



# interact

FOURTEENTH EDITION



## Interpersonal Communication

CONCEPTS, SKILLS, AND CONTEXTS

KATHLEEN S. VERDERBER  
ERINA L. MACGEORGE

OXFORD  
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FOURTEENTH EDITION

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*We dedicate this,  
the fourteenth edition of Inter-Act to:*

PROFESSOR  
RUDOLPH F. VERDERBER,  
PH.D., AUTHOR EMERITUS,

*who, though no longer able to do  
that which he so truly loved,  
has left his imprint on this book.*

*His influence on all basic  
textbooks in our field will be  
felt for many years to come.*



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# Preface

## Welcome to the Fourteenth Edition of *Inter-Act!*

### To Students Who Are About to Use This Text

Few courses you take in college can have as profound an impact on your life as a course in interpersonal communication. You are embarking on a course of study that will help you be a better friend, family member, lover, partner, employee, manager, co-worker, and leader. Today our rapidly changing technology and social media are presenting new challenges to how we manage effective relationships. This textbook, *Inter-Act*, will help you by introducing you to specific skills that you can use to overcome the complications that arise when our conversations are face-to-face and when they are mediated by technology. Each chapter explores concepts and current theories that explain how interpersonal communication processes work and the skills that help us to be effective.

You will be encouraged to practice, refine, and adopt specific skills that increase your capacity to communicate in different ways. This will increase your interpersonal competence and your ability to have healthy relationships. The basic skills you will learn include developing messages that effectively convey your thoughts and feelings, understanding the nonverbal behavior of others, listening effectively, managing conversations with strangers and acquaintances, providing support and comfort to others, dealing with conflict, and simply finding the most effective way to speak up for yourself. You will also practice more complex skills that help us to sustain intimate relationships with family members, close friends, intimate partners, and people in your workplace. Because how we communicate is embedded in culture, *Inter-Act* introduces you to some of the primary cultural differences that explain how and why specific communication behaviors are interpreted differently in different cultures.

### Goals of *Inter-Act*

As with previous editions, this fourteenth edition of *Inter-Act* meets six specific goals that are essential to a basic course in interpersonal communication. These are:

1. To explain important communication concepts, frameworks, and theories that have been consistently supported by careful research so that you can understand the conceptual foundations of interpersonal communication;
2. To teach specific communication skills that research has shown to facilitate effective relationships;
3. To present ethical frameworks you can use to be a moral communicator in your relationships;

4. To sensitize you to ways that communication needs, rules, and processes differ between diverse cultural groups and among people in any particular cultural group;
5. To challenge you to think critically and creatively about the concepts and skills you learn;
6. To provide abundant practice activities that significantly enhance your learning.

### To Instructors Who Have Selected This Text

The skills-based approach to interpersonal communication that was pioneered in *Inter-Act* and has remained so popular over the years has been expanded and reinforced with this new edition. These changes continue to be based on a message-centered approach to interpersonal communication (see Burleson, 2010). A message-centered approach allows us to explore how people form relationships and applies current theories and concepts as a framework for understanding interpersonal communication. The message-centered approach is consistent with the premise that there are basic universal message skills and guidelines that improve the likelihood of successful human interaction. This edition emphasizes both automatic and mindful processes involved in message preparation. Understanding these processes enables students to incorporate new skills into their behavioral repertoire and improve relationships. With this overview in mind, let's take a closer look at what is new in this edition.

### New to This Edition

- **Explicit discussion of how our emotions affect our communication and our relationships:** In this edition, increased attention is given to theory and research on the role of emotions in our communication processes. Because emotions are integral to every aspect of interpersonal communication, this material is integrated in multiple chapters.
- **Continued and updated emphasis on social media:** Social media has become ubiquitous in our lives and the lives of our students, and has a profound effect on how we “do” our relationships. This edition has been strengthened with updated and expanded discussions of social media and interpersonal communication. Each chapter now includes a section called **The Social Media Factor** that discusses the newest practices, influential theories, current research findings, and practical guidelines for using social media related to the chapter's content. Additionally, the **Inter-Act with Social Media** marginal activities challenge students to apply what they learn about social media from their reading.
- **Expanded scholarship and theoretical profile:** Throughout, the fourteenth edition relies on current interpersonal communication theories that are well supported by programmatic research as the

foundation for the concepts and skills students learn. We believe that the purpose of a textbook is to make these theories accessible to introductory students so that they understand why particular communication practices are more effective than others.

