

Professional Communication in Speech-Language Pathology

How to Write, Talk, and Act Like a Clinician

Third Edition

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PREFACE

It was 8:14 on Monday morning and Abby strolled in for her 8:00 clinical practicum meeting with her supervisor, Ms. Bryce. She lingered outside Ms. Bryce's doorway, balancing a half-eaten breakfast sandwich and her cell phone while returning a text message. Ms. Bryce looked up and set aside the papers she had pulled out to work on while waiting for Abby. She waited for Abby to introduce herself, or at least explain herself, but Abby was focused on finishing off her breakfast. Eventually, Ms. Bryce introduced herself and asked Abby, who was wearing a questionably short skirt and revealing tank top, to have a seat. Abby sat down across from Ms. Bryce and began to complain about how tired she was and that it was all her roommate's fault that she was late. Ms. Bryce proceeded with the meeting, informing Abby about her expectations for the semester, as well as vital information about Abby's client. Abby appeared to be listening to what Ms. Bryce said, but she did not take a single note. What Ms. Bryce could not tell from her interaction with Abby was that she was a compassionate and intelligent student who wanted, more than anything else, to help children with autism. It was obvious that Abby was unaware about the many facets of professionalism.

How could she become a successful speech-language pathologist who works in a community clinic, school system, or medical facility? If Abby did not get some instruction in professional appearance, professional demeanor, and professional communication before practicum started, her initial clinical experience would be similar to diving into a very cold pool of water. This book is designed to make the exciting journey from student to clinician more predictable and a bit less onerous for all students, especially those like Abby.

Preparing a student for the clinical practicum experience has always been a challenge. The students come to us eager about embarking on a new and rewarding profession. They have studied some of the disorders of communication in classes and observed treatment sessions performed either by master clinicians in the field or more advanced graduate students. When the time for clinical

practicum arrives, they are enthusiastic and anxious about their first foray into a clinical relationship. Unfortunately, clinical work is one of those enterprises that almost all students enter with no practical experience. By our calculations, people in the speech-language pathology major have about 3 years to complete the transition from carefree undergraduate student

to competent clinical professional with a master's degree.

We asked ourselves many questions in planning this text: *Would students have a better grasp of professionalism if examples were provided and it was more clearly delineated? Wouldn't it be nice if we could forewarn students about common pitfalls in the clinical practicum process, so these could be avoided? Would students operate more efficiently in off-campus placements if we spent a little time introducing the nature of those settings before the student leaves the university environment? Would clinical reports be of higher quality if we gave examples and provided suggestions for writing and a list of common errors? Would students be less anxious if we prepared them ahead of time with examples of the clinical documentation used in medical and school settings? Would students be better able to verbally interact with clients, families, other professionals, and supervisors if we provided suggestions regarding professional verbal communication?* Clearly, we felt that the answers to our questions would no doubt be in the affirmative.

This textbook was designed to help speech-language pathology students as they approach and journey through the clinical practicum experience. There are several major characteristics that distinguish our textbook. First, we wanted to provide the student with a clear understanding of professional demeanor common to speech-language pathologists. It is our view that such professionalism is largely communicated through a variety of modalities. For instance, a person's behavior, written communications, and verbal communications are perceived by others as significant indices of professionalism. Actions can include such varied components as appearance, ethical behavior, decision making, planning clinical work, and nonverbal communica-

tion skills. Actions, as they say, often speak louder than words. Written communications range from various clinical reports to progress notes and e-mails. We project our level of professionalism every time we write any type of clinical documentation. Verbal communication with clients, families, other professionals, and supervisors is the means by which we provide information, obtain information, counsel, and solve problems related to clinical activity. Because the features of professional behavior, professional writing, and professional speaking are so important in defining a professional, we elected to name this book *Professional Communication in Speech-Language Pathology: How to Write, Talk, and Act Like a Clinician*. In this third edition of the text, we have revised, updated, and expanded upon the original text to include up-to-date research and current trends in clinical practicum.

A second characteristic of this book involves the detailed information of different practicum settings. Since clinical practicum is different from any other experience these students have encountered, it is important to provide a road map of where they are headed in the process of learning to be a competent clinician. For this reason, we have chosen to discuss three practicum settings in almost every chapter: (a) university clinics, (b) medical settings, and (c) public school settings. The chapters provide examples of professional written communication that are unique to each type of workplace. Clinical documentation is similar yet different across these work settings and students should be aware of those variations before they experience an off-campus placement. But the information in this text goes beyond paperwork. We discuss professional verbal communication when interacting with clients, families, other professionals, and supervisors across work settings.

