

Dr Jan Jervis, PhD



FREE RESOURCE

The AAVA Framework

A Research-Backed Guide to Bridging Communication Gaps for Non-Designers



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The AAVA Framework serves as a guide for clearer conversations. It addresses a frequently overlooked cause of communication breakdown in the modern workplace—our shared understanding of words! Give it a try.

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Confusing Conversations

The Everyday Challenge

Confusing conversations are a part of everyday life. Our words are often misunderstood, even when we believe we are communicating clearly. Surprisingly, commonly used words can also cause confusion!

Communication breakdowns are particularly prevalent when different professional groups, like those in design and business, try to work together. My PhD research uncovered a persistent “Design Gap” rooted in these very challenges.

The turning point in my research came when I focused on a 100-year-old theory: **Symbolic Interactionism**.

At the time, I had no idea that the insights provided by this social theory would not only become the foundation of my PhD but also change how I see the world. It took me eight years to complete my PhD, which included three intense studies and much angst, to arrive at a framework for bridging communication gaps: **AAVA**.

AAVA is an acronym that can be broken down as:

Accept that we all make **Assumptions**,
be conscious of our **Vocabulary**, and
Acknowledge a shared meaning of our words.

This may sound like common sense. Unfortunately, it is not. Read on to discover how the theory of Symbolic Interactionism helped me find AAVA.

Symbolic Interactionism

(Simplified)

What is Symbolic Interactionism? (Stay with me; I'll break it down and be brief!).

Symbolic Interactionism is a social theory from the early 20th century that explains how we give meaning to things through our interaction with others.

Humans use words (language) to communicate. It was often thought that these meanings came from institutions and systems and they were “given” to us.

In reality, it is the opposite. Symbolic Interactionism shows us how we make our meaning of things—**together**. Think about it. Symbolic Interactionism shows us how important other people and social settings are to the meaning and sense we make of “things”—including the words we use.

It is such a simple and powerful concept, but it was a revolutionary theory for its time.

100 Years On, Still Relevant: Mead & Blumer's Insights

Symbolic Interactionism was developed by George Herbert Mead, a philosopher and sociologist from the University of Chicago, who believed language connects how we think, act, and relate to society.

His ideas were formalised by Herbert Blumer, a colleague and Mead's former student, who in 1969 coined the term Symbolic Interactionism. The term stuck and became the theory's name.

Blumer distilled Symbolic Interactionism into three (3) key concepts that I showcase on the next page.

Symbolic Interactionism

(Simplified)

Blumer's three premises

1. We act toward things based on the meanings we give them.

Think of it this way, imagine you receive an email from a colleague with the subject line **Quick chat?** If, from past experience, you know their meaning of "Quick chat?" is usually a "long, unplanned discussion that derails my afternoon," you might hesitate to respond immediately or even feel a slight dread. Your action (or inaction) is directly based on the meaning you've personally assigned to that phrase.

2. Those meanings come from social interactions.

But where did that specific meaning of "Quick chat?" come from? It wasn't something you were born knowing. It developed through your interactions with that particular colleague or perhaps from observing how others reacted to similar requests or from the general communication culture within your team. Through these shared experiences and observations, you've established a specific meaning for "Quick chat?".

3. We constantly interpret and adjust those meanings as we go through life.

Blumer believed that three (3) was the most critical premise. Let's say that colleague starts using the subject line "Quick chat?" for genuinely brief and impactful discussions. Over time, the meaning of "Quick chat?" (for you) will adjust in your mind, perhaps now signifying "a genuinely brief, helpful conversation." Your future actions will change accordingly – you'll respond more readily, feeling less dread. This shows how our meanings are not static; they morph and change as we do, constantly shaped by our ongoing interactions.

Blumer's premises were criticised for being simplistic. Yet, I find them an incredibly helpful introduction to a complex perspective. AAVA, my framework, is founded on these three principles. See the next page!

INTRODUCING AAVA

Meet AAVA

A Framework for Bridging Communication Gaps



AAVA is a communication framework that helps us bridge gaps and reach a “shared understanding” of our words.

The acronym ‘AAVA’ stands for:”

accept
assumptions
vocabulary
acknowledge

To me, AAVA (I also refer to AAVA as ‘she’ or ‘her’!) is more than a model for fixing communication gaps – originally her focus was the miscommunication between design and business; yet, it is clear to me now that we all need to be more aware of what our vocabulary means to others.

AAVA offers a practical way to help people from different backgrounds or disciplines work better together, especially regarding fuzzy or complex topics like design, digital, or strategy. Let’s break down the power of AAVA.

AAVA Four Steps to Clarity



ACCEPT that people have different interpretations of words, and **ASSUMPTIONS** are always present. Therefore, check a group's **VOCABULARY** and **ACKNOWLEDGE**, and document shared meanings of key terms—even common ones.

1. Accept

Before having better conversations, we must **Accept** that not everyone shares our worldview of even common words. This is the crucial first step towards genuinely productive dialogue.

