

co·wonders



**cooperative  
principle**

# cooperative principle

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## What is it about:

- ways to express yourself to be understood
- conversational maxims for effective communication

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**source:** Cooperative principle by Paul Grice

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**domains:** effective communication, cooperation in communication

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## approach description:

This canva is based on the concept introduced by the philosopher of language Paul Grice, who stated:

*“Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.”*

In lean English: say what you need to say, when you need to say it, and in a way it should be said. This method assumes that speaker and listener want to (and have to) act cooperatively and mutually accept one another to be understood in a particular way.

Grice described 4 maxims of conversation:

- quantity
- quality
- relevance
- manner

Those maxims are descriptions of principles which people intuitively follow in order to guide their conversations and to make sure that they're properly understood by others. They were originally describing how people intuitively communicate, but they can be also used as guiding principles to be used for more effective communication.

**Maxim of quantity: be informative.** Provide all the information which is required for the counterpart to understand, but do not say too much. Leave out unnecessary details.



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**Maxim of quality: be truthful.** Tell the truth, do not speculate, do not say what might be wrong or things for which you lack evidence (and if you do so, then provide a disclaimer that points your doubts regarding this information).

**Maxim of relevance: be relevant.** Do not say anything irrelevant, do not change the subject.

**Maxim of manner: be clear.** Avoid language difficult to understand, avoid ambiguous language which can be interpreted in multiple ways, be brief and provide information in an order that is easy for your recipient to process it.

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## aim of use:

Cooperative principle (or Grice's maxims of conversation) can be used as a concept inviting reflection on our communication styles and ways of expressing ourselves in order to be understood. It is also a method to think about the importance of cooperation between the sender of a message and the recipient.

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## educational method:

- **Step 1: Introduction**

Introduce the basics of the Cooperative principle with the focus on 4 maxims of conversation. Note that those maxims may sound trivial, however in our conversations we often violate them (without realising we are doing so). Let participants know they will have a chance to learn to recognize the use/lack of use of the maxims, then to practice using them and as a final stage: to write questions ensuring we are following the maxims in our conversation.

- **Step 2: Detect the 4 maxims**

Divide participants in groups of 4-5 people and hand to all groups fragments of interviews with a famous person. It can be an interview from a newspaper, social channels, or video. Alternatively you can prepare a scene with your co-trainer with a conversation which on one hand follows, and on the other hand, violates the maxims of conversations and present it to participants.

Ask participants to detect the use or the violations of any of 4 maxims of conversation. Invite participants to present their findings and to discuss briefly how the process of detecting the use/violations of maxims was.

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- **Step 3: Use the 4 maxims**

Divide participants in 4 groups. Assign to each group one of the maxims of conversation. Ask groups to prepare examples of two answers to the questions you will give them.

Answer 1: needs to follow the maxim of conversation the group is assigned to.

Answer 2: needs to violate the maxim of conversation the group is assigned to.

*Example for the group of maxim of quantity:*

**Question:** “How do I get from here to the train station?”

**Answer following maxim of quantity:** “Keep walking straight until you reach the roundabout and then take the first exit”.

**Answer violating the maxim of quantity:** “Keep walking” (not providing necessary information) or “Keep walking straight, you will pass some beautiful yellow plants that are typical for this region, then reach the roundabout with the palm tree brought here from one of the islands, and then take the first exit” (answer providing too much information).

Hand to each group questions they need to prepare the answers to. Prepare different questions for each of the groups, like: “How do I bake banana cake?” “What should I pack if I spent the month of May in Galicia, Spain?” “Where is the best place to buy vegetables in Warsaw?” “How do I make a video on my phone?”, etc.

- **Step 4: Presentations**

Invite all groups to present both of their answers, starting with violating their maxim, and continuing with following the maxim. Ask the participants from other groups to guess the maxim of the group presenting and briefly discuss the idea behind the presentation in the plenary.

- **Step 5: Debriefing**

Ask learners to reflect in the plenary over the following questions:

- How were you feeling when working in your group?
- How was the process of designing the answer violating the maxim?
- How was the process of designing the answer following the maxim?
- Was it easy to recognize the maxims in the presentation of the other groups?
- How important is cooperation among the sender of the message and the recipient?
- How can the maxims support/hinder communication?



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- **Step 6: Tips to follow the maxims**

To close the activity ask learners to brainstorm together on the guiding questions - reminders on how to build communication in line with the Grice's maxims. Invite participants to propose ideas and possibly use the following questions as inspiration:

- Am I including all the necessary information?
- Am I being as concise as possible, by omitting unnecessary details and irrelevant information?
- Am I certain that everything that I'm saying is true, and can be backed up with evidence? If not, am I sure that this information should be included, and did I provide a disclaimer showing my doubts about it?
- Am I using language that is clear and without any ambiguity?
- Am I presenting the information in a structured, well-organized, and logically ordered manner?

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## read more:

- **Book:** Paul Grice, "Logic and Conversation" in Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts, edited by P. Cole and J. J. Morgan (1975)
- **Book:** Paul Grice, "Studies in the Way of Words" (1991)
- **Article:** Grice's Maxims of Conversation by Itamar Shatz in Efectiviology
- **Book:** Mikael Krogerus, Roman Tschäppeler, "The communication book. 44 ideas for better conversations every day" (2019)



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