

What Is Landing?

Why “the message landed” may be one of communication’s least precise conclusions

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RN-01 | Version 1.0 | Published | 29 September 2026

RESEARCH QUESTION

What can we legitimately mean when we say that a message “landed”?

ABSTRACT

Communication practice often uses “landing” as if it were a single receiver-side outcome. The literature assembled in this note gives good reasons to separate outcomes such as comprehension, interpretation, retention, expression, action and onward transmission.

The practical consequence is evidentiary rather than terminological: evidence for one of these outcomes should not silently be treated as evidence for the others. The note therefore treats “landing” as an umbrella question, not as a new construct, scale or universal sequence of effects.

KEY FINDINGS

- 1. Landing is not one outcome.** Understanding, judgment, retention, expression, action and onward transmission can diverge.
- 2. Time changes the evidentiary question.** Immediate comprehension and what remains later are not interchangeable claims.
- 3. Visible response does not reveal the whole path.** Action or retransmission can be relevant evidence without establishing every prior receiver state.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

One word, several questions

Communication practice likes short verdicts. Did they get it? Did it land? Are managers aligned? Do customers understand?

The trouble starts when evidence for one question is allowed to answer another. Suppose someone can accurately repeat what was said. That tells us something about comprehension or recall. It does not tell us whether they agree. Suppose someone says the message was convincing. That tells us something about their judgment of the message. It does not tell us what they will do next week. Suppose the requested behaviour occurs.

That matters. But the behaviour does not tell us, by itself, whether the person agreed, trusted the sender or interpreted the request exactly as intended. Different research traditions have good reasons to keep these outcomes apart. Work on organisational sensemaking treats people as active interpreters rather than empty destinations for transmitted meaning. Research on comprehension distinguishes representations of wording from the meaning and situation people construct from it. Learning research separates different classes of outcome rather than treating learning as one undifferentiated result. And research on implementation and transfer exists precisely because knowing, agreeing, adopting and using are not the same event.[1–5] The fields differ.

The warning is consistent. One visible response should not be made to stand in for another.

Analytic inference: what a receiver expresses is evidence about that expression; it is not a complete record of what they understood, retained, judged or would do.

What did they make of it?

A message never arrives alone. It arrives in a situation already in progress. Someone listening to a reorganisation announcement may have heard rumours for weeks. A manager may have helped design the change. Another may be hearing about it for the first time. One person may be listening for what happens to their role. Another may be trying to work out whether a promise made three months earlier still stands.

The words can be identical. What those words become for each person need not be. That is why asking what someone made of communication is not the same as asking whether they can repeat it. A receiver may find something credible, irrelevant, threatening, useful, obvious or impossible. Those judgments matter. They are not contained in the file that was sent.

That creates an asymmetry we often forget. The sending side leaves excellent records. A deck can be opened. A recording can be replayed. Two drafts can be compared. An email can be retrieved. There is rarely an equivalent file containing what the communication became for everyone who encountered it.

What remained?

Then time gets involved. Someone can leave a meeting able to repeat almost everything that was said. A week later, one idea remains. A condition has gone. An exception has disappeared. Or the wording has vanished while the underlying meaning is still available. That is not unusual. Research on memory and comprehension gives us good reasons not to treat exact wording and retained meaning as the same thing. Fuzzy-trace theory, for example, distinguishes relatively literal or verbatim representations from meaning-based gist.[6]

So these are not the same question: What did they understand? and What remained?

Immediate evidence is evidence about the immediate moment. It should not be quietly treated as evidence about what survives.

What did they do?

Action looks more solid because action is visible. People used the new process. Customers signed up. Managers completed the cascade. Employees complied with the instruction.

If action was the outcome that mattered, this may be much more useful evidence than whether people liked the communication. It still does not make the path transparent. The same behaviour can come from different places. A person may comply because they agree. Because their manager instructed them to. Because the system gives them no alternative. Because the consequences of not complying are clear.

Because they interpreted the instruction differently but arrived at the same action. The action tells us that an action occurred. It does not automatically tell us what happened before it. This distinction has close parallels in training-transfer and implementation research. Capability under one set of conditions, adoption, adherence and spontaneous use in another setting are not interchangeable outcomes.[4,5,7] A visible outcome can be highly relevant evidence. The mistake is asking it to prove more than it can.

What happened when it travelled again?

Communication rarely stops with the first receiver. A manager hears an announcement and explains it to a team. A colleague paraphrases a decision. A customer tells another customer what they were told. An AI system turns a document into a summary. Now the receiver has become a sender. The serial reproduction tradition, beginning with Bartlett and continuing in later experimental work, gives us ample reason to expect information to change as one person's reconstruction becomes the next person's input. [8] But change is not automatically failure. Imagine a central message says: The new operating model will improve cross-functional accountability. A local manager knows that this will not answer the question waiting in the team meeting. So the manager says: From Monday, Operations approves this category of customer exception. The second version is less faithful to the original wording. It may be much more useful. The opposite can happen too.

A manager can preserve the approved words almost perfectly while losing the one threshold, condition or exception that later determines what people actually do. Textual fidelity is therefore not enough to tell us whether what mattered survived the relay. The question is not always: Did the wording survive? Sometimes the better question is: Did what had to remain true survive?

Relay needs its own evidence.

So what is landing?

