

“Say What?” Best Practices in Complex Issue Messaging

APPA Customer Connections Conference

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Donald Trump's Messaging

Disciplined

- Make America Great Again
- Build a wall
- Bring back the jobs
- Take back our country

Undisciplined

- Crooked Hillary (Lying Ted, Little Marco)
- Radical Islamic terrorists
- The system is rigged



Opening Thoughts

- “Any fool can make something complicated. It takes a genius to make it simple.”

— Woody Guthrie

- “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.”

— Albert Einstein

- “Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection we can catch excellence.”

— Vince Lombardi



What We Did

- Reviewed news releases from ~40 public power utilities over last 12 months
- Topics: Price Changes, Net Metering, Environmental Upgrades, Customer Service Charge
- Diagnostic, not comprehensive
- Tip of the communications iceberg



Why We Did It

- Utility business becoming more complex.
- Consumers are over-messaged.
- Most consumers are scientifically illiterate
- Speaking the customer's language is necessary to build confidence and trust
- Utility communicators sometimes rely too much on technical terms.



Orwell's Rules for Writing

- Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.



Source: "Politics and the English Language"

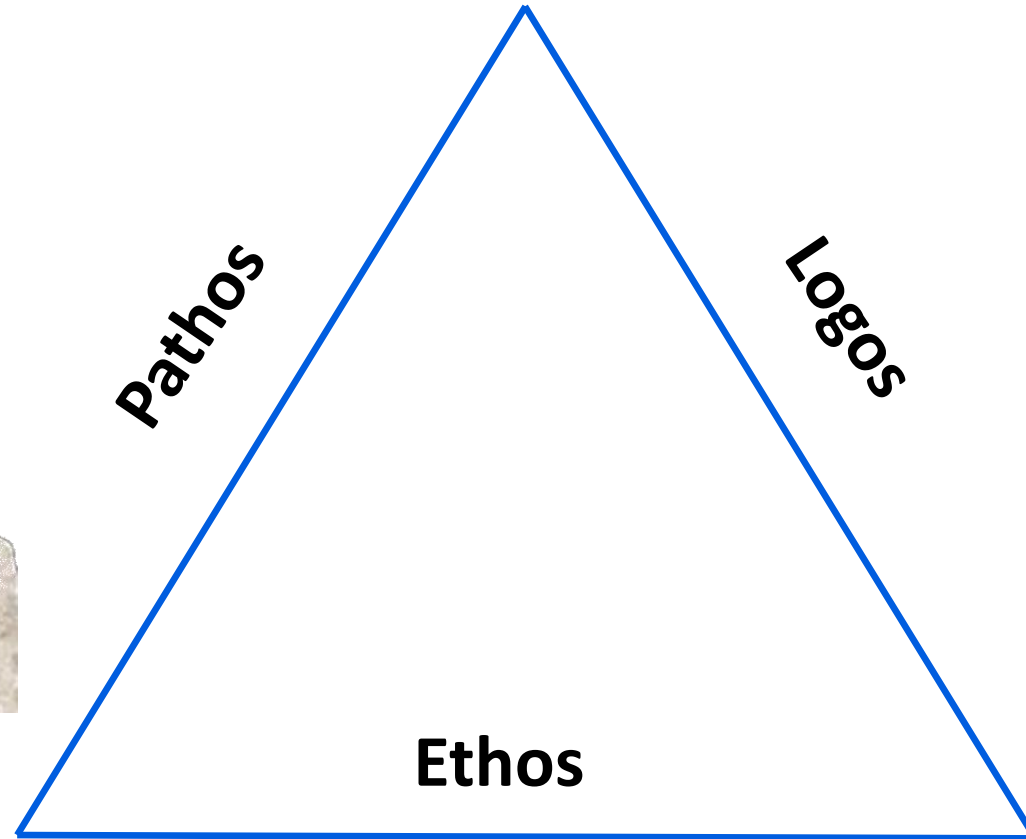
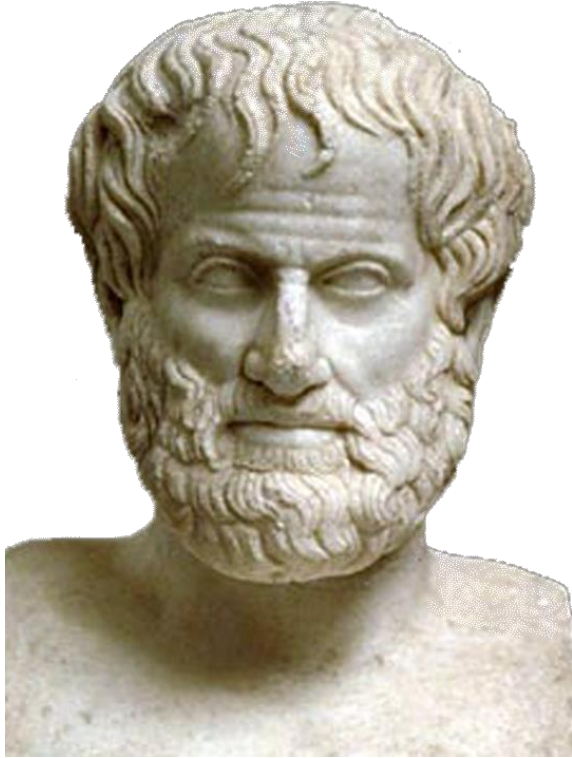


