Our textbook defines interpersonal communication as “a selective, systemic, ongoing process of transaction between people who reflect and build personal knowledge of one another and create shared meanings” (Wood, 22). This type of communication occurs between myself and many other people in my life. However, the relationship that I am going to take a closer look at is the friendship that my roommate Beth and I share. We were paired up as roommates in October of last year after experiencing problems with our initial roommates. At that time we did not even know each other, but ever since then we have maintained a friendship that continues to grow to this day.

As I analyze this relationship, I am going to explore some of the different concepts we have learned about in class. I will begin by looking at the relationship development. Following that I will analyze the interpersonal climate and how that affects our friendship. Because Beth and I are both females, I will also examine gendered communication among females and compare the themes of gendered communication to Beth and me. Another element of interpersonal communication that I want to study are the relational dialectics and how we respond to them. Finally I will look at how Beth and I maintain conflict management skills, which contribute to the well being of the relationship. All of these elements of interpersonal communication will come together to better explain the friendship between Beth and me. First I am going to study the development of the relationship.
As I analyze the development of Beth’s friendship, and mine I will do so according to Bill Rawlins’s model of friendship development found in the Galvin and Cooper reader (333). I feel that it would be interesting to compare Rawlins’s stages to how our friendship actually developed and analyze the similarities and differences that I find. The first stage of Rawlins’s model is Role-Limited Interaction, and the Galvin and Cooper reader explains this as “initial interactions are characterized by social roles and rules” (333). Beth and I had spoken to each other only one time before our RAs suggested that we switch roommates and live together. Before we started living together, we barely had a full conversation; we were basically just introduced. Therefore after we came off of a poor initial roommate situation and became rooming with one another, we were both on our best behavior because we both really wanted this to work. This goes along with the role-limited interaction stage because we were going along with the expectation of how people should behave. We weren’t very familiar with one another yet, so we probably weren’t totally being ourselves. I think we both knew what we wanted in a roommate and we carried out that role. It was odd because we were put in this situation where we suddenly spent so much time together, but we were just beginning to really get to know the other person. Because we were together so much, I think that our role-limited interaction stage was probably shorter than an average non-roommate friendship. I feel this way because you can only follow the social roles so long before the real you comes out, and living with someone speeds this phase up, and this brings us to the second stage.

The second stage of Rawlins’s model is Friendly Relations (333). This is compared with the experimenting stage in the development of romantic relationships, in
which things are kind of tested out. This is a stage in my friendship with Beth that is not very prominent. I feel like we progressed through the first stage rather quickly due to the fact that we were roommates, but then this stage where you are kind of testing things out practically got skipped. I think this is because we instantly started spending a lot of time together since we were roommates. For example, we almost always went to eat meals together, and this could partly be because we were dependent upon each other. We didn’t know tons of people at school yet so it was like there wasn’t any doubt that because we were roommates we would always go places together. We subconsciously considered that to be the assumed role of a roommate, and we didn’t really stop to test out if we liked it or not. Unlike acquaintances that see each other every now and then, we were around each other a lot and really wanted our friendship to work. And we didn’t have to try to hard, because we were having a great time and it didn’t feel like we had to work at getting along. This leads us to the third stage of the model of friendship development.

Rawlins’s third stage is labeled as “moving toward friendship”. This stage is characterized by moving beyond social roles. The Galvin and Cooper reader describes this stage by saying that “talk focuses on the similarity of attitudes and values and on the exploration of differences in opinions” (334). For Beth and I, the line between the second stage and this stage is rather foggy. We never really “tested the waters” because we knew any roommate could be better than our first ones, and then we instantly began the moving toward friendship stage, combined with some role-limited interaction as we tried to be polite and not do anything that would make the other person mad. I would agree with the model in the respect that as we moved closer and closer friendship, the social roles lessened. As I learned more about Beth as a person and she learned about
me, the comfort level went up. I think we began to worry less about anyone passing judgment, and this probably occurred within the first several weeks of being roommates. This takes us to the fourth stage, which is nascent friendship.

In the fourth stage, nascent friendship, people begin thinking of themselves as friends. The Galvin and Cooper reader talks about how people in this stage participate in more varied things together and talk about a wider range of topics (334). Our textbook also adds that this stage develops rules for interacting that are sometimes not discovered until later (Wood, 277). Looking back, I can see how this stage took place with Beth and me. For instance, maybe instead of our activity being going to the cafeteria together, we would go to Galesburg on the weekend or do weird things like spending an hour coming up with the best thing to put on our answering machine message. (Hey, there isn’t a whole lot to do in Monmouth). But the weirder the things were that we did, the closer together it brought us because we were letting loose and being ourselves. In this stage, we were definitely thinking of ourselves as friends, because it is safe to say that we were together all the time. When we met new people, we were meeting them together and our conversation developed into more than just learning about our families and how our day went. It would not be long before things moved into the fifth stage.

