Objectives

1. Describe the relationship between words and meaning.
2. Understand how words influence us and our culture.
3. Identify word barriers and know how to manage them.
4. Discuss how the words we use affect our relationships with others.
5. Describe supportive approaches to relating to others.
6. Describe how an apology can enhance the quality of interpersonal communication.
7. Use appropriate assertiveness skills to enhance the quality of interpersonal communication.

Outline

- How Words Work
- The Power of Words
- Word Barriers
- Words of Support
- Words of Apology: When You’ve Not Been Other-Oriented
- Words of Assertion
Words are powerful. Those who use them skillfully can exert great influence with just a few of them. Consider these notable achievements:

Lincoln set the course for a nation in a 267-word speech: the Gettysburg Address.

Shakespeare expressed the quintessence of the human condition in Hamlet’s famous “To be, or not to be” soliloquy—363 words long.

Two billion people accept a comprehensive moral code expressed in a mere 297 words: the Ten Commandments.

Words have great power in private life as well. In this chapter, we will examine ways to use them more effectively in interpersonal relationships. We’ll investigate how to harness the power of words to affect emotions, thoughts, and actions, and we’ll describe links between language and culture. We will also identify communication barriers that may keep you from using words effectively and note strategies and skills for managing those barriers. Finally, we will examine the role of speech in establishing supportive relationships with others.

According to one study, a person’s ability to use words—more specifically, to participate in conversation with others—is one of the best predictors of communication competence. One study found that people who simply didn’t talk much were perceived as being less interpersonally skilled than people who spent an appropriate amount of time engaged in conversation with others. This chapter is designed to help you better understand the power of words and to use them with greater skill and confidence.

Throughout our discussion of the power of verbal messages, we invite you to keep one important idea in mind: You are not in charge of the meaning others derive from your messages. Meaning is created in others. You don’t determine what other people think. That is, words don’t have meaning; people create meaning.

How Words Work

As you read the printed words on this page, how are you able to make sense out of these black marks? When you hear words spoken by others, how are you able to interpret those sounds? Although several theories attempt to explain how people learn language and ascribe meaning to both printed and uttered words, there is no single universally held view that neatly clarifies the mystery.

Words Are Symbols

As we noted in Chapter 1, words are symbols that represent something else. A printed or spoken word triggers an image of an object, a sound, a concept, or an experience. Take the word cat, for instance. The word may conjure up in your mind’s eye a hissing creature with bared claws and fangs. Or perhaps you envision a cherished pet curled up by a fireplace.

The classic model in Figure 6.1 was developed by Charles Ogden and Ivor Richards to explain the relationships between referents, thought, and symbols. Referents are the things the symbols (words) represent. Thought is the mental process of creating an image, sound, concept, or experience triggered by a referent or symbol.

symbol Word, sound, or visual device that represents an object, sound, concept, or experience.

referent Thing that a symbol represents.

thought Mental process of creating an image, sound, concept, or experience triggered by a referent or symbol.
Words Symbolize Denotative and Connotative Meaning. Language creates meaning on two levels: the denotative and the connotative. The **denotative meaning** of a word creates content: It is the word’s restrictive or literal meaning. For example, here is one dictionary definition for the word *school*:

An institution for the instruction of children; an institution for instruction in a skill or business; a college or a university.\(^4\)

This definition is the literal, or denotative, definition of the word *school*; it describes what the word means in American culture.

The **connotative meaning** of a word creates feelings. Words have personal and subjective meanings. To you, the word *school* might mean a wonderful, exciting place where you meet your friends, have a good time, and occasionally take tests and perform other tasks that keep you from enjoying your social life. To others, *school* could be a restrictive, burdensome obligation that stands in the way of making money and getting on with life. The connotative meaning of a word is more individualized. Whereas the denotative, or objective, meaning of the word *school* can be found in any dictionary, your subjective, personal response to the word is probably not contained there.

The denotative and connotative meanings of words made headlines in 2008, when the U.S. Supreme Court considered whether a well-known, four-letter word is obscene if it is used connotatively rather than denotatively.\(^5\) The Federal Communication Commission doesn’t permit the word to be used on public airways (although it can be used on cable TV or satellite radio). TV broadcasters were fined for allowing the word to be used in a live, on-air broadcast. The broadcasters fought back, arguing that the word is not obscene if it is used to express frustration or that things are a mess (one of its connotative meanings) rather than to describe the act of sex.
Most of us can agree on the denotative meaning of the word school. But the connotative meaning will be different for each person.
Words Are Arbitrary

American linguist (a linguist is a person who studies the origin and nature of language) Charles Hockett suggested that words are, for the most part, arbitrary. There’s not an obvious reason many words represent what they refer to. The word *dog*, for example, does not look like a dog or sound like a dog. Yet there is a clear connection in your mind between your pet pooch and the symbol *dog*. The words we use have agreed-on general meanings, but there is not typically a logical connection between a word and what it represents. Yes, some words, such as *buzz*, *hum*, *snort*, and *giggle*, do recreate the sounds they represent. Words that, when pronounced, sound like the event or thing they are signifying are called onomatopoetic words. You probably learned about onomatopoeia in an English class. And many words can trace their origin to other languages. But most of the time words have an arbitrary meaning. A linguistic group, such as all the people who speak the English language, has agreed that the word *tree*, for example, will represent the thing with bark, branches, and leaves growing in your yard or a nearby park. The arbitrary nature of most words means that there is no inherent meaning in a word. Therefore, unless we develop a common meaning for a word, misunderstanding and miscommunication may occur.

Words Are Context-Bound

Your English or communication teacher has undoubtedly cautioned you that taking something out of context partially changes its meaning. Symbols derive their meaning from the situation in which they are used. The phrase *old man* could refer to a male over the age of seventy, your father, your teacher, your principal, or your boss. You need to know the context of the phrase in order to decipher its specific meaning. The transactional nature of communication emphasizes how meaning is created in a context.

Words Are Culture-Bound

As you learned in Chapter 4, culture consists of the rules, norms, values, and mores of a group of people, which have been learned and shaped by successive generations. The meaning of a symbol such as a word can change from culture to culture. To a European, for example, a “Yankee” is someone from the United States; to a player on the Boston Red Sox, a “Yankee” is an opponent; and to someone from the American South, a “Yankee” is someone from the American North. A few years ago, General Motors sold a car called a Nova. In English, *nova* means bright star—an appropriate name for a car. In Spanish, however, the spoken word *nova* sounds like the words “no va,” which translate “It does not go.” As you can imagine, this name was not a great sales tool for the Spanish-speaking market.
One way to measure how words reflect culture is to consider the new words that become entries in dictionaries. Here are some new words that are finding their way into people’s conversations:9

**Crackberry:** Nickname for a BlackBerry, a personal digital assistant that can become quite addictive

**Webisode:** A video clip designed for the Internet

**Vlog:** A web log (blog) of videos

**Bromance:** A close but nonsexual relationship between two males

**Frenemy:** Someone who has a close personal relationship with you but who also hurts you

**Crunk:** A type of hip-hop music

**Ridonkulous:** Over-the-top ridiculous

The study of words and meaning is called *semantics.* One important semantic theory known as **symbolic interaction theory** suggests that a society is bound together by the common use of symbols. As we discussed in Chapter 2, the theory was originally developed by sociologists as a way of making sense out of how societies and groups are linked together.10 The theory of symbolic interaction also illuminates how we use our common understanding of symbols to form interpersonal relationships. Common symbols foster links in understanding and therefore lead to satisfying relationships. Of course, even within a given culture people misunderstand each other’s messages. But the more similar the cultures of the communication partners, the greater the chance for a meeting of meanings.

Some researchers, such as linguist Deborah Tannen, suggest that gender plays a major role in how we interpret certain verbal messages.11 Women tend to interpret messages based on how personally supportive they perceive the message to be. Men, according to Tannen, are more likely to interpret messages based on issues related to dominance and power. Research confirms that psychological gender is a better predictor than biological sex of the general framework we use to interpret messages.12 Clearly, our life experiences help us interpret the words we hear.

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**The Power of Words**

Sticks and stones may break my bones,
But words can never hurt me.

This old schoolyard chant may provide a ready retort for the desperate victim of name-calling, but it is hardly convincing. With more insight, the poet Robert Browning wrote, “Words break no bones; hearts though sometimes.” And in his book *Science and Sanity,* mathematician and engineer Alfred Korzybski argued that the words we use (and misuse) have tremendous effects on our thoughts and actions.13 Browning and Korzybski were right. As we said at the beginning of this chapter, words have power.

**Words Create Perceptions**

“To name is to call into existence—to call out of nothingness,” wrote French philosopher Georges Gusdorff.14 Words give you a tool to create how you perceive the world.

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**symbolic interaction theory**
Theory that members of a society are bound together through common use of symbols.
by naming and labeling what you experience. You undoubtedly learned in your elementary science class that Sir Isaac Newton discovered gravity. It would be more accurate to say that he labeled rather than discovered it. His use of the word gravity gave us a cognitive category; we now converse about the pull of the earth’s forces that keeps us from flying into space. Words give us the symbolic vehicles to communicate our creations and discoveries to others.

When you label something as “good” or “bad,” you are using language to create your own vision of how you experience the world. If you tell a friend that the movie you saw last night was vulgar and obscene, you are not only providing your friend with a critique of the movie; you are also communicating your sense of what is appropriate and inappropriate.