Orwell's Rules, cont.

- Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.



22 Centuries Before Orwell



How Some Enviro Groups Message



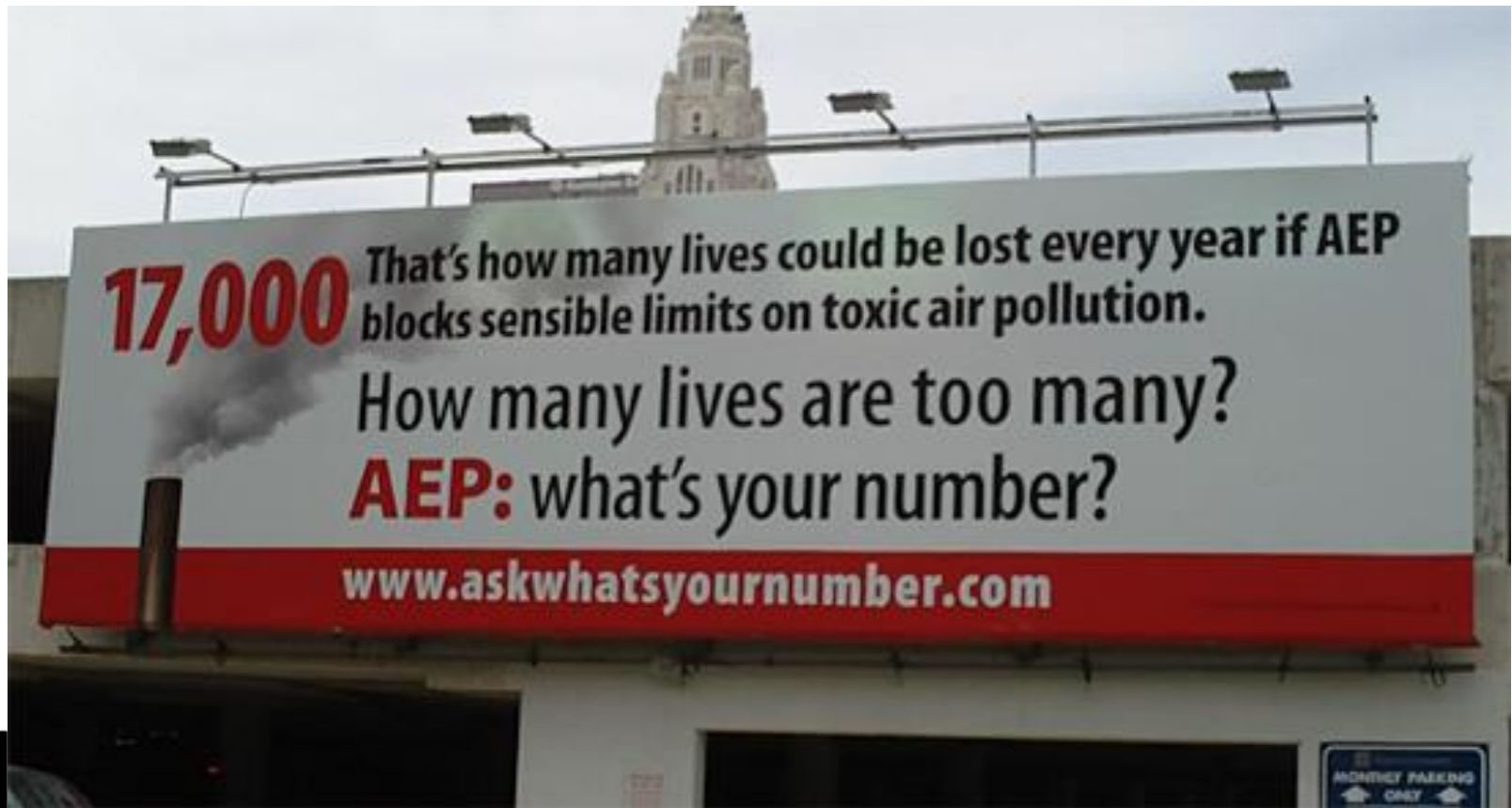
Sierra Club: “How the Coal Industry Poisoned Your Tuna Sandwich”

