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IDEAS

Write shorter messages

Research confirms: Simpler communications are much more likely to be read.

By **Todd Rogers and Jessica Lasky-Fink** Updated December 19, 2020, 4:00 a.m.



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News alert: People don't [have enough time](#), and they receive too many communications. The average professional spends [28 percent of their work week](#) — over 11 hours — reading and answering email. The average person communicates more than [90 times per day by text](#) and more than [100 times per day by email](#). Every message received demands attention and time from people who are already too busy.

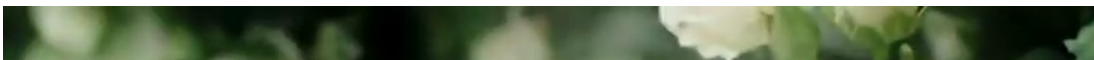
Communicators too often appear oblivious to this reality by sending long and poorly organized written messages. We've all been guilty of this. But writing messages without a keen awareness of readers' limited time and attention creates two problems.

One, these messages may not be read or understood. They immediately fail to achieve their purpose.

Two, even if they are read, they impose an unkind tax on each reader's time. Although this per-message tax may seem small, it quickly adds up. Imagine you receive 120 emails every day and each is three paragraphs long. It takes about 20 seconds to read a paragraph as long as this one, meaning reading all 120 emails will require two hours each day. If every message was one paragraph shorter, you would save at least 40 minutes every day.

Our research examines how to improve written communications with practical purposes. People often write for other reasons. The New Yorker's flowing prose, for example, is intended more for leisurely enjoyment than efficient knowledge transfer. Practical written communications, whether in the form of text messages, emails, or printed letters, have a different purpose. Sometimes it's for all readers to understand key information like upcoming plans, vaccination schedules, disclosures, or policies. Other times it aims to prompt an action like asking for feedback or scheduling a meeting.

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For communication of this kind to accomplish its purpose, it must be read, understood, and acted upon if necessary. We have identified three principles for achieving these goals.

Less is more

People are more likely to read, understand, and respond to shorter messages. A randomized experiment we conducted illustrates this point. We emailed 7,002 school district leaders a request to complete a voluntary survey. Half received a 127-word email with the survey link at the end. This was a well-written, coherent message that reflected our goals for the survey and our appreciation for their time. The other half received a 49-word email with the survey link at the end. The shorter message was identical to the longer message, except for five sentences cut from the middle of the longer message.

In an online survey, we asked 148 people to predict which message would generate more survey responses; 67 percent predicted that the longer message would be more effective. In reality, 4.8 percent of those who received the short message clicked on the link to take the survey, compared with just 2.7 percent of those who received the long message. Cutting the number of words by two-thirds increased the response rate by 80 percent.

127 words: 2.7% response rate

Hello,

I am a professor at Harvard studying the opinions, decision-making, goals, and expectations of school board members. As a school board member, you have an important and difficult job. You and your fellow school board members are making critical decisions right now that will profoundly impact the lives of students, teachers, and families in your schools and communities. I know you are busy with many urgent and important decisions as your schools reopen. School district leaders like you are balancing many competing interests. Your participation will be very helpful to the research I am conducting. I would like to learn from you how school district leaders are thinking about the challenges facing schools right now. Would you please complete this brief survey? The link is here: <http://surveylink.com>

Thank you for your time,

Dr. Todd Rogers
Professor of Public Policy

49 words: 4.8% response rate

Hello,

I am a professor at Harvard studying the opinions, decision-making, goals, and expectations of school board members. ~~As a school board member, you have an important and difficult job. You and your fellow school board members are making critical decisions right now that will profoundly impact the lives of students, teachers, and families in your schools and communities. I know you are busy with many urgent and important decisions as your schools reopen. School district leaders like you are balancing many competing interests. Your participation will be very helpful to the research I am conducting. I would like to learn from you how school district leaders are thinking about the challenges facing schools right now. Would you please complete this brief survey? The link is here:~~ <http://surveylink.com>

Thank you for your time,

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**Cutting the number of words by 60%
increased response by 80%.**

Seven thousand school district leaders were sent emails asking them to complete a voluntary survey. Half of them received the longer email; half received the shorter email. TODD ROGERS AND JESSICA LASKY-FINK (CUSTOM_CREDIT)

Use simple language

Messages that are more difficult to read are less effective. People have limited attention that they often must allocate across many competing items. A gratuitous “wall of words” message requires more time and mental effort to understand and process than a well-organized and concise message. And not all people can equally access written communication. [Over 40 percent of US adults](#) have limited literacy, which roughly translates to reading at or below a sixth to eighth grade level.

Simplifying language can increase the likelihood that readers will pay attention to, understand, and follow through on your message.

In a [randomized experiment](#) conducted with Carly Robinson from Brown University and Hedy Chang from Attendance Works, we rewrote legally mandated truancy

notifications that were sent to 130,000 public school students in California. Truancy notices are printed letters that are mailed to parents to inform them when their child has accrued a specified number of unexcused school absences. The [original standard letter](#) used punitive language that parents often perceived as threatening, was written at a 10th grade reading level, and included 382 words. The rewritten letters reduced the number of words and used more supportive language. And, most importantly for highlighting this principle, they were written at a fifth grade reading level. These simplified letters were an estimated 40 percent more effective than the standard letter at reducing student absences over the subsequent month.

