

Getting to the Headline: 10 Criteria for Facts Worth Sharing

Do you write technically sound, detailed documents full of useful information, context, and a solid description of how you got to your answers? Publish them in beautifully-formatted PDFs with lots of photos? Spend months in review and polishing processes to get to the perfect product? Come up with a descriptive title, like “Lessons Learned from the HIV Project in Tanzania”?



Sound familiar? I have some bad news for you: ***no one who needs to know about it is reading what you write.***

We all are overloaded with information all the time. There is simply too much going on for anyone to stay on top of it all. So when we get we hear about an important report that is relevant to our work, we flag it and it goes into the black hole of “I will read that when I have time.” When that pile overwhelms the storage space, we throw it out and start over.

Your goal is to get your report to the top of the pile, especially for the most influential—and likely busiest—people in your [audience](#). Sadly, technical quality, pretty formatting, and deep detail won’t get them there. Those aspects are critical—they make people do something about your report once they have read it, but they won’t make someone prioritize your report over everything else they have to do.

What will put your report at the top of the pile? Two things:

- 1) A headline that someone’s catches attention and helps them do their job.
- 2) Enough detail and facts to make someone believe your headline in fewer than 700 words.

It’s not a new idea that we should learn to write more like journalists. The book [Made to Stick](#) offers some great tips for how we can frame good ideas to make them memorable. But most people get stuck even before the framing. They can’t figure out how to pick which details are the ones that should go into a headline. It feels like playing favorites to boil down 100 pages into 5-10 bullet points, and they are overwhelmed by figuring out which ones need to get left behind.

Sound familiar? Then I have good news for you: ***you can fix it.*** These 10 criteria will help you figure out which facts make up your headline and highlights that will hook people into reading the whole report. You are looking for ideas where there is:

- 1) **An impact:** Did something change? Something that moved in the world?
- 2) **A hook:** Is there something surprising or unexpected? Different than business as usual? The human brain loves surprises, so building on the unexpected dramatically improves people’s willingness to read.
- 3) **Evidence:** Can you produce proof—numbers, quotes, qualitative data—that backs up your impact claim?
- 4) **An audience:** Can you think of at least 50 different people who need to know this? Maybe not people by name, but jobs titles that would find it helpful?

- 5) **A distribution network:** Can you think of at least 10 people you have heard talk about this issue in the last 6 months? It's especially useful if they have been asking questions or looking for information that you can provide. Those are the people you need to send the headline and the facts to personally.
- 6) **A solution:** can you think of a problem that this can help solve for a person or a part of your organization? Will applying what this tells them make their jobs easier?
- 7) **Relevance to the field:** Have you read an article/blog post/report or attended an event in the last year that this information builds on or contradicts? Will knowing this help advance the whole field or open new avenues of exploration?
- 8) **An action:** Is there something other people can do with this information? Can they take action because of it?
- 9) **An emotional connection:** Did something make you respond emotionally? A great story about a person or a good quote? Research shows that emotion is hugely important in the workplace, and even the most die-hard technical experts need to feel connected to what they do. Emotion isn't enough to prove a point, but it's a good way to get people to look at the rest of what you have to say.
- 10) **Brevity:** Can you explain it in one sentence? Albert Einstein said, "If you can't explain it to a 6-year-old, you don't understand it yourself." If you can't get to the heart of the idea in one sentence, people won't dig any deeper. They don't have the time to spend on ideas that they can't understand.

If you can answer yes to 7 or more of these questions, then the idea is probably worth including in your headline or your short description. From the short version, you should hyperlink to the full report so people who want more can get it. People who don't have time for more will at least have read the most important part of what you have to say, even if they never get to the full report.



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