You create your self-worth largely with self-talk and with the labels you apply to yourself. Psychologist Albert Ellis believes that you also create your moods and emotional state with the words you use to label your feelings. Although emotions may sometimes seem to wash over you like ocean waves, there is evidence that you have the ability to control your emotions based on your ability to control what you think about, as well as the choice of words you use to describe your feelings. In Chapter 2, we talked about the appraisal theory of emotions, which suggests that we exert considerable control over our emotions based on how we frame what is happening to us. If you get fired from a job, you might say that you feel angry and helpless, or you might declare that you feel liberated and excited. The first response might lead to depression, and the second to happiness. One fascinating study conducted over a thirty-five-year period found that people who described the world in pessimistic terms when they were younger were in poorer health during middle age than those who had been optimistic. Your words and corresponding outlook have the power to affect your health. The concept of reframing, discussed in Chapter 2 as a way to improve self-concept, is based on the power of words to “call into existence” whatever we describe with them.

Words Influence Thoughts

If someone says, “Don’t think about a pink elephant,” it’s hard not to think about a pink elephant, because just thinking the words pink elephant more than likely triggers an image of a pink pachyderm. Words and thoughts are inextricably linked. Words influence our thoughts.

Is it possible to think without using linguistic symbols (words or numbers)? Yes, we can certainly experience emotions without describing them in words and enjoy music without lyrics. Artists paint, dancers dance, and architects dream new structures, all without words. Yet words are what transmit our dreams and our emotions to others when we verbalize what we feel. Words have tremendous power to influence what we think about, just as our thinking influences the words we use.

There is scientific evidence that words influence our thoughts. As Figure 6.3 illustrates, the process of hearing, seeing, or saying words influences different parts of the brain. How we use words literally changes our brain activity.

Because words have the power to influence our thoughts, the meaning of a word resides within us, rather than in the word itself. Words symbolize meaning, but the precise meaning of a word originates in the mind of the sender and the receiver. The meaning of a word is not static; it evolves as a conversation evolves. Your meanings for words and phrases change as you gain additional experiences and have new thoughts about the words you use.
Words Influence Actions

A paraphrase of a well-known verse from the book of Proverbs in the Bible tells us, “As a person thinks, so is he or she.” Words not only have the power to create and influence your thoughts, they also influence your actions—because your thoughts, which are influenced by words, affect how you behave. Advertisers have long known that slogans and catch phrases sell products. Political candidates also know that the words they use influence whether they will get your vote.

In the late 1960s, a California sociology professor conducted an experiment to demonstrate that words have the power to affect behavior. He divided his class into two groups. To one group, he distributed a bumper sticker that boldly displayed the words “I support the Black Panthers.” At that time, many members of the students’ local community thought the Panthers were using unnecessary force to promote their agenda. Students in this first group had to drive around for a week with the stickers on their cars. The other group drove around as usual, without stickers.

It took only a few hours to demonstrate the professor’s point: Words do affect attitudes and behavior. Students who had the stickers were harassed by other motorists and issued traffic tickets at an alarming rate. The other group experienced no increase in hassles. By the end of the study, seventeen days later, the “Panther” group had received thirty-three traffic citations. Although this classic example happened decades ago, words are just as powerful today in influencing behaviors. Bumper stickers about gay marriage and abortion refer to contemporary issues that pack an emotional wallop and generate intense reactions. What other words that appear on bumper stickers today might elicit strong reactions?

Research suggests that the very way we use language can communicate the amount of power we have in a conversation with others. We use language in ways that are both powerful and powerless. When we use powerless speech, we are less persuasive and have less influence on others. Powerless speech is characterized by more frequent use of pauses, which may be filled with “umm,” “ahhh,” and “ehh.” We also express our lack of power by using more hesitation and unnecessary verbal fillers like “you know,” and “I mean.” We communicate our low power when we hedge our
conclusions by saying “I guess” and “sort of.” Another way of communicating a lack of power is by tacking on a question at the end of a statement, such as “I’m right, aren’t I?” or “This is what I think, OK?” So, the very way in which you speak can influence the thoughts and actions of others.21

Words Affect and Reflect Culture

In the early part of the twentieth century, anthropologists Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Whorf worked simultaneously to refine a theory called linguistic determinism.22 The essence of linguistic determinism is that language shapes the way we think. Our words also reflect our thoughts and our culture. A related principle, called linguistic relativity, states that each language has unique elements embedded within it. Together these two principles form the underlying elements in the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, which suggests that language shapes our culture and culture shapes our language. To support the theory, Benjamin Whorf studied the languages of several cultures, particularly that of Hopi Native Americans. He discovered that in Hopi, one word (the word masa’ytaka) is used for every creature that flies, except for birds. While this seems odd to an English speaker, because the English language has many different words for different flying creatures (and things such as airplanes, balloons, and rockets), for the Hopi, flying creatures (or objects) constitute a single category. Whorf saw this as support of his hypothesis that the words we use reflect our culture and our culture influences our words. Similarly, today’s highly developed technological culture has given rise to many new words that reflect the importance we place on technology; terms such as PC, hard drive, and gigabytes weren’t part of your grandparents’ language. And the fact that a certain type of behavior is now labeled attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is an example of how words can create a reality in a culture. Grandpa might argue that there weren’t any ADHD kids in his day—some kids were just “rowdy.”23

Words not only reflect your culture; there is evidence that they mold it. When Wendell Johnson, a speech therapist, noticed that very few Native Americans in a certain tribe stuttered, he also found that their language had no word for stuttering.24 He concluded that few people had this affliction because it never entered their minds as a possibility. Perhaps you’ve heard that Eskimos have forty-nine different words for snow. Even though they really don’t have quite that many, there is evidence that they have more words for snow than does someone native to Miami, Florida.25

These examples also show that the words people use affect their worldview—how they interpret what they experience. The words you use to describe your view of the world, including those you use in your everyday interpersonal conversations with your friends, reflect and further shape your perspective.26 And you, in turn, help to shape your culture’s collective worldview through your use of language.

Words Make and Break Relationships

What you say and how you say it have a strong impact on how you relate to others. Relationships are the connections we make with others. As we noted in Chapter 1, to relate to another person is like dancing with the person. When you dance with a partner, your moves and countermoves respond to the rhythm of the music and the
moves your partner makes. In our interpersonal relationships with others, we “dance” as we relate to our communication partners with both language and nonverbal cues (something we’ll discuss in more detail in the next chapter). A good conversation has a rhythm, created by both communicators as they listen and respond to each other. Even our “small talk,” which is our everyday, sometimes brief, responses and exchanges with others (“Nice weather we’re having” or, simply, “Oh, that’s nice”), is important in establishing how we feel about others. The words we use, especially in our daily conversations, are directly related to the quality of the relationships we have with others.

Interpersonal communication researcher Steve Duck suggests that we literally talk a relationship into being. It is through our talk that we establish our relationships with other people. And what do we talk about? One research team simply looked at what satisfied couples talked about with each other during the course of a week. The team found that the most frequent topic was the couples themselves—what they did during the day and how they were feeling—followed by general observations, and then responses to each other such as, “Yes, I see,” and “Uh huh”—what researchers call backchannel talk. The researchers also found we’re more likely to have conflict with our partners on the weekend, as well as to use humor, to talk about household tasks, and to make general plans about the future. Couples were least satisfied with their partners on Saturdays and Wednesdays; Monday was the day they were most satisfied. What this means is that what we talk about and the way we talk to others form the basis of how we relate to others.

The use of profanity, words that people consider obscene, rude, or insensitive, has an impact on our relationships with others. If you grew up in a home where profanity was never uttered, you may simply have not developed a habit of using such words. Or, you may have made a conscious decision not to use profanity because of your religious or moral convictions. Yet profanity is ever-present in everyday conversations and the media. If you have heard the late comedian George Carlin’s monologue “Seven Dirty Words You Can’t Say on Television,” then you have an idea of the words that form the bedrock of profane speech.

Whether or not something is profanity is determined by context and culture. If you have British friends, then you know the word bloody is an obscene word synonymous in profane power with the “F word.” Yet you may see nothing wrong with using the word bloody in your conversations. Dog breeders know that a female dog is a bitch, yet using that term to describe a female classmate would be considered using profanity.

Remember that the other person, not you, determines the effect of the use of profanity on the relationship. Some people might be highly offended if you were to use one or more of George Carlin’s seven “dirty” words in a conversation. Yet using profanity may signal your comfort with being yourself when you’re with another person.
Your use of profanity provides important information about your perception of the relationship you have with the other person.

Another clue to the nature of the relationship you have with someone is your use of euphemism. A euphemism is an expression that describes something vulgar or profane (or something people prefer not to talk about directly) but uses less explicit language. Just above, when we referred to “the F word” rather than spelling it out, we were using a euphemism. Not using euphemisms and more directly and explicitly describing your thoughts and feelings provides relational cues that you trust the other person to accept your blunt language. Politicians use euphemisms to soften the impact of an event. Rather than saying innocent people were killed, the spokesperson may say “there was collateral damage.” Noting your use of euphemisms and the use and frequency of euphemisms in the speech of others can give you insights about the nature of your relationship with them.

Word Barriers

According to theologian and educator Ruel Howe, a communication barrier is “something that keeps meaning from meeting.” Words have the power to create monumental misunderstandings as well as deep connections. Although it is true that meanings are in people, not in words, sometimes assumptions or inaccurate use of words hinders understanding. Let’s identify some of the specific barriers to understanding that people sometimes create through language.

Bypassing: One Word, Multiple Meanings

A student pilot was on his first solo flight. When he called the tower for flight instructions, the control tower asked, “Would you please give us your altitude and position?” The pilot replied, “I’m five feet ten inches, and I’m sitting up front.”

