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Communication Skills for your Policing Degree

**CRITICAL
STUDY SKILLS**

JANE BOTTOMLEY, STEVEN PRYJMACHUK AND MARTIN WRIGHT

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Introduction

Communication Skills for your Policing Degree is the fourth book in the *Critical Study Skills for Police Officers* series. The *Critical Study Skills for Police Officers* series supports policing and other law enforcement degree students as they embark on their undergraduate degree programme. It is aimed at all student police officers, including those who have come to university straight from A levels, and those who have travelled a different route, perhaps returning to education after working and/or raising a family. The books in the series will be of use both to students from the UK, and international students who are preparing to study in a new culture – and perhaps in a second language. The books also include guidance for students with specific learning requirements.

As well as technical/clinical skills, police officers and other law enforcement professionals need to develop what are often described as ‘soft skills’, that is, communication skills and people skills. The terms ‘oracy skills’, ‘interactional skills’ and ‘interpersonal skills’ are also commonly used. Whichever terms are employed, the skills they describe are becoming increasingly important in university and professional settings. *Communication Skills* aims to support policing students as they engage in vital oral and written communication activity in their policing studies and professional lives. It focuses on improving general oral and written communication in professional life. It also provides guidance on public speaking, in particular, academic presentations, and covers the skills you need to participate in group discussions, especially seminars. It also provides guidance on communication with lecturers during tutorials, as well as discussing the skills required for successful networking in a range of contexts, including social media. If you require more information on academic writing, related to essays or dissertations, see another book in this series, *Academic Writing and Referencing for your Policing Degree*.

Between them, the authors have many years’ experience of both policing practice and education, and academic study skills. All the information, text extracts and activities in the book have a clear policing focus and are often directly linked to the **College of Policing Code of Ethics**. There is also reference to relevant institutional bodies, books and journals throughout.

The many activities in the book include **tasks**, **reflections**, **top tips**, and **case studies**. There are also **advanced skills** sections, which highlight particular knowledge and skills that you will need towards the end of your degree programme – or perhaps if you go on to postgraduate study. The activities in the book often require you to work things out and discover things for yourself, a learning technique which is commonly used in universities and in policing! For many activities, there is no right or wrong answer – they might simply require you to reflect on your experience or situations you are likely to encounter at university or in your professional life; for tasks which require a particular response, there is an answer key at the back of the book.

These special features throughout the book are clearly signalled by icons to help you recognise them:



Learning outcomes;



Quick quiz or example exam questions / assessment tasks;



Reflection (a reflective task or activity);



Case studies;



Top tips;



Checklist;



Advanced skills information;



Answer provided at the back of the book.

Students with limited experience of academic life and policing practice in the UK will find it helpful to work through the book systematically; more experienced students may wish to 'dip in and out' of the book. Whichever approach you adopt, handy **cross references** signalled in the margins will help you quickly find the information that you need to focus on or revisit.

There are three **Appendices** (Academic levels at university; Key phrases in assignments; English language references) at the back of the book which you can consult as you work through the text.

We hope that this book will help you to become a successful communicator in all areas of your policing studies and practice.

A note on terminology

In the context of this book, the term 'policing' should be taken to include 'policing and other law enforcement professions', wherever this is not explicitly stated.

Chapter 1

Professional speaking skills

Learning outcomes



After reading this chapter you will:

- be aware of the particular characteristics of professional, as opposed to social, communication;
- develop your understanding of the role of oral communication in the context of policing;
- be aware of the importance of oral communication skills as a part of your policing practice;
- be aware of strategies which can help you communicate and interact with victims, witnesses, offenders, the public and colleagues in a clear, appropriate and effective manner.

This chapter provides guidance to help you improve your oral communication skills in policing contexts. It will present a number of strategies to help you communicate and interact with victims and other parties in a clear, appropriate and effective manner.

Communication

A human language is essentially 'a signalling system' (Barber, 2000, p 2). The signals used include sounds, written symbols such as alphabets, and signs such as those in road signals, semaphore and the sign languages used by the Deaf Community. **Communication** can be defined as the transmission or exchange of information and ideas using these signalling systems.

Communication skills are one of the core skills of policing, and they are central to the Authorised Professional Practice of the College of Policing (2019). In this chapter, the focus is on general **oral communication**. Other chapters in this book deal with specific areas of oral communication which are important in academic life, ie presentations, seminars and tutorials. Chapter 6 focuses on the spoken and written communication skills required for successful networking. Chapter 2 looks at some areas of practical **written communication** in policing. Another book in this series, *Academic Writing and Referencing for your Policing Degree*, explores the writing skills you need to produce academic essays and dissertations.

