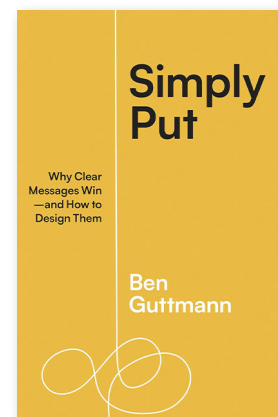


Simply Put

Why Clear Messages Win—and How to Design Them

by **Ben Guttman**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Think about the most powerful message you've ever heard. Picture the most life-changing piece of advice from a mentor, the most stirring call to action in a stump speech, or the stickiest slogan splashed across a commercial. Author Ben Guttman set out to answer a basic question he's been trying to answer his entire career. "Why do some messages work when others don't?" Regardless if these messages are trying to get your dollars, your votes, or just your thoughts, the most effective messages all share one thing: They are simple.

We can know *what* works pretty easily, but knowing *why* things work and knowing *how* to create messages that work is a different thing altogether. In ***Simply Put: Why Clear Messages Win—and How to Design Them***, Guttman explores science and history, lessons from the world's most captivating leaders and innovative companies, and tools that can harness the power of simplicity to connect and communicate. This book is for anyone who wants to break through the noise in a world of great complexity, to tell the world their stories by getting better at doing the hard work of getting simple.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why simple messaging wins.
- The impact of the busy world on our stupid brains.
- How compilation is a crime in communication.
- The five principles of simple messages.

Part 1: Why Simple Wins

Simple: When a message is easily perceived, understood, and acted upon.

Simple messages have five attributes: beneficial, focused, salient, empathetic, and minimal. But in the battle for simplicity we meet our nemesis: the complicated. We often have a bias to add, an easy retreat into complexity, and a fear of taking big swings. The complicated is attractive because it doesn't require sacrifice or hard choices. But, as we'll see, when we cover into the path of least resistance and fail to communicate clearly, we can pay a devastating price.

Our Stupid Brains in Our Busy World

Our minds aren't precise computers recording and processing everything in perfect precision—they are deeply flawed, fleshy machines. Despite these limitations, we get along pretty okay most of the time. We're good, talented users of the world around us. We run into trouble, though, when we're thrust into the other role: when we become somebody who has something to say, build, or share. That's when everything breaks down.

Most of our communications rely on a foundational idea: we are smart, caring, rational actors who pay attention and understand what other people are saying—in all the ways all the time. But because of our nature and the world we've built around us, that simply isn't the case. This is the problem. This is why so many of our messages don't get through. To put it bluntly, we're stupid, and we're busy.

We ignore and forget because it helps us live our lives. Subconsciously filtering out unnecessary details has been evolutionarily advantageous in our development as a species. Imagine how exhausting it would be to consciously process and consider every single thing that comes before us. But as many a marketer knows, this propensity to filter is bad if you're trying to get somebody's attention.

Our attention is precious and finite, and we prefer to spend it on what matters to us. We notice information that is tied to our goals and helps us survive and thrive. And often that means failing to notice most of the messages bombarding us at any given moment.

On top of that, our memory capabilities are quite limited. The first three stages of memory—sensory, short, and working—are all small and brief in storage. In the short run, our attention and capacity to retain information are much more limited than we would like to think. On top of that, our

memory decays—fast. Some stuff makes it to our long-term memory storage, but the vast majority doesn't. These shortcomings play out every time we communicate. At every step of the process of taking information out in the world and getting it into our thick heads, we face problems. Each sliver of attention and focus is a tiny miracle.

The problem is we've built a world that isn't built for us. Our devices cry out constantly, jolting our minds from one urgent thing to the next. And the pace is only quickening. We live in the golden age of distraction, and piercing through this noise is harder than ever.

The Case for Simplicity

If you want to be heard, you need to simplify what you say—and we can use the brains that got us into this mess to help us get out. Simplicity is a function of what scientists call *fluency*, which can be distilled down to two buckets:

- Perceptual fluency: How easily do we notice things?
- Processing fluency: How easily do we understand things?

Simplicity is not new; it is tested. Across science, medicine, and history, when we look for explanations for what happens around us, we continually see that the right answer is the simplest one, the one with fewer assumptions and the least number of hoops to jump through. In every era, when faced with challenge and uncertainty, we return to that same principle. What wins, what we want, and what moves us is just that: less is better.

