

UNLOCK YOUR KEY MESSAGE

PURPOSE

The information in this flyer helps researchers communicate their work succinctly through a key message, so that the right people understand it, care about it, and act on it.

CONTRIBUTORS

Content is based on the workshop delivered for GACD by Rich Watts (Further Communications) in May 2026. For more information, please see richpublicspeaking.co.uk.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



UNLOCK YOUR KEY MESSAGE WITH A TWO-STAGE PROCESS

First, prepare the 'Four A's: the audience, the action, the appeal, and the anchor. Second, apply the Pyramid Principle. Once unlocked, your key message can be tailored, adapted, and edited for multiple purposes.



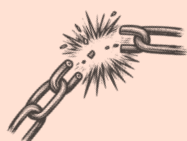
PUT THE MOST IMPORTANT INFORMATION FIRST

The Pyramid Principle places the most important information right at the beginning without any "warm up". This structure helps audiences quickly understand what matters most and what action they should take. It is a great starting point for any type of communication.



TELL YOUR AUDIENCE WHAT TO DO NEXT

A call to action provides necessary direction, telling your audience exactly what to do next. Most likely, the core content is the 'do' element of the action in the 'Four A's. However, to be an effective call to action, it is reworded to be specific, actionable, and memorable.



BREAK THE CURSE OF KNOWLEDGE

'The Curse of Knowledge' is the idea that being an expert on a topic negatively impacts your ability to communicate about it. It is not a failure of expertise, just a side effect. To break this curse, be ruthless about relevance, not completeness.

Work on your project's key message as a team

Coming together as a project team to draft a shared key message strengthens both the clarity and impact of your work.

Co-developing a key message ensures everyone agrees on what the project is really saying, what matters most, and what should be communicated externally. This avoids mixed or conflicting messages.

Writing a single key message requires the team to move from 'everything we found' to 'what people need to know'.

This improves focus and prevents overload.

If the team agrees the message collectively everyone is more likely to use it and communications stay aligned. This builds credibility across contexts.

Bringing the team together transforms a key message from an individual interpretation into a clear, agreed, audience-focused statement that others can understand, remember, and act on.

Unlock a key message with a two-stage process

STAGE 1: PREPARE THE 'FOUR A'S



THE AUDIENCE

Who is the **THE AUDIENCE** for this communication?



THE ACTION

What do you want **THE AUDIENCE** to think / feel / do after receiving your communication?



THE APPEAL

What are **THE AUDIENCE** motivated by? What appeals to them?



THE ANCHOR

Pinpoint the most important piece of information that **THE AUDIENCE** need to know, believe, and remember to achieve **THE ACTION**.

STAGE 2: APPLY THE PYRAMID PRINCIPLE



THE KEY MESSAGE

One or two succinct sentences in plain language. This links **THE ACTION**, **THE APPEAL**, and **THE ANCHOR**.



THE MOST IMPORTANT SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Why it matters to *this* audience. Refer back to **THE APPEAL** and **THE ANCHOR**.



ADDITIONAL DETAIL - IF NEEDED

Data, cases, quotes, implementation lessons. Start by thinking about what can be left out.



A CALL TO ACTION

Tell your audience exactly what to do next with a specific, actionable, and memorable call to action.

Stage 1: Prepare the 'Four A's'

THE AUDIENCE

Before starting any email, slide, brief, or conversation, be explicit: who is this for?

If you can't name the audience clearly, don't start drafting your key message yet.

Common audiences of your implementation research might include:

- Policymakers
- Funders
- Service users and their families
- Community groups
- Clinicians
- Health service managers
- Other research teams



Your most important audiences are likely to be project stakeholders.

There is no single 'correct' level of audience granularity - it is a trade-off.

Ideally, messages are highly tailored (by role, seniority, or individual) because relevance increases impact. In reality, limits on time and resources make this impractical.

Use a cost-benefit approach:

- Be highly granular where it matters most and where audiences differ significantly in motivation and decision-making.
- Stay broader where added tailoring won't improve impact.

Even when grouping audiences, clearly defining who they are and what they care about improves communication quality.

THE ACTION

Every communication should aim to change something.

Each audience should have their own, tailored set of statements outlining what you want them to think, feel, and do after receiving your communication.

THINK

What belief or understanding should they leave with?

Examples

For a policymaker: This intervention addresses a priority policy problem in a feasible, evidence-informed way.

For a funder: The science is well thought-through and reduces risk of failure.

FEEL

What emotion will support action?

Examples

For a policymaker: A sense of urgency that delaying action has measurable costs.