The obvious move would be to replace the vague word with a precise definition. That would only move the problem. If landing means understanding, we lose judgment, retention and action. If it means retention, we lose what someone understood and used before the wording faded. If it means behaviour, we collapse all the different routes that can produce the same behaviour. There is no need to invent a new scientific construct. Keep the ordinary word.

Just stop asking it to do more analytical work than it can carry. When someone says a message landed, ask: What do you mean? Do you mean:

what was understood;

what the receiver made of it;

what remained later;

what the receiver expressed;

what the receiver did;

what travelled onwards?

These are not six stages. They are not a new communication model. They are different questions. Evidence for one should not silently become evidence for all the others.

The problem is not a lack of measures

Communication has plenty of metrics. Reach. Views. Clicks. Recall. Satisfaction. Sentiment. Agreement. Engagement. Intentions. Behaviour. Business outcomes.

The harder question is what each one can legitimately tell us. A click can establish that someone clicked. A favourable rating can establish a favourable rating. Accurate recall can tell us something about what was remembered. A changed behaviour can establish that behaviour changed. The problem begins when the interpretation grows faster than the evidence. That is why landing works perfectly well

in conversation and badly as a conclusion. It puts several receiver-side outcomes into one word and invites whatever evidence happens to be available to answer for the whole thing.

The correction is not another dashboard. It is earlier than that. Before measuring communication, decide what you are actually trying to know happened. Then ask what evidence could establish it. And stop when the evidence stops. “It landed” sounds like a conclusion. Most of the time, it is an unfinished question.

WHAT THIS NOTE ESTABLISHES

Evidence level: cross-disciplinary synthesis of established research; no original empirical data.

The synthesis supports three bounded propositions: “landing” can refer to several distinguishable receiver-side outcomes; evidence is specific to the outcome and moment observed; and observable response or onward transmission can matter without revealing the complete receiver-side pathway.

CLAIM BOUNDARY

This Research Note does not propose landing as a new psychological construct, a validated scale, a universal measure or a sequence of communication effects.

It does not claim that evidence for one receiver-side outcome establishes another, or that one observation reveals the full path by which a message was interpreted, retained or acted on.

The practical boundary is simple: what exactly are you claiming happened, and what does your evidence actually establish?

SOURCES & NOTES

1. Sensemaking. Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Weick's work provides established prior art for treating organisational actors as active sensemakers rather than passive endpoints for transmitted meaning. This Research Note does not claim that insight as new.
2. Kintsch, W. (1986). Learning From Text. *Cognition and Instruction*, 3(2), 87–108. DOI: 10.1207/s1532690xcio302_1. Kintsch's work distinguishes levels of representation involved in comprehension, including the wording of a text, its propositional meaning and a situation model integrating text with prior knowledge.
3. Kraiger, K., Ford, J. K., & Salas, E. (1993). Application of Cognitive, Skill-Based, and Affective Theories of Learning Outcomes to New Methods of Training Evaluation. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 78(2), 311–328. DOI: 10.1037/0021-9010.78.2.311. Relevant here because learning outcomes are not treated as one undifferentiated result.
4. Pathman, D. E., et al. (1996). The Awareness-to-Adherence Model of the Steps to Clinical Guideline Compliance. *Medical Care*, 34(9), 873–889. PMID 8792778. Distinguishes awareness, agreement, adoption and adherence rather than assuming one outcome implies the next.
5. Vakratsas, D., & Ambler, T. (1999). How Advertising Works: What Do We Really Know? *Journal of Marketing*, 63(1), 26–43. DOI: 10.1177/002224299906300103. Their review found little basis for assuming a single universal temporal hierarchy of communication effects.
6. Reyna, V. F., & Brainerd, C. J. (1995). Fuzzy-trace theory: An interim synthesis. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 7(1), 1–75. DOI: 10.1016/1041-6080(95)90031-4. Fuzzy-trace theory distinguishes verbatim representations from meaning-based gist; the bounded use here is that exact wording and retained meaning need not have the same trajectory through time.
7. Barnett, S. M., & Ceci, S. J. (2002). When and Where Do We Apply What We Learn? A Taxonomy for Far Transfer. *Psychological Bulletin*, 128(4), 612–637. DOI: 10.1037/0033-2909.128.4.612. PMID 12081085. Transfer varies with

the relationship between learning and application conditions; demonstrated capability under prompted conditions is not identical to spontaneous use elsewhere.

8. Serial reproduction and retransmission. Bartlett, F. C. (1932). Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. See also Kashima, Y. (2000). Maintaining Cultural Stereotypes in the Serial Reproduction of Narratives. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 26(5), 594–604. DOI: 10.1177/0146167200267007. Kashima used five-person communication chains to examine how information was retained across social transmission. The claim made here is deliberately narrower than saying retransmission necessarily degrades communication: transformation can also make information locally more usable.

PUBLICATION INFORMATION

AUTHOR Peter van Poelgeest

PUBLISHER COMMODYN Research

EVIDENCE TYPE Literature-based synthesis; no original empirical data

VERSION 1.0

COMPETING INTERESTS No competing interests declared.

AI ASSISTANCE AI tools were used for research support, editorial development and document production. Source selection, interpretation, claim boundaries and publication decisions remain the author's responsibility.

RECOMMENDED CITATION van Poelgeest, P. (2026). What Is Landing? COMMODYN Research Note RN-01, version 1.0.