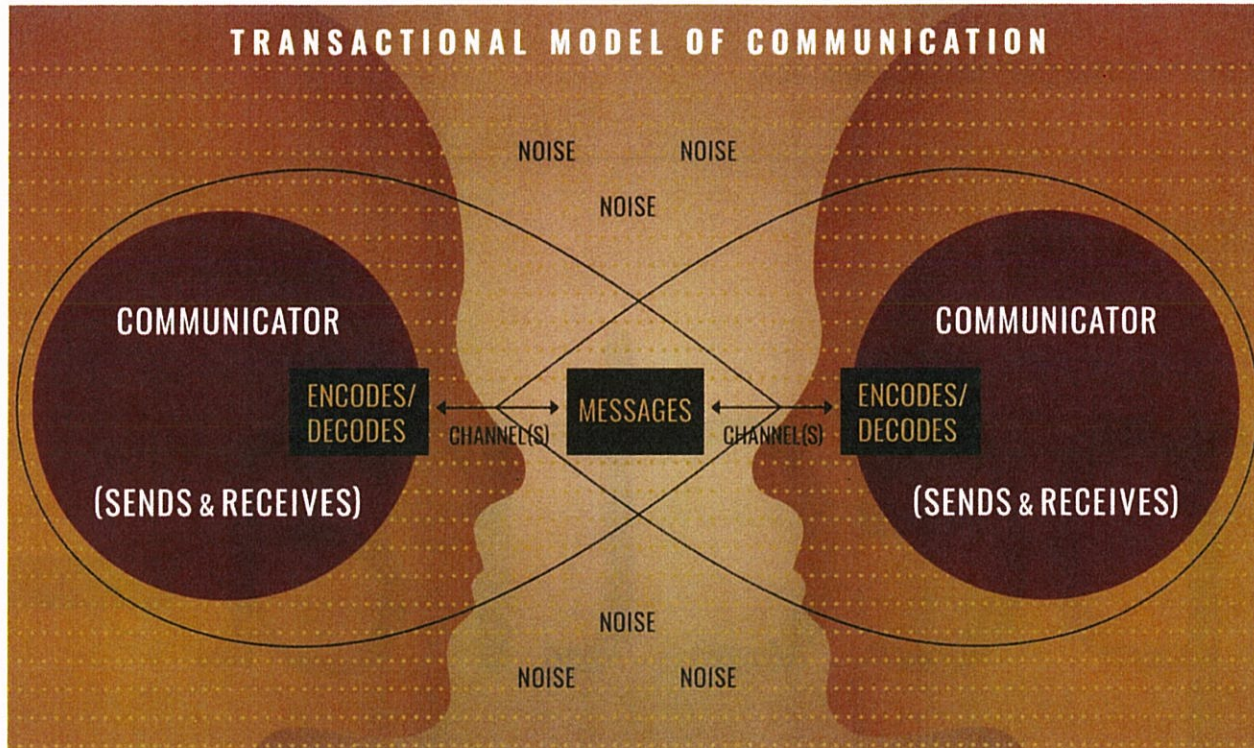


# WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?



At its foundation, Communication focuses on how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, and is the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media, and consequences of communication through humanistic, social scientific, and aesthetic inquiry.

## A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE COMMUNICATION DISCIPLINE

In November 1914, on an unseasonably warm Chicago day, 17 Speech teachers voted to formally sever ties with the National Council of Teachers of English and form their own association, the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking (now NCA). In so doing, these teachers declared that the study and teaching of Communication was distinct from other disciplines, deserving of its own institutional and intellectual legitimacy as a discipline within the context of American higher education. Over the next century, this vision flourished; Communication is now firmly established as a course of both undergraduate and graduate study in colleges and universities across the United States and around the world. At its foundation, Communication focuses on how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, and is the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media, and consequences of communication through humanistic, social scientific, and aesthetic inquiry.

