Communication Insights

Book Report: Smart Brevity

Mark Twain, writing to a friend in 1871, confessed, “I didn’t have time to write you a short letter, so I wrote you a long one.”

In Smart Brevity, the authors share that eye-tracking studies show most people spend fewer than 15 seconds on a web page. What does that mean? You need to get your reader’s attention, and fast.

It’s hard to let go of long-form content, because writing succinctly leaves nowhere to hide. Without obscure jargon and big words, we worry if our message can stand on its own—but the truth is, if no one knows what you’re saying, no one will listen.

Smart Brevity: The Rules
Writing short is not optional if you want eyeballs on your message.

• Identify ONE thing you want your audience to know (after all, you’ve only got them for 15 seconds). Write that point in one clear, short sentence, and then leave it alone.

• Tell your audience why it matters. What is the reason for your email/press release/report? Don’t bury the main idea. Give it to your audience at the very beginning.

• Think short, not shallow. If we accept that most people will simply scan what we write (like this bullet point), we’re more likely to make every word count.

• Write like a human, for humans. Say the point you’re trying to make out loud. Then write that down. Don’t try to hide your message behind vagueness or vocabulary you’d never normally use when speaking.

• Is a point or concept essential to your message? If not, delete it. Every word or sentence you can erase will save people time. And time is money.

Get it down. Take chances. It may be bad, but it’s the only way you can do anything really good.

— William Faulkner

Continued on Next Page
The NOAA Office for Coastal Management’s website features “Impact Stories,” which are short wins shared with the public. Each story has a punchy headline, and below it is “The Takeaway.” That single sentence details the key point we want our audience to retain with the 15 seconds that we have them. Here’s an example:

**Study of 15 Research Reserves Finds Crabs Pose No Large-Scale Salt Marsh Threat**

*The Takeaway: While specific crab species can cause local damage, rising seas appear to be a bigger threat to salt marshes nationwide.*

Could a longer story with hundreds of details be written? Yes, but would it be read? Probably not. Providing short stories leads to greater impact.

**Apply Smart Brevity to Everything**

- **Graphics:** Use simple graphs and pictures that make key points on their own.

- **Emails:** Put the news in the first sentence. Explain why it matters. Bold items you want to stand out for those skimming.

- **Meetings:** Set meetings for 20 minutes, not 30. Create a one-sentence objective emailed in advance. List the decisions that need to be made. Guide the discussion.

- **Speeches:** The Gettysburg Address was only 272 words (about half of this article). Go with your most important point and polish it.

- **Presentations:** Write down the precise outcome you want. Simplify it. Add pictures. Close with your pitch.

Attention spans are short, but by following these techniques, you won’t waste a single word—or more importantly, a minute of your audience’s time.

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Communication Product of the Month

Featured products: “Writing Short” Presentation

Source: coast.noaa.gov/data/docs/coastalcommunicators/writing-short.pdf

Submitted by: Pamela Jacobs, Lynker for NOAA’s Office for Coastal Management

What it is: A presentation—created by Donna McCaskill, the Office for Coastal Management’s communications manager—that showcases the virtues and value of succinct writing, and does so, not surprisingly, in an equally succinct way.

Why I like it: In keeping with this issue’s theme of brevity in writing, and knowing (thanks to the above article) that I have about 15 seconds to keep your attention, I’ll keep it brief. This is one of those communication products that walks the walk and talks the talk. With sparse slides that demonstrate the impact of just a few words, Donna was able to create a product that tells why and how to, well, write short. She gives examples and tips, and even a few of her not-so-secret weapons, once again proving that less is more.

Pro tip: keep this presentation on hand when you need a reminder, share it with your colleagues, or adapt it into your own presentation to be shared with your audience.

NOAA OFFICE FOR COASTAL MANAGEMENT

Donna McCaskill

“Writing Short, Speaking Short, Going Long for Impact”
Outreach Tool Spotlight – Tsunami Aware
One of the most important tools you can have at your disposal is the ability to easily and effectively communicate hazard information. This online information system provides interactive maps of tsunami evacuation zones, as well as related information, allowing users in Hawai‘i and Guam to learn and share critical facts with ease. Access it here: coast.noaa.gov/digitalcoast/tools/tsunamimap.html.

Upcoming Social Media Campaigns
Follow us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, and tag along with these themes:
• August 7 to 11: New York
• August 14 to 18: Back to School
• August 21 to 25: Connecticut
• August 28 to September 1: Rhode Island

Fast Facts – Tourism and Recreation
This is one of the many graphics and facts available for your use in presentations and handouts. Grab this one at coast.noaa.gov/states/fast-facts/tourism-and-recreation.html. If you have an idea for a new group of fast facts or illustrations, please let us know.

Ocean Tourism and Recreation
The Top Five Contributors

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<th>State</th>
<th>Number of Workers</th>
<th>Gross Domestic Product</th>
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