

Don't Let It Become a Thing

Communications essentials for
municipal leaders

AMCTO Zone 5 Quarterly Meeting

Breakout: Plain or Pain? (2 mins)



With your table:

- Read each excerpt
- Decide: **Plain** or **Pain**
- Pick most painful phrase
- Rewrite in plain language

Excerpt 1 - Public Notice

“Notice is hereby provided that the Municipality will be undertaking scheduled infrastructure rehabilitation activities within the Elm Street corridor, which may result in temporary disruptions to vehicular and pedestrian access for the duration of the project timeline.”

Excerpt 2 - By-law Summary

“The proposed by-law seeks to regulate and govern the operation of short-term rental accommodations through the implementation of a licensing framework, inclusive of applicable conditions, requirements, and enforcement provisions.”

Excerpt 3 - Service Update

“Garbage collection will be delayed by one day this week due to the holiday.”


Excerpt 4 - Staff Report

“The purpose of this report is to update Council on progress made to date on the downtown revitalization project and outline the next steps.”

Today's Goals

1. Build confidence in day-to-day communications
2. Learn repeatable tools
3. Leave with templates and quick-reference guides





Plain Language & Accessibility



Plain Language Prep

- Lead with action
- Cut unnecessary words
- Use human language

Importance of a focus on reducing barriers

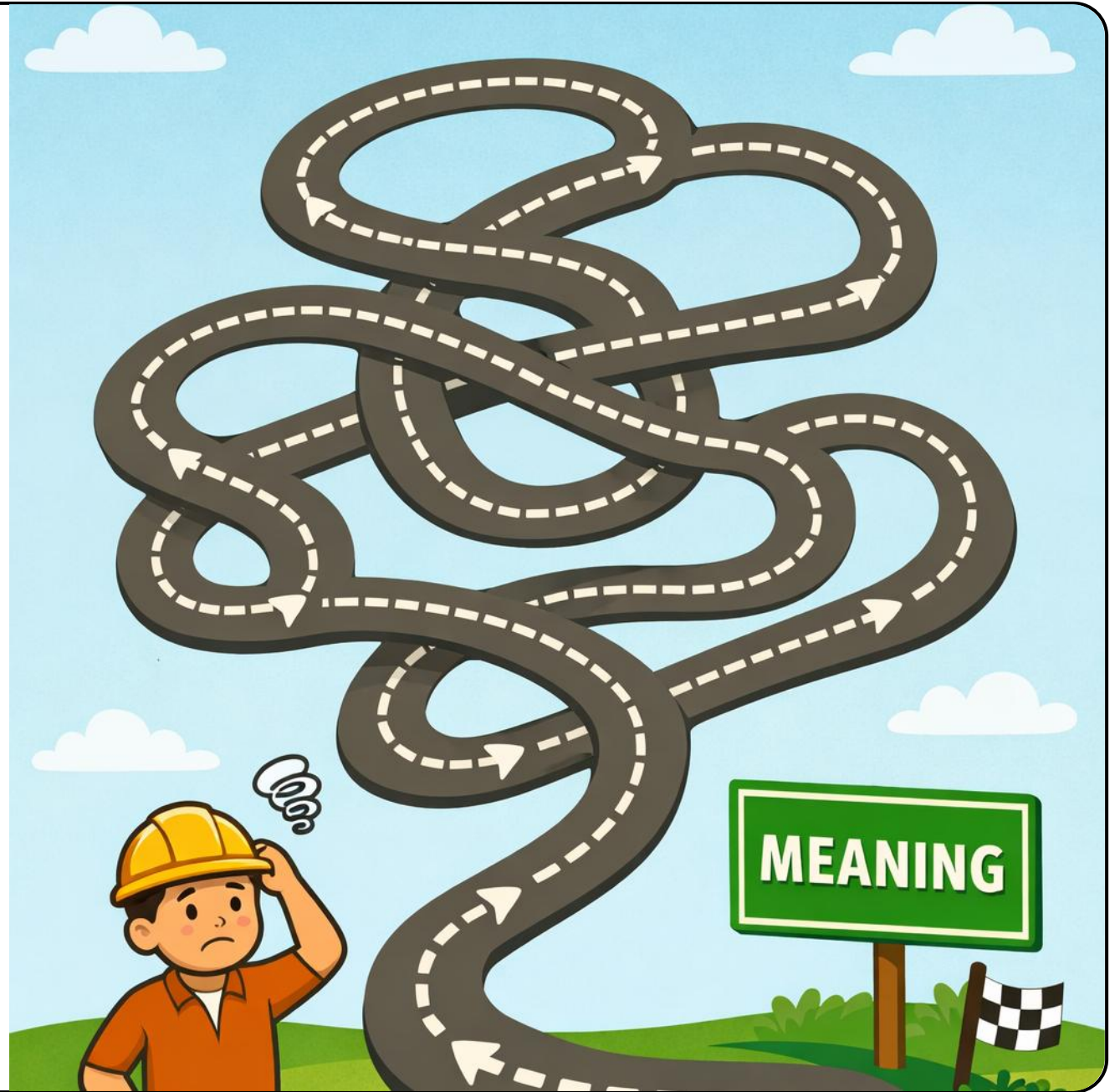
Accessibility

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Understanding

Where Things Go Wrong

Trap #1: Long sentences



“Operators with Junior/Senior Kindergarten-aged children who are not registered in school but are instead registered in licensed centres as of December 21, 2020, may continue to serve these children throughout the duration of these time-limited public health actions, including the week when elementary schools have moved to a virtual learning model.”

Where Things Go Wrong

Trap #2: Passive Voice



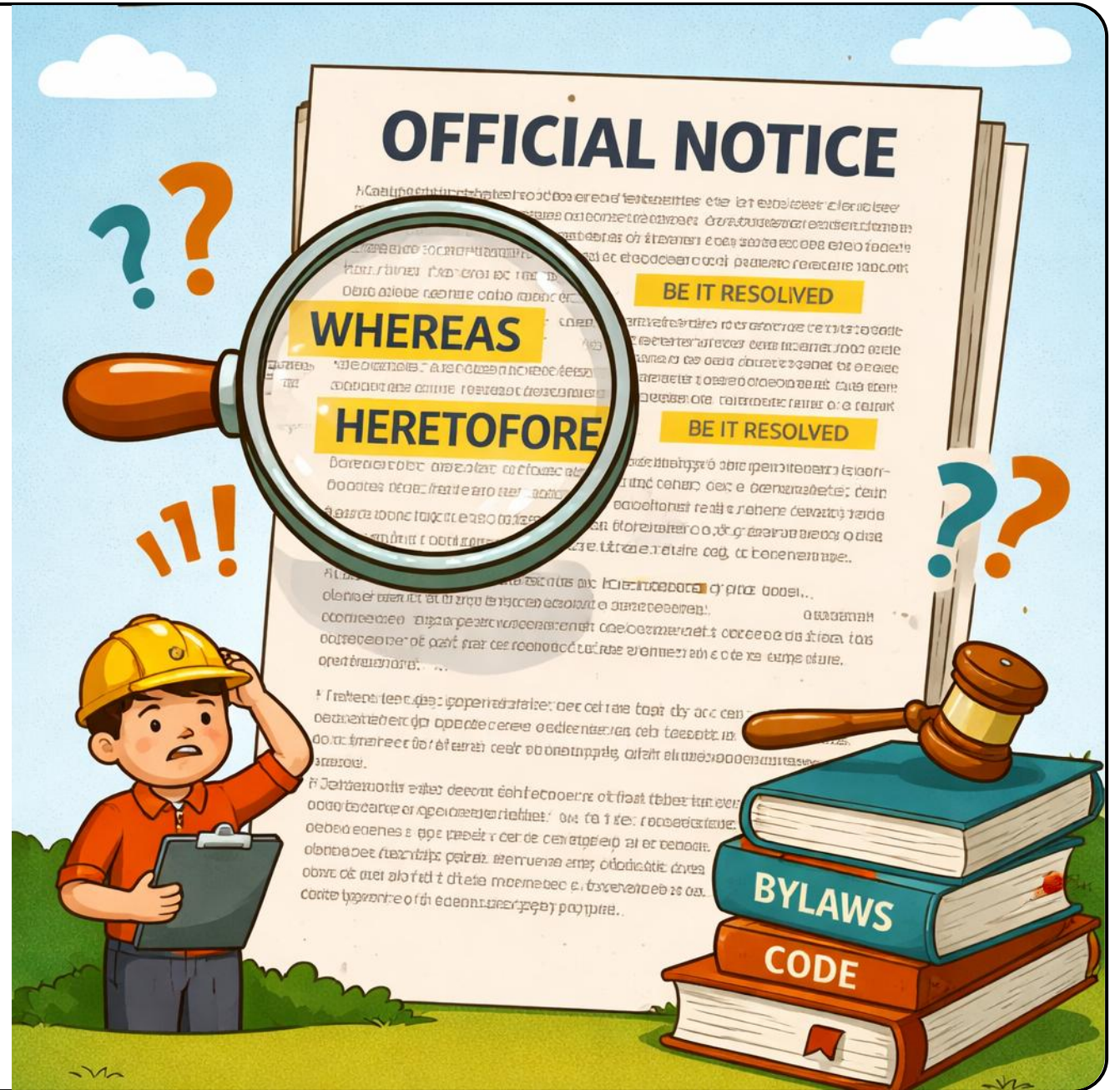
“Notice has been given.”