- **Streamlined chapter organization:** We have responded to feedback from our users by updating, reorganizing, redistributing, and removing some content. As a result we have been able to shorten the text to thirteen rather than fourteen chapters.
  - Chapter 1, “An Orientation to Interpersonal Communication,” begins with an overview of a message-centered interpersonal communication model and includes discussion of how the message production, message interpretation, and message coordination processes work. This model is complemented by sections describing the purposes and characteristics of interpersonal communication, communication ethics, the dark side of interpersonal communication, and communication competence.
  - Chapter 2, retitled “Social Cognition: Understanding Others and Ourselves” has been substantially revised to provide a current overview of how we perceive and think about ourselves and others. This update incorporates substantial theory and research showing that attention, memory, and judgement processes have a profound influence on how we think about ourselves and interact with others.
  - Chapter 3, “Intercultural Communication,” has been lightly revised. Updates include a discussion of cultural differences in displays of emotion.
  - Chapter 4, “Verbal Messages,” has been lightly revised and streamlined. A new discussion of how to improve the semantic meaning of messages incorporates guidance on improving your emotional vocabulary and the skill of describing feelings. Grice’s Cooperative Principle and maxims are now presented as explanations for how we interpret others’ speech acts, and the skill of politeness is introduced as a means of avoiding damage to others’ “face.”
  - Chapter 5, “Nonverbal Messages,” has been updated. The skill of perception-checking has been moved into this chapter, where it complements a recognition that nonverbal behavior can convey multiple messages.
  - Chapter 6, “Communication in the Life Cycle of Relationships,” has been substantially edited to eliminate redundancy, simplify concepts, and improve the flow of ideas. Some content from this chapter was moved to other places in the text where it more naturally fits. Since relationships develop through disclosure, the discussion of self-disclosure and privacy in relationships has been moved here from a separate chapter in the last edition.



- Chapter 7, “Listening Effectively,” has been updated to emphasize the four listening styles identified in recent research by Brodie and Worthington (2010).
- Chapter 8, “Holding Effective Conversations,” has been streamlined and a section on using humor in conversations has been added.
- Chapter 9, “Supporting Others,” has been reorganized, updated, and streamlined. The chapter explicitly deals with the importance of emotion in supportive interactions. New sections on creating supportive climates, validating emotions, and encouraging reappraisals couple contemporary theory with pragmatic strategies and skills.
- Chapter 10, “Using Interpersonal Influence,” has been lightly revised with the addition of a section on interpersonal influence via social media.
- Chapter 11, “Managing Conflict,” has been lightly edited, with the section on cyber-bullying expanded and updated to reflect new approaches to stopping it.
- Chapter 12, “Communicating in Intimate Relationships: Long-Term Romantic Relationships, Family, and Friends,” has been substantially revised with new content. The chapter includes sections on long-term romantic relationships, families, and friendship. Each section explores the nature of these relationships, the challenges they face, and the role that communication plays in maintaining them.
- Chapter 13, “Communication in Workplace Relationships,” has been refocused. Material on job searching has been updated by a senior human resources executive and moved onto the textbook website. The chapter now focuses on improving the effectiveness of our communication in our formal and informal workplace relationships: managerial, co-worker, client/vendor, mentor, and workplace friendships, including workplace romances. The section on how workforce diversity impacts communication has been updated. Finally, a new section thoroughly discusses how to improve workplace performance through giving and receiving feedback. The Social Media Factor has been completely rewritten with a focus on effective use of social media at work.
- **Revised and expanded suite of Analyze and Apply (formerly known as “Apply Your Knowledge”) and Skill Practice activities:** Skill Practice exercises at the end of nearly every chapter reinforce *Inter-Act’s* stature as the premier skills-based text. Exercises provide students with one or more activities for them to practice each skill discussed in the text.