Bypassing occurs when the same words mean different things to different people. Meaning is fragile. And the English language is imprecise in many areas. One researcher estimated that the 500 words used most often in daily conversations have more than 14,000 different dictionary definitions. And this number does not take into account personal connotations. So it is no wonder that bypassing is a common communication problem. Consider the unsubstantiated story about a young FBI employee who was put in charge of the supply department. In an effort to save money, he reduced the size of memo paper. One of the smaller sheets ended up on J. Edgar Hoover’s desk. The director didn’t like the small size and wrote on the narrow margin of the paper, “Watch the borders.” For the next six weeks, it was extremely difficult to enter the United States from Canada or Mexico.
Pavlov’s dog salivated when he heard the bell that he had learned to associate with food. Sometimes we respond to symbols the way Pavlov’s dog did to the bell, forgetting that symbols (words) can have more than one meaning.

How do you avoid bypassing and missing someone’s meaning? Using the listening and responding skills we talked about in the previous chapter is key to enhancing communication accuracy. Ask questions if you’re uncertain of the meaning. Listen and paraphrase your understanding of the message.

Lack of Precision: Uncertain Meaning

Alice Roosevelt Longworth writes about a merchant seaman who was being investigated under the McCarran Act. “Do you,” asked the interrogator, “have any pornographic literature?”

“Pornographic literature!” the sailor burst out indignantly. “I don’t even have a pornograph!”

At a ceremony in the Princeton University chapel, an old lady buttonholed an usher and commanded, “Be sure you get me a seat up front, young man. I understand they’ve always had trouble with the agnostics in the chapel!”

Each of these examples illustrates a malapropism, a confusion of one word or phrase for another that sounds similar to it. You have probably heard people confuse such word pairs as construction and instruction, and subscription and prescription. Although this confusion may at times be humorous, it may also result in failure to communicate clearly. So, too, can using words out of context, using inappropriate grammar, or putting words in the wrong order. Confusion is the inevitable result, as illustrated by these notes written to landlords:

The toilet is blocked and we cannot bathe the children until it is cleared.

Will you please send someone to mend our cracked sidewalk? Yesterday my wife tripped on it and is now pregnant.

These are funny examples, but in fact, incorrect or unclear language can launch a war or sink a ship. We give symbols meaning; we do not receive inherent meaning from symbols. If you are other-oriented, you will assess how someone else will respond to your message and try to select those symbols that he or she is most likely to interpret as you intend.

For most communication, the object is to be as correct, specific, and concrete as possible. Vague language creates confusion and frustration. Consider this example:

Derrick: Where’s the aluminum foil?
Pam: In the drawer.
Derrick: What drawer?
Pam: In the kitchen.
Derrick: But where in the kitchen?
Pam: By the fridge.
Derrick: But which one? There are five drawers.
Pam: Oh, the second one from the top.
Derrick: Why didn’t you say so in the first place?

malapropism Confusion of one word or phrase for another that sounds similar to it.
But is it possible to be too precise? It is if you use a restricted code that has a meaning your listener does not know. A **restricted code** is a set of words that have a particular meaning to a subgroup or culture. Sometimes, we develop abbreviations or specialized terms that make sense and save time when we speak to others in our group. Musicians, for example, use special terms that relate to reading and performing music. Most computer users know that “a screamer” is someone who sends e-mail messages typed in **ALL CAPITAL LETTERS**. Ham radio operators use codes to communicate over the airwaves. Yet, in each instance, this shorthand language would make little sense to an outsider. In fact, groups that rely on restricted codes may have greater cohesiveness because of this shared “secret” language, or **jargon**. Whatever your line of work, guard against lapsing into phrases that can only be interpreted by a few.

Dot Mobile is a British cell phone service for students that uses a restricted code to summarize classic literary phrases in a text-message format. Can you break the code of the following phrases from literature?³²

1. **2B?NTB? = ????**
2. Ahors, m’kindom 4 Ahors
3. 2morrow &”&”
4. WenevalUFeelLykDissinNel,jstMembDatADaOoubDaWrldHvntHdDaVantg-stU vAd
5. IfUfWnt2HrBoutit,Da1stFingUlProbWnt2NolsWhereIWsBorn&WotMy Lousy ChildhdWsLyk&HwMyRetsWerOcupyd&Alb4ThetHdMe&ThtDave CopafielKi ndaCr”p,BtIDnFeeLylkGolnintaltifUWannaNoDaTruf

Here are the answers:

1. “To be or not to be? That is the question.” (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*)
3. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.” (William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*)
4. “Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone . . . just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had.” (F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*)
5. “If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.” (J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*)

When people have known one another for a long time, they may also use restricted codes for their exchanges. Often married couples communicate using shorthand speech that no outsider could ever interpret. To enhance the clarity of your messages with others, especially people who don’t know you well, be as clear as you can to reduce uncertainty. For example, rather than saying, “I may go to town today,” one research team suggests you should be more specific by saying, “There’s a 50 percent chance I may go to town today.”³³ Be precise to be clear.

**Allness: Overgeneralized Meaning**

The tendency to use language to make unqualified, often untrue generalizations is called **allness**. Allness statements deny individual differences or variations. Statements such as “All women are poor drivers” and “People from the South love iced tea” are...
generalizations that imply that the person making the pronouncement has examined all the information and has reached a definitive conclusion. Although the world would be much simpler if we could make such statements, reality rarely, if ever, provides evidence to support sweeping generalizations.

One way to avoid untrue generalizations is to remind yourself that your use and interpretation of a word are unique. Saying the words “to me” either to yourself or out loud before you offer an opinion or make a pronouncement can help communicate to others (and remind yourself) that your view is uniquely yours. Rather than announcing, “Curfews for teenagers are ridiculous,” you could say, “To me, curfews for teenagers are ridiculous.”

Indexing your comments and remarks is another way to avoid generalizing. To index is to acknowledge that each individual, each situation, or each example is unique. Rather than announcing that all doctors are abrupt, you could say, “My child’s pediatrician spends a lot of time with me, but my internist never answers my questions.” This helps you remember that doctor number one is not the same as doctor number two.

### Static Evaluation: Rigid Meaning

You change. Your world changes. An ancient Greek philosopher said it best: “You can never step in the same river twice.” A static evaluation is a statement that fails to recognize change; labels in particular have a tendency to freeze-frame our awareness. Ruby, known as the class nerd in high school, is today a successful and polished businessperson; the old label does not fit.

In addition, some people suffer from “hardening of the categories.” Their world view is so rigid that they can never change or expand their perspective. But the world is a technicolor moving target. Just about the time you think you have things neatly figured out and categorized, something moves. Your labels may not reflect the buzzing, booming, zipping process of change. It is important to acknowledge that perception is a process, and to avoid trying to nail things down permanently into all-inclusive categories.

General semanticists use the metaphorical expression “the map is not the territory” to illustrate the concept of static evaluation. Like a word, a map symbolizes or represents reality. Yet the road system is constantly changing. New roads are built, old ones are closed. If you were to use a 1949 map to guide you on your cross-country trip from Washington, D.C., to Kansas City, Missouri, you would probably lose your way because the interstate highway system would not even be on it. Similarly, if you use old labels and do not adjust your thinking to accommodate change, you will get lost semantically.

To avoid static evaluation, try dating your observations and indicate to others the time period from which you are drawing your conclusion. For example, if your second cousin comes to town for a visit, say, “When I last saw you, you loved to listen to The Dixie Chicks.” This allows for the possibility that your cousin’s tastes may have changed during the last few years. But most importantly, try to observe and acknowledge changes in others. If you are practicing what you know about becoming other-oriented, you are unlikely to erect this barrier.

### Polarization: Extreme Meaning

Describing and evaluating what you observe in terms of extremes, such as good or bad, old or new, beautiful or ugly, brilliant or stupid, is known as polarization. General semanticists remind us that the world is not black and white but comes in a variety of colors, hues, and shades. If you describe things in extremes, leaving out
the middle ground, then your language does not accurately reflect reality. And because of the power of words to create, you may believe your own pronouncements.

“You either love me or don’t love me,” says Jerome.

“You’re either for me or against me,” replies Lisa.

Both people are overstating the case, using language to polarize their perceptions of experience.

Family counselors who listen to family feuds find that the tendency to see things from an either/or point of view is a classic symptom of a troubled relationship. Placing the entire blame on your partner for a problem in your relationship is an example of polarizing. Few relational difficulties are exclusively one-sided.

Biased Language: Insensitivity Toward Others

Using words that reflect your biases toward other cultures or ethnic groups, the other gender, people with a different sexual orientation, or people who are different from you in some other way can create a barrier for your listeners. Because words, including the words used to describe people, have power to create and affect thoughts and behavior, they can affect the quality of relationships with others. Although TV and radio shows and magazine articles may debate the merits of political correctness, there is no doubt that sexist or racially stereotypical language can offend others.

Hate speech is any word or phrase that is intended to offend and show disrespect for another person because of his or her race, ethnicity, cultural background, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, social class, occupation, personal appearance, mental capacity, or any other personal aspect that could be perceived as demeaning. Some people use words to intentionally express their prejudice, bias, ignorance, or just plain meanness toward other people, hoping to hurt someone. Like the sticks and stones that are hurled at others to intentionally inflict harm, hate speech is uttered with the explicit purpose of hurting someone. In the United States, the Second Amendment to the Constitution provides for freedom of speech. Yet do people have the legal right to direct hurtful, venomous comments toward others, knowing that such comments will create mental anguish? Your college or university may have a speech code that prohibits hate speech, yet critics of such codes argue that it’s impossible to prove the motivation or intent of someone who uses such language.