The academic study of Communication dates back centuries. For the ancients, Communication was the study of rhetoric—the art of persuading others through public speaking and oratory; they believed that understanding rhetoric was critical for every citizen's education. As the ancient Greek rhetorician Isocrates wrote in his famous *Antidosis*, "Because there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and, generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish." Throughout many centuries of rhetorical study as a liberal art, Isocrates' words have served as an enduring reminder of the power of communication, and the contemporary academic discipline of Communication continues to promote its effective and ethical practice.



The classical study of rhetoric as a liberal art migrated to U.S. colleges and universities; Harvard University has long had an endowed chair in rhetoric and oratory (the Boylston Chair), for example, and one of the first professors in that position, John Quincy Adams, authored a two-volume collection of *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory* in 1810. The development of the Communication discipline in the United States owes much to this classical tradition. The mid-20th century expansion and evolution of the discipline, furthermore, owes much to the emergent interest in the social sciences that flowered in the post-World War II period. Perplexed by the power of communication to move entire populations toward fascism and violence in Europe and Asia, Communication scholars turned to social scientific methods as a means to understand audiences and message effects. As the research focus of some Communication scholars shifted, so, too, did the curriculum in many Communication departments. Joining the courses in Public Speaking, British and American Public Address, Rhetorical Theory, Radio Speaking, and the like were new offerings in Interpersonal Communication, Mass Communication Effects, and Persuasion and Social Influence. Along with studies of great orators and their rhetoric, graduate students began producing dissertations that experimentally tested the power and reach of mass-mediated communication and that surveyed large audiences for their attitudes toward political communication, for example.

Amidst all of these disciplinary and scholarly changes, Communication scholars and teachers retained their appreciation for the role and influence of communication across all aspects of public and private life. They continue to embrace the ubiquity of communication and are mindful of the inherent value of communication to meaningful citizenship. Emerging from the democratic impulse embodied in 19th- and 20th-century progressivism, this is the pedagogical foundation of the discipline.

Communication cuts across contexts and situations; it is the relational and collaborative force that strategically constructs the social world. Knowledge and understanding of communication and strong communication skills allow people to create and maintain interpersonal relationships; employers in all sectors seek employees with strong communication skills; and society needs effective communicators to support productive civic activity in communities.

## AREAS OF SPECIALIZATION

One of the defining features of the discipline of Communication is that it has many areas of specialization. That means a major in Communication can often be tailored to a student's interests, strengths, and ambitions through "concentrations" or "tracks." While areas of emphasis differ from one school to another, the list below describes some of the most common areas of Communication study. In addition to the specializations below, [NCA's Interest Groups represent many more areas of study.](#)

**Applied Communication** – How Communication theory and research can be useful and relevant in addressing practical problems. *Example:* How can emergency management personnel best communicate severe weather warnings to affected populations?

**Communication Education** – How communication theory and practice can inform effective instruction and learning in the classroom and other pedagogical contexts. *Example:* How can teachers establish credibility with students?

**Electronic & Digital Media** – How people make use of different forms of media to communicate with audiences. *Example:* How are news reports produced and disseminated via social media?

**Health Communication** – How people communicate in different health care contexts. *Example:* How should doctors communicate with patients to increase the likelihood of adherence to prescribed medication protocols?

**International & Intercultural Communication** – How people communicate across national and international boundaries and different cultural backgrounds. *Example:* How can diplomats from different countries most effectively negotiate with one another in a manner that is sensitive to the other's cultural norms?

**Interpersonal Communication** – How pairs of people communicate in personal relationships. *Example:* Why does father-daughter communication differ from mother-daughter communication?

**Legal Communication** – How communication organizes and creates meaning in courtrooms and other legal contexts. *Example:* What should defense attorneys do to effectively persuade juries of their clients' innocence in closing statements?

**Mass Communication & Media Literacy** – How mass forms of communication, such as print, radio, and television, create meaning for audiences. *Example:* How does watching *Grey's Anatomy* on television affect viewers' interactions with their health care providers?

**Mediation and Dispute Resolution** – How conflict is understood, managed, and resolved via different types of communication interactions. *Example:* How can the competing claims and arguments of opposing parties in negotiations over labor contracts be resolved?



