

Communication Studies

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What this handout is about

This handout describes some steps for planning and writing papers in communication studies courses.

What do people write about in communication studies?

Courses in communication studies combine material from the humanities, fine arts, and social sciences in order to explain how and why people interact in the ways that they do. Within communication studies, there are four different approaches to understanding these interactions. Your course probably falls into one of these four areas of emphasis:

- **Interpersonal and organizational communication:** Interpersonal communication concerns one-on-one conversations as well as small group behaviors. Organizational communication focuses on large group dynamics.
- **Rhetoric:** Rhetoric examines persuasion and argumentation in political settings and within social movements.
- **Performance studies:** Performance studies analyze the relationships among literature, theater, and everyday life.
- **Media/film studies:** Media and film studies explore the cultural influences and practical techniques of television and film, as well as new technologies.

Understanding your assignment

The content and purpose of your assignments will vary according to what kind of course you are in, so pay close attention to the course description, syllabus, and assignment sheet when you begin to write. If you'd like to learn more about deciphering writing assignments or developing your academic writing, see our Writing Center handouts on these topics. For now, let's see how a general topic, same-sex friendships, might be treated in each of the different areas. These illustrations are only examples, but you can use them as springboards to help you identify how your course might approach discussing a broad topic.

Interpersonal communication

An interpersonal communication perspective could focus on the verbal and nonverbal differences and similarities between how women communicate with other women and how men communicate with other men. This topic would allow you to explore the ways in which gender affects our behaviors in close relationships.

Organizational communication

Organizational communication would take a less personal approach, perhaps by addressing same-sex friendships in the form of workplace mentoring programs that pair employees of the same sex. This would require you to discuss and analyze group dynamics and effectiveness in the work environment.

Rhetoric

A rhetorical analysis could involve comparing and contrasting references to friendship in the speeches of two well-known figures. For instance, you could compare Aristotle's comments about Plato to Plato's comments about Aristotle in order to discover more about the relationship between these two men and how each defined their friendship and/or same-sex friendship in general.

Performance studies

A performance approach might involve describing how a literary work uses dramatic conventions to portray same-sex friendships, as well as critiquing how believable those portrayals are. An analysis of the play *Waiting for Godot* could unpack the lifelong friendship between the two main characters by identifying what binds the men together, how these ties are effectively or ineffectively conveyed to the audience, and what the play teaches us about same-sex friendships in our own lives.

Media and film studies

Finally, a media and film studies analysis might explain the evolution of a same-sex friendship by examining a cinematic text. For example, you could trace the development of the main friendship in the movie *Thelma and Louise* to discover how certain events or gender stereotypes affect the relationship between the two female characters.

General writing tips

Writing papers in communication studies often requires you to do three tasks common to academic writing: analyze material, read and critique others' analyses of material, and develop your own argument around that material. You will need to build an original argument (sometimes called a "theory" or "plausible explanation") about how a communication phenomenon can be better understood. The word phenomenon can refer to a particular communication event, text, act, or conversation. To develop an argument for this kind of paper, you need to follow several steps and include several kinds of information in your paper. (For more information about developing an argument, see our handout on arguments). First, you must demonstrate your knowledge of the phenomenon and what others have said about it. This usually involves synthesizing previous research or ideas. Second, you must develop your own original perspective, reading, or "take" on the phenomenon and give evidence to support your way of thinking about it. Your "take" on the topic will constitute your "argument," "theory," or

“explanation.” You will need to write a thesis statement that encapsulates your argument and guides you and the reader to the main point of your paper. Third, you should critically analyze the arguments of others in order to show how your argument contributes to our general understanding of the phenomenon. In other words, you should identify the shortcomings of previous research or ideas and explain how your paper corrects some or all of those deficits. Assume that your audience for your paper includes your classmates as well as your instructor, unless otherwise indicated in the assignment.

Choosing a topic to write about

Your topic might be as specific as the effects of a single word in conversation (such as how the use of the word “well” creates tentativeness in dialogue) or as broad as how the notion of individuality affects our relationships in public and private spheres of human activity. In deciding the scope of your topic, look again at the purpose of the course and the aim of the assignment. Check with your instructor to gauge the appropriateness of your topic before you go too far in the writing process.

Try to choose a topic in which you have some interest or investment. Your writing for communications will not only be about the topic, but also about yourself—why you care about the topic, how it affects you, etc. It is common in the field of communication studies not only to consider why the topic intrigues you, but also to write about the experiences and/or cognitive processes you went through before choosing your topic. Including this kind of introspection helps readers understand your position and how that position affects both your selection of the topic and your analysis within the paper. You can make your argument more persuasive by knowing what is at stake, including both objective research and personal knowledge in what you write.

Using evidence to support your ideas

Your argument should be supported with evidence, which may include, but is not limited to, related studies or articles, films or television programs, interview materials, statistics, and critical analysis of your own making. Relevant studies or articles can be found in such journals as *Journal of Communication*, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Communication Education*, and *Communication Monographs*. Databases, such as Infotrac and ERIC, may also be helpful for finding articles and books on your topic (connecting to these databases via NC Live requires a UNC IP address or UNC PID). As always, be careful when using Internet materials—check your sources to make sure they are reputable.

Refrain from using evidence, especially quotations, without explicitly and concretely explaining what the evidence shows in your own words. Jumping from quote to quote does not demonstrate your knowledge of the material or help the reader recognize the development of your thesis statement. A good paper will link the evidence to the overall argument by explaining how the two correspond to one another and how that relationship extends our understanding of the communication phenomenon. In other words, each example and quote should be explained,

and each paragraph should relate to the topic.

As mentioned above, your evidence and analysis should not only support the thesis statement but should also develop it in ways that complement your paper's argument. Do not just repeat the thesis statement after each section of your paper; instead, try to tell what that section adds to the argument and what is special about that section when the thesis statement is taken into consideration. You may also include a discussion of the paper's limitations. Describing what cannot be known or discussed at this time—perhaps because of the limited scope of your project, lack of new research, etc.—keeps you honest and realistic about what you have accomplished and shows your awareness of the topic's complexity.

Communication studies idiosyncrasies

- Using the first person (I/me) is welcomed in nearly all areas of communication studies. It is probably best to ask your professor to be sure, but do not be surprised if you are required to talk about yourself within the paper as a researcher, writer, and/or subject. Some assignments may require you to write from a personal perspective and expect you to use "I" to express your ideas.
- Always include a Works Cited (MLA) or References list (APA) unless you are told not to. Not giving appropriate credit to those whom you quote or whose ideas inform your argument is plagiarism. More and more communication studies courses are requiring bibliographies and in-text citations with each writing assignment. Ask your professor which citation format (MLA/APA) to use and see the corresponding handbook for citation rules.



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