A third characteristic in almost every chapter is our delineation of proactive suggestions that are helpful to the student in navigating the various settings of clinical practicum. In this way, the book serves as a kind of survival guide to clinical practicum because we discuss common problems across settings and ways to avoid them. If we expect students to perform well across different practicum experiences, then we should tell them how their behavior and documentation should change in these settings as compared to the university clinic. In many cases, it is as simple as just listing things to do and not do. Ironically, many of the issues in practicum settings are caused by poor communication. Fortunately, it is

also professional communication that plays a major role in solving practicum difficulties.

The final characteristic of this book is that we attempted to write it in a student-friendly style with copious examples and vignettes to help the student understand the material not only intellectually, but practically as well. Many books on clinical practicum are compilations of rules, references, regulations, and writing exercises that, while certainly important, are often difficult to digest. This book generally discusses most of these issues, but also illustrates them in a practical and interesting way. We hope the text can be useful as part of the smooth transition from novice student to a respected speech-language pathologist.

SECTION I

Introduction to Professional Communication, Clinical Practicum Sites, and Ethics

1

The Nature of Professionalism and Professional Communication

Introduction

The field of speech-language pathology is among the distinguished and respected helping professions. Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) work alongside a diverse group of related professionals in a variety of settings to assess and treat patients across the life span. No matter the setting, “professional” should be a term that describes us, so we need to have a clear understanding of the concept. But when we think of *professionalism*, what does this really mean? Typically, a person knows if the treatment being received is professional and can easily distinguish unprofessional behavior on the part of a service provider. However, explaining what it means to act professionally is as elusive as reaching a consensus on a common definition. We wanted to investigate what students and clinicians thought, and we included a sampling in the box below.

“Conducting oneself in a manner that brings respect to the profession and reflects well on your fellow colleagues. It’s a line I have trouble with and constantly cross over.”

“Professionalism is being kind and respectful when other people are being unprofessional.”

“It’s a behavior represented by actions of collegiality and ethical conduct.”

Professionalism: “the skill, judgment, and polite behavior that is expected from a person who is trained to do a job well.”
Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary

According to Cornett (2006, p. 1), “We demonstrate professionalism by attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors that reflect a multi-faceted approach to the standards, regulations, and principles underlying successful clinical practice.” She continues that “inquiry, introspection, and integrity”

are critical components of professionalism. Professionalism requires that you take the initiative to assess yourself during and following each interaction to strive to improve your skills. It is typical that some students naturally have strengths in some areas, as well as areas to improve upon.

The literature from many health-related disciplines is concerned with professionalism both at the level of training programs and in the clinical practice after graduation. For example, fields such as medicine (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2007), occupational therapy (Randolph, 2003), pharmacy (Hammer, Berger, & Beardsley, 2003), and nursing (Clooman, Davis, & Burnett, 1999) all view professionalism as a critical variable in clinical practice and in training programs. But it is not only in so-called “white collar” positions that professionalism is important. Even in jobs that are technically not “professional,” we have certain standards of demeanor that are expected. For example, when you take your car in for repair you expect a certain degree of professionalism from the employees. We expect restaurant employees to behave professionally when serving customers. Professional behavior is an important part of every job from plumbing and carpentry to lawn maintenance and selling of automobiles. In all of these fields we expect the practitioners to have certain knowledge and skills that allow them to competently perform the job, and we expect to be treated with respect. If these expectations are not met, people tend to not return for additional services.

It should be no surprise to students that professionalism is an important and critical component in the practice of speech-language pathology. When clients and other professionals interact with the SLP, there are certain expectations for professionalism. What are some practical ways you

can show that you are a professional? The general public expects an SLP to work in a physical setting with an appearance that instills confidence in clients and represents the professional as someone to be respected as a clinician. The language we use with clients and people from other disciplines should be professional in tone and content. The reports we generate in the course of assessment and treatment of patients should reflect the specialization and integrity of our field. Wilkinson, Wade, and Knock (2009) identified several themes when researching the definition of professionalism. These included honesty/integrity, confidentiality, respect, demeanor, empathy/rapport, organization, punctuality, and responsibility.

Professionalism is not just about how clients and other disciplines perceive us; it is also about how it makes others feel about themselves. If you treat a client with empathy and respect, it will create an environment that is conducive to positive clinical change. Conversely, a client who feels disrespected, judged, or misunderstood may have decreased motivation or participation in therapy activities.

You can see that professionalism is expected not only of seasoned clinicians, but of clinicians in training as well. One objective of this book is to help students realize the importance of professionalism in becoming an SLP and how one’s behavior, language, and writing are important factors in becoming a professional. You may be wondering why someone would not choose to act professional. It may be ignorance regarding a certain area or a choice to take an easier, more convenient route.

