

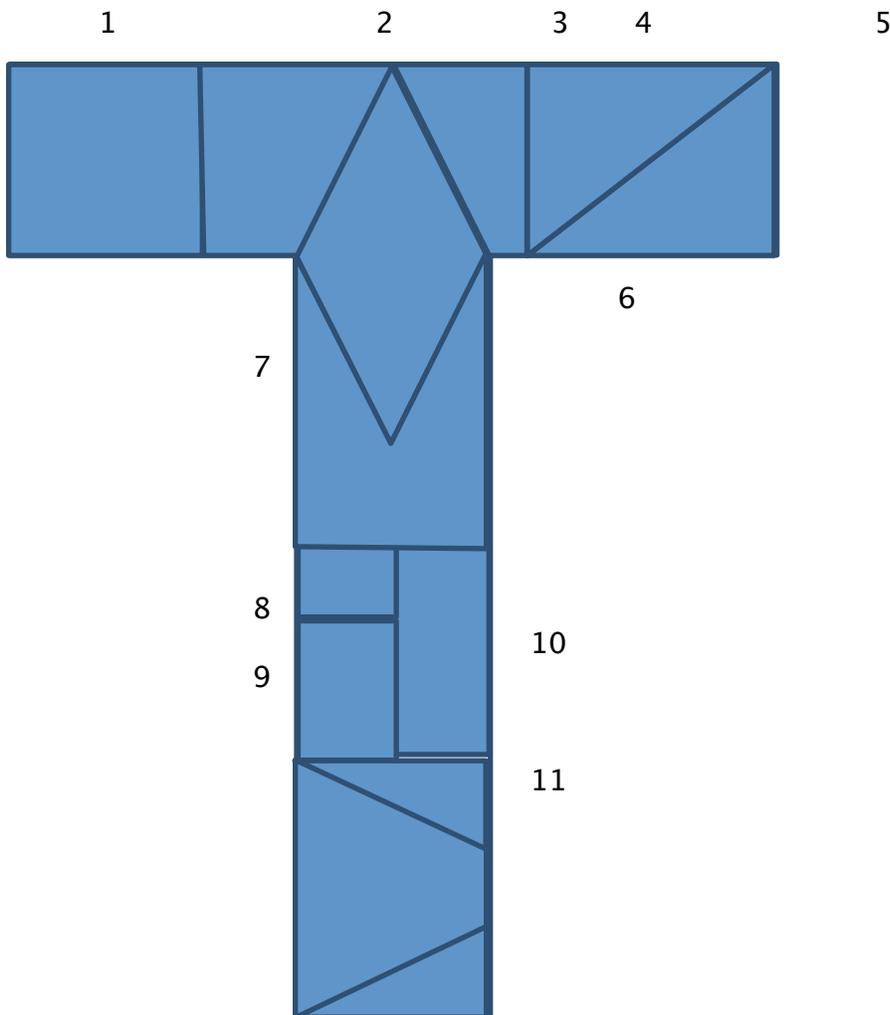
# Communication and the Fractured T

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This exercise provides a concrete exercise which can become a platform for describing and analyzing what happens when communication occurs. It has applications for writing as well as speaking and reading.

- The teacher asks the students in the class to arrange their desks in a large circle if this is possible. Otherwise they can sit in some way along the walls.
- Two desks are reserved and placed in the middle of the room, back to back. You now have a “fish-bowl” arrangement.
- The teacher arranges an assembled puzzle in the shape of a capital T on one of the desks, and covers it with a piece of paper. On the other, another set of the same pieces is spread out randomly, and covered.