The word 'communicate' presupposes the involvement of a person or persons on the receiving end of the transmission of information (eg the audience in a presentation) or participating in a two- or multi-way communication process (eg students participating in a seminar or interviewing witnesses). For this reason, some people

CROSS REFERENCE

Academic Writing and Referencing for your Policing Degree

also use the word **interaction** when discussing these processes. **Communicative and interactional competence** is the focus of much current educational research (see for example Escobar Urmeneta and Walsh, 2017), and it is seen by many as key in the development of a range of **intellectual and interpersonal skills**. The development of these skills has become increasingly prioritised by universities in recent years. They form an important part of the '**graduate attributes**' promoted by universities, ie the **key transferable skills** which are believed to facilitate academic study while also preparing students for the world of work.

Professional communication

Professional communication is communication that occurs in a professional context rather than a social one. It is characterised by the fact that it is 'purposeful, ethical and has boundaries' (Jagger et al, 2015, p 47). It requires a high degree of self-awareness and a willingness to understand the lives and experiences of others. This means being aware of the gaps in your knowledge, the things you don't know or understand about the life of a person or people you are talking to. It also involves reflecting on your own values and beliefs. This includes trying to identify and acknowledge your own preconceptions and biases. We all grow up with social and cultural preconceptions and biases, some conscious, some unconscious. Being open to the realities of others and being more aware of your own preconceptions and biases can help you to communicate more sensitively and effectively.

Oral communication

As mentioned earlier, human communication is generally divided into spoken and written communication. Speech, however, is the 'primary form of language' (Barber, 2000, p 2). Speech is learned before writing, and while there are communities that have speech but no written form of their language, no human community has been discovered to have a written language without a spoken one (Barber, 2000). **Oral communication** obviously involves the voice, and the use of **verbal** elements such as sounds, words, phrases and sentences. But it involves much more than these. It comprises **non-verbal** elements such as facial expressions, body language and tone of voice. If you consider talking on the phone or writing an email, you can probably think of difficulties that can arise because of the absence of face-to-face contact with the person you are communicating with. For example, on the phone and in an email, you might need to be very careful when making a joke, as the person on the other end cannot see you smile (though it's perhaps sometimes possible to 'hear' a smile in your tone of voice on the phone). This is why we use 'emojis' 😊 😞 😞 in emails and text messages to friends to indicate emotions and pre-empt misunderstandings. However, when this tool is not available, in a more formal email for example, particular care is needed with regard to word choice and phrasing.

Michael Argyle, a renowned social psychologist, identified a number of **non-verbal cues** that humans use when interacting face to face (1988):

- facial expression;
- eye contact;

- posture;
- body space – proximity and closeness to others;
- gesture;
- touch;
- ‘artefacts’ – clothes and emblems and the way they make us look;
- paralanguage – *how* we say things rather than *what* we say, including intonation (the pitch and melody of the voice), vocal buffers (‘oh’, ‘ah’) and vocalisations (laughing, crying, groaning, muttering).

For police officers, it is especially important to be able to pick up on these cues in offenders and other people. For example, not noticing or misreading such cues can result in a police officer failing to pick up on signs of escalating aggression, and this failure could even exacerbate such aggression. This is particularly important in areas of policing where offenders may be ‘emotionally charged’ such as football matches, public houses, incidents of domestic abuse and road traffic collisions.

Communication in policing

As a police officer, you will need to communicate with a range of people, such as victims, witnesses and offenders, as well as members of the public. You will also communicate with colleagues: some on a regular basis, others more intermittently. In addition, you will sometimes be required to interact with third parties such as solicitors, social workers, translators and other emergency service personnel.

As social beings, we perhaps instinctively feel that communication is an essential part of human relationships. It is generally accepted that interpersonal skills are important and that good communication and interaction should be encouraged in all aspects of life. But your own experience probably tells you that communication can often be tricky, and that people can quite easily misunderstand each other. Look at the following **case studies** and discuss what may have gone wrong, and how, perhaps, miscommunication could possibly have been avoided. Some of the issues raised will be discussed in more detail in later sections of this chapter.