It is not difficult to recognize unprofessional demeanor, as illustrated by this account by Joseph Berkley, a businessman who is suffering from depression.

I was seeking help for my depression, so I searched online for “professional counseling services” and found Dr. Beck. When I arrived at the office, I found the receptionist complaining on her cell phone about the patient she had just checked out. After several minutes, she got off the phone and glanced up at me. When I told her I had an appointment with Dr. Beck, she told me to follow the signs to room 112. I navigated my way through the halls, found room 112, and knocked on the door. A loud voice from inside the room yelled, “Who is it?” I felt uncomfortable announcing my name for others to hear, so I replied softly as I opened the door. Room 112 revealed a man sitting behind a cluttered desk in a t-shirt and sweatpants, finishing a bag of potato chips. Cluttering the desk were old files and paperwork from previous patients. He greeted me by saying, “What’s your name, again? I didn’t have time to look at my notes.” It took me months to work up the courage to make an appointment with a counselor, and now I’m doubtful if this person I’m sitting across from is someone I can trust to help me. It became clear that professionalism is not conferred on a person by simply earning a degree.

The extreme example above illustrates lack of professionalism on many levels. The next day, Joseph tells us of his second attempt at finding help.

I had postponed making an appointment with a psychologist for months now. Hesitantly, I opened the double doors to Dr. Tyson’s office building and walked up to the receptionist’s window. The receptionist welcomed me to the office as she handed me an information packet to complete. After I signed in, she told me Dr. Tyson was expecting me and invited me to have a seat in the waiting room. Five minutes later,

before I could even crack open the book I’d brought to pass the time, a man in a freshly pressed suit emerged from behind the waiting room door. He walked directly to me and introduced himself. I put away my book and followed him out of the waiting room. Dr. Tyson escorted me to his office while we discussed our mutual appreciation for the crisp fall weather outside. We arrived at his office, a modest, yet tidy, room warmly lit by the natural light coming in through the window. Dr. Tyson asked me to have a seat and explained his goals for the session. He then asked me questions related to the concerns I had expressed over the phone. It was clear that he was sincerely interested in me as a person, not just another patient, and I felt the fear and hesitancy I had built up for so long start to disappear.

The overall difference between these two vignettes could be described in terms of physical appearances of the offices, demeanor of the office staff, the appearance of the psychologists, and the language used by the psychologists. However, an overall discriminating variable between the two scenarios is the construct of professionalism. In one situation, professional behavior was lacking, and in the other it was not. Again, we know professionalism when we see it, but it is difficult to exactly quantify. That is probably because being professional involves many variables that all interact in complex ways. There are certain characteristics of a professional that not only include duties (e.g., assessment and treatment in the case of the SLP), but also interactions (engagements) and personal attributes (character or skill).

One common thread running through the concept of professionalism is the idea that it is demonstrated largely through various forms of communication. The physical

properties of a clinical environment and your appearance communicate important information about professionalism, as illustrated in the vignettes. Nonverbal communication can indicate confidence and expertise, as well as empathy for the client. Verbal communication with clients and other professionals can be a clear indication of a clinician’s knowledge about the field and ability to perform assessment and treatment activities. Finally, written communication (e.g., letters, reports, treatment plans,

progress notes) represents the clinician to others when face-to-face interactions are not possible. The notion of communication is inseparable from the construct of professionalism. It is how professionalism manifests itself to clients and other professionals. Thus, it is not simply a coincidence that we have used the term *professional communication* in the title of this textbook. The term is very broad and includes both written as well as verbal interactions. Figure 1–1 shows examples of professional communi-