## Hallmark Features of *Inter-Act*—Strengthened and Revised

- **New chapter opening dialogues:** Each chapter opens with a new problematic conversation to set the scene for key ideas that are

discussed in the chapter. These conversations are based on real ones reported by college students in Interpersonal Communication classes taught by the authors and contributors. At the end of each chapter, the opening dialogue is revisited, and students are asked to analyze the original dialogue using concepts and theories from the chapter. Then students are instructed to use what they have learned in the chapter to rewrite the dialogue so as to avoid some of the problems that occurred.

- **Running chapter features:** Each chapter includes several unobtrusive features that reinforce learning by engaging the student. *Key terms* and definitions are highlighted in the margins. *Observe and Analyze* activities ask students to observe common communication situations and analyze them using the concepts and theories that have just been presented in the text. *Inter-Act with Social Media* activities direct students to think about how basic interpersonal processes are affected when we use social or electronic media. Instructors can assign these activities as graded exercises or as prompts for journal entries.
- **Chapter box features:** A variety of special boxes highlight other perspectives on interpersonal communication. The popular feature *Diverse Voices* presents excerpts from previously published essays that shed light on the communication experiences of people from a wide range of backgrounds and cultures. Each feature includes a set of thought-provoking questions that will stimulate lively class discussions about diversity. *A Question of Ethics: What Would You Do?* are short case studies presenting ethical dilemmas that ask students to think critically about the situations and develop recommendations concerning the central issues. *Learn About Yourself* are self-administered attitude or behavior assessments that provide students with information about themselves that is related to the material in each chapter. All of these activities are based on research, and most illustrate well-respected ways of measuring a particular concept. While students often complete activities without prompting, instructors may choose to assign these and use them in class discussion.
- **Skill Builder charts:** Skill builder charts appear in the text near the discussion of the skill. They provide a graphic summary of the skill, including the definition, usages, message formation steps, and an example to illustrate its use.
- **End-of-chapter resources:** *Key Words* are lists with page numbers that provide students with an easy way to access chapter concepts. *Analyze and Apply* are activities that challenge students to use chapter concepts and skills to understand or improve a communication situation. These can be used as graded assignments, journal activities, or as in-class exercises. *Skill Practice* activities are short drills where students can practice forming messages using the communication skills presented in the chapter. These may be assigned as written activities or used as part of in-class activity. A *Communication Improvement Plan* helps students identify an area of their communication practice that they would like

to improve and to design a program for meeting their objective. Students can download a form for making Communication Improvement Plans from the companion website. Instructors can create graded assignments based on these.

## Supplementary Materials

As a reader of this text, you also have access to supplementary materials for both students and instructors.

### Student Materials

- The companion website, [www.oup.com/us/verderber](http://www.oup.com/us/verderber), offers a wealth of resources for both students and instructors, study aids such as: practice quizzes, key term flashcards, discussion questions, journal prompts, review questions, communication improvement plans, and media examples, , links to a variety of communication-related websites, and a link to the latest *Now Playing*.
- *Now Playing: Learning Communication through Film*, available as an optional printed product, looks at more than 60 contemporary and classic feature films and television shows through the lens of communication principles. *Now Playing* illustrates a variety of both individual scenes and full-length films, highlighting concepts and offering discussion questions for a mass medium that is interactive, familiar, and easily accessible.

### Instructor Materials

- **Ancillary Resource Center (ARC)** at [www.oup-arc.com](http://www.oup-arc.com) This convenient, instructor-focused website provides access to all of the up-to-date teaching resources for this text—at any time—while guaranteeing the security of grade-significant resources. In addition, it allows OUP to keep instructors informed when new content becomes available. The following items are available on the ARC:
  - The *Instructor's Manual* and *Test Bank* provide teaching tips, exercises, and approximately 400 exam questions in multiple-choice, true/false, and essay formats that will prove useful to both new and veteran instructors. The *Instructor's Manual* includes pedagogical suggestions, sample syllabi, content outlines, discussion questions, chapter activities, simulations, and journal assignments. A computerized test bank is also available.
  - Newly revised PowerPoint®-based lecture slides.
  - The Instructor's Companion Website at [www.oup.com/us/verderber](http://www.oup.com/us/verderber) is a password-protected site featuring the *Instructor's Manual*, PowerPoint®-based lecture slides, and links to supplemental materials and films.
  - *Now Playing: Instructor's Edition*, an instructor-only print supplement, includes an introduction on how to incorporate film

and TV examples in class, more sample responses to the numerous discussion questions in the student edition of *Now Playing*, viewing guides, additional films, and references.