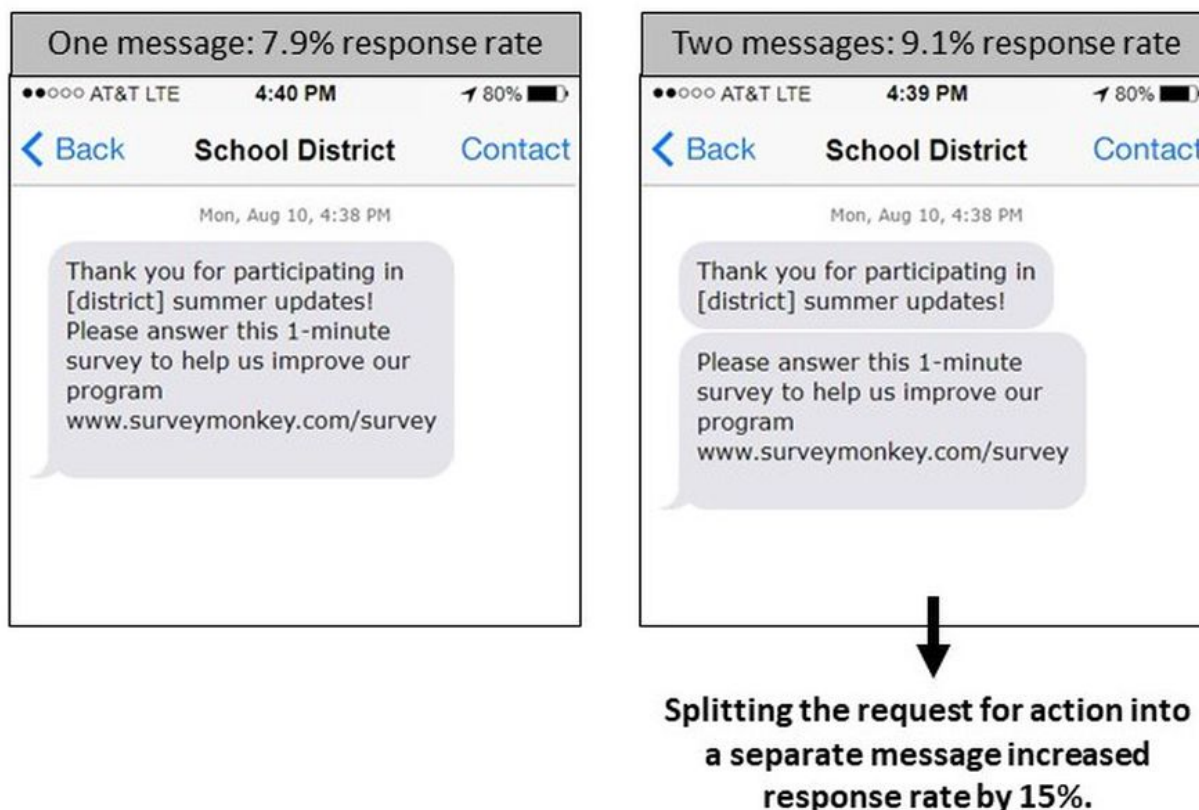
Make it skimmable

When hurried, people don't read every single carefully chosen, thoroughly considered, grammatically perfect, correctly spelled, precise written word. They skim. If a message's purpose is not immediately obvious, readers must allocate more of their limited time to read and understand it. This increases the chance they will just give up and move on to the next item competing for their attention. Formatting like bullets, highlighting, and short paragraphs can guide readers' attention toward (or away from) the purpose of a message.

We are part of a company, [EveryDay Labs](#), that conducted another randomized experiment to demonstrate the power of this principle. EveryDay Labs reduces student absenteeism around the country by implementing targeted and optimized family communications on behalf of school districts. In the experiment, 22,694 public school parents received a text message asking them to complete an online survey. Half received a single text message with two sentences: "Thank you for participating in [district name] summer updates! Please answer this 1-minute survey to help us improve our program [survey link]."

The other half received the same two sentences, but they were sent in two consecutive text messages. This two-message formatting made it easier for readers to quickly

understand what action was being requested. By doing so, it increased response rates by 15 percent.



Nearly 23,000 school parents were sent text messages asking them to complete a voluntary survey. Half of the parents received the two-sentence message in a single text; half received the same message split into two separate texts. TODD ROGERS AND JESSICA LASKY-FINK (CUSTOM_CREDIT)

Simplifying communication is hard. That is why French philosopher Blaise Pascal apologized to a friend, "I have only made this letter longer because I have not had the time to make it shorter." But simplifying communication is worth the effort: It makes practical communication more effective.

We recognize the irony of using roughly 1,000 words to implore you to write more efficiently. So here is a concise summary written at a sixth grade reading level:

Simple writing is better and kinder.