

May 2020

# ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

## Be radically clear in your crisis communications

Storytelling is the most powerful form of communication. Forget it for now. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, this is a time for “radical clarity” in school communications.

You must deliver the information people want to know as concisely, specifically and easily as possible.

Don’t confuse what people want to know with what you think they need to know. Those are not always the same.

Remember the caveat of good writing: Show, don’t tell.

### So, Mr. Know-it-all, what is “radical clarity?”

I’m so glad you asked. The four opening paragraphs illustrate “radical clarity.” It’s writing that gets straight to the point. It’s writing stripped of pretense, agenda or elaboration. It’s terse but not brusque. It’s like a brief DIY video. “This is what to know about . . . .”

Think short and punchy. Short sentences. Short paragraphs. But with enough variation to be conversational. Another way to think of it is providing a quick-hit bulleted list of responses to what people are asking about.

I led this essay with the concept of radical clarity because such writing is the secret of effective school district communication, especially during crises. Communication is based on understanding the audience and communicating what the audience will want to know. Radical clarity complements adults’ short attention spans, especially now.

### Enough chatter. Give an example.

“Dear students and families,

“All schools in the Hughesville School District will now remain closed through (new date).

“Starting (date), education will continue through distance learning. Teaching will be very different while covering much of the same material as in the traditional classroom.

“Teachers will email and post online assignments each Monday, including due dates and any submission requirements. Weekly instruction packets are being mailed to families for whom we don’t have email addresses.

“Remember, free bag lunches are being distributed at each elementary and middle school from 11:30 a.m. to 1:15 p.m. Monday through Friday, and at the school bus stops listed below.”

*(Over)*

For subscription information, contact WSSDA at (800) 562-8927 or (360) 493-9231.

For content questions, contact: Marcia Latta Communications Consultant (503) 580-2612.

Reproduction rights for materials distributed as part of *On Call* are granted only to subscribing districts and are restricted to distribution as part of their local public relations programs.



“Here are more details. If you have questions, please call or text the district administration at 123-456-7890 or email Info@Hughesville.edu.

“(Brief sentence of appreciation or acknowledgment, if desired, with more appreciation/ acknowledgment later.)

Then come the details. By now, the audience will be receptive, not having had to struggle through a prologue.

### **Your emphasis on “radical clarity” sounds cold-hearted. Where is the empathy?**

If you or someone feels the need to open with paragraphs of heartfelt sympathy for what families are going through and appreciation for the hard-working staff, please write those words.

Then throw them away.

OK, that was a bit harsh. What I really mean is, set them aside. Condense them and they will provide a worthy conclusion to the communication.

Seriously. I’ve written more than 15,000 pieces for publication, plus countless for internal consumption. Sometimes I yield to temptation and begin a piece with an effusive exposition of how deeply I care about this or that. Then I come to my senses and discard those self-absorbed paragraphs with a shudder. Writing is not about me, the author; it’s about the audience.

Please, please remember that the audience — parents, teachers, bus drivers, students or others — wants to know what affects them. Prolific words of commiseration or appreciation are lost when they stand between the audience and the news.

I recognize that this advice may go against our instincts. We do care, and we want to show that. The best way to demonstrate caring is by understanding what the audience wants and immediately providing that information in bite-sized nuggets that easily can be absorbed. To do otherwise is to be self-serving and counter-productive.

### **What does the audience want to know?**

Ask them. If the audience is parents, talk with several. Read their social media posts.

Ask for their specific questions, so long as you don’t come across as out of touch.

### **Accept responsibility**

The No. 1 mistake I’ve seen in viewing scores of coronavirus press releases, press conferences, videos and the like is starting with ponderous, albeit heartfelt, pronouncements of commiseration and appreciation. The No. 2 mistake is blaming someone else for the situation, such as, “The Governor ordered us to close schools, so we are following ....”

Who cares whose fault it is? You might; the audience doesn’t. There are ways to neutrally say you’re following so-and-so-’s directive without casting blame.

In other words, practice the civil behavior we try to embed in our students.

### **Show, don't tell**

Don't say, "We're doing everything we can to ...". For one thing, it sounds pompous. It's also a falsehood, and the audience may catch you. What we really mean is, "We're doing everything we know how to do and that we can within our budget, staffing levels and other constraints."

I'm not suggesting that you say that. Instead, tell what you're doing.

Leave it to the audience to decide whether you're doing everything you can.

### **Make it easy**

Again, consider the audience's time. Don't waste it by sending an email that says, "The Hughesville School District has provided updated guidance on such-and-such. Click here to read it."

Put the "updated guidance" in the body of the message. The recipients have opened the email; don't ask, or expect, them to take another step. Links to additional information are fine if used judiciously, instead of an expectation being placed on the recipients.

### **No storytelling?**

I love storytelling. You may want to post success stories. People can draw encouragement and inspiration from them.

But don't mix storytelling with providing information. Anecdotes will come across as unwanted tangents, no matter how relevant they might seem to their authors.

This is a time for the radical clarity of a short, clear intro; an informational but not overwritten middle; and an empathetic wrap-up.

---

*Contributed by Dick Hughes, communications consultant. Contact him at [TheHughesisms@gmail.com](mailto:TheHughesisms@gmail.com).*