- Course cartridges for a variety of e-learning environments allow instructors to create their own course websites with the interactive material from the instructor and student companion websites. Contact your Oxford University Press representative for access.

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—Erina MacGeorge



interact





# AN ORIENTATION TO INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Casey and Katherine are good friends who live together. Casey has been searching unsuccessfully in her closet for her favorite sweater. Just as she has given up hope of finding it, she sees Katherine walking past her room and then remembers . . .

Casey: Hey, Kath . . . didn't you take my sweater the other day?

Katherine: Um . . . no. I never wore it.

Casey: (in an exasperated tone) It's fine if you wore it. I just want to wear it today.

Katherine: But I didn't wear it! You must have left it somewhere . . . like you ALWAYS do.

Casey: No, you asked to borrow it! Fine . . . if you can't find it, can I borrow one of YOUR sweaters?

Katherine: (in a fake bored tone, with a smirk on her face): Sorry. You know I don't lend my clothes out . . . I might not get them back.

Casey: Seriously? Katherine, I know you took my sweater. Why are you lying to me?

Katherine: Excuse me? You're crazy. I don't even know what you're talking about!

Casey: (turns her back to Katherine) Whatever. Until you give me my sweater back, stay out of my room.



**WHAT YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO EXPLAIN AFTER YOU HAVE STUDIED THIS CHAPTER:**

- ▶ The definition of interpersonal communication
- ▶ How messages are produced, interpreted, and coordinated

- ▶ The contexts for interpersonal communication
- ▶ The purposes of interpersonal communication
- ▶ The characteristics of interpersonal communication
- ▶ “Dark-side” messages

- ▶ Interpersonal communication competence and what it requires
- ▶ The five traits of social media

**WHAT YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO DO AFTER YOU HAVE STUDIED THIS CHAPTER:**

- ▶ Write a Communication Improvement Plan (CIP)

**Interpersonal communication**—is the complex process through which people produce, interpret, and coordinate messages to create shared meanings, achieve social goals, manage their personal identities, and carry out their relationships

**Communication theories**—systematic and research-based explanations of how communication works

**Communication skills**—combinations of goals, plans, and scripts that are effective and appropriate for specific messages, interactions, and relationships

In the space of a brief conversation, not only have Casey and Katherine damaged their friendship, but Casey still doesn’t have her sweater. Why do these kinds of interactions happen, and how can they be improved?

The purpose of this textbook, and your **interpersonal communication** class, is to help you become a more effective interpersonal communicator, by introducing you to well-established **communication theories**—systematic and research-based explanations of how communication works, and by developing your **communication skills**—goals, plans, and sequences of behavior that are effective and appropriate for particular contexts. You will find that some of the theories you will study will confirm personal theories that you have developed based on your experiences, but many will provide a more accurate understanding of what happens when people talk and why. Practicing a variety of communication skills in a safe classroom setting before trying them out in your “real” relationships can help you become a more effective interpersonal communicator. Let’s get started by exploring the definition of “interpersonal communication.”

**INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION** is the complex process through which people produce, interpret, and coordinate messages to create shared meanings, achieve social goals, manage their personal identities, and carry out their relationships.

We often take interpersonal communication for granted, but there’s a lot going on. In this first chapter, we begin by looking at a model of interpersonal communication in order to help understand how this complex process works. We will then discuss the unique characteristics of interpersonal communication, the ethical standards that we expect in our own and others’ interpersonal communication, and the ways that we can fall short of these standards. Next, we will describe what it means to be competent in interpersonal communication,

the types of skills that can help you become more competent, and the steps necessary for learning new interpersonal communication skills. Finally, a significant amount of our interpersonal communication today is mediated. To end this chapter, we discuss the traits of social media that distinguish one type of communication from another and from face-to-face interactions. Throughout the text, there will be detailed discussions of how social media affects our interpersonal communication and relationships.

## A Model of Interpersonal Communication

A model of interpersonal communication includes messages, their senders, and their receivers; the message production process used by senders; and the message interpretation process used by receivers. It also includes the interaction-coordination process they use during their conversation, and the communication context in which they exchange messages.

