



BEST PRACTICES FOR WRITING TALKING POINTS

Talking points can help provide key findings from policy-relevant research quickly, clearly, and with clear implications for action.

I. WHAT ARE TALKING POINTS?

Talking points are short, jargon-free nuggets of information that policymakers can use when speaking on an issue. An individual talking point should be one sentence long and make only one concrete point. For example:

“Repealing the Affordable Care Act would gut financial assistance for lower- and moderate-income families and further increase premiums for older adults by thousands of dollars.”

II. HOW TO CONSTRUCT A TALKING POINT SHEET

A talking point sheet can include a few talking points (two to three, bolded), followed by a short paragraph or a couple of bullet points to give background and key data to make a strong argument. Ideally, it should fit on one side of one page; it should never be more than two pages (so that it fits on one sheet of paper).

Legislators may want to follow up for more information, so do provide contact information. Adding a simple “For more information, contact “Name, Title, Institution” at “email” to the footer of the document should suffice.

I. AVOID JARGON

Different audiences will have different levels of familiarity with technical language. Don't make assumptions about your audience's knowledge. As Steven Pinker suggests in *The Sense of Style*, “...assume that your readers are as intelligent and sophisticated as you are, but that they happen not to know something you know.”

- **Explain specialized or technical terms** or leave them out altogether. Some specialized terms will come as second nature to you, but limit your use as much as possible.
- **Avoid acronyms and abbreviations.** This depends on your audience. Using “NOAA” (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) may be fine for the Chairperson of an environmental committee but others may be unfamiliar. Err on the side of caution, even with acronyms and abbreviations that you think are well known.

II. KEEP IT SIMPLE

The simplest way to explain your idea is usually the best one.

- **Keep your argument straightforward.** There will always be more you want to say or more evidence you could provide, but usually less is more.
- **Repeat your main point.** Focus on a single, key takeaway and repeat it multiple times.
- Use simple and short sentences. **Limit adjectives, adverbs, and compound tenses;** use strong verbs that convey meaning without extra descriptors.
- **Keep vocabulary basic,** even if it may seem less precise. For example, instead of “analogous” or “based on partisanship” use “similar to” and “based on political party”.
- Opt for **several easy words in place of one complex word.** For example, instead of “disenfranchised” use “prevented from voting”.
- That said, **replace wordy phrases with a single word** where possible. For example, use “investigate” instead of “conduct an investigation of...”

III. BE CONCRETE, GIVE EXAMPLES

Concrete examples are always better than abstract statements or generalizations.

- Give examples that mean something to the **lives of the people you are speaking to** or your intended audience.
- **Use statistics strategically,** but do not assume that they speak for themselves. Explain why they matter. Pair them with other types of evidence like stories and do not overuse them. Even the strongest statistic won't stick with your audience as much as a powerful example.
- **Don't be equivocal.** While scientists want caveats and scope conditions, legislators want a clear answer.

IV. SAY IT OUT LOUD

The purpose of talking points, of course, is for them to be spoken out loud. To make sure that the talking points you are crafting are clear, say each sentence out loud to a colleague or friend who is not an expert on the topic.