

Crafting effective communications during a crisis

Five tips from the Behavioural Insights Team
April 2020



In partnership with



Cabinet Office





BIT's work on coronavirus

The [Behavioural Insights Team](#) (BIT) is a social purpose company part owned by the UK Cabinet Office. We apply ideas from behavioural science and robust evaluation techniques to policy-making.

We have been working with UK central government to test public health messages on coronavirus to see which are most effective. We've been using our online testing platform [Predictiv](#) to run large randomised controlled trials (also called A/B tests) to identify the best performers.

The aim of this deck is to share tips and advice for local authorities on how to make their communications more effective based on what we've found in our testing.

If you'd like to work with us [Get in touch](#)

Rhys Campbell

Local government (London-based)

rhys.campbell@bi.team

Eva Kolker

Local government (Manchester-based)

eva.kolker@bi.team

[Our values](#)

Social Impact | Empiricism and humility

Fresh thinking and intellectual curiosity

Collaboration | Public Service

Five tips for effective communications

1. Put the key action at the top - tell people what you want them to do
2. Use plain English - make it easy to understand
3. Shorten text - use as few words as possible
4. Use images and graphics
5. Test and improve



Launched by Department of Health (3.3.20)



Illustrating the top tips with a COVID case study

Original poster



This is the original poster that central government asked us to improve

Final poster



This is the final poster that went live after testing & improving it.



1. Put the key action at the top

If the aim of your communications is to change behaviour, **put the key action you want people to take at the top** in large letters. Remember you need to tell people what behaviour you want them to do e.g. wash your hands or stay at home

People will only spend fractions of a second looking at your communications. This is why it is so important that your main message is at the top.

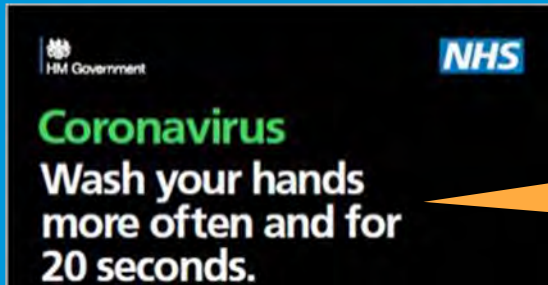
This idea applies to letters and emails, too: any communication where you want people to take action should have that action at the top.

Original poster



Not a key action at the top (more of a title)

Final poster



Key action at the top



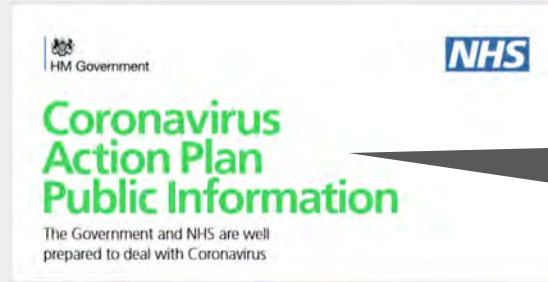
2. Use plain English

Avoid using complex words or jargon in your communications.

When we see a word or phrase that we don't understand, we are more likely to give up trying to understand what the message is asking us to do.

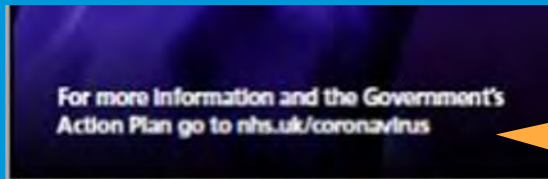
It can sometimes be hard to spot jargon. You can address this by asking a family member (such as a parent or a partner) to read and explain the message to you.

Original poster



Most people won't know what 'Action Plan' means

Final poster



Non-essential, additional information to bottom



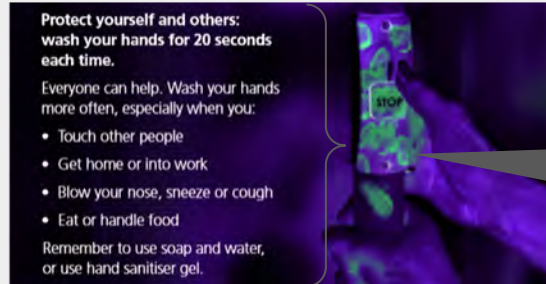
3. Shorten text

Do what you can to **reduce the amount of text** in your communications so that you keep focus on your main message.