Simplicity, by being focused on the receiver, is a form of kindness. Valuing other people's time and desires is generous. Simplicity, by its nature, is also efficient. Simplicity requires that we strip away the excess and leave only what works. When we do that, we cut out the costs associated with all that fluff and ultimately get the most bang for our buck.

When we pay for messaging, such as in advertising, that is self-serving, complicated, and not squarely focused on the customer and their needs, then we're flushing money down the toilet. And all of this would be for nothing if simple didn't work. Good thing it does. A massive body of research proves it. But it's not easy. We must first face a familiar foe.

The Crime of Complicated

If you've ever worked on a team at work, in school, or in your community, you likely know (and have suffered from) somebody who complicates matters. Maybe we've even

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been the culprit ourselves—intentionally or not. When we're bad communicators and we complicate or jumble our message, we're sabotaging ourselves. This is how communication fails.

We *complicate* as a verb. Complicated is when things are too long, cumbersome, and too confusing. Complicated causes friction because complicated is unfinished. Complicated things work, but they take work. You really don't want your message to take work. The problem is, we are programmed to complicate and it's our greatest weakness when seeking to connect and communicate.

We are subject to a complexity bias, by which we are predisposed to push ideas toward that end of the spectrum—to complicate them. This complexity is so attractive to us because, paradoxically, dealing with a complex task is easier than a simple one. Complexity allows us to focus on the little things, to distract ourselves in the nuance of details instead of dealing with one large truth. When a challenge has lots of little parts, we have lots of places to put our attention. When we have only one big thing to deal with, we can't help but notice it.

We complicate when we are afraid or we complicate when we don't know our stuff and want to hide behind a wall of words. We use complicated language to compensate for our shortcomings. We think that if we use the right buzzwords and acronyms, maybe we can fool the audience into thinking we know what we're talking about. Plausible—that's the secret of complication. complicated gives us a plausible way out of our responsibility to ourselves and our audience.

A simple message, when executed properly, is dumbfounding. It's inescapable. Unarguable. It makes you go, "Well, yeah." It offers no room to hide. It's refreshing. Your brain sparkles when you understand something that clearly. When we look to psychology and biology, history and culture, economics and business, we see that simplicity is the key that unlocks our full ability to connect and truly reach others. In an age of disconnected connection, it's the most valuable thing we can do.

Part 2: How to Get Simple

Now that we know the challenges we face to get our point across and how vital simplicity is in our mission to connect, we're going to dispel the mystique and show how anybody can use this powerful idea in their own work and lives. We'll pull out the five-part tool kit for developing simple messages, empowering you to break through and become a world-class leader and communicator.

Beneficial: The Hole, Not the Drill

Let's say you work for a Big Tool Company. The engineers worked hard to design a new drill with more torque and the most ergonomic grip you've ever felt, so you write an ad based on those facts. It says, "Now with 20% more power, a new ultra-comfort silicone grip, and improved 8-hour battery life, the Simple Drill 3000 is the best tool for homeowners and construction workers alike."

Although the facts are true, and the product is better than ever, an ad like that sucks. An ad like that doesn't understand why people buy drills. That's a message that comes from just opening up the window of the five senses, taking in a few facts, and seeing what comes out. But we don't buy drills because they have more torque, comfortable handles, or a longer battery life. Why do we buy drills? Legendary marketing Professor Theodore Levitt best summarizes the reason: "People don't want to buy a quarter-inch drill. They want a quarter inch hole!" We don't want the thing, we want what the thing does for us. Understanding this is the first step in our blueprint.

The drill and the hole illustrate a fundamental truth about how we make decisions. Every single time somebody has ever tried to get you to do anything, be it buy a product, vote for a candidate, donate to a cause, or even just take out the overflowing garbage bag, a voice in your head is asking one question: "What's in it for me?" Sometimes the "me" is ourselves, while other times the "me" is our community. Sometimes that voice is screaming, and other times it speaks at just a whisper. Ultimately, we only ever do things because we somehow want the *result* of that thing.

In all our choices, we seek benefits, not features. Features exist in the five senses. Benefits are how those features bring value to our lives. When we frame our messaging around benefits, we tell people why they should give a damn.

The good news is, we can easily uncover the benefits of anything we're trying to pitch by asking a simple question: "So what?" Let's look at the drill example. The drill has a longer battery life. "So what?" The drill's longer battery life means you can drill more holes without stopping. That already feels more vivid and enticing than the ad before. But here's what the most effective communicators do: they ask that question again. "So what?" The drill's longer battery life means you can drill more holes without stopping, which means you can get those family photos on the wall sooner.