An other-oriented communicator avoids language that would intentionally hurt someone. We’ll address three issues in language use that can reflect poorly on the speaker and affect interpersonal relationships with others: sexist language, ethnic or racially biased language, and demeaning language.

Avoid Sexist Language. Sexist language is the use of words that reflect stereotypical attitudes or that describe roles in exclusively male or female terms.

Words such as congressman, mailman, and mankind ignore the fact that women are part of the workforce and the human race. Contrast these with member of Congress, letter carrier, and humankind, which are gender-neutral and allow for the inclusion of both men and women. Or, rather than eliminating the word man from your vocabulary, try to use appropriate labels when you know the gender of the subject. A male police officer is a policeman; a female police officer is a policewoman. Rather than salesperson, you could say salesman or saleswoman, depending on the gender of the seller.
H. S. O’Donnell found that even dictionaries fall into the trap of describing men and women with discriminatory language.34 Included in the Oxford English Dictionary definition of woman are (1) an adult female being, (2) a female servant, (3) a lady-love or mistress, and (4) a wife. Men are described in more positive and distinguished terms: (1) a human being, (2) the human creation regarded abstractly, (3) an adult male endowed with many qualities, and (4) a person of importance or position.

Many of our social conventions also diminish or ignore the importance of women:

Sexist

I’d like you to meet Dr. and Mrs. John Chao.

Unbiased

I’d like you to meet Dr. Sue Ho and Dr. John Chao. They are husband and wife.
or I’d like you to meet John Chao and Sue Ho. They’re both doctors at Mercy Hospital.

Let me introduce Mr. Tom Bertolone and his wife, Beverly.

Let me introduce Beverly and Tom Bertolone.

Language has, however, made more substantial progress in reflecting changes and changed attitudes toward women in the professional arena. Compare the terms used to describe workers now with those used in the 1950s:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terms Used Today</th>
<th>Terms Used in 1950s</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flight attendant</td>
<td>Stewardess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firefighter</td>
<td>Fireman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police officer</td>
<td>Policeman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physician</td>
<td>Female doctor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women at the office</td>
<td>Girls at work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms.</td>
<td>Miss/Mrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People/humans</td>
<td>Mankind</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consciously remembering to use nonsexist language will result in several benefits.35 First, nonsexist language reflects nonsexist attitudes. Your attitudes are reflected in your speech, and your speech affects your attitudes. Monitoring your speech for sexist remarks can help you monitor your attitudes about sexist assumptions you may hold. Second, using nonsexist language will help you become more other-oriented. Monitoring your language for sexist remarks will reflect your sensitivity to others. Third, nonsexist language will make your speech more contemporary and unambiguous. By substituting the word humankind for mankind, for example, you can communicate that you are including all people, not just men, in your observation or statement. And finally, your
nonsexist language will empower others. By eliminating sexist bias from your speech, you will help confirm the value of all the individuals with whom you interact.

In addition to the debate over language that refers to gender, there is considerable discussion about the way people talk about sexual orientation. The principle of being other-oriented suggests that you can be sensitive in the way you speak of someone's sexual orientation. Labeling someone a *fag, queer,* or *dyke* not only may be offensive and hurtful to the person being labeled but also reflects on the sensitivity of the person doing the labeling. We're not suggesting that certain words be expunged from dictionaries or never uttered; we are suggesting that when describing others, people should be sensitive to how the others wish to be addressed and discussed.

**Avoid Ethnically or Racially Biased Language.** In addition to monitoring your language for sexual stereotypes, avoid racial and ethnic stereotypes. Using phrases such as “She’s an Indian giver,” or “I jewed him down on the price,” or “He doesn’t have a Chinaman’s chance” demonstrates an insensitivity to members of other cultural groups. Monitor your speech so that you are not, even unconsciously, using phrases that depict a racial group or ethnic group in a negative, stereotypical fashion.

Is Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas Black or African American? Is labor leader Dolores Huerta Hispanic or Latina? Given the power of words, the terms we use to label ethnic groups reflect perceptions of culture and identity. Using the wrong word can result in your being labeled “politically incorrect,” or worse, a “bigot.” In 1995, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics surveyed 60,000 households, asking what ethnic label they liked best. More than 44 percent of households then called “Black” by the government preferred the term “Black,” and 28 percent preferred “African American.” Twelve percent preferred “Afro-American” and a little more than 9 percent had no preference. In another ethnic category, “Hispanic” was the choice of 58 percent of those currently labeled “Hispanics,” rather than terms such as “Latino/Latina” or the generic “of Spanish origin.” More than 10 percent had no preference. The survey also reported that the label “American Indian” was the term of choice for slightly fewer than half of the respondents, whereas 37 percent preferred “Native American.” Most of those currently designated “White” preferred that term, although 16 percent liked the term “Caucasian” and a very small percentage liked the term “European American.”36 Some of these preferences may surprise you, in that they may have changed since this survey was conducted. A sensitive, other-oriented communicator keeps abreast of such changes and adopts the designations currently preferred by members of the ethnic groups themselves.

**Avoid Demeaning Language.** Language barriers are created not only when a speaker uses sexist or racially biased language, but also when a speaker disparages a person’s age, mental or physical ability, or social standing. Calling someone a “geezer,” “retard,” or “trailer trash” is disparaging.37

Discrimination based on age is a growing problem in the workplace. In some occupations, as a worker moves into his or her fifties, it may be difficult to change jobs or find work. Despite laws designed to guard against age discrimination, such discrimination clearly exists. As we have noted, the language that people use has power to affect attitudes and behavior. That’s why using negative terms to describe the elderly can be a subtle—or sometimes not-so-subtle—way of expressing disrespect toward the older generation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barrier</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>What to Do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Bypassing:** Bypassing: Confusion caused by the fact that the same word may evoke different meanings for different people | *W. C.* might mean “wayside chapel” to a Swiss person and “water closet” to a British person. (Americans know this as “the bathroom.”) | - When speaking, provide specific examples.  
- When listening, ask questions to clarify the meaning.  
- When speaking, use precise language whenever possible; provide short, specific examples or indicate the probability of something happening: “There’s a 40 percent chance I won’t go shopping today.”  
- When listening, paraphrase the message to ensure you understand it accurately.  
- When speaking, say “To me” before you offer a generalization to indicate that the idea or perception is your own. Index a generalized statement by using phrases that separate one situation, person, or example from another.  
- When listening, ask the speaker whether he or she means to say that all or every situation or person fits the generalization presented.  
- When speaking, place your observation in a time frame: “I thought he was a difficult child when he was in elementary school.”  
- When listening, ask the speaker whether the observation remains true today or if the same generalization applies now.  
- When speaking, avoid either/or terms and blaming something on a specific cause.  
- When listening, ask the speaker whether a statement really reflects an all-or-nothing, either/or proposition.  
- When speaking, be mindful of how insensitive language can hurt someone. Avoid using labels or derogatory terms.  
- When listening, try to keep your emotions in check when others use inappropriate words or derogatory phrases. You can’t control what others do or say, only what you do and say and how you react. Consider appropriately but assertively communicating that a word, label, or phrase offends you. |
| **Lack of clarity:** Lack of clarity: Inappropriate or imprecise use of words | Sign in Acapulco hotel: “The manager has personally passed all the water served here.” |  
| **Allness:** Allness: Tendency to lump things or people into all-encompassing categories | “All Texans drive pick-up trucks and hang rifles in their back windows.” | - When speaking, say “To me” before you offer a generalization to indicate that the idea or perception is your own. Index a generalized statement by using phrases that separate one situation, person, or example from another.  
- When listening, ask the speaker whether he or she means to say that all or every situation or person fits the generalization presented.  
- When speaking, place your observation in a time frame: “I thought he was a difficult child when he was in elementary school.”  
- When listening, ask the speaker whether the observation remains true today or if the same generalization applies now.  
- When speaking, avoid either/or terms and blaming something on a specific cause.  
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- When speaking, be mindful of how insensitive language can hurt someone. Avoid using labels or derogatory terms.  
- When listening, try to keep your emotions in check when others use inappropriate words or derogatory phrases. You can’t control what others do or say, only what you do and say and how you react. Consider appropriately but assertively communicating that a word, label, or phrase offends you. |
| **Static evaluation:** Static evaluation: Labeling people, objects, or events without considering change | You still call your twenty-eight-year-old nephew a “juvenile delinquent” because he spray-painted your fence when he was eleven. |  
| **Polarization:** Polarization: Use of either/or terms (good or bad, right or wrong) | “You’re either for me or against me.” |  
| **Biased language:** Biased language: Use of language that reflects gender, racial, ethnic, age, ability, or class bias | “His mom is a mailman.” |  

In Chapter 4 we noted that gender makes a difference in how we interact with others. John Gray’s popular self-help book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* has been heralded by some as “the book that saved our relationship,” yet other communication scholars have concluded that Gray has overstated his case in claiming that there are vast differences in the ways men and women speak to each other.49 The thing to keep in mind is that although there are differences, the differences are not so vast that they cannot be bridged. Men and women do indeed speak the same language, but they may have different assumptions about the function of talk in the development of relationships.