Case studies



A

Reeta is a civilian custody officer working in a busy police station. A prisoner who has been diagnosed as being mentally unwell said they felt nauseous at lunchtime and missed their meal. However, she feels hungry now that the nausea has worn off. She asks Reeta if she could have something to eat. Reeta is flustered because she has a thousand things to do, so she says to the prisoner (somewhat abruptly): ‘Just give me ten minutes and I’ll sort it’. Because she is so busy, Reeta forgets about this and goes on her break. When she returns from her break, she remembers the prisoner’s request. It’s now an hour and a half since the prisoner asked for

something to eat. Reeta quickly collects a meal and takes it to the prisoner. But the prisoner becomes really upset at the delay, saying Reeta doesn't care about her.

- 1) What are the communication and interpersonal issues here?
- 2) How can Reeta resolve this communication issue now?

B

Jo is 15 years-old. She was born male but currently identifies as female. Jo's appearance is gender-ambiguous and she dresses in gender-neutral clothing (jeans, t-shirts, trainers). She states she is female and has asked to be referred to by the pronouns 'she' and 'her'. However, a number of pupils at her school have subjected her to hateful messages posted online. Jo attends the police station with her parents to make a criminal complaint and statement regarding the online abuse and harassment. The enquiry officer at the police station who initially meets Jo says, 'Hello mate, how can I help?'. Upon realising her mistake, she says, 'Sorry love, I got a bit confused'.

Later, when Jo is providing her statement, she mentions that the enquiry officer's behaviour and remarks did upset her. However, she says she is more upset by those who refer to her as 'she' and 'her' without really meaning it: 'At least those who accidentally refer to me as "him" are more genuine than those who say "her" through gritted teeth.'

- 1) What could make Jo say this? What aspects of paralanguage and body language might she be picking up on?
- 2) What is most important to Jo regarding the way people talk to or about her?

C

While on patrol, a tutor constable asks a probationary constable to issue a car with a fixed penalty notice for parking on the pavement. The probationer misunderstands the direction from the tutor constable and issues the ticket for parking too close to a road junction. The tutor constable happens to spot the error as they are walking away and rectifies the situation.

- 1) What should the officers have done in this situation?
- 2) What are the dangers of this type of miscommunication?

D

Jenny was involved in facilitating an inter-professional group which consisted of social workers, police volunteers, nurses and occupational therapists. In the middle of the session, Jenny made reference to CP – in policing and social work this is an abbreviation for 'Child Protection'. She did in fact check herself, asking: 'Do we all use the term CP?' Everyone

promptly nodded and the session continued. A little later, a discussion around risk management processes became rather confusing and the social workers and voluntary support workers seemed to be adopting a very different approach from the nurses and occupational therapists. They stopped for a moment to explore why the discussion had become so confused and found that although all the professions use the term CP, in fact it means different things in different professions. For the police, social workers and voluntary support workers, CP is an abbreviation for ‘Child Protection’, whereas in the health professions, CP is an abbreviation for ‘Cerebral Palsy’. Miscommunication was the result!

- 1) How could the participants have avoided misunderstandings over terminology?
- 2) What factors should be considered when using acronyms like ‘CP’?

Discussion of case studies

A

The prisoner probably picked up on the body language suggesting Reeta is flustered, which could make the prisoner feel like she is a nuisance and that no one is concerned about her. Reeta also made a promise to the prisoner, who has been identified as vulnerable, that was never fulfilled; this can lead to a breakdown of trust. The best thing now would probably be for Reeta to apologise and provide an honest explanation – saying she forgot because she was so busy. It would be unhelpful for her to be defensive or try to justify her perhaps understandable lapse, especially in view of the prisoner’s vulnerability. Reeta should be mindful of the Code of Ethics (2014) and the Policing Principles within it, most particularly the need to be ‘open and transparent’ (p 3).

B

It is fair to say that the enquiry officer should be far more aware of their language and behaviour and keep in mind the Code of Ethics (2014) and the Policing Principles within it, most particularly the need to ‘treat people fairly’ and ‘with respect’ (p 3). However, the officer did immediately apologise and it is clear from Jo’s comments that she understands that it might be difficult for people to adapt to her situation, and she accepts that people make mistakes; what is important to her is that people are genuine, even if that means showing their doubts or confusion.

C

The probationer should have checked their understanding of the offence and fixed penalty notice with the tutor constable. (‘Can I just check? Did you say parking on the pavement?’). The tutor constable should also have checked the notice

before it was served. The tutor constable should have also have pointed out to the probationary constable the need to pay close attention and check every direction they are given if they are not absolutely clear as to what is being asked of them. While the mistake is identified in this case, and the notice cancelled, there are many circumstances in policing when misunderstanding or mishearing directions can lead to serious problems or even fatalities: 'You are responsible for your decisions, actions and omissions' (Policing Principles, Code of Ethics, 2014, p 3).