### Messages

At the center of interpersonal communication is the exchange of messages. A **message** is a performance that uses words and/or nonverbal behaviors to convey the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of the speaker. In interpersonal communication, we typically alternate between sending messages and interpreting the messages we receive from others. Through **encoding** we create messages that convey our meanings and goals by selecting words and behaviors that we believe represent our ideas and feelings. The **message production process** encompasses both mental and behavioral steps that we use to form messages during encoding. Similarly, through **decoding**, we interpret both words and nonverbal behaviors in order to make sense of the messages we receive from others. Decoding is accomplished through the **message interpretation process**. When we talk with others, not only do we produce and interpret messages, we also have to adjust our messages to accommodate the messages of the person we are talking to, otherwise known as the **message coordination process**. Finally, the way senders and receivers produce, interpret, and coordinate interaction is influenced by the **communication context**, or background conditions surrounding the interaction.

Let's look at a simple message exchange as an example of what happens when two people interact. Suppose a toddler wants her bottle, which is sitting on a table next to her father. She may encode her desire by pointing to the bottle while crying out, "Da-da, ba-ba!" This message, comprising a nonverbal gesture and sounds, expresses what she wants. How the father responds to this message depends in part on how he decodes it—how he interprets the performance he has observed. He might hand her the bottle, smile, and say, "Here you go, little girl: Da-da and ba-ba are right here," or he may give her a puzzled look while raising his hands and shoulders, indicating that he doesn't understand what she wants.



How does the social context of this photo explain the reactions of each person? How might a different context result in different reactions?

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**Message**—a performance that uses words, sentences, and/or nonverbal behaviors to convey the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of the speaker

**Encoding**—creating messages that convey our meanings and goals by selecting words and behaviors that we believe represent our ideas and feelings

**Message production process**—what we think and do to encode a message

**Decoding**—making sense of the messages we receive

**Message interpretation process**—what we think and do to decode a message

**Message coordination process**—adjusting messages to accommodate the messages of the person we are talking to

**Communication context**—the set of background conditions surrounding the interaction

His response, too, will be a message. Additionally, the father will coordinate his reply by purposefully directing his expression to his toddler, just as she coordinated her message by using her name for her father so that he would understand her message was meant for him. The messages that are produced, interpreted, and coordinated will be influenced by the context as well. If the father understands what his daughter means, how he responds is likely to depend in part on contextual factors, like how long it has been since she had her last bottle. Interpersonal communication is complicated because we produce and interpret messages while simultaneously adjusting and coordinating our messages with those of our partner, who is also juggling these processes, all within the specific context of the conversation (Burlinson, 2010).

Now, let's look more closely at how the message production, message interpretation, and message coordination processes work, and then we will describe how contextual factors influence these processes.

### Message Production

You've probably heard the term "producer" used to refer to people who generate the messages we receive through television, movies, and music. But you are also a producer—of messages during interpersonal communication. Message production is the process of encoding a message for the person you are talking with. While you may appreciate the complexity of producing a movie, have you ever thought about the complex process you manage as you produce a message in a conversation? Like movie production, in message production we have goals, plans, and actions that determine the messages we produce.

As Charles Berger (2002), a leading communication scholar, observes: "Social interaction is a goal-directed activity." Communication is motivated by **interaction goals**, the things we want to accomplish during a conversation. Your goals may or may not be complex or important, and you may not be fully aware of them, especially when they are routine. For example, Marko usually arrives home after his wife and children, and almost always asks his wife "How'd it go today, hon?" He might not be consciously aware that he has the goal of learning what has happened in his family's life that day, but if asked to explain his question, he would probably say something like, "I wanted to know what happened at my wife's work and how my sons did at school." Different goals result in different communication behaviors. Suppose one night Marko arrives home anxious to get everyone in the car so that they are not late for his son's Little League game. He may holler, "I'm home! Let's go!" and save the usual "How'd it go today?" for the drive. Our goals can, and often do, change quickly during conversation. If his wife replies, "The game is postponed to 6:30," Marko can relax, realizing that he doesn't have to get the family on the road as quickly, and may then encode a message that conveys his usual goal of catching up.