This much
mercury can
contaminate
a 20-acre lake

U.S. coal-fired power plants produce 48 tons of it each year

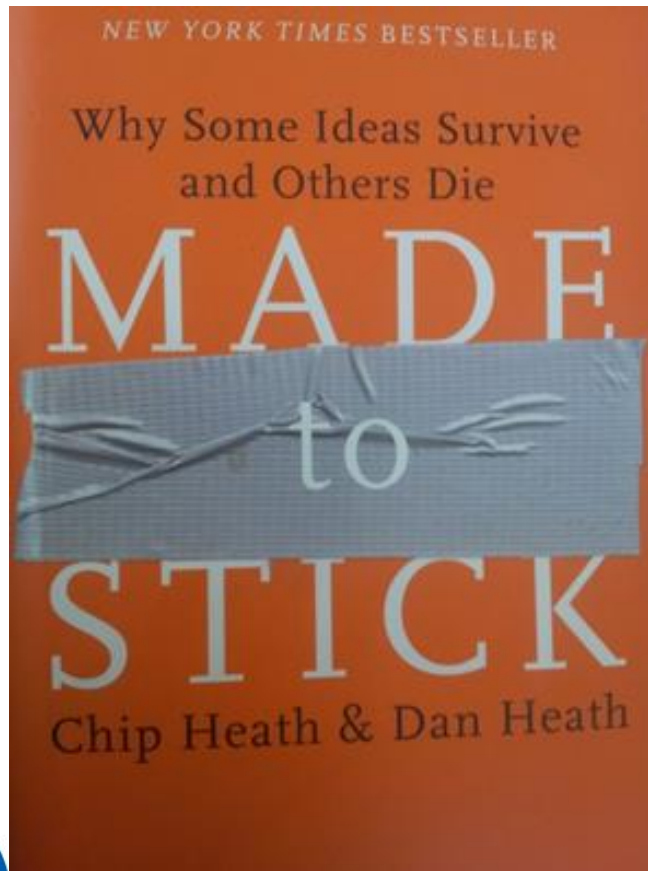


EDF: “AEP, What’s Your Number?”



ENERGY COMMUNICATIONS, Inc.

SUCCESSful Messaging



- Simple
- Unexpected
- Concrete
- Credible
- Emotional
- Stories



EEI's Lexicon Project

■ "Look at the way we talk as an industry. We use of all of these acronyms, all of this jargon. Some of us use the same words but define them differently or we use different words to mean the same thing."

— Stephanie Voyda,
EEI executive director of communications.



EEL's Lexicon Project

Words to Lose

- Ratepayer
- Electricity
- Utility
- Rooftop Solar
- Utility-scale Solar
- Distribution Charge

Words to Use

- Customer
- Energy
- Energy Company
- Private Solar
- Universal Solar
- Energy Delivery Charge



Source: m+p Lexicon Project

Table Top Exercise

- Each table prepare 1-2 brief messages each on these complex issues:
 - Price changes (up or down)
 - Rooftop solar/Net metering
 - Customer service changes
 - Environmental cleanup of power plants



Word has Readability Tests

- Click the **File** tab, and then click **Options**.
- Click **Proofing**.
- Under **When correcting spelling and grammar in Word**, make sure the **Check grammar with spelling** check box is selected.
- Select **Show readability statistics**.



Test Your Text!

Flesch Reading Ease (bowling)

- Score of 1-100
- Aim for 60-70
- Higher score is better

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (golf)

- No upper bound
- Aim for 7-8 (grade)
- Lower score is better

Both scores driven by average sentence length and average number of syllables per word





Hidden Present!

