

Scientific language is useful in many contexts, but it often represents a barrier to access for those who have a need to use the information. Critics also argue that overly technical language is not helpful as policymakers, leaders, and other stakeholders make decisions that could be informed by research. Jargon interferes with the ability to process information, even if definitions are provided. Jargon also reduces people's interest in research and makes them less likely to identify as part of the research community.

Increasing clarity in research communication

As researchers have explored better ways to communicate their work, they have called for increasing the clarity of language used in research communication. Suggested strategies fall into broad categories, including more effective ways to organize documents and recommendations around word choice, sentence construction, structure of paragraphs, and other aids to clarity. For example, writing in passive voice is less effective because sentences are longer and the subject is often absent or overlooked. Active voice helps your reader more easily understand your message and its context.

Some researchers worry that increasing the clarity of scientific information means that they must oversimplify complex information. Simplified language sometimes lacks nuance that helps stakeholders to understand new information and act on it. Even when research-based information is presented clearly, stakeholders may not change their attitudes and behaviors in expected ways. However, it still is important to use accurate terminology, even while avoiding jargon. Researchers may assume that the solution is to provide more or clearer information to stakeholders. However, sometimes changing the way you present the information is more effective. In all cases, it is important to realize that stakeholder inaction to your findings does not necessarily mean that they are anti-science or anti-intellectual.

Effective research communication is not just a matter of disseminating information **to** stakeholders. Communication is about creating meaning **with** stakeholders, and the general public's knowledge is valuable and relevant in the research process. While it still is important to consider the clarity of research communication, it is also important to learn new ways of engaging with stakeholders in dialog.

Strategies for Increasing Clarity

- Begin documents with their purpose and bottom line, including necessary background information toward the end
- Organize documents into short sections with useful headings
- Write brief paragraphs that focus on one topic only
- Keep sentences short, feature the main idea first, and keep subject, object, and verb close together
- Use active verbs and pronouns, and short, simple words
- Use examples, lists, tables, and illustrations

Engaging with diverse stakeholders

Informing the attitudes and behaviors of stakeholders relies on more than just the clarity of messages. Researchers play various roles in the communication process. They may be needed to disseminate research findings to other professionals, testify as public experts, help the public to understand research findings, participate in decision making, and more. Each of these contexts involves different stakeholder groups, who may be experts in other fields and have their own language, jargon, communication goals, and concerns. In fact, research communication takes place in many different contexts: within specialist groups, between different groups of specialists, and in teaching contexts, popular media, and other public settings.

This reality requires researchers to develop a process for identifying stakeholder groups, understanding their needs, and incorporating their language and priorities in communications. One simple way to build an understanding of stakeholder needs, language, and priorities is to attend public events where researchers can interact and communicate with those outside their areas of expertise. For example, you might attend a local talk on a topic of interest to your stakeholders.

Researchers also may take more formal approaches to ensuring they are communicating clearly. Consider the following strategies:

- **Paraphrase Testing:** A stakeholder is asked to read a document prepared by a researcher. Then, the stakeholder is asked to describe the meaning of the document to the researcher, using the stakeholder's own words. This method is best for brief documents.
- **Usability Testing:** A stakeholder is provided with a hypothetical scenario where they would need specific information. Then, the stakeholder is asked to use a document created by researchers to find and understand that information. *Example scenario: You learn that a river may be polluted. Find out if you should report it to a local or national environmental agency. If you do, find out the process to do so.*
- **Controlled Comparative Studies:** Different group of stakeholders test different versions of a document. Researchers collect and compare data on how well stakeholders are able to paraphrase information from and/or use the different versions.

Employing these strategies will enable you to draft content with your audience in mind, check content accuracy, and assess how well your audience will understand your messages.

Strategies for tailoring messages

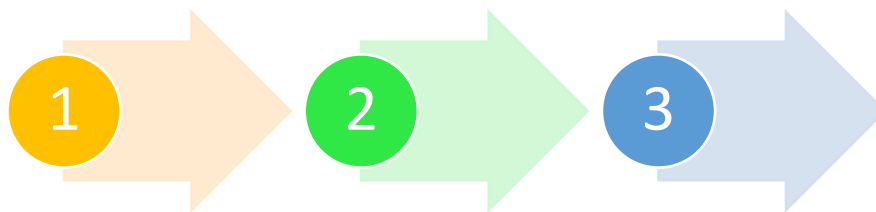
As researchers develop clarity around stakeholder needs, language, and priorities, they become better able to tailor communication to those audiences. While content is important, research has found that careful design of messages can increase their persuasiveness. For example, it is more effective to introduce familiar concepts before new or controversial findings. Providing multiple options for decisions, as opposed to only one way forward, may spur more stakeholders to act. Focusing on the benefits of engaging in a new behavior, as opposed to the consequences of failing to engage in that

behavior, is also more effective in some contexts. Even a product's visual design elements can affect the persuasiveness of its messages. For example, italics can be difficult to read, and sans-serif fonts are more easily read than serif fonts. A serif is a decorative element at the end of a letter stem. The arrows in the illustration at right point to serifs. As the name implies, serif fonts have serifs, while sans-serif fonts do not. Commonly used and effective sans-serif fonts include Helvetica, Arial, and Calibri. Consider these examples:



- This sentence uses a sans-serif font. Many people find these fonts easier to read than serif fonts.
- This sentence uses a serif font. Many people find these fonts harder to read than sans-serif fonts.

Employing stark color contrasts in graphics, as in the example below, can also increase the persuasiveness of messages. The paraphrase and usability testing approaches described above can help researchers to learn which strategies are effective in communicating with their particular stakeholders.



Moving beyond clarity in research communication

As researchers continue to study effective communication, it is becoming increasingly clear that improving the clarity of language is necessary, but it is not sufficient as a sole strategy for increasing the accessibility of language in research communication. It is important to attend to document organization, paragraph structure, sentence construction, word choice, and other aids to clarity. Indeed, your reader will not have to work as hard to understand your message, which will result in a better ability to respond to it. Beyond those strategies, researchers would do well to develop processes for engaging with, and understanding the needs and language of, diverse stakeholders. Testing the effectiveness of messages will help researchers to tailor those messages to different audiences. In more accessible terms: Context is as important as content in research communication. When your research project involves diverse stakeholders with different needs, consider approaches toward accessible language. The strategies outlined in this document as well as our online training are critical elements in a comprehensive strategy for research translation. Accessibility lends itself to action, which can mean increased impact for your research translation project.

Works Referenced

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