

# Improving Communication to the Public and City Hall: How to Write So Busy People Will Read

## with Todd Rogers

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What can behavioral science tell us about effective communication? How can you craft communications that get a response? How can you reach vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations?

Up to one in four heads of US households struggle with low literacy, with 40% of American adults reading at or below eighth-grade level. English is a second language for heads of households in one in five American families.

There are multiple reasons people do not respond to messages:

- Too many messages
- Too little time/selective attention
- Low literacy
- Poorly written messages

Following the **five principles** below, developed with Jessica Lasky-Fink, will make your communications with the public and the people you work with more effective.

### PRINCIPLE 1: USE FEWER WORDS

*“With more time, I would have written a shorter letter.”*

—Blaise Pascal, edited by Jessica Lasky-Fink and Todd Rogers

Editing is an act of kindness. There is a welfare cost associated with asking people to read and interpret overlong messages.

Countless randomized experiments demonstrate that **using fewer words improves response rates**—often dramatically.

### PRINCIPLE 2: DECREASE READING LEVEL

According to the Flesch-Kincaid scoring system, there are **three components** comprising reading levels:

- Syllables per word
- Words per sentence
- Grammar complexity

Reducing the reading level of your communication means your messages will reach more people more quickly. Everybody is busy. Like using fewer words, making your sentences simple and direct is a way of showing care and respect for others' time and literacy/learning differences.

### **PRINCIPLE 3: MAKE PURPOSE AND KEY INFORMATION OBVIOUS, NOTICEABLE**

A skimmer should be able to tell what the communication is about at a glance. **Put the key information upfront**—the title, the subject line, or first sentence.

### **PRINCIPLE 4: MAKE RESPONSE EASY**

Work to **reduce friction and barriers** to response:

- Embed hyperlinks to relevant forms and resources.
- If you are trying to reach harder-to-reach populations with a new program or benefit, make it opt-out rather than opt-in.
- Minimize the number of steps needed to respond.
- Ensure the relevant information or resources are easy to find at each step.
- Rather than “What do you think?” ask a yes/no question.

### **PRINCIPLE 5: USE FORMATTING TO DIRECT ATTENTION**

Use formatting to **direct people to the thing you want them to do**. This may be as simple as breaking up a long text message to direct attention to a link embedded in the message. Or it may involve investing in good graphic design. A couple of points on formatting to bear in mind:

- If everything is highlighted (or bolded, italicized, placed in a text box), nothing is spotlighted. Messages with too much highlighted content overwhelm the reader.
- Be mindful of the potential for unintended consequences: other content may be missed.

\*\*Click link for online version of [Checklist for Effective Communication](#) (also reprinted on next page).\*\*

## Checklist for Effective Communication

### Take inventory of information

- ✓ What is the purpose?
- ✓ What pieces of information are the most important?
- ✓ What pieces of information are necessary to include, but not critical?

### Readability

- ✓ Can the same message be conveyed in fewer words?
- ✓ Does formatting only highlight important items?
- ✓ Is the message easy to understand?
  - Short sentences
  - Short words
  - Simple grammar
- ✓ Check reading level and readability ([www.readable.com](http://www.readable.com) or <http://www.hemingwayapp.com/>)
  - Aim for 5th grade reading level (or lower) whenever possible

### Structure

- ✓ Is the purpose clear to a skimmer?
  - If multiple purposes, then the primary purpose is: "There are X items"
- ✓ Is the purpose where a reader would expect? (i.e., at top)
- ✓ Is the critical information included concisely above the sign off, and supportive information below?
- ✓ Are any next steps/action items clear and precise?
  - If proposing a meeting, propose a specific date/time?