“Measures have been implemented.”

“Consultation is being conducted.”

Where Things Go Wrong

Trap #3: Legal/technical wording



“Pursuant to the provisions outlined in the municipal traffic regulation by-law, vehicles found to be in contravention may be subject to enforcement measures, including but not limited to penalty issuance and/or removal.”

Before and After

Before

“A temporary disruption to parking availability will be experienced due to the implementation of revised regulatory measures.”

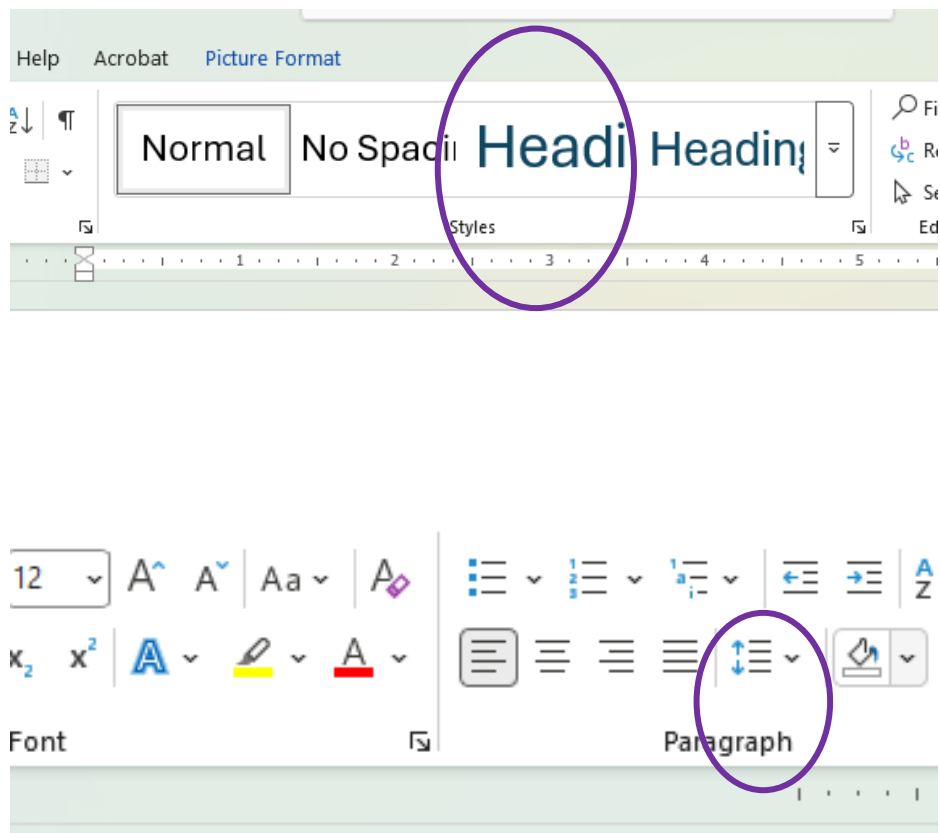
After

“Parking will be temporarily unavailable as we put new plans in place.”