Julia Wood is a communication researcher who has criticized John Gray for oversimplifying the differences in how men and women talk to one another. She acknowledges that women tend to use talk to establish and maintain relationships more so than men. In reviewing the literature on women’s speech, Wood found the following characteristics of the way women interact with others:40

- **Women tend to seek to establish equality between themselves and others** by using such phrases as “I know just how you feel” or “Yes, the same thing has happened to me.”
- **Women are more likely to show emotional support for others using statements such as “How wonderful” or “Oh, that sounds very frustrating. You must feel tired.”**
- **Women often spend time conducting conversational “maintenance work,” by, for example, trying to keep the conversation from lagging by asking open-ended questions that prompt a more detailed response.**
- **Women not only tend to work at keeping conversations going, they are more likely to be inclusive—to make sure everyone present is invited to talk.**

- **Women also have been found to be more tentative in the way they use language. They may use more qualifiers and hedges when they talk, saying things like “I thought it was kind of boring” (rather than just saying “It was boring”). Tentativeness is also expressed by ending a phrase with a question—called a tag question—such as “That was a good class, wasn’t it?” or “She was a good speaker, wasn’t she?”**

In contrast, men tend to use their verbal messages for “proving oneself and negotiating prestige.”41 Rather than talking about a relationship, men are more likely to engage in mutual activities to communicate friendship, such as going to a movie together or participating in sports or other activities of mutual interest. Wood’s literature review suggests:42

- **Men are less likely to present information that indicates their vulnerabilities. Men talk to establish their power, status, and worth.**
- **Men also talk to accomplish tasks rather than to express feelings—they are more instrumental in the way they use language. Men talk to seek information, share information, and solve problems.**
- **Men tend to use speech to sustain and even dominate a conversation; there is evidence that they interrupt others more than women do.**
- **Men are, according to research, more assertive and less tentative when talking with others.**
- **Men speak in more general, abstract ways and often are less concrete and specific when describing situations and events.**
- **Men tend to provide fewer responsive cues such as “I’m listening,” “yes,” “uh-hum,” and “I’m with you.”**

Yet, despite differences, researchers have also found much similarity, which is why many communication researchers and educators suggest that it’s not helpful to compare and contrast the way men and women speak as if they were from separate planets. For example, one research study suggests that it’s not true that women talk more than men; both men and women use about the same number of words during a typical day of conversation.43 Communication researcher Anthony Mulac has concluded that although there are some differences between the speech of men and women, the differences are not significant enough to explain why conflicts may occur. Mulac found that when reading written transcripts of conversations, it was difficult for readers to identify whether the speakers were men or women.44 The differences that emerge from research on the way men and women talk may reveal less about the actual words used and more about the underlying function or assumptions behind the words. Women may pay more attention to the nature of the relationship and men may emphasize the tasks that are to be accomplished. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations may occur because of these underlying assumptions about the function of talk that we harbor as we speak and listen.

Deborah Tannen suggests that differences between men and women can be described as cultural differences.45 As a linguist, she has focused on how the ways men and women talk to one another shape the cultural differences between them. The strategies for bridging cultural differences that we discussed in Chapter 4 can be useful in enhancing the quality of communication between men and women: Being mindful of different communication assumptions, tolerating some uncertainty and ambiguity in communication, asking questions, seeking more information before reacting (or overreacting) to messages, being other-oriented, and adapting communication messages are strategies that can enhance communication quality between the sexes.
Similarly, the way someone describes people with disabilities can negatively affect how they may be perceived. A study by researcher John Seiter and his colleagues found that when people with a disability were called demeaning or disparaging names, they were perceived as less trustworthy, competent, persuasive, and sociable than when the same people were described in more positive or heroic terms. At the end of their study, the authors note, “Communicators who want to be effective should avoid using derogatory language.” Guard against calling attention to someone as a “cripple,” “dim-witted,” or “mental”; these terms are offensive. As communication researcher Dawn Braithwaite notes, one preferred term is “people with disabilities.”

Also monitor the way you talk about someone’s social class. Although some societies and cultures make considerable distinctions among classes, it is nonetheless offensive today to use words that are intended to demean someone’s social class. Terms such as “welfare recipient,” “manual laborer,” and “blue-collar worker” are often used derogatorily. Avoid labeling someone in a way that shows disrespect toward the person’s social standing, education, or socioeconomic status.

**Words of Support**

“I’m going to win this argument.”

“You’re wrong and I’m right. It’s as simple as that.”

“You’re going to do it my way or else!”

None of these statements is likely to result in a positive communication climate. All three are likely to lead to debate rather than true dialogue. The words you hear and use are central to your establishing a quality or positive relationship with others. Author and researcher Daniel Yankelovich suggests that the goal of conversations with others should be to establish a genuine dialogue rather than to verbally arm-wrestle a partner in order to win the argument. True dialogue requires establishing a climate of equality, listening with empathy, and trying to bring underlying assumptions into the open. Expressing equality, empathy, and openness is more likely to occur if you approach conversations as dialogue rather than debate. As shown in Table 6.1, in true dialogue people look for common ground rather than using a war of words to defend a position.

**TABLE 6.1 Debate and Dialogue Compared**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debate</th>
<th>Dialogue</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is one right answer, and you assume that you have it.</td>
<td>Many people have pieces of the answer; together, you can find the best solution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The goal is to win.</td>
<td>The goal is to seek common ground and agreement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The focus is on combat; you try to prove that you are right and the other person is wrong.</td>
<td>The focus is on collaboration and seeking common understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You search for weaknesses and errors in others’ positions.</td>
<td>You search for strengths and value the truth in what others say.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You defend your views.</td>
<td>You use the contributions of others to improve your thinking.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For more than three decades, Jack Gibb’s observational research has been used as a framework for describing verbal behaviors that contribute to feeling either supported or defensive. His research, one of the most cited studies in communication textbooks in the past half century, is so popular because he’s identified practical strategies for developing supportive relationships with others—dialogue rather than debate—through the way we talk to each other. Gibb spent several years listening to and observing groups of people in meetings and conversations, noting that some exchanges seem to create a supportive climate, whereas others create a defensive one. Words and actions, he concluded, are tools we use to let someone know whether we support them or not. And an emotional response in one person is likely to trigger an emotional response in another. Now let’s consider how you can use words to create a supportive climate rather than an antagonistic or defensive one.

Describe Your Own Feelings, Rather Than Evaluate the Behavior of Others

Most people don’t like to be judged or evaluated. Criticizing and name calling obviously can create relational problems, but so can attempts to diagnose others’ problems or win their affection with insincere praise. In fact, any form of evaluation creates a climate of defensiveness. As British statesman Winston Churchill declared, “I am always ready to learn, although I do not always like being taught.” Correcting others, even when we are doing it “for their own good,” can raise their hackles.

One way to avoid evaluating others is to eliminate the accusatory “you” from your language. Statements such as “You always come in late for supper” or “You never pick up the dirty clothes in your room” attack a person’s sense of self-worth and usually result in a defensive reaction.

Instead, use the word “I” to describe your own feelings and thoughts about a situation or event: “I find it hard to keep your supper warm when you’re late,” or “I don’t enjoy the extra work of picking up your dirty clothes.” When you describe your own feelings instead of berating the receiver of the message, you are, in essence, taking ownership of the problem. This approach leads to greater openness and trust because your listener is less likely to feel rejected or as if you were trying to control him or her. Also, when you express your emotions, make sure you choose the right words to communicate your feelings.

Although we’ve discussed the importance of using “I” messages, interpersonal communication researchers Amy Bippus and Stacy Young found that simply prefacing an emotionally charged piece of feedback with the word “I” instead of “you” doesn’t always melt away relational tension. These researchers had subjects in their research read hypothetical examples in which people used either “I” messages or “you” messages. The researchers found no significant difference in how people thought others would respond to the messages. In other words, an “I” message was not found to be better than a “you” message in all instances. (Of course, the fact that the subjects were reading a message rather than actually involved in their own conversation with a partner may have affected the results.) The researchers concluded that regardless of whether a message is prefaced with “I” or “you,” people don’t like hearing negative expressions of emotion directed toward them.
Sometimes simply using an “I” message may be too subtle to take the sting out of the negative message you want to express. You may need to add a longer justification when you provide negative, emotional information to another. We call this using extended “I” language, which is a brief preface to a feedback statement, intended to communicate that you don’t want the person to think that you don’t value or care about him or her even though you have a negative message to share. Saying something like, “I don’t want you to misinterpret what I’m about to say, because I really do care about you,” or “I don’t think it’s entirely your fault, but I’m feeling frustrated when I experience . . .” may have a better chance of enhancing communication than simply beginning a sentence with the word “I” instead of “You.” Remember, there are no magic words for enhancing communication. However, strategies of being other-oriented do seem to enhance the quality of communication. Building Your Skills: Practice Using “I” Language and Extended “I” Language will help you practice expressing your feelings accurately and effectively.

### Solve Problems Rather Than Try to Control Others

Most of us don’t like others’ attempts to control us. Someone who presumes to tell us what’s good for us, instead of helping us puzzle through issues and problems, is likely to engender defensiveness. Open-ended questions, such as “What seems to be the problem?” or “How can we deal with the issue?” create a more supportive climate than critical comments, such as “Here’s where you are wrong” or commands such as “Don’t do that!”

### Be Genuine Rather Than Manipulative

To be genuine means that you honestly seek to be yourself rather than someone you are not. It also means taking an honest interest in others and considering the uniqueness of extended “I” language. Brief preface to a feedback statement, intended to communicate that you don’t want your listener to take your message in an overly critical way.
for expressing your feelings in positive, neutral, or negative terms. Categorizing these terms as positive, neutral, or negative doesn’t mean that you should only use positive or neutral terms and avoid negative terms. What’s important is that you select a word that accurately helps you communicate your emotions to others.