Pieces assembled

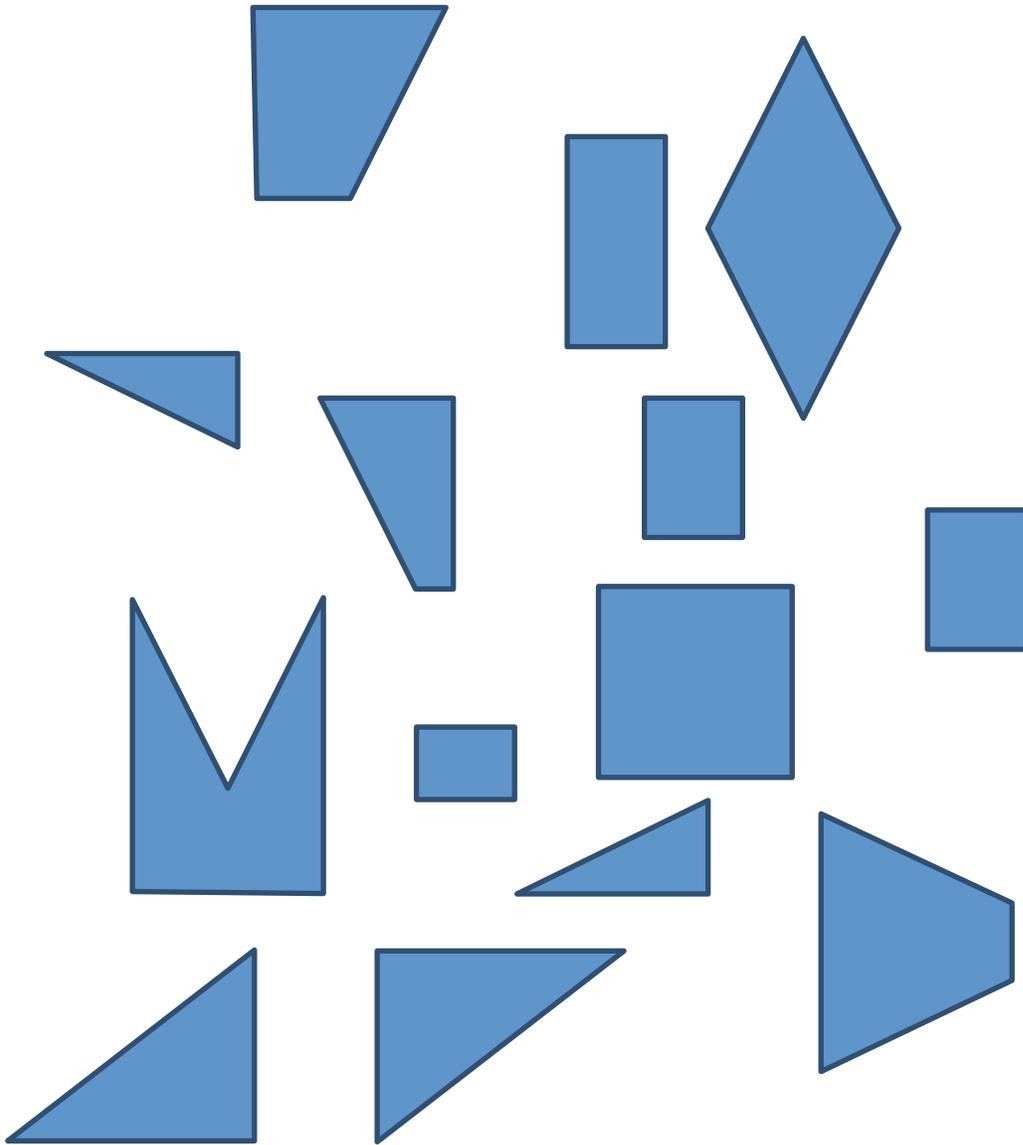


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Pieces spread randomly.



- The teacher explains that this is an exercise in communication. The students on the periphery will be researchers, observing and making notes on how the two students in the center communicate with each other.
- The teacher explains that this physical arrangement is called a “fish bowl” and is often used in research of various kinds.
- Without revealing the shape of the puzzle, the teacher tells the class what is on the two desks in the center, and that they will observe two students, whose job will be to get the random pieces arranged in the same way as the assembled puzzle.
- The two students, sitting back-to-back, may say anything they wish to each other, but they may not look at each other’s pieces.
- The teachers asks for two volunteers to work on the puzzle, or appoints two students to do it.
- The researchers around the room should not say anything during the exercise, or laugh, or make any gestures, or help the two students in the center in any way. The researchers should remain strictly objective. If they wish, they may get up and approach the two students in the center from time to time to get a better look at the puzzle and the pieces, but the researchers should not react in any way.
- The exercise will conclude either when the students in the center complete the task and announce they are finished, or when they want to stop.
- Following the completion of the exercise, the class as a whole will discuss what was observed about communication.

This could take anywhere from five to 30 minutes. If there is only a certain amount of time available, when giving the directions initially the teacher could say that after fifteen or 20 minutes time would be called and the class would proceed to the whole-class discussion.