**Organizational Communication** – How people communicate in different organizational contexts. *Example:* How can suggestion boxes in employee lounge areas encourage positive feelings about an organization?

**Performance Studies** – How performers, audiences, texts, and contexts interact in popular entertainment and other forms of public performance. *Example:* How do different types of Latino/a performance art redefine citizenship and political participation in U.S. states that border Mexico?

**Political Communication** – How we can explain the communicative activity of citizens, individual political figures, governmental institutions, the media, political campaigns, advocacy groups, and social movements. *Example:* Are protestors effective at influencing public policy?

**Public Address** – How speakers have persuaded audiences and shaped social and political ideas in their specific historical contexts via public oratory. *Example:* How did Abraham Lincoln's pre-presidential oratory shape public and social understandings of abolition and antebellum politics?

**Public Relations** – How relationships between an organization and its various publics are managed. *Example:* How can non-profit organizations most effectively use public service announcements to recruit volunteers?

**Rhetorical Criticism** – How rhetoric is defined, classified, analyzed, interpreted, and evaluated. *Example:* How can audiences interpret and evaluate the most relevant and important characteristics of the U.S. President's most recent State of the Union address?

**Small Group Communication** – How groups of three or more individuals interact around a common purpose and influence one another. *Example:* How does a 10-member citizens' advisory group for a local food co-op reach a decision about whether to sell beer and wine?

## Why Communication?

College students considering a Communication major, their parents, employers, and other interested stakeholders all want to know the answer to the question, "*What can Communication majors do professionally after graduation?*"

There are many answers, ranging from securing full-time employment to making a difference in their workplaces and communities to continuing their education. But among the most important answer is that college graduates with Communication degrees have the knowledge and skills employers need. When responding to a recent National Association of Colleges and Employers Job Outlook Survey, employers identified the ability to verbally communicate with others inside and outside the organization and the ability to create and/or edit written documents as among the top ten skills they seek when hiring new college graduates. Communication graduates bring these critical skills to the workplace. They demonstrate strong verbal, nonverbal, and written communication skills and have considerable expertise in speaking well in front of small and large audiences.

The [Humanities Indicators](#) track trends in humanities disciplines and are developed from existing data sets and from the Humanities Departmental Survey. Humanities Indicators' data indicate that Communication is one of the most popular humanities majors. In 2015, nearly 25 percent of bachelor's degree completions in the humanities were in Communication.

Students, parents, faculty, and administrators—people from just about everywhere—are asking about Communication. As more and more students major in Communication, and as more students successfully pursue careers and professions that require and reward knowledge and ability in the Communication arts and sciences, NCA provides resources that assist students, their faculty mentors, career counselors, and other interested educators in their professional growth and development.

## Advantages of a Degree in Communication

### BE VALUED

The knowledge, understanding, and skills that a student acquires through a program of study in Communication will help them become a valued asset in a variety of contexts—from organizations to politics, from families to multinational corporations. Communication graduates are trained to think deeply about how communication processes relate to many of today's important issues, which will serve them well whether advising on a public relations campaign or developing a community program. They also understand that effective communication can bring people together across cultural contexts, and they know how to communicate with care and respect for others' beliefs, making them an essential asset in an ever-connected world.

## GET HIRED

The ability to communicate is one of the most highly sought skills by employers. In fact, the 2018 National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) survey of 201 employers found that the knowledge and skills taught in Communication courses are essential to being hired, regardless of one's major.

## MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Many programs of study in Communication embrace a deep commitment to ethical and civically productive communication; they bring these values to their students via service learning experiences and coursework that reinforces the ethical imperative of good communication. Students emerge from such programs with a commitment to using their education to make a difference.

Communication majors make a difference in their workplaces every day. And they also make a difference in their communities.

## What Can a Graduate Do with a Communication Degree?

A degree in Communication opens the door to a wide variety of employment opportunities. Communication graduates find jobs in the private, government, and non-profit sectors. Following are profiles of people with Communication degrees who are now employed in a range of interesting positions. These profiles illustrate the