Ok so I was _____! I'm a kid, I'm supposed to
(verb/ing)
snoop, especially around _____ time! What _____
(holiday) (person)
doesn't snoop? I just so happened to be in our _____.
(place)
Normally I'm not up there, it's _____ and _____. Plus
(adjective) (adjective)
there are _____, yuck! I couldn't help myself! There
(animals)
it was right by my little sister's old _____. Guess
(noun)
_____ didn't think I would _____ it. I _____ it,
(person) (verb) (verb/ed)
it felt _____. Should I _____ it? Looking closer I saw
(adjective) (verb)
some _____. I got even closer and _____ a _____!
(nouns) (past verb) (noun)
The hidden _____ was alive! A yelp came
(noun)
from the _____. I opened the _____ and to my surprise
(noun) (noun)
a _____ was inside! Guess who else was hidden
(noun)
in the _____? _____ and _____ just
(place) (person) (person)
knew I was _____!
(verb/ing)



Price Changes

- Most utilities refer to “rates,” even when they’re discussing price changes related to **fuel costs.**
 - Very few used “prices”
 - “Rates” vs. “Prices”: A distinction with a difference.
 - Sample: “The price of electricity/gas delivered by COMPANY will rise/fall next month based on WHAT.”
- Most releases also referenced impact on bills.
- Strive for consistency with news media.



Price Change Readability

■ “(Utility) Board of Directors today approved a new approach to how the utility better links the actual cost of generating power with the amount customers pay.”

■ Passive Sentences: 0%

■ Flesch Reading Ease: 40.5 (seek highest #)

■ Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level 14 (seek lowest #)



My rewrite

■ “(Utility) is changing the way we charge customers for power.”

Passive Sentences: 0%

Flesch Reading Ease: 69.7

72% easier to read (69.7 - 40.5/40.5)

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 6

57% more accessible (6 – 14/14)



Price Changes #2

- “(Utility) summer electric rates will be in effect for all energy used between June 1 and Sept. 30.”
 - Passive Sentences: 0%
 - Flesch Reading Ease: 46.9 (seek highest #)
 - Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 11.6 (seek lowest #)



My Rewrite

■ “Summer is here and your electric prices will be increasing.”

Passive Sentences: 0%

Flesch Reading Ease: 69.7

49% easier to read (69.7 - 46.9/46.9)

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level 6

48% more accessible (6 - 11.6/11.6)



Price Changes #3

- “Retail electric customers of (Utility) received good news today.”
 - Passive Sentences: 0%
 - Flesch Reading Ease: 25.4
 - Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level 12.6



My Rewrite

■ “Our customers received good news today.”

Passive Sentences: 0%

Flesch Reading Ease: 59.7

135% easier to read (59.7 – 25.4/25.4)

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level 6.4

49% more accessible (6.4 - 12.6/12.6)



Net Metering

- Contentious issue, some utilities involved in litigation, few news releases.
- Recommended message: fairness
 - “Fair, stable and predictable.”
 - “Rooftop solar users effectively pay nothing for their use of the grid.”
 - “Solar subsidy”



Customer Service Charges

- We found very few news releases on this topic.
- “Monthly service fee increase”
- Consider vehicle analogies
 - Congestion
 - Fuel
 - Periodic maintenance



Customer Service Charges

Readability

- “To more appropriately recover some of the fixed costs associated with supplying power to its customer-owners, slight modifications to how we bill residential, general service and heating service customers were also approved.”
 - Passive Sentences: 100%
 - Flesch Reading Ease: 7.7 (seek highest #)
 - Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level 20.1 (seek lowest #)



My Rewrite

“To make sure our prices are as fair as possible, we are changing the two main parts of our bill.”

Passive Sentences: 0%

Flesch Reading Ease: 89.2

10,600% more readable (89.2 – 7.7/7.7)

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level 5.7

72% more accessible (5.7 – 20.1/20.1)



Environmental Cleanup

- Very few new releases posted.
- In prior research, many utilities used technical terms to describe technologies.
 - Flue Gas Desulfurization
 - Activated Carbon Injection
- Recall high-impact copy and images used by environmental groups.



Environmental Cleanup

Readability

- “(NAME), STATE’s largest electric utility, plans to replace an existing coal-fired boiler at its (NAME) plant in (CITY AND STATE) with one that uses (DIFFERENT) fuel.”
 - Passive Sentences: 0%
 - Flesch Reading Ease: 17 (seek highest #)
 - Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level 18.5 (seek lowest #)



My Rewrite

■ “We’re going to try something new at our (NAME) power plant: burning hydrogen instead of coal.”

Passive Sentences: 0%

Flesch Reading Ease: 56.2

230% improved readability (56.2 – 17/17)

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level 9.1

51% more accessible (9.1-18.5/18.5)



Translating “Utility” into Everyday Language

Utility Terms

- Appropriate
- Restructure
- Rate
- Infrastructure

Everyday Terms

- Fair
- Change
- Price
- Network



Takeaways

- Always try to bite-size your copy
- Test your concepts and messages
 - Focus groups, online customer panel, literacy group, Word readability tool or your children
 - Aim for 8th grade readability
- Create a company style book if you don't have one.
- Pay attention to how non-utilities message



Thank You!

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