For the researchers to remain objective is sometimes hard to do, and the teacher may have to give reminders about this.

There are usually going to be road-blocks and problems in communicating, so the teacher does his or her best to assure that the two

students who have volunteered to be in the center are confident enough to deal successfully with set-backs while being observed. To better assure this, the teacher might choose these two students rather than ask for volunteers. This should be an exercise where the students can have some fun as well as work at a serious task.

When the students in the middle have finished, or decide they want to stop, or the teacher calls time—at that point the class as a whole may look at the puzzles, and the two students in the center join the rest of the class in the big circle. Sometimes the newly assembled puzzle is correct, sometimes not. If it is not, the teacher can point out the parts that have been assembled correctly and praise the two central participants for that. The teacher thanks them for contributing so substantially to the class's learning, praises them for particular instances of creative or effective communication, and asks them to comment on their experience and their feelings about being in the fish bowl.

Then the teacher leads the class in a discussion of what they observed. The purpose of this exercise is to articulate methods of communication (uses of rhetorical strategies).

In a recent enactment of this exercise in my classes, my students and I observed several devices:

- Using technical, specialized language (in this case from the discipline of geometry: rectangle, triangle, rhombus, trapezoid).
- Making comparisons.
- Talking about relationships—how various pieces and parts of the puzzle relate to each other.
- Using metaphorical thinking. Most students will talk about a “diamond.” This is not an original metaphor, but it is one nonetheless. One time, however, a student who was adept at speaking metaphorically told his receiver that the longest rectangle, piece no. 10, should be placed like a skyscraper and not a hot dog. This was effective. Another time another student said that piece no. 7 looked like a pair of pants, and it should be placed with the legs sticking up. Even though these instances occurred in past years, I mention them every year.
- Describing pieces precisely.

- Repeating.
- Working from the whole to the parts (“OK, we’re going to make these pieces form a capital T.”) Other students start with the parts and work towards the whole. We see both of these strategies used in general communication.
- Speaking about the puzzle in hypothetical terms: “Suppose you were to divide the stem of the T into three parts....”
- Talking with a certain tone. Sometimes the two students in the center are helpful and cooperative, sometimes they get frustrated, even angry. Sometimes they become impatient, or they are gentle and understanding.

And there could be other observations. In short, this exercise presents an opportunity to observe communication first-hand and to articulate several of its most common methods and devices from direct observation, as well as to see the pitfalls that can plague senders.

On another level, this exercise also demonstrates how a communicator (either a writer or speaker) can confer with a partner about his/her communication. We often see sender and receiver checking in with each other to ascertain what is getting across, and we see revision based on a receiver’s needs.

At various times, the two students in the center both play sender and receiver. While the student with the assembled pieces is the primary sender, the primary receiver also becomes a sender by asking questions and making comments. This helps the primary sender put him/herself in the receiver’s place, like a writer trying to put him/herself in the role of a reader of a draft.

Ultimately we come up with a definition of what “communication” is, and I rely on a definition I learned from Luis Forsdale: communication is the successful receiving of a message the sender intends to be received. If this does not happen, miscommunication occurs. This places a great responsibility on any sender and is a challenging standard to accept. Of course, this is only one way of looking at communication.

I have tried several ways to break a capital T into pieces, and there are many ways to make the puzzle easier or more challenging.

It is important to highlight that the methods of communication in this exercise, which is done orally, can be applied to writing and to reading—in the analysis of how text is put together with the use of rhetorical strategies.

One of my most satisfying moments as a teacher occurred after a recent playing out of this exercise. We had been talking in previous classes about rhetorical strategies, a difficult concept for many of my students to grasp. After watching two students wrestle with the fractured T, a student told me that he understood rhetorical strategies much better. When students do this exercise at the beginning of the year, I find I can continue to refer to it often as we talk about writing and speaking throughout the year.

Thanks to Meg Ziegler for feedback on drafts of this write-up.

#### Background

I first read about this exercise in *Cavalcade of Poems*, Scholastic, 1968, edited by George Bennett and Paul Molloy. They used it to sharpen students' perceptions of objects and people by drawing attention to precise detail (which could be another reason for doing the exercise).

On-line sites say this exercise was developed early in the last century and show a puzzle with altogether differently-shaped pieces.