For a funder: Reassured that risks are acknowledged and managed.

DO

What concrete action should they take next?

Examples

For a policymaker: Allocate resources or authorise integration into existing programmes.

For a funder: Renew or expand support to additional settings or phases.

THE APPEAL

Ask yourself:

- What motivates this audience?
- What appeals most to them?

It can help to reflect on why the audience don't already think / feel / do as you would like.

THE ANCHOR

What is the most important piece of information that will motivate the audience to think / feel / do as you would like?

Here, you must link the action (what you would like them to think / feel / do) to the appeal (what motivates them).

Stage 2: Apply the Pyramid Principle

This structure helps audiences quickly understand what matters most and what action they should take.

It also helps communicators stay focused on what their audience actually needs to know.

This structure is a great starting point for any type of communication and can be used for papers, emails, briefs, reports, presentations...

Whoever you are communicating with and through whichever channel, always lead with the key message. There is no need to 'warm up' with background information.

This is often called 'BLUF' - Bottom Line Up Front.

Why? The audience's attention and memory are highest at the start.



THE KEY POINT

One or two succinct sentences in plain language.

This links **THE ACTION**, **THE APPEAL**, and **THE ANCHOR**.



THE MOST IMPORTANT SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Why it matters to *this* audience.

Refer back to **THE APPEAL** and **THE ANCHOR**.



ADDITIONAL DETAIL - IF NEEDED

Data, cases, quotes, implementation lessons.

WHERE DOES THE 'PYRAMID PRINCIPLE' COME FROM?

The Pyramid Principle draws on a body of cognitive psychology and linguistics evidence about how people process and retain information. It is a practical synthesis of multiple well-established principles.

The structure matches how people understand information

Research in comprehension shows that people understand information better when they receive a schema or organising framework first then the details filling it in.

Bartlett FC (1932) *Remembering: A study in experimental and social psychology*. Cambridge University Press.

Rumelhart DE (1980) Schemata: The building blocks of cognition. In R. J. Spiro et al. (Eds.), *Theoretical issues in reading comprehension* (pp. 33–58). Lawrence Erlbaum.

People remember the 'gist' more than detail

Audiences retain the core meaning rather than verbatim content, so leading with a clear governing message increases recall and impact.

Reyna VF & Brainerd CJ (1995) Fuzzy-trace theory: An interim synthesis. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 7(1), 1–75.

First impressions matter because of the primacy effect

Information presented first is more likely to be remembered, so starting with the main point ensures it is not missed.

Murdock BB (1962) The serial position effect of free recall. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 64(5), 482–488.

Effective communication places the most important information first and ensures that readers can quickly identify what matters to them.

To illustrate the 'Bottom Line Up Front' (BLUF) principle, workshop participants compared two emails and evaluated their effectiveness in communicating an 'ask'.

- What makes the email difficult to follow?
- How could it be improved?
- How might it be structured to make the key messages clearer?

EMAIL A

Hi Oscar,

I hope you are well. As you know, we have been working on the GACD grant submission over the past few weeks, and there have been quite a few iterations of the budget as we have gathered further input from different stakeholders.

Following yesterday's call with the University's Finance Team, we made some adjustments to the cost assumptions, particularly around the implementation timeline and associated resource allocation. Our partners in Australia also provided revised estimates late yesterday afternoon, which we have now incorporated. Overall, the budget is in a strong position and reflects the strategic intent we discussed in last week's leadership meeting.

Given the importance of this opportunity and the need to ensure alignment across the senior team, it would be helpful to ensure that everything is fully reviewed before submission. The deadline for submission is tomorrow morning, so we are now finalising the last elements of the documentation pack.

When you have a moment today, it would be great if you could take a look at the attached budget document and let me know if you are comfortable with it.

Thanks,
Clara

EMAIL B

Hi Oscar,

Could you please review and approve the attached final pricing document for the GACD grant submission by 3pm today so we can submit on time?

This is the version incorporating the changes from yesterday's call with the University's Finance team and the updated delivery assumptions from our Australian partners. The budget has been stress-tested against the threshold we discussed, and we are currently sitting at US \$1.32 million over four years.

The only material change since the draft you saw on Monday is the revised implementation timeline (page 4), which slightly increases year-one cost but improves our overall competitiveness.

If you are happy, a quick email confirmation is fine. If you would prefer to discuss, I am free between 1pm and 3pm.

Thanks in advance,
Clara

The ask is immediate, explicit, and unambiguous.

No summary of what is actually new or sensitive (e.g. "key changes since last version").

Decision-relevant context replaces process narration.