The **Goals-Plans-Action theory** of message production (Dillard, 2015) proposes that goals motivate us to communicate, but planning determines what we actually say. **Message planning** is identifying one or more strategies you can use that will accomplish the goal of your message. Some planning is done prior

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**Interaction goals**—the things a message sender wants to accomplish through communication

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**Goals-Plans-Action theory**—a theory of message production that posits that goals motivate us to communicate, but planning determines what we actually say

**Message planning**—identifying one or more message strategies you can use that will accomplish your interaction goals

to interaction. For example, you might spend time thinking through what you will say in a job interview if asked, “What is your greatest weakness?” Or you might plan how you are going to break the news to your mom that you are going to spend Thanksgiving with your dad and his wife. This kind of planning can be quite elaborate and may include contingencies or “if–then” plans, such as, “If I’m asked why I don’t list my prior employer as a reference, I’ll explain that I listed people who are more familiar with my skills relevant to this job.” Or, “If Mom starts to cry, I’ll give her a hug and promise to spend winter break with her.” When the outcome of an interaction is important to you, this kind of pre-interaction planning can be very helpful.

However, we can’t plan extensively for every encounter. In fact, most of our planning is far more spur-of-the-moment: it occurs just prior to and during interaction. How are we able to set goals, plan, listen, and speak more or less simultaneously? We get a lot of help by accessing our “canned” plans, stored in memory. A **canned plan** is a learned communication strategy for a specific type of situation. Canned plans come from reflecting on what repeatedly has worked for us or others in similar situations in the past, or by imagining and rehearsing what might work well in these types of situations (Berger, 1997). We remember these strategies and use them to guide our message production in future interactions where they appear to fit. We all have canned plans for the situations that we regularly encounter, such as making small talk, ordering food at a restaurant, or picking someone up in a bar. Beyond that, the kinds of canned plans you have and how detailed they are depend on the types of goals and situations you routinely encounter. For example, most of us have a canned plan for trying to persuade someone to do something. But if you are a salesperson, you probably have more elaborate canned plans for particular products, or for persuading specific kinds of customers—for example, for moms with kids, focus on moderate cost, parental controls, and ease of setup; for obviously wealthy customers, focus on brand prestige, new and unique features, and aesthetics.

Canned plans include **scripts**, which are sequences of communication behaviors or specific messages that are designed to carry out a plan. When you see a friend that you haven’t seen in a while, do you have to stop and think about what to say? Probably not. You might say “Hey there!” or “What’s up?” but whatever you says just pops out, because it is the start of one of your greeting scripts from your canned plan of how to acknowledge a friend. Many of our canned plans and scripts are acquired during childhood. For example, can you remember your mother admonishing you to “Wave, smile, and say ‘Hi!’” as she modeled this behavior? As we grow, we add to and embellish these scripts. So, for example, as we learn to differentiate between different types of relationships, we expand our repertoire of greeting scripts. The variety of scripts you have stored in your memory will depend on the situations you most frequently encounter and your goals in those situations. Parents, teachers, and caregivers develop a repertoire of phrases for redirecting errant behavior in children (“Jackson, please stop. Let’s do this instead”), and for rewarding good behavior (“Good job,

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**Canned plan**—a learned communication strategy for a specific type of situation

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**Script**—a sequence of communication behaviors or messages designed to carry out a plan

Jackson, what a big boy!”). People who work in a call center dealing with customer complaints are usually trained to say something like “How may I assist you today?” and once the customer has explained their complaint, respond, “I understand your concern. Let me see how I can help.”

The point is that when we need to form a message, we don’t usually have to start from scratch. Instead, knowing what we want to accomplish, we access the canned plans and associated scripts that are relevant to the goal and put them to work, customizing as we go in order to fit the unique context and other aspects of the current situation. For instance, you probably have a well-honed script you use to ask for a favor from a friend. But in a particular situation you will add that person’s name, the specific favor requested, and anything you might be offering in return for the favor. All this mental activity typically happens automatically, in nanoseconds, so we are usually unaware of all the mental work going on that enables us to produce our messages. But think about it: How often is what you say similar to something you have said or heard said in a similar past situation?