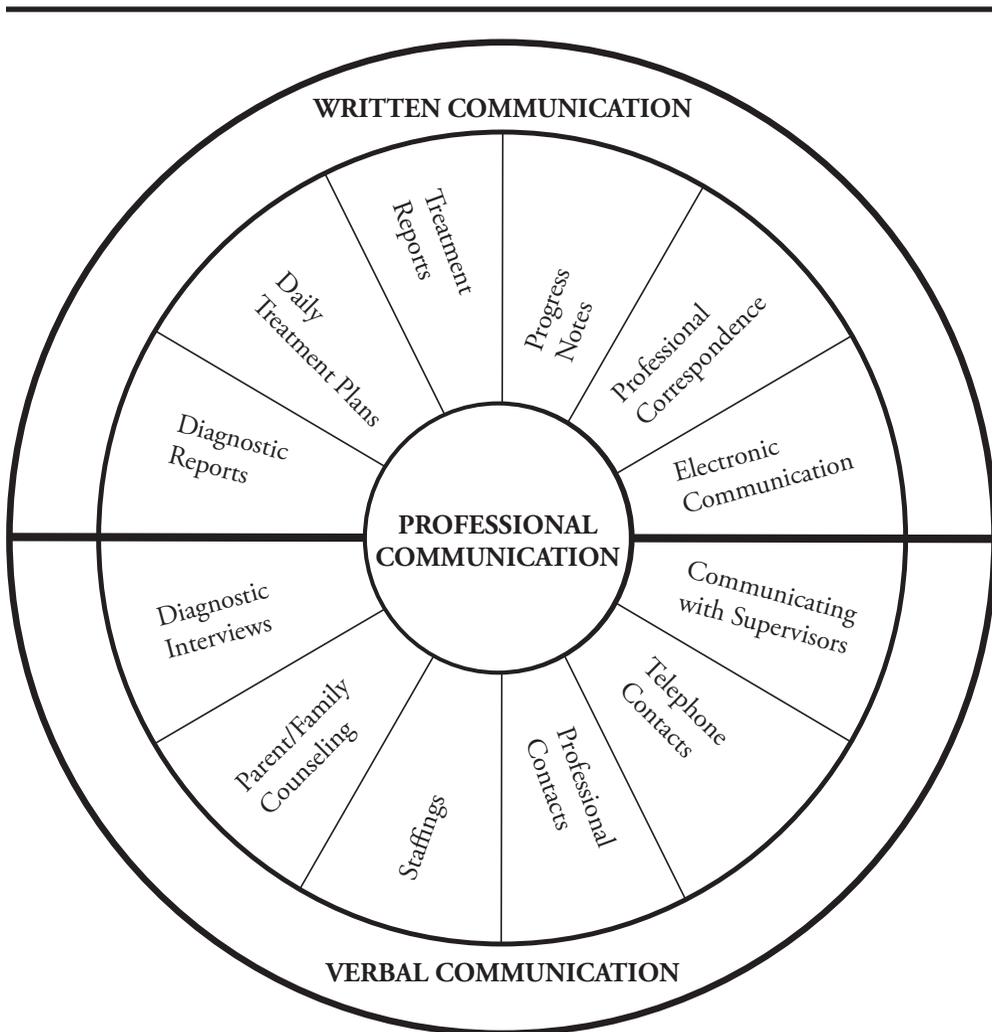


Figure 1–1. The two modalities of professional communication.

cation that represent the written and verbal modalities. Although we will be spending more time on the written forms of professional communication, it is important to address verbal communication as well. Let us spend a little time discussing the types of professional communication illustrated in Figure 1–1. In subsequent chapters of the present text we cover each of these areas in more detail.

Professional Written Communication

Both students and professionals are required to generate professional documents related to evaluations, treatment planning, and treatment reporting. All of the following reports may be shared with patients, caregivers, and allied professionals to ensure the highest quality of care. In addition, paperwork is required by third-party payers. Depending on your setting, the clinical record may be electronic or written. Figure 1–1 shows several important areas of professional written communication:

- 1. Diagnostic reports:** These are clinical reports that summarize the results of a formal assessment of communication abilities, including standardized and nonstandardized testing. The diagnostic report paints a clear picture of the patient's communication abilities, including strengths and weaknesses. It becomes part of a patient's clinical record and is often transmitted, with patient permission, to other professionals. Our reports represent not only the student who wrote them, but the student's clinical supervisor and the facility (university, hospital, school system) that performed the assessment.
- 2. Daily treatment plans:** Students in training are often required to develop written goals and procedures for a session in the form of a treatment plan that is submitted to the clinical supervisor for review and approval. The treatment plan outlines the plan for the therapy session with regard to goals and procedures. Students may also be asked to include rationales from theory or research for goal selection and the use of particular procedures in the treatment plan. The treatment plan should represent the result of considerable thought by the student after reviewing the case information, appropriate textbooks, class notes on the appropriate disorder, and discussions with the clinical supervisor.
- 3. Treatment reports:** These reports are designed to summarize the progress of a patient in a treatment program and address changes in behavior for goals and objectives of therapy over a period of time. These reports become part of a patient's file and serve to communicate the treatment approach and progress to other professionals or future students who will provide treatment in subsequent semesters. For example, a patient being seen in the university clinic may also be seen in the public schools, and treatment reports are routinely sent to the SLP in the school system to make him or her aware of the patient's progress at the university.
- 4. Progress notes:** Progress notes are short synopses written on a session by session, weekly, or monthly basis. They are part of the clinical record and summarize the patient's performance and progress toward short-term goals, benchmarks, and objectives. Progress notes are representative of the data and outcomes of therapy sessions and may be shared