Structure for Success: 4 Steps to Say Less & Mean More

- One main idea
- Most important information first
- Short sentences
- Bullet points where possible

Text Tips: Accessibility in Practice



- **Add** white space
- **Avoid** *italics* and ALL CAPS
- 'Align Left' **instead of** 'Justify' for text
- **Write** descriptive links
- **Use** 'Headings'
- **Use** 'Line Spacing' options

Breakout: Plain Language-fy (3 mins)

“Residents are advised that waste collection services may experience delays due to operational constraints. Services where impacts may be noted include curbside collection, bag tag sales at municipal facilities, and drop-off of household hazardous waste at the landfill.”





Media Relations

Importance of media interview preparation

Structure for Success: 3-Step Interview Prep

1. The info you need **from media**
2. The info you need **for media**
3. The info media need **from you**

1. Info **from** media



Topic: know what they want to discuss



Deadline: confirm timing & plan response



Questions: clarify, anticipate



2. Info for media

What
is changing?

Start with
clear, plain-
language
statement

Why
are we doing this?

Reason behind
decision.
Address
controversy
before it arises

Impact
on people?

Connect it
directly to
residents.
Answer:
What's in it
for me?

What-Why-Impact model

Message 1: What

- “Council has updated the parking by-law to improve turnover and make parking more available in busy areas.”

Message 2: Why

- “This change responds to feedback from residents and local businesses about limited access to short-term parking.”

Message 3: Impact

- “For most drivers, this means it will be easier to find a spot when running errands or visiting downtown.”



3. Info media need **from you**

- Think like a reporter:
develop Questions &
Answers

Warning

'Off the Record' is
Fake News!

Breakout: (Media)Ready or Not? (9 mins)

Part 1: Individual Activity

- Pick a real-life topic
- Develop your 3 Key Messages using What-Why-Impact model

Part 2: With your table

- Select one group member
- Develop the list of likely interview questions





Issues Management & Crisis Comms

Case study: Emerging issue

The Rachel Case Study

What Happened?

- ⚠ Small lie told to avoid conflict
- ⚠ Evidence contradicts claim
- ⚠ Double down with bigger explanations
- ⚠ Truth becomes obvious