The email provides a chronology rather than decision-relevant context.

It does not state what has changed since Oscar last saw this, and why it matters to him.

The mention of stakeholders and teams adds length without clarifying risk, trade-offs, or judgement calls.

Changes are isolated and signposted.

Accountability and outcome are clear - and urgency is reinforced with a concrete fallback.

The deadline appears after multiple paragraphs of background.

The core action Oscar is expected to take is only revealed at the end.

The ask is vague: "take a look" and "let me know if you are comfortable" don't specify the depth or type of review (sanity check? formal approval? sign-off?).

"When you have a moment today" conflicts with the tomorrow-morning deadline, creating ambiguity about urgency.

End with a clear call to action

A call to action provides direction, telling your audience exactly what to do next. Most likely, the core content is the 'do' element of the action in the 'Four A's'.

USE ACTION WORDS

Action words prompt immediate behavioural responses and are typically positioned at the start of a call to action.

POLICY FOCUS

Endorse, adopt, prioritise, approve, implement, commission, allocate, integrate.

HEALTHCARE FOCUS

Apply, incorporate, follow, deliver, screen, refer, coordinate, monitor.

COMMUNITY FOCUS

Participate, share, co-design, support, contribute, engage, voice, access.

ACADEMIC FOCUS

Collaborate, partner, investigate, evaluate, replicate, publish, disseminate.

MAKE IT SPECIFIC

Clearly state what you want your audience to do. Avoid vague language: state who, what, and when.

EXAMPLE

"Share this brief with your team this week and identify one change to test in your setting."

MAKE IT EASY TO ACT

Remove barriers by making the next step simple and realistic. Provide links, tools, or a clear first step so people can act immediately.

EXAMPLE

"Download the checklist and use it in your next stakeholder focus group."

MAKE IT MEMORABLE

Frame your call to action in a way that sticks, reinforcing the core message.

EXAMPLE

"Start small, test quickly, and learn what works."

Break the curse of knowledge

'The Curse of Knowledge' is the idea that being an expert on a topic negatively impacts your ability to communicate about it. Your expertise clouds your judgement of your audience's level of knowledge and so you use too complex language, concepts or ideas.

The curse of knowledge is not a failure of expertise, it is a side-effect.

Experts often assume shared understanding that does not exist, use jargon or shorthand without realising it, and include information because it is interesting or important to them. This leads to communication that is technically accurate but ineffective, overwhelming, and fails to prompt action.

Be ruthless about relevance, not completeness. Before including any / all information, ask yourself two questions:

- Does this help this audience take action?
- If I removed this, would the message still work?

The pyramid model is a protective tool against the curse of knowledge:

- Putting the key message first forces prioritisation.
- Limited supporting points prevents overload.
- Putting evidence last stops hiding the point among details.

A worked example of unlocking a key message.

PREPARING THE 'FOUR A'S

Who is the audience for this communication?	Another implementation research team who plans to implement this programme in a different country.
What do you want them to THINK after receiving the communication?	• This programme is feasible and adaptable in settings similar to the ones they work in. • The implementation challenges and solutions are clearly documented. • The evidence is robust enough to justify replication.
What do you want them to FEEL after receiving the communication?	• Confident that implementation risks are manageable. • Reassured that lessons learned are transferable. • Motivated rather than overwhelmed by complexity.
What do you want them to DO after receiving the communication?	• Use the findings to inform their own implementation design. • Adapt the programme using the documented core components and flexibilities. • Contact the original team for further discussion or collaboration.
What are they motivated by? What appeals to them?	• Implementing evidence-based mental health programmes effectively. • Avoiding common implementation pitfalls. • Demonstrating impact, scalability, and value for money in their own context.
What is the most important piece of information that will motivate them to think / feel / do as we would like?	Clear evidence that the programme achieved meaningful outcomes <i>because of</i> our specific implementation strategies and these can be adapted across contexts, not because of unique local conditions.

APPLYING THE PYRAMID PRINCIPLE

The key message	This mental health programme can be successfully implemented in diverse contexts if core components are preserved and key implementation strategies are adapted thoughtfully.
The most important supporting information	• Which implementation strategies were critical to success. • What adaptations were made and why. • How these strategies influenced reach, fidelity, and mental health outcomes.
Additional detail - if needed	• Contextual barriers and facilitators encountered. • Staffing, training, and resource requirements. • What did not work as expected and how this was addressed.
Call to action	Use these findings to design your local implementation approach, explicitly adapting strategies while maintaining core programme elements - and reach out to discuss alignment and shared learning.

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