The fifth stage of the model is stabilized friendship, and that is where Beth and I are today. Our Galvin and Cooper reader says that trust is the major part of this stage, because more personal information is being disclosed (334). In this stage, people can truly be themselves without the fear of being judged. This is a very comfortable place to be, but you are also making yourself vulnerable to someone else. For example, Beth might put herself out there and tell me something really personal but she trusts that I will
not tell anyone. After really thinking about our friendship at this stage, I realize that trust is definitely the most important part of a friendship. Beth and I have both proven to each other that we will not break the other’s trust and that is very important. When Beth and I were moving into stabilized friendship, I think we became so comfortable and trusting that we realized that we didn’t have to spend all our time with one another, because we just know that the other person will still be there no matter what. I believe that our strong trust is the reason why our friendship hasn’t moved in the sixth stage, which is waning friendship.

After looking at all of these stages of development, I can see that the stages aren’t clear-cut. If I was given a timeline to label all of the stages on, I would find it very difficult because there are even times when we might have moved back and forth between stages such as role-limited interaction and moving toward friendship. I feel that when thinking about a relationship according to stages, one needs to keep an open mind and realize that the stages may not always line up as perfectly as they do when written in a book. If every relationship worked out with that degree of predictability, we probably wouldn’t be writing a paper like this.

The second aspect of interpersonal communication that I’m going to look at in this paper is the communication climate. Our textbook refers to the climate as “the overall feeling or emotional mood between people” (Wood, 211). Our text also presents a continuum of interpersonal climates that shows a confirming climate at one end, a mixed climate in the middle, and a disconfirming climate at the other end. Martin Buber, a philosopher, believed that healthy relationships require a confirming climate. There are different levels of confirmation and disconfirmation. The levels of confirmation range
from recognizing that the person exists to endorsement, or accepting ones feelings or thoughts as valid. According to our textbook, communication researcher Jack Gibb studied these climates and came up with the idea of defensive and supportive climates. Furthermore Gibb developed six types of communication that would support either the defensive or supportive climates.

I can easily say that Beth and I exist in a supportive climate according to Gibb’s categories. A major aspect that stands out to me is the category of neutrality versus empathy. I feel like Beth and I are very emphatic towards each other when someone is talking about a problem or concern. We are both good about trying to put ourselves in the other’s shoes and relate to the situation. Another one is evaluation versus description. Evaluation creates a very defensive environment, while describing uses a lot more tact. For example, if I would walk into the room and get mud on the carpet, Beth wouldn’t say “geez you’re always making messes”. First of all she wouldn’t care too much but she might say something like “I think the carpet is getting kind of messy, maybe we should clean it up”. I think being tactful is key in any roommate scenario and if people are not used to acting that way, then they will probably learn to in time. I can definitely see the logic in many of Gibb’s comparisons shown in the text, and I also agree with the text when it states that communication isn’t always set on one type of climate. It is an ever-changing thing that could go from confirming to disconfirming, to somewhere in between. However, by maintaining a certain amount of tact and empathy, among other aspects, Beth and I have managed to stay in a confirming climate with much consistency. To take an even more specific look at our relationship, next I’m going to compare it with themes in women’s friendships.
Some people may believe that communication is communication, but after studying the details of how males and females communicate, I found that there are many differences. In the handout, “Friendships Among Women: Closeness in Dialogue” by Fern Johnson, I learned about the different themes that are typically present in relationships among females. I’m going to look at these themes and see if they hold true for Beth’s friendship and mine. The first theme states “Women’s friendships are typically centered in conversation” (Johnson, 82). I would say that this is true for our friendship. For example, if we are having a really busy week and don’t get the chance to talk very much, I definitely notice. Even when we go out and do something, talking is a large part of the event, and it has been this way since the beginning of our friendship, and has grown as more trust has developed. I also feel like we gain closeness when we go and actually do something together, but when I think about it, that isn’t a big surprise because a lot of conversation goes on at the same time.

The second theme is pretty closely related to the first, and it states “Women friends cultivate interpersonal intimacy through dialogue” (83). It also talks about how much of this occurs in the dyadic context. I would find this to be true with Beth and I because we are best friends, and there really isn’t anyone else that we have that same degree of friendship with. Through talking about problems one of us might have, we create vulnerability, but we have the trust there as well. We have built that friendship up largely because we confide in one another, and we talk about things that go far beyond everyday small talk.