The less text there is, the easier it will be for people to understand and focus on what you want them to do.

You can shorten texts by providing links to helpful but non-essential information and by using bullet points or tables to break up blocks of text.

Original poster



52 words

Final poster



34 words



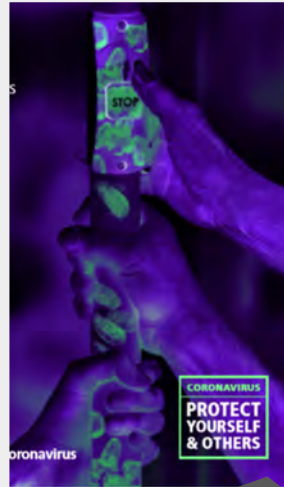
4. Use images and graphics

Adding an image or an infographic that reinforces your message can help make information more accessible.

As with text, images should be simple and easy to understand. People need to be able to scan the image and quickly understand what it is.

If you want people to follow a process, consider outlining the steps with images and simple text (see our [comparison of handwashing posters](#) for examples.)

Original poster



People in our tests didn't know what this image was showing

Final poster



People in our tests identified this image more easily



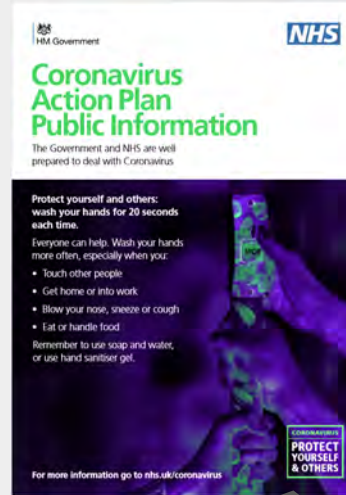
5. Test and improve

Test which design is most effective in getting your point across. You can do this online using randomised controlled trials (also known as A/B testing).

We test a design's effectiveness by asking participants in our trials:

- What was the main action being advised (i.e. 'wash your hands')
- Was the information easy to understand
- To what extent do you intend to change your behaviour

Original poster



85% recalled 'Wash your hands more often'

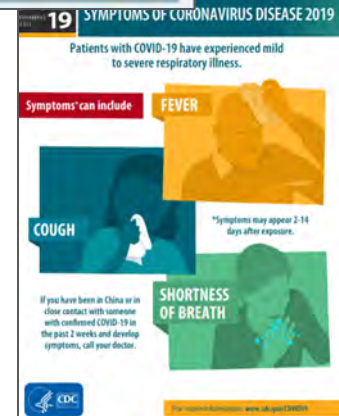
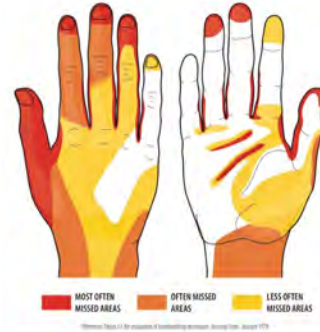
Final poster



96% recalled 'Wash your hands more often'

Plans for future testing

- How to increase understanding and motivation to adopt behaviours like handwashing and social distancing?
- How to communicate that there are different stages of pandemic which require different behaviours (e.g. personal protection measures, voluntary quarantine / self isolation)?
- How to communicate case summary, which number to emphasise? (new cases / total cases / recovery cases/ critical cases)
- How to communicate rationale behind certain guidance (eg parents may think school closures are to clean schools rather than reduce contact between children)
- How to communicate alternatives to hand-shaking?



Find out more

Follow us on twitter: @B_I_Tweets

Visit our blog: www.bi.team/blog



Get in touch

Rhys Campbell
Local government (London-based)
rhys.campbell@bi.team

Eva Kolker
Local government (Manchester-based)
eva.kolker@bi.team