

Apolitical: How to improve your writing in government

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What you're up against

2

- ▶ Information overload and competing demands for our attention
- ▶ Misinformation and disinformation
- ▶ Decreasing trust in government
- ▶ Busy decision-makers or colleagues who may not be subject matter experts
- ▶ Language barriers

What can you do?

Simplify

- inverted pyramid
- short sentences (15-20 words)
- active voice
- identity
- break down complex concepts

How simplifying helps

4

Increase compliance

Get people to do what you want or need

- From making decisions to taking action, it's easier for people to do what you're asking of them when the ask is clear

Improve understanding

Spend less time answering questions and addressing complaints

- Lack of understanding causes frustration which can lead to push back

Better translation

Help make sure information is translated accurately

- Difficult words and concepts can lead to misinterpretation by people and AI

Inverted pyramid

5



Call to action

What you need them to do

Information
they need

Information
you want
to share

Connect action to self-identity and activate agency

Verbs to nouns

- make the action about **who** they are
- e.g., don't litter > don't **be a** litterbug
- e.g., slow down, drive safely > **be a** good driver, slow down

Can't and don't

- “can't” suggests an inability to do something; external
- “don't” implies more of an attitude; internal
- e.g., I can't litter because it's against the law > I don't litter because I care about my community
- e.g., I can't drive over speed here because it's unsafe > I don't speed because I care about the people who live here

Ambiguous to concrete

- relate it to something common
- talk about it in different terms
- paint a picture: before and after, take people on a journey
- break it down

Ditch the hedges

Instead of	Try	
I think...	(just omit)	I think We should do X
In my opinion...	The data shows...	In my opinion The data shows people want...
Arguably...	Clearly...	Arguably, Clearly, this will improve...
It's probably...	Obviously, it...	It's probably going to Obviously it will create

Resources

Magic Words (book) by Jonah Berger

Made to Stick (book) by Chip and Dan Heath

TheMeasureofThings.com

Hemingway editor (hemingwayapp.com)