A third theme that is present in female relationships states that “Women’s friendships serve therapeutic functions” (84). When I first started thinking about this
concept I began to wonder why it was just women’s friendships that serve a therapeutic function. In my opinion, cross-gendered relationships could also be therapeutic, but I suppose female relationships are even more that way because of all the conversation that occurs. In the relationship with Beth and I, I think I probably play the “therapist” more often and she is usually the “patient”. Beth can be one of those people that create drama in the mildest of situations. She gets stressed out and worked up over little things and I’m usually the person to put it in perspective for her and bring her out of that mode. The handout talks about how the therapy function within friendship can be a good thing as long as it isn’t excessive or a one-way thing. Although it can be a bit of a one-way event with Beth, I feel that because my personality is the type that doesn’t mind helping her out, this is not unhealthy for our relationship. Beth can be a source of therapy to me, but in a little less obvious way. If we were both total drama queens then we might have a problem on our hands, but because our personalities aren’t carbon copies of each other, we make it work.

“Women’s friendships are situated in culture, class, life position, and affectional circumstances” (86). This is the fourth theme from Fern Johnson. Overall this category says that these aspects can be different for everyone depending on what the life circumstances may be. When addressing the topic of social class, the handout says that working class women or those with limited incomes are more likely to develop friendships with women in their own families. It goes on to say that the teen years and early adulthood are times of strong friendship for females. This would be true for Beth and I, as we are both college students. I feel that the handout is accurate when stating that teens and those in early adulthood develop strong friendships because I think social
status and creating groups of friends is emphasized during these stages in one’s life. Like the handout says, people are struggling for personal identity at these times, and I feel like to reduce insecurity, people reach out for those that can function as a “best friend”. There hasn’t been a great deal of research on the effects of race and ethnicity on women’s friendships, but this does not really apply to Beth and I anyway. This takes us to Johnson’s final theme.

The fifth and final theme in women’s friendships states: “Women’s friendships are the site for both conservation and resistance of gendered social structures and processes” (83). This section goes on to state:

“The feelings of rejection among teenage women when their best friends’ romantic involvements relegate the friendship to second place likewise reflect a prevailing gender ideology favoring romantic, heterosexual pairing that subordinates and displaces women’s closeness with one another” (84).

I feel that this quote can apply to many situations that teen female friends encounter. For example with Beth and I, I have had a boyfriend all throughout our friendship and Beth has not. There was once a time when she thought that I was spending time with him because I didn’t want to be around her. Then I just had to explain how it can be hard to juggle two close relationships while being extremely busy on top of everything. Once she saw my point of view, it all worked out. Female relationships can conserve relationships with males because you have that person to go to and talk through problems with, and as our handout says, “This keeps much gender tension away from men” (84). At the same time female relationships can resist relationships with males because one person in the relationship may feel that the male is being favored. In the case of Beth and I, effective communication can help get the relationship back on track. I think the Glavin and Cooper book kind of sums things up when it says, “There is no single meaning of
The Galvin and Cooper reader describes three central dialectical tensions that exist in relationships. These include autonomy and connection, openness and protection, and novelty and predictability. Relational dialectics are also described in our textbook as “opposing forces, or tensions, that are normal parts of relationships” (Wood, 216). I plan to look at each of these sets of tensions and see if they apply to Beth’s friendship and mine.

The first of the dialectical tensions is autonomy and connection. This refers to the need to be close versus the need for alone time or space. Often times in a relationship you will see one person that is very needy of another’s time and attention and there may be another friend that is content with being alone sometimes. With Beth and I, it seems that this dialectical tension is not really an issue. We are both roommates, and if we didn’t have the varied interests that we have, I could see that one of us might need to get away and spend time alone. The fact of the matter is that Beth and I both have our own individual interests- Beth is active in things like hall government and tutoring and I have cheerleading. This means that while we do see each other a great deal because we live together, we have our own things that we are interested in so we aren’t totally reliant on one another. We also have a shared interest, which is Pi Phi. I think this is healthy because it shows that we can have something in common, but we are still our own people. Within Pi Phi we share a similar group of friends, and we recognize that we can still be “best friends” while having others to hang around with as well. The next dialectical tension is novelty and predictability.
According to Galvin and Cooper, “The openness and protection dialectic focuses on our conflicting desires to be open and vulnerable to our relational partners while at the same time to be strategic and self-protective in our communication” (30). This brings up the issue of a person’s need for privacy, and the fact that some people have a greater need for that than others. Personally, I do not see myself as a very private person, but I know that I can be private if I am in a situation with a lot of people that I don’t know very well. However, once I have built up some familiarity, I feel comfortable with being open about personal issues. So in my mind, the ability to be open is something that comes with time, and when that sharing sort of reaches a plateau, then you can tell that there may be certain things that people just aren’t comfortable with sharing. When Beth and I first met, I’m sure I wasn’t sharing every detail of my life with her. But the more comfortable we started to feel around each other, the more we shared and I think this is something that comes with time. Overall we do not have a major conflict with one of us being very closed off and one sharing everything. It is pretty even and we tend to both be quite open with one another. This takes us to the third and final dialectical tension.