CROSS
REFERENCE

Academic Writing for your Policing Degree, Chapter 5, Preparing your work for submission, Editing and proofreading your final text, Systematic treatment of names and titles

D

When we are part of a particular community, including academic and professional communities, it is often easy to assume that people outside that community know what we are talking about! Professionals sometimes use technical terms without providing an explanation, and this is particularly true of acronyms. We use acronyms because they are useful shorthand, but they are generally not accessible to people outside our immediate community. Jenny was right to check herself, but it would also have been useful to provide the full term at the outset of the discussion (as is the convention in academic writing).

Communicating with the public

Communication is essential to effective policing. The College of Policing (2019) has provided an Engagement and Communication Framework encompassing the values and standards that police officers are expected to work towards to ensure effective service delivery.

As the College of Policing emphasises, 'Effective communication shapes service delivery towards the needs of the public. The various ways the police communicate should be proportionate to the needs and requirements of the different communities they serve'. Without good communication, it is difficult for police officers to adhere to the professional values and standards of policing. Police officers who lack communication skills will struggle to be competent police officers. The following **reflection** touches on some important issues which will be discussed in the rest of this section.

Reflection

- 1) In what ways do you think communication most affects the victim, witness, offender or member of the public's policing experience?
- 2) What factors should be considered when talking to a victim, witness, offender or member of the public? (Think about physical, environmental, cultural factors, for example.)
- 3) What do you need to consider when communicating with victims, witnesses or offenders about their crime, enquiry or report?
- 4) How might you check that a victim, witness, offender or member of the public has understood what they have been told?

- 5) What do you consider to be the values that should inform communication between a police officer and a victim, witness, offender or member of the public?
- 6) Can you think of an incident from your own experience which could have been improved with better communication?

Being a good communicator

When speaking to a victim, witness, offender or member of the public (and to other parties) it is essential that you consider the **purpose** of your communication, ie what you want to achieve. It is important that your communication is **clear**, **meaningful** and **appropriate**, and that the victim, witness, etc is able to process and understand what you say.

- Firstly, always introduce yourself. In addition, it can be helpful to explain what your role is, eg:

‘Hello, my name is Charlotte [include surname if you wish]. I am a Special Constable and I will be helping to take your details for a crime report.’

- Also ask victims, witnesses, etc (especially those who may be older) how they want to be addressed, eg:

‘Is it OK if I call you Mary?’ or ‘Do you prefer Mr Khan or Saeed?’

- Check too that victims, witnesses, etc understand what you are saying to them, giving them ample opportunity to ask any questions.

You should also try to avoid:

- police or technical jargon;
- acronyms and abbreviations that you might use as shorthand with police colleagues;
- slang;
- terms which might cause offence or convey overfamiliarity.

There are a number of approaches and strategies which can help you to manage the way you communicate with victims, witnesses, etc, or at least help you to be more aware of the factors which can impact on that communication. Some of these are discussed below.

Policing principles

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the Code of Ethics (College of Policing, 2014) outlines the Policing Principles which should guide you in your practice, thus ‘doing the right thing in the right way’ (p 3). Some of these principles particularly relate to communication, namely:

- Respect: you treat everyone with respect.
- Fairness: you treat people fairly.
- Honesty: you are truthful and trustworthy.

It can be challenging to uphold these principles in practice. For example, police officers are sometimes faced with individuals who are known or believed to have behaved in a distasteful or criminal manner – individuals involved in gang violence or those who have perpetrated serious sexual offences for example. In these scenarios, it is important for a police officer to be able to reflect calmly on their role and responsibilities, and to focus on doing all they can to remain positive, empathetic and genuine. A related communication challenge, rooted in equality and diversity issues, is to 'show compassion and empathy, as appropriate, to people you come into contact with' (College of Policing, 2014, p 7).

Reflection



Think of some of the clichés that might be used in policing and ask yourself if they convey genuine compassion and empathy, eg:

- 1) 'I'm sure everything will be alright.'
- 2) 'It must be awful for you.'
- 3) 'I'm sorry, you'll have to ask the sergeant.'

Can you think of some alternative ways of expressing compassion and empathy that are perhaps more genuine?

Discussion of reflection

- 1) 'I'm sure everything will be alright.'

