

Simplifying a message: A step by step guide



What is this guide about?

When we send someone a message, through text, letter or in a poster, we often have a specific goal in mind. Whether that goal is to help the reader grasp an idea or encourage them to do a specific behaviour, having a message that is clear, easy to understand and quick to find will increase the odds your message will be effective.

When the Behavioural Science Aotearoa (BSA) team are asked to improve the effectiveness of communication, we start with the same five practical steps:

- Step 1: Identify what you want the message to achieve
- Step 2: Make your main messages stand out
- Step 3: Make it easy to read
- Step 4: Think about who is sending the message and when
- Step 5: Measure the Impact

In this guide, we will take you through these five practical steps to help you simplify your messages and avoid some common pitfalls. While many of these steps may seem like common sense, having a structured approach is useful to ensure you avoid the most common problems we see with communication.

In this guide, we use a letter as an example. However, many of these steps can be applied to other types of communications.

Box 1: What are the common pitfalls?

- The main message is unclear
- Legal and government jargon
- Complex sentences
- The letter is too long
- The letter is too detailed

When we are writing a letter, we are often deeply familiar with its content. However, when we know something it is very hard to imagine what it's like not to know it¹. This explains why we use jargon and expect the reader to understand it too. Also, we can be so familiar with the content we forget how it feels to receive the message.

Meet our case study

To help illustrate these steps we use a real example of a letter BSA helped to simplify. This letter was sent to people who failed to pay their fine on time. The original letter was already pretty good: It was simple, and it passed the flip test (Box 2).

Box 2: Flip test

The flip test is a useful rule of thumb to gauge if your main message is clear and easy to find.

1. Find someone who doesn't know the contents of your letter
2. Give them 5 seconds to look at your letter
3. Ask them what the key message is

If they can tell you what the main message is after 5 seconds, then this suggests your message is clear and stands out.

Original Letter



MINISTRY OF
JUSTICE
Tika a te Ihu

Collections Contact Centre
DX SX10099 | Wellington 6011
0800 609 669
www.justice.govt.nz

PPN xxxxxxxxxx

<date>

<first name> <last name>
<address field>
<address field>
<address field>

Dear <first name>

OUTSTANDING FINE

According to our records you have outstanding fines.

The time for paying this fine or making an arrangement to pay by instalments has expired.

We now intend to take enforcement action to collect the outstanding amount. This will add a **\$102** enforcement fee to your outstanding balance, and the following things may happen:

- The court can take money from your income or bank account
- The court can clamp your car
- The court can stop you travelling overseas
- The court can suspend your driver licence
- You may not be able to get a loan, credit card or hire purchase.

However, you can stop the court taking enforcement action and avoid the additional \$102 enforcement fee by contacting us on **0800 4 FINES (0800 434 637)** to arrange to pay your outstanding fines.

You can visit justice.govt.nz/fines/about-fines for more information, including ways to pay your fines.

If you don't believe you're the person we're looking for, you should still contact us as soon as possible to prevent enforcement action being taken against you in error.



Collections Registry Officer

Step 1: Identify what you want the letter to achieve

The first and arguably most important step is to identify your main message. Below are some principles that will help you do just that.

1.1 Highlight the key outcome you want to achieve

Most of the time the aim of our communications is to trigger a certain behaviour, such as paying a fine, signing up for a service, checking our website for more information, or showing up for an appointment. However, this key message can sometimes get lost.

If starting from scratch, write down why you are contacting the recipient and what you want them to know or do. If you are improving an existing letter, print it out and highlight the key outcome you want to achieve. You might find that this information is hidden halfway or at the end of the letter, as was the case in our example letter on the right.

1.2 What information do readers need to act on your main message?

The next step is to identify what the reader needs to know to act on the information. For instance, in our example letter, the reader needs to know what number to call. Other example information includes a link to a website or bank account number.