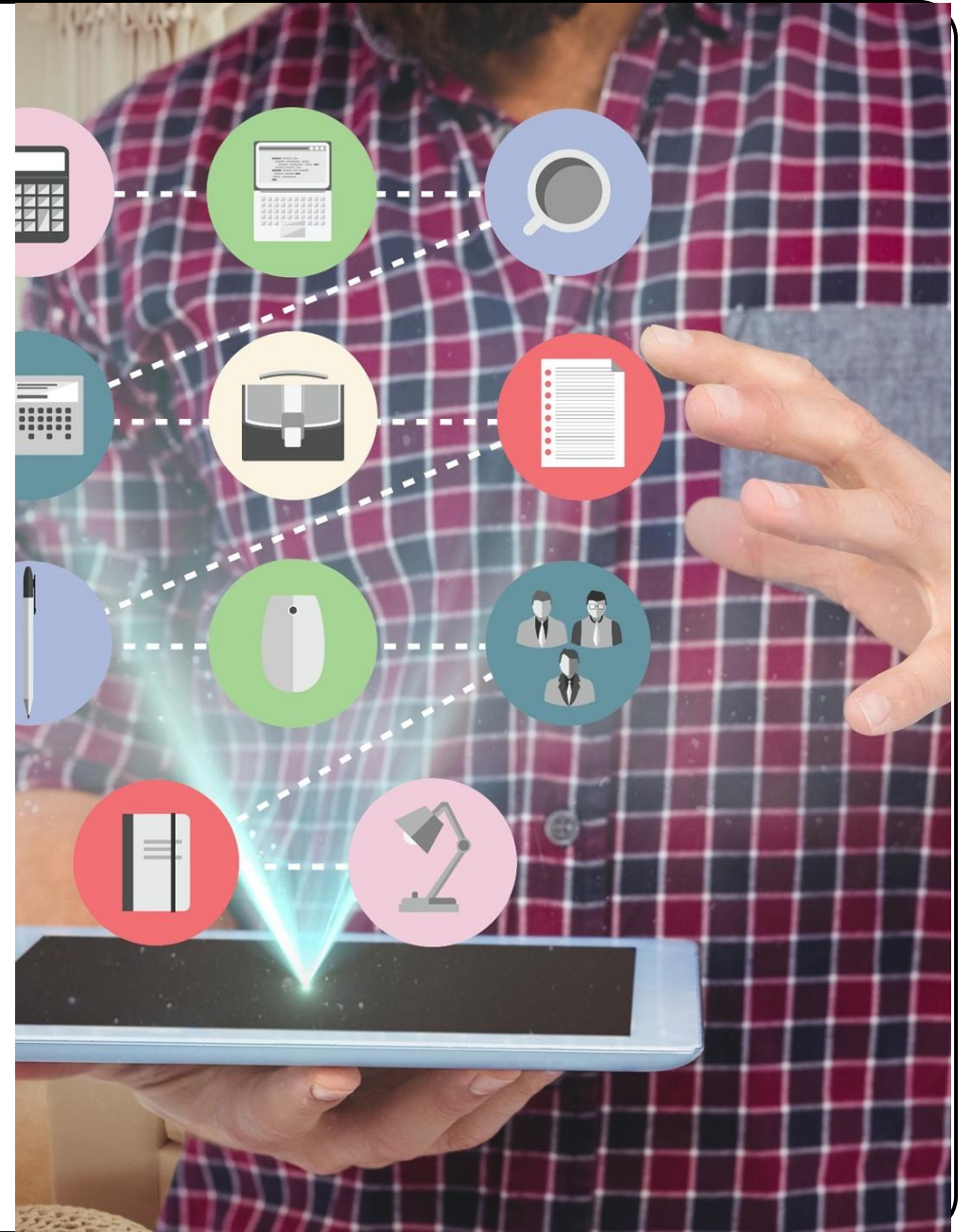
The Lesson

- ✅ Early misstatements create risk
- ✅ Audiences notice inconsistencies
- ✅ Crisis escalation
- ✅ Credibility damage

Issue Management is Crisis Mitigation

Have system of touch points in place:

- Media
- Social media
- Customer service
- 'Report an Issue'



Structure for Success: First 4 Questions for Crisis Comms

1. What happened?
2. What are we doing about it?
3. What do people need to know/do right now?
4. What's next?

“Due to a depressurization incident affecting the northeast corner of the water/wastewater service area, precautionary measures have been recommended pending the results of lab analysis anticipated within 48 hours.”

What happened?

- “We are putting a boil water advisory in place, following a loss of pressure in part of our water system.”

What are we doing about it?

- “Our team has repaired the issue and we have sent water samples for testing.”

What people need to know/do right now?

- “Residents in the affected area should boil water for drinking, cooking, and brushing teeth until further notice.”

What's next?

- “We will share an update within 48 hours when test results are in.”

"In the early morning hours, emergency services responded to a fire at the Municipality of Anywhere Public Works Yard located at 321 Somewhere Road. The fire is believed to have originated in the vehicle storage bay, though the exact cause remains under active investigation by municipal Fire Services in cooperation with the Ontario Fire Marshal's Office. Significant structural damage has been identified in the primary storage building and attached administrative wing, and the facility has been closed to all staff and public access pending a full engineering review.

No injuries to staff, firefighters, or members of the public have been reported. Residents should be aware that some municipal services relying on this facility may be subject to delays or temporary interruptions. Staff are working to identify contingency arrangements to maintain service continuity where possible. Further updates will be provided as the investigation and assessment progress."

Breakout: Clarity in Crisis (5 mins)

With your table: Write a statement using the 'First 4 Questions'



1. What happened?
2. What are we doing about it?
3. What do people need to know/do right now?
4. What's next?

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Wrap Up

Key Takeaways



- Accessible communications: 4 steps for clear writing + 'Front Counter Test' + text tips
- Media interview prep: Gather info + 3 Key Messages (What-Why-Impact) + Q&A
- Issue management: Keeping track of issues is crisis mitigation – monitor touch points
- Crisis statements: 'First 4 Questions'

THANK YOU ZONE 5!

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