Will it? How do you know? Compare with:

'There have been lots of people who've suffered similar crimes as yours and we've been able to assist them to report them effectively.'

- 2) 'It must be awful for you.'

This can sound almost dismissive. Compare with:

'I've never had that sort of experience myself and can't imagine what you are going through but it's clear you must be going through a very difficult time.'

- 3) 'I'm sorry, you'll have to ask the sergeant'

This is a default 'I don't know what to say' statement for many.

Compare with:

'I'm sorry, I don't know but I can try and find out for you if you'd like.'

Appendix 1

Academic levels at university

UNDERGRADUATE STUDY		
England, Wales, Northern Ireland	Scotland	Award
Level 4	Level 7	Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE)
Level 5	Level 8	Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE) Foundation Degree (FdD)
Level 6	Level 9	Ordinary Bachelor Degree eg BSc Policing
	Level 10	Bachelor Degree with Honours eg BSc (Hons) in Policing
POSTGRADUATE STUDY		
Level 7	Level 11	Masters Degree, eg MSc, MA, MPhil Postgraduate Certificate or Diploma (PGCert; PGDip)
Level 8	Level 12	Research Doctorate (PhD) Professional Doctorate

Appendix 2

Key phrases in assignments

analyse	Mostly levels 5 and 6, especially with the word 'critically'; rarely level 4	Look at the concepts and ideas under discussion in depth; the addition of 'critically' means look at the concepts and ideas in depth and with a critical eye
assess	All levels, though common at lower levels	Make comments about the value/ importance of the concepts and ideas under discussion
compare	All levels, though common at lower levels	Look for similarities between the concepts and ideas under discussion
contrast	All levels, though common at lower levels	Look for differences between the concepts and ideas under discussion; often used with 'compare' (see above)
define	All levels, though common at lower levels	State precisely what is meant by a particular issue, theory or concept
discuss	Level 5 and above; sometimes level 4	Give reasons for and against; investigate and examine by argument
evaluate	Mostly levels 5 and 6, especially with the word 'critically'	Weigh up the arguments surrounding an issue, using your own opinions and, more importantly, reference to the work of others
illustrate	All levels	Make clear by the use of examples
outline	All levels, though tends to be used with the lower levels	Give the main features of
review	All levels, though 'critically review' would imply level 5 and above	Extract relevant information from a document or set of documents
state	All levels, though tends to be used with the lower levels	Present in a clear, concise form
summarise	All levels, though tends to be used with the lower levels	Give an account of all the main points of the concepts and ideas under discussion
with reference to	All levels	Use a specific context, issue or concept to make the meaning clear

Appendix 3

English language references

This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of resources, but rather a selection of those that we have found most useful in our work with students.

Dictionaries

There are many online dictionaries, but if you prefer to feel the weight of one in your hands, then Chambers is a good choice:

Chambers 21st Century Dictionary (1999) Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap Publishers Ltd.

A good online dictionary, especially for students whose first language is not English, is the Cambridge Dictionary. The definitions are very clear and easy to understand, and there is an excellent pronunciation tool for students whose first language is not English:

Cambridge Dictionary [online]. Available at: <http://dictionary.cambridge.org> (accessed 24 November 2019).

Grammar books

Caplan, N (2012) *Grammar Choices for Graduate and Professional Writers*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Caplan's book is aimed at postgraduate students (known as 'graduate' students in the USA, where this book is published). Nevertheless, if you are looking for a systematic analysis of English grammar in the context of academic English, you may find this book very useful. It contains many clear examples of grammar in use in real-life academic writing.

Hewings, M (2015) *Advanced Grammar in Use*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Murphy, R (2015) *English Grammar in Use*. 4th ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Murphy, R (2015) *Essential Grammar in Use*. 4th ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The Grammar in Use series is particularly useful for students whose first language is not English. The books present each grammar point in a clear and systematic way, and provide exercises and a self-study answer key. There are also lots of multimedia features in recent editions.

Other resources

Academic Phrasebank [online]. Available at: www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk (accessed 24 November 2019).

Academic Word List [online]. Available at: www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist (accessed 24 November 2019).

Baily, S (2011) *Academic Writing for International Students of English*. 3rd ed. Oxon: Routledge.

Bottomley, J (2014) *Academic Writing for International Students of Science*. Oxon: Routledge.

Peck, J and Cole, M (2012) *Write it Right: The Secrets of Effective Writing*. 2nd ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Swales, J and Feak, C (2012) *Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential Tasks and Skills*. 3rd ed. Michigan: Michigan ELT.

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