Original Letter

The image shows a letter from the Ministry of Justice. At the top left is the Ministry of Justice logo with the text 'MINISTRY OF JUSTICE' and 'Te Kaitiaki Take Kōwhiri'. At the top right is contact information: 'Collections Contact Centre', 'DX 5X10099 | Wellington 6011', '0800 609 669', and 'www.justice.govt.nz'. The letter body contains several placeholder fields: '<date>', 'PPN xxxxxxxxxxx', '<first name> <last name>', '<address field>', '<address field>', '<address field>', and 'Dear <first name>'. The main heading is 'OUTSTANDING FINE'. The text reads: 'According to our records you have outstanding fines. The time for paying this fine or making an arrangement to pay by instalments has expired. We now intend to take enforcement action to collect the outstanding amount. This will add a \$102 enforcement fee to your outstanding balance, and the following things may happen:'. A bulleted list follows: '• The court can take money from your income or bank account', '• The court can clamp your car', '• The court can stop you travelling overseas', '• The court can suspend your driver licence', and '• You may not be able to get a loan, credit card or hire purchase.'. Two red boxes highlight key information: the first box contains 'However, you can stop the court taking enforcement action and avoid the additional \$102 enforcement fee by contacting us on 0800 4 FINES (0800 434 637) to arrange to pay your outstanding fines.', and the second box contains 'You can visit justice.govt.nz/fines/about-fines for more information, including ways to pay your fines.'. Below this is a signature and the text 'Collections Registry Officer'.

1.1 The main message is towards the end of the page

1.2: Identify other key information: how to pay the fine

Step 2: Make your main messages stand out

Now that we have identified the key information, the next step is to make this information stand out. On the right is the letter after we have simplified it. Below, we explain the changes and why we made them.

2.1: Provide a clear call to action: This letter tells you exactly what do to ("Pay your outstanding fine" compared to the previous "Outstanding Fine"). Providing a clear call to action can increase the chances a person will do the suggested behaviour. For example, a trial in Australia found that when letters included a stamp that said "Pay Now" in red, there was a 3.1% increase in payment rates compared to the standard letter ².

2.2. Make the key information salient

Both the call to action and the payment details are in red to draw people's attention to the most important information. We know that making key details stand out helps the reader act on that information. For example, one study found that when the tax of a product is included on the price tag as opposed to being added on at the checkout, this reduced the sales of the item by 8%³. The idea here is that having the tax on the price tag, as opposed to having it added on at the checkout, made the extra cost more salient, and therefore reduced the number of sales.

2.3: Put the most important information in the top 3rd of the page

The further down the page information is, the less likely it will get read. Eye-tracking studies show that people tend to focus their attention on the top of the page⁴. By putting the main messages near the top of the page it is more likely people will read it.

2.4. Group the same types of information together

If the letter is organized by the type of information, it makes it easier for the reader to find key information. Subheadings may also be useful in your letter. For example, you might have a heading that says, "What is this letter about" "What do I need to do", "Where can I go for more information?". By chunking together information that is alike you can make it easier for people to remember key information⁵.

Simplified Letter

MINISTRY OF JUSTICE
Take a stand

Collections Contact Centre
DX 5110099 | Wellington 6011
0800 509 689
www.justice.govt.nz

<date>

<first name> <last name>
<address field>
<address field>
<address field>

Ways to pay:
Call us: 0800 434 637 (0800 4 FINES)
Pay online: justice.govt.nz/fines

Payment details:
PPN xxxxxxxxxx
Amount due: \$<amount>

Pay your outstanding fine now to prevent further actions

Dear <first name>

According to our records you have missed the deadline to pay your \$<amount> fine.

Please pay within **10 days**. If you do not pay we can take further actions to collect the outstanding amount. This would add a \$102 fee to your fine and the following things can happen:

- Suspend your driver license or clamp your car
- Stop you travelling overseas
- Take money from your income or bank account
- You may not be able to get a loan, credit card or hire purchase.

If you are not the person we are looking for, please call us as soon as possible to prevent the above actions being taken against you in error.

If you have trouble paying, please call us. Our staff are here to help.

Collections Registry Officer

2.2: Make key information salient

- Main message is in red
- Red box around the information about how to pay

2.1: Call to action

2.3: The key information is now at the top of the page

2.4: PPN number is now with the payment details

Step 3: Make it easy to read

The easier your letter is to read the more likely readers will understand what you want them to know⁶. Below are some principles for making your document easier to read.

3.1: Simplify the language: Readers find it easier to understand simple messages than complex ones. For instance, research shows that voters have a better understanding of where a political party sits in the ideological spectrum if the campaigns use simpler messages⁷.

Below we show how we simplified the letter to make the main message easier to understand.