With these changes, we see what's in it for us. These features aren't just bullet points on a brochure, they are keys to us having a better life. Digging deeper helps us connect deeper.

Focused: Fighting the Frankenstein Idea

In Mary Shelley's pioneering horror novel, Dr. Frankenstein deliberately picked beautiful individual pieces of anatomy, but when he assembled this collection of mismatched components, what awoke was a hideous monster. Each part formed a "horrid contrast" with the others, and the whole was far worse than the sum of its parts.

The same mad science happens whenever groups of people are brought together to form ideas. Somebody throws out the thought of using influencers, another person shouts drones, AI enters the conversation, and three different hashtags appear on the whiteboard. The deadline comes, everything is mashed together, and the final project is a seven-headed monster that makes little to no sense. These never work. Frankenstein ideas are fundamentally unfocused.

When you have one big point, people can't help but notice it. But when you have four or five crammed in there, they can easily lose the plot. This isn't just a problem of losing a little bit of effectiveness though. It's a problem of losing focus.

Our brains just aren't wired to give attention to multiple inputs simultaneously. When you force divided attention by failing to focus your message, you fail to connect all together. Focus requires us to make choices, manage trade-offs, and sell our ideas. To reach our receiver, we need to do the internal work of becoming a focused sender.

In our fight for simplicity, the word *and* is the enemy. And shoots too wide; *and* means "something else." Instead, in

your planning and thinking, replace it with *so*. *So* means that one idea flows from another and that a direct causal relationship and lineage exists between your big idea and how you bring it to life.

The goal "We are going to develop a loyalty program for our cafe and release a line of collectible coffee mugs" sounds like it makes sense. But replace the "and" with "so" and listen again. "We're going to develop a loyalty program for our cafe, so we'll release a line of collectible coffee mugs." A flag goes up in our heads and we realize those two things aren't really related.

You can attach a lot of ideas that don't go together with *and*. Frankenstein's monster is sewn together by *ands*. But *so* makes you think. *So* means that you need to develop a clear path from the first idea you say to the second one. If your story doesn't make sense with a *so*, it just doesn't make sense.

Salient: Constraints Breed Creativity

Our perception of the world around us is largely determined by what's salient. And what's salient is determined not by the message or object itself, but by how it differs from its environment. You need both the figure and its background to achieve contrast.

The best way to achieve salience is by doing something that others aren't. And the best way to do something different is to play by rules others don't. This is the incredible creative power of constraints.

Anybody who has stared at a blank canvas or silently blinking cursor knows that the expanse doesn't represent freedom but rather houses the crushing weight of the infinite. Without limitations, we fall into our well-worn creative grooves. But a good limitation can put up a wall that blocks business as usual and forces you down a new and unfamiliar path. This leads us toward different, innovative, and maybe even brilliant new ideas. Constraints make us exercise our creative muscles.

There are three spheres in which we can use the power of constraints to help us craft more salient messages.

1. **Limit your Space:** In brevity, there is clarity. Limitations on our space aren't a jail, they're a frame. They are a forcing mechanism that pushes us to make decisions—what stays and what goes. And when we make that decision, they showcase the beauty and value of that intention. When we limit how many characters, words, inches, or pixels we can use, we find creative

Minimal is about having everything you need, but only what you need.

and effective ways to make the most of them.

2. **Limit your Time:** The more time we're given to do something, the longer that task takes. If we can cut down the time we allow, it both saves that precious finite resource of ours and results in us doing our best work. But this suggestion comes with a warning: not too much, not too little. When it comes to creative pressure, there's a Goldilocks zone where we thrive.
3. **Limit your Options:** Before the age of streaming, production companies' limited budgets led to the *bottle episode* format, which uses limited cast and sets. The results are such iconic episodes as *Seinfeld's* "The Chinese Restaurant," where the characters grow increasingly frustrated waiting for a table. Going deep instead of wide unlocks a level of creativity and excellence previously unreached. If your idea works and your message sticks, it will stick in even the most spartan conditions.

Empathy: Welcoming the Enlightened Idiot

Insular groups can develop their own language of references and assumptions that make it impossible for outsiders to understand. Anybody who has ever sat through a corporate meeting knows it can contain an alphabet soup of acronyms and a heaping helping of jargon. This insider language can help groups work and communicate, but it breaks down when we have to reach those outside our walls.

Effective communication is based on a shared understanding, a common ground of language, values, and experiences between the sender and the receiver. We can achieve that level of connection only when we are earnestly empathetic with our audience.

