

Grice's Maxims: Rules for Effective Conversation

For most of us, conversation is an intuitive, passive practice. We're used to the contours of natural speech and writing, and we often make contributions to everyday interactions almost without thinking. Our habits of communication can come as natural as breathing. But when communication breaks down, there's always the question of where things went wrong. How did we manage to confuse others when trying to convey key information? Or how did a friendly debate turn into a shouting match?

With how important conversation and communication are to our lives, it's surprising how little we think about them. But before we get to the point where communication goes sideways, a set of conversation "rules" called [Grice's maxims](#) can help us keep conversations on track.

Grice's maxims are a framework for actively evaluating our contributions to written and spoken discussion, aiding us in speaking clearly and intentionally. Whether it's explaining a complex philosophical or political idea or just communicating with our co-workers, these principles can guide us through our everyday conversations.

First developed by the linguist Paul Grice, these maxims were initially intended to describe the qualities of an effective conversation. Grice believed that every statement communicated in a sentence—whether spoken or written—should align well with four communicative aspects: quantity, quality, manner, and relevance.

Beyond just the descriptive, though, these maxims can have prescriptive value: By following these "maxims," or "rules," we can generate better conversations for all involved. So,

what are these rules, and how can we apply them?

1. Quantity

Quantity refers primarily to how much we are saying. Our sentences should be long enough to say what we mean but short enough to say it clearly.

For example, telling your boss, “I wasn’t able to find the file,” is generally better than saying, “I spent 20 minutes trying to clean up the folders on my computer that my 2-year-old son scrambled when he was clicking around with my mouse as I was trying to cook linguini for our family’s dinner, and after I finally got them all sorted out, I was able to get into the folder that used to hold the file. The file wasn’t there.”

Of course, the amount of information we should share will change based on whom we are communicating with. A spouse might want to know information that’s peripheral for a boss, and a good friend probably deserves more detail than a newfound acquaintance. Still, the rule of quantity applies: Information should be the appropriate length for the current situation.

2. Quality

Our words should not only have the appropriate length, but also they should have the appropriate quality. For most every conversation, this quality is one of truthfulness. We are obligated to not say things we know to be false and to not say things we don’t know to be true.

If we find that we’re not sure as to the truthfulness of a statement (for example, when we remember a general statistic but can’t recall the exact number), we should let our listener or reader know. In other words, we should work to make sure that our information is verified and true. This will ensure

that people can continue to trust us through future conversations.

3. Manner

Contrary to the two previous maxims (which deal with *what* is said), the maxim of manner considers *how* the information is said. The maxim of manner deals primarily with clarity: The manner in which we speak shouldn't obscure the value of what is being said. For instance, when communicating information to a general audience, we should avoid ambiguous or specialized words, using instead words that concisely communicate what we're trying to say.

Like the maxim of quantity, how we apply this maxim might change depending on the circumstance. I could probably get away with referencing the philosophical term [ontological parsimony](#) when talking to my theology professor; if I'm having a conversation with an 8-year-old at church, though, I'd have to avoid the word or use examples to explain what it means.

4. Relevance

The last of Grice's maxims deals with how information relates to prior conversation or written interaction. Obviously, we shouldn't spin off the conversation in a previously un navigated direction, and we shouldn't introduce a topic that has no bearing on the topic at hand. When we pay attention to the maxim of relevance, we will understand how information relates to what came before it in the interaction.

Additionally, the issue of relevance easily bleeds into the foci of the other maxims. For instance, information that violates the rule of quantity can easily become irrelevant to the issue at hand. As such, when we consider all the maxims, we are able to better fulfill the specific maxim of relevance.

Combined, Grice's rules have important bearings on how we conduct ourselves in both verbal and written conversation. Our words should be quantitatively solid, qualitatively sound, clear, and relevant. By following these guidelines and paying attention to how we are speaking, we can more effectively communicate. And whether it's having a heart-to-heart with a loved one or getting into a heated discussion with someone who has opposing views, effective conversation is something of which we can all use more.

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