The last dialectical tension is novelty and predictability and this deals with the need that people have for familiarity, but also the desire for change. Having been roommates with Beth for about a year and a half, we have given ourselves plenty of opportunity to mutually fall into a certain rhythm of doing things. I don’t think this is something that either of us particularly mind. Often times we are both so busy that we have no choice to be in this rhythm that goes really fast and we don’t even have time to get bored with it. Looking at this dialectical tension causes me to see how well Beth and I actually get along. For example, say we both have a spare hour in between classes. We
can both be sitting there talking about nothing important but we end up leaving the room laughing our heads off. We joke around that our life is a Seinfeld episode because we are always going on and on about meaningless stuff. So basically, Beth and I have the right combination to fight off the novelty and predictability dialectic. We are both really busy people, and we are also very easily entertained. This leads me to the final concept of this paper, which is conflict management.

Having constructive conflict management skills is an important part of any relationship. There are eight different conflict management skills listed in our textbook. I’m going to analyze some of these skills and look at how Beth and I handle them. Communicating supportively is one of these conflict management skills (Wood, 258). I feel that this is a skill that we manage rather effectively. If I am ever having a problem and I go to Beth to talk about it, I don’t usually end up being defensive when our conversation is over. However I think it is also important for friends to not sugar coat everything. If a problem actually exists, it isn’t good for the other friend to just smile and say things are o.k. A friend is there to help you solve a problem, and also recognize that one exists if necessary. I always feel like Beth and I maintain a supportive climate in our friendship, and I don’t think that either of us really have the personality type to create defensiveness in one another.

Another conflict management skill is taking responsibility for your thoughts, feelings, and issues (259). This is something that I don’t really think about very much, but I can see why it is important to remember so your friend doesn’t get defensive. When a person uses “you” at the beginning of statements it makes things seems like much more of an accusation rather than beginning with “I feel”. The reading also refers to using
“we”, like “we need to clean to room more”. This is something I think Beth and I do a lot of. One of us might say, “We need to go get some groceries”. And we don’t even even think twice that the other person might not feel that way. Basically this conflict management skill is stressing the need to take ownership of the way you feel through the statements you make. It is important to speak for yourself and not put words in the other person’s mouth.

One final conflict management skill that I would like to touch on is looking for points of agreement (259). It can be very difficult to focus on anything but disagreements when people are arguing. However, this is an important skill to remember when trying to put things in perspective. Though there may be some little things that you disagree on, we need to think about the really important things that you do agree on. Finding a common ground can make things more tolerable and can put everyone back on the same page. Beth and I really do not encounter conflict like this very much because I think we are both good at thinking things through before we say them. Sometimes I might get ticked off in my head if Beth takes forever to get ready to go somewhere, but then I can stop and realize that it is important to make sure your outfit matches. I know this may seem like a small insignificant thing, but when you live with a person, little things can add up and you need to think before you speak. So I think that if you can internally come up with some points of agreement, you can dodge certain conflicts altogether.

Maintaining good conflict management skills such as the three that I have touched on can help a friendship stay on the right track.

My roommate Beth is also the best friend that I have ever had. Sometimes I wonder how we have maintained such a great friendship. After taking a close look at
some interpersonal communication concepts in this paper, I have been able to recognize not only why, but how our friendship works so well. The first step was looking at the development of our relationship. Through analyzing this I was able to see the changes that occurred that led up to our currently stabilized friendship, and I also noticed that friendships don’t always develop in clean-cut stages. Following this I took a look at our communication climate, which I found to be a supportive one. Next I took an even more detailed look at our friendship by studying how we relate to Johnson’s themes in female relationships. I noticed a lot of variation in these themes. This led me to the three central dialectical tensions mentioned in the Galvin and Cooper reader. After looking at these I described how Beth and I are able to keep some of these tensions at bay. The final concept was conflict management and for this I looked at several conflict management skills and studied how Beth and I maintain these skills so that conflict does not hurt the friendship itself.

No matter what concept you are talking about, effective communication skills are always important. I feel that the concepts I have learned about help me to be a more effective communicator in my everyday life. And even if you are in contact with someone who isn’t studying communications, your good habits can rub off on them too. This is the case with my roommate Beth and I. For a year and a half we have maintained a stable friendship that continues to grow. I thought that I had some good friends in high school, but when I came to college and became roommates with Beth, I truly feel what it’s like to have a best friend. Beth and I have created such a confirming and supportive climate for our friendship that I have no doubt that we will remain friends after college.