Empathize Rather Than Remain Detached from Others

Empathy is one of the hallmarks of supportive relationships. As you learned earlier, empathy is the ability to understand the feelings of others and to predict the emotional responses they will have to different situations. Being empathic is the essence of being other-oriented. The opposite of empathy is neutrality. To be neutral is to be each individual and situation, avoiding generalizations or strategies that focus only on your own needs and desires. A manipulative person has hidden agendas; a genuine person discusses issues and problems openly and honestly.

Carl Rogers, the founder of person-centered counseling, suggests that true understanding and dialogue occur when people adopt a genuine or honest positive regard for others. If your goal is to look out only for your own interests, your language will reflect your self-focus. At the heart of being genuine is being other-oriented—being sincerely interested in those with whom you communicate. Although it’s unrealistic to assume you will become best friends with everyone you meet, Rogers suggests that you can work to develop an unselfish interest, or what he called an unconditional positive regard for others. That’s hard to do. But the effort will be rewarded with a more positive communication climate.
To practice expressing your emotions, imagine yourself in each of the following situations, and use some of the words listed here to write a response for each situation. Describe your response using either a single word or a short phrase, such as “I feel angry,” or express your feelings in terms of what you’d like to do, such as “I’d be so embarrassed I would sink through the floor” or “I would feel like leaving and never coming back to this house.”

- You have several thousand dollars charged to your credit cards, and you get fired from your job.
- Your best friend, with whom you spend a lot of time, is moving to another country.
- You have just learned that your adored aunt has died and left you a $35,000 inheritance.
- Even though you do your best to keep your room clean, your roommate is complaining again that you are a slob.
- You have brought your two-year-old son to a worship service, but he talks and runs around during the service and will not sit still. Other worshippers are looking at you with disapproval.
- You arrive at your vacation hotel only to discover that they do not have a reservation for you, and you do not have your room confirmation number.

Another skill to help you accurately and appropriately express your emotions is to use a word picture. A word picture is a short statement or story that dramatizes an emotion you have experienced. Using a visual image can add extra power to an expression of your feelings when a simple descriptive word may not suffice. Word pictures can be used to clarify how you feel, to offer praise or correction, and to create greater intimacy. A key goal of a word picture is to communicate your feelings and emotions. An effective way to express your emotions through a word picture is to use a simile. A simile, as you may remember from your English class, is a comparison that uses the word like or as to clarify the image you want to communicate. “When you forgot my birthday, I felt like crumbs swept from the table,” exclaimed Marge to her forgetful husband. Or, after a hard day’s work, Jeff told his family, “I feel like a worn-out punching bag—I’ve been pounded time and time again, and now I feel torn and scuffed. I need a few minutes of peace and quiet before I join in the family conversation.” His visual image helped communicate how exhausted he really felt. The best word pictures use an image to which the listener can relate. To practice your skill, try to develop word pictures to express in a powerful and memorable way the feelings you might have in the following situations.

- You have just learned that a cherished family pet has died.
- You want to tell your friends how happy you are when you learn you received an A in a difficult course.
- You’ve asked your sister not to leave empty milk cartons in the refrigerator, but you discover another empty carton in the fridge.
- Your family is planning a vacation but didn’t ask you to be involved in the planning.

indifferent or apathetic toward another. Even when you express anger or irritation toward another, you are investing some energy in the relationship.

Research suggests that one of the most important things we can do to be empathic and supportive is simply what we have been suggesting throughout this book: Be other-oriented. Interpersonal communication researcher Amy Bippus determined that what most people want from others during times of stress are messages of empathy and sensitivity to their feelings, followed by problem solving, relating, refraining from general negativity, and offering a different perspective. The positive interpersonal outcomes that resulted from providing other-oriented messages were a more upbeat mood, feelings of empowerment, and more focused, calmer thoughts.54

**Be Flexible Rather Than Rigid Toward Others**

Most people don’t like someone who always seems certain that he or she is right. A “you’re wrong, I’m right” attitude creates a defensive climate. This does not mean that you should have no opinions and go through life blithely agreeing to everything anyone else says. And it doesn’t mean that there is never one answer that is right and others that are wrong. But instead of making rigid pronouncements, you can use phrases such as “I may be wrong, but it seems to me . . .” or “Here’s one way to look at this problem.” This manner of speaking gives your opinions a softer edge that allows room for others to express a point of view.

**BEING Other-oriented**

Developing empathy is a quintessential skill of being other-oriented. Yet, if you empathize and then feel smug or self-righteous about being empathic, your efforts to relate to another person may appear manipulative. How can you empathize with another person without focusing on yourself or appearing self-serving?

**word picture** Short statement or story that illustrates or describes an emotion; word pictures often use a simile (a comparison using the word like or as) to clarify the image.
Present Yourself as Equal Rather Than Superior

You can antagonize others by letting them know that you view yourself as better than they are. You may be gifted and intelligent, but it’s not necessary to announce it. And although some people have the responsibility and authority to manage others, “pulling rank” does not usually produce a cooperative climate. With phrases such as “Let’s work on this together” or “We each have a valid perspective,” you can avoid erecting walls of resentment and suspicion.

Also, avoid using abstract language or professional jargon to impress others. Keep your messages short and clear, and use informal language. When you communicate with someone from another culture, you may need to use an elaborated code to get your message across. This means that your messages will have to be more explicit, but they should not be condescending. For example, two of this book’s authors vividly remember trying to explain to a French exchange student what a fire ant was. First, we had to translate ant into French, and then we had to provide scientific, descriptive, and narrative evidence to help the student understand how these tiny biting insects terrorize people in the southern part of the United States.

Underlying the goal of creating a supportive rather than a defensive communication climate is the importance of providing social and emotional support when communicating with others. A basic principle of all healthy interpersonal relationships is the importance of communicating positive, supportive messages that impart liking or affection. Several researchers have documented that providing verbal messages of comfort and support, not surprisingly, enhances the quality of a relationship. As a relationship develops over time and the communication partners gain more credibility and influence, messages of comfort play an even more important role in maintaining the quality of the interpersonal relationship. We use not only words of comfort but, as you will learn in Chapter 7, nonverbal expressions of comfort as well.

Communication researchers have documented the power of humor in helping to turn a tense, potentially conflict-producing confrontation into a more supportive, positive conversation. Research by communication scholar Amy Bippus found that most people report using humor as a way of providing comfort to others. Humor also was perceived as a productive way to help a distressed person better cope with problems and stress.

elaborated code Conversation that uses many words and various ways of describing an idea or concept to communicate its meaning.

RECAP Using Supportive Communication and Avoiding Defensive Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supportive Communication Is . . .</th>
<th>Defensive Communication Is . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive: Use “I” language that describes your own feelings and ideas.</td>
<td>Evaluative: Avoid using “you” language that attacks the worth of another person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Oriented: Aim communication at solving problems and generating multiple options.</td>
<td>Controlling: Don’t attempt to get others to do only what you want them to do in order to control the outcome.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneously Genuine: Be honest and authentic rather than fake and phony.</td>
<td>Strategically Manipulative: Avoid planning your conversation in advance to get what you want. Don’t develop a script to manipulate the other person and accomplish your goal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathic: Be emotionally involved in the conversation; attempt to understand what your partner is thinking and feeling.</td>
<td>Neutrally Detached: Avoid being emotionally indifferent or creating the impression that you don’t care how another person is feeling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible: Be open to receive new information; demonstrate flexibility in the positions you take.</td>
<td>Certain and Rigid: Don’t take a dogmatic or rigid position on issues; be willing to listen to others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal: Adopt a communication style based on mutual respect, and assume each person has a right to express ideas and share information.</td>
<td>Superior: Avoid assuming an attitude or mindset that your ideas are better than those of others.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Words of Apology: When You’ve Not Been Other-Oriented

In this chapter, we’ve talked about the power of words and how communication sometimes can create problems and bruise a relationship. There are times, if we’re honest with ourselves, that we aren’t as other-oriented as we should be, and we may say and do things that we shouldn’t. We’re human; we make mistakes. Words, however, not only inflict pain but also have power to repair relational damage.

One of the ways to mend a relational rift when we have made a mistake is to offer an apology—to explicitly admit that we made an error and to ask the person we offended to forgive us. An apology helps us save face and can repair relational stress. One research team found that people who received an apology felt less angry, were less likely to be aggressive, and had a better overall impression of the offender. In addition, research has found that when we apologize to someone, the person we initially offended has greater empathy toward us and is less likely to avoid us or seek revenge. An apology can calm a turbulent relationship.

Communication researchers Janet Meyer and Kyra Rothenberg found that the seriousness of the offense and the quality of the relationship we have with another person determine whether we are likely to apologize and the kind of apology we should offer. Committing a serious blunder or error is more likely to result in an apology than committing a mild offense—especially if we believe we’ve hurt someone. We’re also more likely to apologize to someone if we feel guilty or embarrassed by something we’ve said or done. And the more intimate we are with someone, the more likely we are to apologize.

How to Assert Yourself If You Are Sexually Harassed

What Is Sexual Harassment?