Before: “We now intend to take enforcement action to collect the outstanding amount. This will add a \$102 enforcement fee to your outstanding balance”

After: “If you do not pay we can take further actions to collect the outstanding amount. This would add a \$102 fee to your fine”

3.2: Could a 12-year-old understand your message?

A good rule of thumb to check if your letter is clear is to think about if a person 12-year-old or younger could understand. If a 12-year-old can understand your letter most of the New Zealand adult population will likely be able to as well.

You can test the reading level of your letter in Word by following the steps below: Click: “File” → “Options” → “Proofing”. Underneath “When correcting spelling and grammar in word” check the following boxes

- Check grammar and spelling
- Show readability statistics

Once you’ve saved these changes, press F7 and word will check the spelling and grammar of your document and show you the readability level.

3.3: Remove irrelevant text

Keep only the relevant information. (But check with the legal team to make sure removing any sentences doesn’t change the legal meaning.)

3.4 Remove jargon and acronyms

Using jargon can make it hard for people to understand your letter⁸. One way to check if you have done this well is to give your letter to someone who knows nothing about your project. Ask them if anything is unclear or if there are words they don’t understand.

Simplified Letter

The diagram illustrates a simplified letter from the Ministry of Justice. The letter is enclosed in a blue border. At the top left is the Ministry of Justice logo with the tagline 'Take it to the next level'. At the top right is contact information for the Collections Contact Centre. The letter body contains several sections: a date field, a 'Ways to pay' section with contact numbers and online payment options, 'Payment details' including a PPN and amount due, a red header 'Pay your outstanding fine now to prevent further actions', a salutation 'Dear <first name>', a main message 'According to our records you have missed the deadline to pay your \$<amount> fine. Please pay within 10 days. If you do not pay we can take further actions to collect the outstanding amount. This would add a \$102 fee to your fine and the following things can happen:', a bulleted list of consequences (suspend driver license, stop travelling overseas, take money from income/bank account, inability to get a loan), and a closing statement 'If you are not the person we are looking for, please call us as soon as possible to prevent the above actions being taken against you in error. If you have trouble paying, please call us. Our staff are here to help.' followed by a signature and the title 'Collections Registry Officer'.

Annotations on the right side of the diagram explain readability improvements:

- 3.4: “Enforcement fee” is replaced with “fee”
- 3.1: Simplify the language
- 3.2: The reading age for this sentence: Before BI: 12 – 13-year-old. After BI: 9 – 10-year-old
- 3.3: There are now fewer bullet points

Step 4: Other things to consider

Now that the letter has been simplified there are some other practical things to consider.

4.1: Think about who the letter is from

We know that it is not only the content of the letter that matters but also who the message comes from. Is the sender from a specific government agency? Or a neutral third party? Or perhaps the letter can be written from a specific person rather than an organization. For instance, messages that come from well-known or trustworthy people are more likely to be perceived as credible, this can result in people more engaged with the message⁹.

4.1.1: Personalise the letter

Using someone's name in the letter can make the letter more personal and effective. For instance, behavioural research has found that when bankers were sent emails asking if they would donate to a charity they were more likely to agree when the email used their first name¹⁰.

4.2: Think about timing What is a good time for your letter to be delivered? If you want someone to do a behaviour in 3 months, sending them a letter now probably won't do much good. Think about when the reader is going to be most receptive to your letter.

4.3: How will the letter be delivered?

Do you have to pass information to another team, so they can deliver the message?
When do you need to get them the information by?

4.4: Make it as easy and quick for the reader to do any next steps

For instance, if the reader needs to go to a website, on that website make the behaviour as easy as possible by reducing the number of clicks needed.

Step 5: Measure the Impact

The only way to know if you have achieved your desired effect (or even had a negative effect) is to measure the impact of your message.

Start thinking about what you would need to measure.

Checklists

Below we have summarised the information in the steps above to create a check list. You can use it to help ensure the main points are checked off when simplifying your document

- I have identified what the main message is
- I can write the main message in one simple sentence
- The main message stands out (is bolded and/or in a different colour)
- If we want the reader to act, a call to action is in the top third of the page
- The rest of the letter is easy to understand – i.e. a 12-year-old could understand it
- There are no acronyms
- There is no jargon

References

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