

## How to Make Knowledge Usable

*A colloquial, idiosyncratic, non-comprehensive, always-evolving guide from Usable Knowledge at the Harvard Graduate School of Education*

[www.gse.harvard.edu/uk](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/uk)

### To get started, ask 3 questions:

As you plan any public communication of your research — whether you plan to write it, speak it, or collaborate with your institution's communications staff, ask:

- Who is my audience?
- What is the key point of my work?
- What is the impact I want this work to have?

### And then consider these pointers:

- Identify your audience: Who is your work important to (who should it be important to)?
- What does your audience want to know, and what do they *need* to know?
- What are your takeaway messages? **Practice:** What is the one-sentence description of your project or finding? What is the three-sentence description?
- Use plain, clear, simplifying language. Avoid [jargon](#) (obviously).
- Be concise.
- Think about an inverted pyramid as you write about, speak about, or present your project to a broad audience. Make your big points first. Add some detail. Then conclude with a finely honed targeted point. Your sentences and paragraphs should be brief.
- OR: Think about an iceberg! The part that's above the surface is where the really broad, accessible, and clear takeaways are living. But obviously, it's what you can't see, what's under the water, that's key. That's your impact (literally, if you're the Titanic.) That's your research. That's your evidence. That's what backs up your claims—and what supports your takeaways. You can share all that below-the-surface iceberg stuff with audiences who need or want to probe the topic in a deep, full way.
- Make your work digestible. Break it up into subsections; use callout quotes; use clear visualizations.
- Always ask yourself, will people outside of my immediate subfield understand my references?
- HAVE CONFIDENCE that it's OK (and good) to describe your work in ways that people can understand. Know that it's OK to speak in different levels of detail, and with different language, to different audiences.
- Don't be afraid to describe what you do in general terms. We know you're leaving a lot out. We know there are complexities that you're not sharing. It's OK.

- But: Be accurate. If you're summarizing, tell people you're summarizing. If you're drawing narrative conclusions not stated in your research, say that. Simple does not mean exaggerated, hyped, or wrong.
- To help a piece of work gain traction and become useful and used, give readers "actionable resources" — something tangible they can learn, do, and take with them. This might be as simple as creating three bullet points in your text, summarizing your three takeaways. It might be more ambitious than that: Toolkits, fact sheets, research reports, infographics, videos, dashboards, Q+As, press releases, quotes, narratives — the list is endless. Experiment with formats until you find one that best conveys the impact of your work, to the audience you want to speak to.
- Tell human stories. Connect your work or your product to human beings. That will naturally simplify your language and your references.
- AND FINALLY: What is the impact that you want your work to have? No matter how specific or broad your desired impact, ask yourself whether you are using the right channels to achieve it, and whether you've identified the right audience to create it.

**NOW:** What if you're a communicator working with faculty and trying to tell their stories in accessible ways? **All of the above, plus:**

- Probably the most important, least-discussed thing: **Build trust.** Win the trust of your researcher/expert by understanding their work and showing them that you will handle it with care and respect. Don't be flip.
- Be smart and interested.
- Know your audience, know *their* audience. Who are they concerned about impressing/not alienating?
- Make it clear that there is more to know about the subject than you have room to say. Tell readers when you are summarizing, and link to further resources.
- Be meticulous.