Any unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or other inappropriate verbal or physical behavior of a sexual nature may be classified as sexual harassment. Examples include

- Repeated and unwanted requests for dates, sexual flirtation, or propositions of a sexual nature
- Unwanted sexual remarks or questions about a person’s clothing, body, or sexual activity
- Unnecessary touching, patting, hugging, or brushing against a person’s body
- Direct or implied threats that failure to submit to sexual advances will affect employment, work status, grades, letters of recommendation, or residential choice
- Physical assault
- A pattern of conduct that causes humiliation or discomfort, such as inappropriate terms of greeting; sexually explicit or sexist comments, questions, or jokes; or leering at a person’s body

What to Do If You Are Sexually Harassed

- Be direct and candid with the person.
- Use “I” messages (for example, “I don’t like those kinds of jokes made about me”).
- Avoid being overly dramatic; remain confident that the incident will be dealt with.
- If the incident happens at school or work, use the institution’s or organization’s grievance procedure.
- Report the harasser to your supervisor, department chair, or dean.
- If the harasser is your supervisor or an administrative official, report the incident to his or her supervisor.
- Report the harassment immediately after it occurs. The longer you wait, the less credible your story will be.
- When the harassment occurs, write down important facts.
- Report the incident as if you were a journalist: Give the who, what, when, where, and how; keep to the facts.
- Be prepared to give the interviewer names of witnesses.
- Put aside your anger and embarrassment and be thorough when telling the story.

Source: Information adapted from Texas State University policy and procedure statement on sexual harassment and Vicki West, “Sexual Harassment: Identify, Stop, and Prevent” seminar.
An apology can help you save face when you have made a relationship blunder and can relieve tension between you and another person.

What kind of apologies are most effective? One of the most effective ways to apologize is simply to honestly and sincerely admit that you were wrong. It’s not enough just to say, “I’m sorry I hurt you.” A true apology acknowledges that the offending individual was wrong. Thus, it’s better to say it explicitly: “I was wrong.” Assuming responsibility for the error and offering to do something to repair the damage are specific kinds of behaviors that enhance the effectiveness of an apology. Researchers Cynthia McPherson Frantz and Courtney Bennigson found that it may not be best to apologize immediately after you make a mistake; their results indicated that it may be better to wait a short time before apologizing.65 Your apology will be perceived as more sincere and heartfelt if the other person believes you truly understand how your mistake hurt him or her and that you want to repair the damage. An apology given too quickly may be perceived as insincere—the offended person may think that you’re just trying to quickly dismiss the error. Being perceived as sincerely remorseful is one of the keys to an effective apology.

The words we use can hurt others. We can also use words to repair the damage we have done by offering an apology expressing that we were wrong (not simply sorry), we are sincerely remorseful, we want to do something to repair the damage, we understand how much we may have hurt our communication partner. The book of Proverbs says, “Words fitly spoken are like apples of gold in pictures of silver.” A well-worded apology can help restore luster to a relationship that may have become tarnished.

Words of Assertion

At times, you run across people who are verbally aggressive, obnoxious, or worse—they may try to coerce or intimidate you into doing things you’d rather not do. Should the other-oriented person just politely accept obnoxious verbal assaults? No—
being other-oriented doesn’t mean you should ignore such boorish behavior. Nor do you have to respond in the same way you were treated. Rather than return mean-spirited aggressiveness with an equally inappropriate stream of aggressive words or rude behavior, consider using your verbal skills to be appropriately assertive. To be assertive is to make requests, ask for information, stand up for your rights, and generally pursue your own best interests without denying your partner’s rights.

Each individual has rights. You have the right to refuse a request someone makes of you, the right to express your feelings as long as you don’t trample on the feelings of others, and the right to have your needs met if this doesn’t infringe on the rights of others. Assertive people let their communication partners know when a message or behavior is infringing on their rights.

Some people confuse the terms assertive and aggressive. Being aggressive means pursuing your interests by denying the rights of others. Being appropriately assertive is being other-oriented; aggressiveness is exclusively self-oriented. Aggressive people blame, judge, and evaluate to get what they want. We’ll expand on our discussion of aggressive behavior when we discuss relationship challenges in Chapter 11. Aggressive communicators use communication tactics that contribute to defensiveness, including such intimidating nonverbal cues as steely stares, a bombastic voice, and flailing gestures. Assertive people can ask for what they want without judging or evaluating their partners.

assertive  Able to pursue one’s own best interests without denying a partner’s rights.

aggressive  Expressing one’s interests while denying the rights of others by blaming, judging, and evaluating other people.

Increasingly people are relying on electronically mediated communication to “talk” to each other. In the early part of the twenty-first century, over four-fifths of students and staff at the University of Texas had Facebook accounts. At the University of Michigan the estimate was over 90 percent. We increasingly express ourselves online. It’s likely that you texted one or more of your friends today rather than talking to them in person.

Not only do we connect online, but it’s important to us to do so. In response to the statement “I feel addicted to Facebook,” over one-third of the over 2,850 students who responded to a survey indicated that they “agreed” or “strongly agreed.” One survey respondent wrote “Facebook, I hate you!” in acknowledging the pervasive power it had over her life.

Will the fact that we are using the written word in place of the spoken word to connect to others change the very nature of interpersonal relationships? In speculating about how our reliance on EMC will affect the way we use language and relate to others in the future, linguist Naomi Baron suggests the following consequences of our increased reliance on the written word:

• Informality: We will write more informally as we write more. What we write to one another will continue to take the place of spoken messages, so our written messages will more closely resemble spoken messages.

• Language Use: We will become increasingly uncertain about how we use words, so we’ll make up our own rules and not worry about precise language rules or usage in our informal text messages. As we tap out a quick text message, we may not be as careful or thoughtful about, for example, whether we hyphenate words or how we spell and use punctuation.

• Writing Influences Talking: The way we communicate in EMC contexts will influence how we communicate face to face. We’ll use more abbreviations.

• Word Control: We will have more control over the messages we receive. Because we can often see who’s texting, calling, or e-mailing us, we’ll decide when, where, and even if we will receive messages. We will have what Baron calls greater “volume control” about the number of EMC words that reach us.

• Written Culture: We will increasingly become a “written culture” because of the power and importance of texting, using instant messaging, and other ways of sharing written words.

• More Relationships in Less Depth. We’ll know more people but also know less information about them. In an editorial in The New York Times, columnist Robert Wright noted, “Twenty years ago I rarely spoke by phone to more than five people in a day. Now I often send e-mail to dozens of people a day. I have so many friends! Um, can you remind me of their names? . . .” We know more people more shallowly.

• Moment-to-Moment Contact: Because we can be in touch with others in real time with our cell phones, text messages, and a variety of other tools, we will be able to experience what others are experiencing in real time. As Baron put it, “When we are always on, we have the ability to live in other people’s moments. Relationships can be maintained through running discourse rather than reflective synopsis. Absence may or may not make the heart grow fonder.”
## RECAP
### Assertiveness versus Aggressiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assertiveness . . .</th>
<th>Aggressiveness . . .</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expresses your interests without denying the rights of others.</td>
<td>Expresses your interests and denies the rights of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describes what you want.</td>
<td>Evaluates the other person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discloses your needs using “I” messages.</td>
<td>Discloses your needs using “you” messages.</td>
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When presenting the dos and don’ts of appropriate verbal communication in this chapter, we’ve often emphasized strategies for initiating communication with others. Sometimes what’s most challenging is to respond appropriately when another person (someone who has not taken a course in interpersonal communication) comes at you with an inappropriately aggressive, argumentative, or defensive message, especially if the inappropriate message that’s hurled at you takes you by surprise. You do not have to be passive when you are on the receiving end of such messages. We suggest instead that an effective communicator is appropriately assertive.

### Behaving Assertively: Five Steps

Many people have a tendency to withdraw in the face of controversy, even when their rights are being violated or denied. But you can develop skill in asserting yourself by practicing five key behaviors.

1. **Describe.** Describe how you view the situation. To assert your position, you first need to describe how you view the situation. You need to be assertive because the other person has not been other-oriented. For example, Doug is growing increasingly frustrated with Maria’s tardiness for weekly staff meetings. He approaches the problem by first describing his observation: “I have noticed that you are usually fifteen minutes late to our weekly staff meetings.” A key to communicating your assertive message is to monitor your nonverbal message, especially your voice. Avoid sarcasm or excessive vocal intensity. Calmly yet confidently describe the problem.

2. **Disclose.** Disclose your feelings. After describing the situation from your perspective, let the other person know how you feel. Disclosing your feelings will help to build empathy and avoid lengthy harangues about the other person’s unjust treatment. “I feel you don’t take our weekly meetings seriously,” continues Doug as he asserts his desire for Maria to be on time to the meeting. Note that Doug does not talk about how others are feeling (“Every member of our group is tired of your coming in late”); he describes how he feels.

3. **Identify Effects.** Identify the effects of the behavior. Next, you can identify the effects of the other person’s behavior on you or others. “When you are late, it disrupts our meeting,” says Doug.

4. **Be Silent.** Be silent and wait. After taking the first three steps, simply wait for a response. Some people find this step hard. Again, be sure to monitor your nonverbal cues. Make sure your facial expression does not contradict your verbal message. Delivering an assertive message with a broad grin might create a double bind for your listener, who may not be sure what the primary message is—the verbal one or the nonverbal one.

5. **Paraphrase.** Paraphrase content and feelings. After the other person responds, paraphrase both the content and the feelings of the message. Suppose Maria says, “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize I was creating a problem. I have another meeting that
usually goes overtime. It’s difficult for me to arrive at the start of our meeting on time.” Doug could respond, “So the key problem is a time conflict with another meeting. It must make you feel frustrated to try to do two things at once.”

If the other person is evasive, unresponsive, or aggressive, you’ll need to cycle through the steps again: Clearly describe what the other person is doing that is not acceptable; disclose how you feel; identify the effects; wait; then paraphrase and clarify as needed. A key goal of making an assertive response is to seek an empathic connection between you and your partner. Paraphrasing feelings is a way of ensuring that both parties are connecting.

