

A communications revolution has taken place but you would not know it by looking at the way officials brief up the chain of authority. Briefing documents remain a throw-back to the days of typewriters, form memos, and tabbed binders. Technology enables deeper engagement. It also makes it easier to dump poorly crafted text onto decision-makers without meeting their needs.



Mr. SCEPTIC

He guards against simplistic sell-jobs and insists that claims be backed up with understandable evidence.



Ms. MINDSET

She wants policy framed in familiar terms and accepts new mental models only if communicated insightfully.



Mr. INTEREST

He craves novelty and has a short attention span for policy details expressed in bureaucratic jargon.

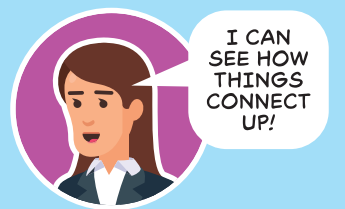


What are the communications goals of the briefing? Who is the audience? In what scenarios will the materials be used and what tasks will they enable? What are the downstream reuses? Work backwards from the answers when selecting and designing materials. The materials should show, not just tell. They should stimulate thinking, not supplant it. Consider these alternatives.

1

GRAPHIC PLACEMATS

A data dashboard and an issue map are displayed on opposite sides of a poster- or tabloid-sized page. Both the details and bigger picture can be seen at once.



FRONT

BACK

Large pages fit more content. The extra space makes it possible to juxtapose findings, compare data, organize ideas—all without taxing viewers' memories or forcing viewers to flip through pages. That improves the flow of analysis and conversation as key ideas are at everyone's fingertips. Annotations and highlighted findings can tell a story and offer key messages. Yet the map-like nature of the placemat can enable a conversation to branch out in multiple directions instead of following a set sequence. That empowers those being briefed to take up a bigger role in the analysis of findings and policy.



SLIDEUMENTS. These “decks” are too wordy to work as overhead slides but not wordy enough to be self-explanatory.*

Stepping through a series of slides feels like being led down a garden path; that is, confined to a single storyline and logic. That limits the scope of conversation instead of enabling a robust exploration of policy options. Corny “clipart” distracts, adds no visual clarity.



Complicated ideas are either broken up into a fixed sequence, making comparison across the whole difficult, or are squished into a single slide. Diagrams tend to be made of labelled shapes that are too abstract to engage the imagination.



Bullet points are cryptic sentence fragments that are hard to decypher after a talk. That abbreviated and disjointed way of communicating is full of buzzwords, empty jargon, and other muddles. The resulting concentration problems and boredom is called “death by bulletpoint.”



INFO DUMP. Long-form reports and briefing binders aim for deep explanation but usually lapse into longwindedness.

Important messages and details get lost in the pile of text. Much of that text is not crafted carefully but is reused text snippets from other sources. Such cut-and-paste jobs result in verbose, disjointed discussions instead of meaningful explanations and coherent arguments.



Dumping long passages of text on decision-makers can seem like an agenda is being foisted upon them. Coming to a meeting of the minds involves dialogue and tailored briefings, which is tough to pull off with large quantities of text.



It is hard to muster the enthusiasm to read long tracts of artless, impersonal prose. Most decision-makers have social work-routines that are not conducive to long periods of uninterrupted reading. A briefing binder is usually read *en diagonale*: skimmed by skipping across pages.



MEMO CARDS. Shoehorning too much text into handy cards has caused the card size to grow and become less handy.

Decision-makers who want intellectual engagement react badly to policy that is dumbed down to a series of slogans, euphemisms, and vagaries. Few memo writers master a nuanced and purposeful *microstyle* that comes across as pithy while also retaining an air of authoritativeness.



When abbreviated messages are written with unfamiliar points of reference, they are perceived as stray factoids. Talking points written in the voice of abstract neutrality end up getting revised on the fly, with much meaning lost in translation.



Brief memos have a superficial appeal to those who are easily bored. Without a grasp of the underlying logic and evidence, these memos become a crutch. Words are put into a decision-maker's mouth, which will look bad when the situation requires going off-script.

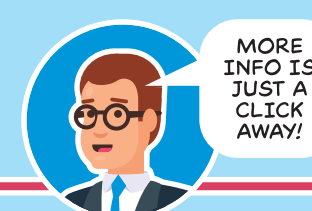
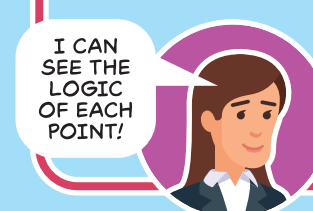
2

SLIDEDOCS*

Each page is a self-explanatory panel. Visuals (charts, diagrams, photographs, and the like) are shown. Full-sentence headlines and elaboration are next to the visuals, with fine-print footnotes and sources at the bottom.



The aim is to reproduce the magazine reading experience with engaging visuals and a concise narrative. The format can be presented on tablets, with clickable links to retrieve underlying source materials and footnotes. Instead of reusing text snippets in longer documents, whole pages are prepared and reused in briefings, with small tweaks to fit the circumstances. A policy unit would maintain a repository of well-designed panels so that they can be updated and assembled on short notice.



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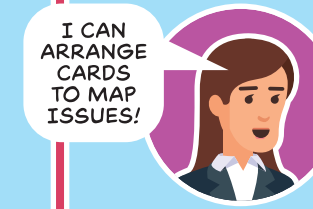
VISUAL DIALOGUE CARDS

The front of these index cards illustrates the topic and offers a marquee message. Text on the back elaborates, with a handy chart illustrating important facts.



FRONT

BACK



A policy issue is broken down into its constituent parts, each getting its own card. The front visuals show the subject in a tangible, relatable form. Such visual references also make card memorable, make the cards easier to organize, and enable various dialogue activities.



It is easy to throw a few cards into a briefcase and review them during spare moments. This format is also easy to translate into small-screen mobile devices, such as phones.

* For “slideuments” see Garr Reynolds, *Presentation Zen* (Berkeley: New Riders, 2007) and Edward Tufte, *The Cognitive Style of Powerpoint* (Cheshire: Graphics Press, 2003). For “slidedocs” see Nancy Duarte’s free e-book, *Slidedocs* (Sunnyvale: Duarte Inc., 2014).
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