We can harness the power of empathy by a welcoming character we'll call the *Enlightened Idiot*. The word idiot sounds rough, and indeed people often use it today as an insult—but here we mean it with love. In ancient Greek origins, it means "common man." As for the use of *enlightened*, that's defined as "being free of misinformation and bias."

The Enlightened Idiot is a stand-in for everybody else. They are somebody who doesn't know as much about what

you're saying—and frankly they probably don't care as much about what you're saying as you do. They embody your boss's busy aloofness and your kindergartner's gentle ignorance. In other words, they're your audience.

We're all Enlightened Idiots sometimes, just like we're all experts sometimes. If you're Jill, a brilliant scientist holding a Ted Talk on your latest advances in genomics, it helps to bring in Jack from the accounting department for your rehearsals to see if he gets it. It doesn't matter that they both have advanced degrees; both Jack and Jill can be Enlightened Idiots.

Outsiders expose our preconceived notions, bring fresh ideas, and can shake us out of our bubble of ignorance. They see things we can't, and they know things we don't. Their welcomed perspective enlightens the rest of us. The most obvious and most overlooked tool in our empathy tool kit is testing your message on other people.

Building empathy into our communications requires that we get out of our own space and occupy the perspective of our receiver. A company that doesn't communicate with its users is dead in the water, and a communicator who doesn't talk to their audience is just as helpless.

Minimal: Say Shit without the Bullshit

The last of our five principles is *minimal*, and that placement is deliberate. Minimal is about having everything you need, but only what you need. This determination can come only after we make sure that our communication is beneficial, focused, salient, and empathetic. Those conditions are all necessary before we can know what is essential and what is not. Brevity in length is a common trait of minimal messages, but it's not the definition. We put on our engineering hats and treat minimal messaging as the design challenge that it is. We're focused on avoiding off-ramps and ensuring structural integrity. Off-ramps are ways in which our message gets distracted or diluted. Structurally sound messages can hold up to the challenges of our environment.

Straight to the point messages say shit without the bullshit. Bullshit is an off-ramp. Unnecessarily complicated language

or words and terms without clear meanings become opportunities for the receiver to pull off and check out. Adding a bucket of syllables doesn't mean you win a battle of wits and, as the victor, you'll have earned the purchase, vote, donation, or whatever else it was you were hoping for. Instead, you're much more likely to make yourself look like a dummy.

Big words are less fluent. When something is harder to read or understand, that struggle turns into distrust and dislike. When we use big words to cover small ideas, we're increasing friction and turning off the people we're trying to reach, and in the process making that off-ramp look awfully tempting.

Communication works only when you use language that meets the following basic criteria:

- The sender understands it.
- The receiver understands it.

If both ends of the equation understand the language that makes up your message, then you're cooking. If they don't, then you failed right at the get-go. Doesn't matter how good of a commercial you've crafted, if it's full of industry buzzwords or acronyms, you've lost me. The message is not structurally sound and it collapses.

Each additional component in a message is another source of possible failure, or at least a point of friction. Don't make your receiver work for it—because they won't. If we take apart what we want to say into its basic building blocks, we can assemble a message that hits all the necessary notes without getting distracted by things that don't serve our mission.

People like to have reasons for doing the things they do. Even when their decisions are emotional or irrational, people like to think they have a logical reason for why they buy what they buy, vote for who they vote for, and donate to who they donate to. So give it to them.

The art of figuring out this answer is called *positioning*, and you can begin to find yours by answering three basic questions:

- Who is your stuff for?
- What problem do they have that you solve?
- Why are you better than all the other ways to solve that problem?

Asking yourself these questions defines where you are positioned in the market, and thus where you are in the mind of the receiver. This building block keeps you focused and on the right path as you move forward.

Simplicity requires certainty, or at least conviction. Simplicity is about finding a perfect fit in your message, when it all clicks and you create that moment of lift. When the five principles—beneficial, focused, salient, empathetic, and minimal—are taken together, simple messages allow us to inform, persuade, and connect in a world that so often pushes back the other way.



Ben Guttman is a marketing entrepreneur and educator who has helped hundreds of clients, ranging from the NFL to Nobel Laureates, from I Love NY to #1 New York Times best-selling authors. He is co-founder of Digital Natives Group, which has worked with more than 60 authors. Since 2014, he has taught at Baruch College and has been a fulltime community leader in New York City, active in Long Island City Partnership, Queens Economic Development Corporation, Queens Community Board and Queens Tech Night.

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