lead to action.

Research administrators should develop individual habits of stating outcomes. At the beginning of a meeting, the goals should be articulated. At the end of the meeting, the conclusions should be reviewed, achievements pointed out, and homework assigned.

¶505.5 **Ensuring Successful Communications**

To achieve one’s highest potential as a communicator, one must work at communications. It is a worthwhile adventure. In *The Future of Leadership*, Warren Bennis called communication “the most important leadership skill.”⁴ Careers can be made or broken by the quality of communication. Generally those who master communications are regarded more highly by society. If someone cannot effectively communicate her contributions to the profession, how will others know her value?

Communication Skills

Communication skills require effort, but the results can impact one’s life dramatically. In *Leadership Is an Art*, Max De Pree wrote that “to achieve meaningful work and fulfilling relationships,” nothing is more important “than to learn and practice the art of communication.”⁵ To learn and practice — these are the keys to developing skills.

Communication success is both a factor of instinct and of cultivated skills. Good communication is the result of several “crafted” components including the following:

- (1) Care in crafting the essential message, which involves
 - knowing the subject and researching the problem as needed;
 - finding a solution to the problem and recommending an action; and
 - expressing the solution in attractive ways for the specific audience.
- (2) Care in crafting the medium, which involves
 - analyzing the audience’s needs;
 - finding the medium or media that suit(s) the circumstances, message, and resources; and
 - monitoring responses and adapting the message and medium accordingly.

Good communicators make certain models habitual. They *habitually* analyze the audience, *habitually* listen and observe feedback, *habitually* frame their messages appro-

⁴Warren Bennis, editor, et al., *The Future of Leadership*, Jossey-Bass, 2001.

⁵Max De Pree, *Leadership Is an Art*, Currency Books, 2004.

priately for the situation, *habitually* trim words to the essence. In part these habits come about through practice. One should be sure to *practice* a PowerPoint delivery, *practice* listening, *practice* repeating someone's statement back to them, *practice* re-reading e-mails before transmitting them.

Good communications are artful. They condense complex materials into comprehensible forms. In place of chaos, they create knowledge. In place of inaction, they invite achievement. Mathematicians often appreciate the "elegance" of a mathematical proof, assigning to it a higher probability of truth than to inelegant formulae. Even the simplest directive or request can be artful.

¶505.6 **Conclusion**

The writer John Gardner, writing about endings in *The Art of Fiction*, said that "The novel's denouement ... is not simply the end of the story, but the story's fulfillment." In professional communications, that fulfillment is some form of change. Professional communications may provoke thought, provide tools for achievement, or stimulate action. All good communications culminate in some change, fulfilling their purpose. Change is the purpose of communication whether it lays groundwork, establishes relationships, provides information, or commands assent.

Peter Drucker, one of the great teachers of management, wrote in *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices* that:⁶

Communication ... always makes demands. ... It always demands that the recipient become somebody, do something, believe something. It always appeals to motivation. If, in other words, communication fits in with the aspirations, the values, the purposes of the recipient, it is powerful. If it goes against his aspirations, his values, his motivations, it is likely not to be received at all or, at best, to be resisted.

Research administrators should remember the following guidelines when preparing and delivering effective communications:

- ◆ Give thought to your communications.
- ◆ Study your receivers; reflect on your messages; and appeal to your *specific* audience: to their aspirations, values, and purposes.
- ◆ Build a bridge between "the farmer and the cowman."
- ◆ Expand your tools of communication.
- ◆ Use all available communication resources to develop the territory of sponsored research.

⁶Peter Drucker, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*, HarperCollins, 1974.