2. Assumptions

We all assume others understand what we mean—but they often don't. If even common words such as “design” can cause miscommunication, so words like “strategy,” “brand,” or “UX” certainly could. When we make **Assumptions** about what others are thinking, we set ourselves up for confusion, frustration, and missed opportunities.

3. Vocabulary

Words matter—but only if we agree on what they mean. The same word can have different meanings depending on who says it, who hears it, and the context in which it's used. The **Vocabulary** step is about openly clarifying key terms and agreeing on their meaning for the current discussion.

4. Acknowledge

Acknowledging our meanings makes shared understanding visible. Whether through a quick verbal check-in during a meeting, a shared document, or referencing a glossary, confirm the understanding you've built or the differences you've identified. This isn't about endless debates; it's about making sure everyone is on the same page before you move forward.

Taking a moment to unpack what we really mean by a word can save hours of miscommunication later.

Start Using AAVA Today

Pick a Meeting

Before your next team meeting, choose one or two potentially ambiguous terms relevant to the discussion (e.g., “deliverable,” “feedback,” “innovation”).

Practice AAVA’s “Vocabulary” Step

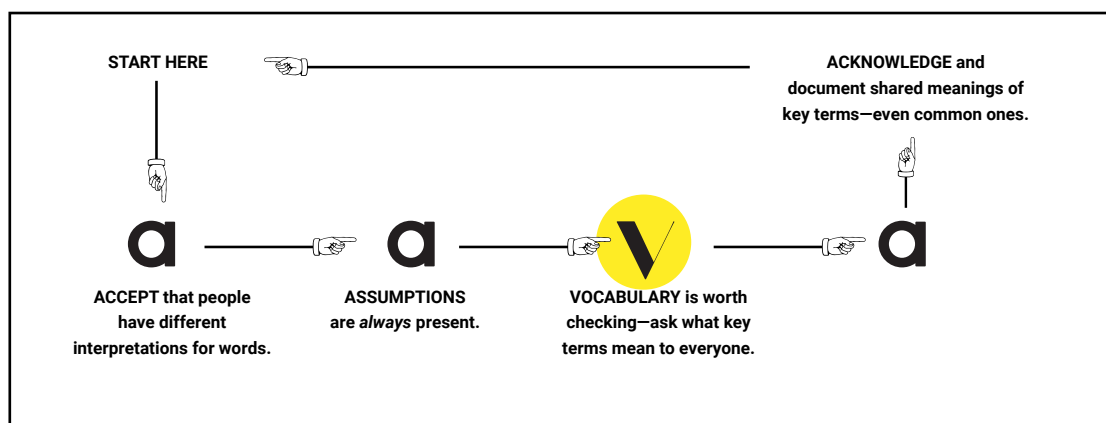
At the start of the meeting, briefly state the term and ask, “Just to ensure we’re on the same page, what does [Term] mean to everyone in the context of this discussion?”

Acknowledge

Once you hear different perspectives, acknowledge them and propose a working definition for the current conversation.

Observe the Difference

Notice how this simple act of clarification changes the flow and understanding of your conversation.



The result? Fewer arguments. Stronger outcomes.

AAVA is a mindset and a practical tool. Once you start using it, you’ll see its application everywhere—from project meetings to family conversations. You don’t need to understand all the philosophy to benefit from the framework, but it’s there, under the hood, adding depth and credibility from years of research.

AAVA Team Guide

Use this simple framework with your team or at your next group meeting to clarify key terms and avoid misunderstandings. *Accept* that we all make *Assumptions*, be conscious of our *Vocabulary*, and *Acknowledge* the shared meaning of our words.



ACCEPT

Start by accepting that others may think differently than you—and that's ok.



ASSUMPTIONS

Check your assumptions before using "familiar" words without clarification.



VOCABULARY

Key terms can have multiple meanings. Ask, "What does this word mean to you?"



ACKNOWLEDGE

Agree on a shared definition and write it down where everyone can see it.

TRY IT IN YOUR NEXT MEETING

1. Pick one term that came up in conversation.
2. Ask: What does this mean for you?
3. Listen and compare responses.
4. Agree on a shared definition.
5. Write it down and keep it visible.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

About Dr Jan Jarvis, PhD



Hello! I'm Jan Jarvis, and I spent eight years immersed in research for my PhD, exploring the fascinating yet often frustrating communication breakdowns between design and business. My goal was to understand why this gap exists and how to bridge it.

The AAVA framework is the practical outcome of that intense study, reflecting the insights and solutions I uncovered. I believe that clear communication isn't just a nice-to-have; it's essential for innovation, collaboration, and success in our increasingly complex professional world.

Next steps

This download is just the beginning. If you're ready to dive deeper into building shared understanding and truly upskill in design and digital communication, download the [Non-Designer's Handbook. 65 + Essential Design and Digital Concepts.](#)

Coming soon

AAVA Clarity Canvas: Team Vocabulary Builder.

Stay connected

Follow me on Instagram: [@dr.janjervis.phd](#)

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