If you tend to withdraw from conflict, how can you become assertive? Visualizing can help. Think of a past situation in which you wished you had been more assertive and then mentally replay the situation, imagining what you might have said. Also practice verbalizing assertive statements. When you are able to be appropriately assertive, consciously congratulate yourself for sticking up for your rights.

**RECAP**

**How to Assert Yourself**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Describe.</td>
<td>“I see you haven’t completed the report yet.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Disclose.</td>
<td>“I feel that the work I ask you to do is not a priority for you.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Identify effects.</td>
<td>“Without that report, our team will not achieve our goal.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Use active listening skills:</td>
<td>“Do you understand how I feel?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question.</td>
<td>“So you were not aware the report was late.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrase content.</td>
<td>“Perhaps you feel embarrassed.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrase feelings.</td>
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**APPLYING AN OTHER-ORIENTATION to Enhancing Your Verbal Skills**

The key to shared understanding is a focus on the needs, goals, and mindset of your communication partner. Throughout this chapter, we have emphasized how to develop an other-oriented approach when communicating verbally. In focusing on others, keep the following principles in mind.

**Meanings Are in People, Not in Words.** Your communication partner creates meaning based on his or her own experiences. Don’t assume that other people will always (or even usually) understand what you mean. Words are symbols and the potential for misunderstanding them is high. Meaning is fragile, so handle with care.

**Words Have Power to Influence Others.** Words have power to determine how people view the world. They also affect thoughts and behaviors. Be mindful of the potency of words for influencing how others react. Words can trigger wars and negotiate peace; they affect how others react to us.

**Speak to Others as They Would Like to Be Spoken To.** It’s not enough to consider how you would react to words and phrases you use; you need to be tuned in to the kinds of messages another person might prefer. You may like “straight talk” and messages that are short and to the point. Your communication partner may prefer a softer tone and a more positive, supportive message than you need. We’re not suggesting that you should be a verbal chameleon and avoid asserting your own ideas and positions. We are suggesting that if you want to be heard and understood, thinking how others will interpret your message can enhance the communication process.

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How Words Work (pages 153–157)

Words are powerful, and they affect emotions, thoughts, and actions. Your ability to use words effectively contributes to the success of your interpersonal relationships and your overall communication competence. Culture, gender, and life experiences also influence words and their meanings. Words are symbols that represent something else—an object, sound, concept, or experience—but the exact meaning of a word originates in the mind of the sender and the receiver. Words can be arbitrary, but they create meaning on two levels: the denotative, or literal, meaning, and the connotative, or more personal and subjective, meaning.

Key Terms
Symbol 153  Connotative meaning 154
Referent 153  Onomatopoeia 156
Thought 153  Symbolic interaction theory 157
Denotative meaning 154

Critical Thinking Questions
1. How is language symbolic? How does the arbitrary nature of language and the naming of objects or experiences lead to misunderstandings?
2. How has culture affected your language? Do you use words that seem confusing to others? Have you been in a situation in which someone used a familiar word but with a different meaning than you were accustomed to? How did you resolve the misunderstanding?

Activities
Make a list of from ten to fifteen familiar, everyday words (such as home, or online communication) and write their denotative and connotative meanings. Working in small groups, share your words with classmates and ask them to write down what the words mean to them. (Have them do the same with their own list of words.) Compare the connotative meanings. Are there differences in what a word means to different people? Is there a wide range of meanings? Can these differences be attributed to culture, gender, or differences in background and past experiences?

Web Resources
http://www.cwebopaedia.com Uncertain about the meaning of a word that you find on the Internet? Look it up on the “Webopaedia.” This site will help you interpret words that you don’t understand.
http://linguistlist.org/ask-ling/index.html is a service provided by The Linguist List, an Internet network for professional linguists. This site is designed to allow anyone interested in language or linguistics to ask a question and get a response from a panel of professional linguists.

The Power of Words (pages 157–162)

Words have power. They have enormous influence on our thoughts and actions. They also create perceptions by giving us tools to name and label what we experience, including moods and emotions. Language also affects and reflects our culture, influencing how we describe our world and in turn, how that worldview continuously shapes our culture. Words also have the power to make or break interpersonal relationships, helping us to establish and maintain relationships, manage conflict, and relate to others.

Key Terms
Linguistic determinism 160  Worldview 160
Linguistic relativity 160  Profanity 161
Sapir–Whorf hypothesis 160  Euphemism 162

Critical Thinking Questions
1. Ethics: Do you think the use of profanity in everyday life is increasing? Have new communication technologies, including texting, blogging, IMing, and the like, contributed to this increase? Do mass media contribute to the increase? Can you think of examples? Do you think the media have relaxed their standards for allowing profanity? Explain.
2. Ethics: Make a list of euphemisms used in everyday speech as well as by politicians and other public figures. (Consider, for example, explanations of the Iraq war, discussions of recent elections, and terms used to describe the recession and economic solutions.) Is the use of these words and expressions appropriate? Do they deliberately mislead? Do they diminish the significance of a difficult situation such as economic woes (e.g., downsizing) or war?

Activities
Collect print ads that feature catchy slogans or phrases. Make a list of other mass media ads (TV, radio, Internet, billboards, etc.) whose words or phrases grab your attention. Share the ads with your classmates and analyze as a group what makes the words or phrases powerful or memorable. Do the words influence your actions—for example, persuading you to do something or to buy a particular product? Explain.

Web Resources
http://www.pitt.edu/~uclid/tips.htm At this site you’ll learn tips about language and examples of good and bad uses of language. You’ll be reminded that language reflects, reinforces, and shapes our perceptions of others.

Word Barriers (pages 162–171)

Words have the power to create misunderstandings as well as deep connections. Potential pitfalls such as the inaccurate use of words, lack of precision, or different meanings ascribed to a
word can hinder the understanding of messages. Other language barriers can be created by overgeneralizing, polarization, using biased and sexist language, including hate speech, or using demeaning language.

### Critical Thinking Questions

1. What is your reaction to the information presented in the Relating to Others in the 21st Century feature? Do you find yourself texting, IMing, or communicating online more often than face to face these days? Do you feel that you have more friends because you use electronically mediated communication? Are your relationships with these “friends” richer or more shallow than your face-to-face relationships? Explain.

2. Ethics: Is it ethical to mask your true feelings of anger and irritation with someone by using supportive statements or confirming statements when what you really want to do is tell the person off in no uncertain terms? Why or why not?

### Activities

**Assertiveness Practice:** Working with a partner, describe a situation in which you could have been more assertive. Ask your partner to assume the role of the person toward whom you should have been more assertive. Now replay the situation, using the assertiveness skills described in the chapter. Ask your classmates to observe the role play and provide feedback, using the following checklist. When you have finished asserting your point of view, reverse roles with your partner.

- Clearly describes the problem
- Effectively discloses how he or she felt
- Clearly describes the effects of the behavior
- Pauses or waits after describing the effects
- Uses effective questions to promote understanding
- Accurately paraphrases content
- Accurately paraphrases feelings
- Has good eye contact
- Leans forward while speaking
- Has an open body posture
- Has appropriate voice tone and quality

### Words of Support and Words of Assertion

*pages 171–181*

The words you hear and use can ultimately enhance or detract from the quality of the relationships you establish with others. Conversation should be a genuine dialogue that includes expressions of equality, empathy, and openness. You can further create a supportive communication climate by using extended “I” language, being a problem solver, and being flexible and genuine rather than manipulative in the positions you take. Being able to offer an apology is another crucial skill for developing and maintaining relationships and a positive communication climate. Being a competent, other-oriented communicator involves being assertive without becoming aggressive and following five steps: describe, disclose, identify effects, silently wait, and paraphrase.

### Key Terms

- Bypassing 162
- Indexing 165
- Malapropism 163
- Static evaluation 165
- Restricted code 164
- Polarization 165
- Jargon 164
- Hate speech 166
- Allness 164

### Critical Thinking Questions

1. Rephrase the following statements, using the skill of indexing:
   - a. All politicians want power and control over others.
   - b. All teachers are underpaid.
   - c. All Texans like to brag about how great their state is.

2. Ethics: Is it ethical to correct someone when he or she uses sexist language or makes a stereotyping remark about someone’s race, gender, or sexual orientation? What if that person is your boss or your teacher? Explain your answer.

### Activities

In small groups, brainstorm lists of “restricted code” words and/or jargon, including “textspeak” (abbreviations used in IMing and texting). Come up with as many words as you can. Share the lists that each group creates. Are the lists similar? Did classmates introduce you to words you hadn’t known before? Do the “restricted codes” seem to suggest a particular group or culture? What do people in these subgroups have in common—for example, age, gender, ethnicity?

### Words of Support and Words of Assertion

*pages 171–181*

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### Key Terms

- Extended “I” language 173
- Apology 177
- Word picture 174
- Assertive 179
- Elaborated code 176
- Aggressive 179

### Web Resources

- [http://www.vandruff.com/artconverse.html](http://www.vandruff.com/artconverse.html) Are you a conversational terrorist, or do you know someone who is? In the article Conversational Terrorism: How NOT to Talk, you’ll discover dos and don’ts for conversing with others and learn how to avoid terrorizing others when you talk with them.
- [http://www.about-personal-growth.com/verbal-communication.html](http://www.about-personal-growth.com/verbal-communication.html) This is a site dedicated to helping you develop your verbal communication by mastering linguistic skills.