At times, we need to produce messages for seemingly unfamiliar situations for which we don’t have appropriate canned plans. In these cases, we search our mental library for canned plans that have similar goals and situations to the one we are currently facing, and modify them as best we can. For example, if, Jana’s mother dies suddenly, and her friend Elyse has never comforted someone grieving the loss of a parent, Elyse may not have a plan for this type of situation. She will probably draw on her canned plans for comforting in other situations, like comforting someone who has lost a job. Elyse’s success at comforting Jana will depend on the effectiveness of those plans and how well she succeeds at adapting them to the current goal and situation. For example, Elyse’s comforting plan for a job loss may include a strategy of being optimistic (“Things will look up for you, I know they will”), but because this strategy is inappropriate for a recently bereaved person, she will need to adapt what she actually says.

The success of your communication depends on how well you are able to implement your goals, using plans and scripts. But frequently we need to meet several goals in the same conversation. For example, if you are interviewing to be a manager, you need to present yourself as cooperative and friendly, while at the same time conveying that you are someone who can take charge and make decisions. During the interview, there will be times when your messages convey that you are easy to get along with, while other messages will demonstrate your decision-making abilities. Sometimes you must choose between two mutually exclusive goals, and that choice can determine how effective you are. For example, in a conflict situation, your goal might be to compromise, or it might be to have your own way. We communicate better in challenging situations if we have done advanced planning and when we have more canned plans and scripts from which to choose. As you progress through this textbook, you will have the opportunity to reflect on your interaction goals and to develop more effective canned plans and scripts for common and important types of interpersonal communication situations.

## Message Interpretation

During an interaction, you not only produce messages, you also consume them. **Message interpretation** is the process of understanding a message you have received. The process begins when you become aware that someone is trying to communicate with you. You observe the nonverbal behavior and listen to the words. Your inferences about the sender's message are influenced by how you perceive yourself and the sender, the goals and plans that you have for the interaction, and those you believe the sender to have. Then, based on your interpretation of the message, you prepare to respond, returning to the process of message production.

Like message production, much of message interpretation happens quickly and automatically, and we are often unaware of all the mental work we are doing unless we encounter behavior that is difficult to interpret. This is a good thing, because it would be hard to get anything accomplished if we had to stop and think carefully about every message we receive. However, there are times when it is valuable to slow down the process and give messages (and their senders) more thoughtful consideration. Your study of interpersonal communication will help you understand more about message interpretation, including developing your listening skills so that you are more likely to interpret others' messages as they are intended.

## Interaction Coordination

A third process during interpersonal communication is **interaction coordination**, which is the activity that participants in a conversation perform to adjust their behaviors to that of the other party. We can think of interaction coordination as a dance where people's moves anticipate and respond to their partner's (Burgoon, 1998). While talking with someone, you anticipate how he or she is likely to act and respond. Additionally, each message you receive from the other person provides **feedback**, actual information about how your message was received. Your messages also provide feedback for your conversational partner; therefore, both of you adjust how you act and what you say depending on how your partner's actual messages and behavior match your expectations. For example, if your partner's messages are more positive than you expected, you may adjust your behavior by mirroring that positive behavior. Alternatively, if your partner's message or behavior is more negative than you expected, then you may also behave in a more positive way, hoping that your positive behavior will encourage your partner to reciprocate. Usually we try to adjust our behaviors so that our partner's behaviors more closely match what we would like them to be. At times you will adjust your behavior to match or mirror your partner's to show similarity or unity. At other times you may act or say things in a way that signals your individuality or distinctiveness from your partner. And your partner will make similar adjustments.

Let's look at an example of interaction coordination. Suppose that you go to see your instructor to discuss a paper on which you received a lower grade than you thought the paper deserved. Suppose you begin with a very assertive

## ▶ OBSERVE AND ANALYZE

### Canned Plans and Scripts

Describe a time when you met someone who was grieving the death of a close friend or family member. What did you do and say to express your sympathy? Recreate a script of the conversation as best you can recall it. How comfortable were you during this conversation? How did you know what to say? Would knowing or not knowing the deceased affect how you approached the conversation? Would it have mattered if the person who died was young or old? Died suddenly or after a long illness? Do you think you were effective and appropriate in what you said and did? How skillful were you in this encounter? What, if anything, would you do differently the next time you face this situation?

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**Message interpretation**—the process of understanding a message you have received

**Interaction coordination**—the activities participants in a conversation perform to adjust their behaviors to those of their partners

**Feedback**—information about how a message was interpreted by its recipient, conveyed in a subsequent message