

FLUENCY: PEOPLE ARE MORE LIKELY TO TRUST INFORMATION THEY EASILY UNDERSTAND

*"(A)nything that occupies your working memory reduces your ability to think."
—Thinking, Fast and Slow*

"Fluency theory" holds that people are more likely to believe information they can quickly process. Understanding an idea easily makes us feel good—and makes the idea feel true. If people readily comprehend the idea or information, they are more likely to *trust* and *believe* it.

Being easy-to-understand obviously doesn't mean the information is more reliable, but people will perceive it that way. Conversely, complexity can evoke suspicion.

Anything that inhibits fluent mental processing, or "cognitive ease," raises a barrier to both understanding and trust. Taxing people's limited store of mental energy can demotivate them: Throwing unfamiliar words, complex data or convoluted sentences at people distracts the brain, as it searches "working memory" and attempts to process all the information. They literally stop listening—and miss the whole point. Most won't invest the energy to figure it out.

To facilitate fluency, strictly avoid jargon, abstract language, complex sentences and complicated data. The techniques of poetry—using words that rhyme and sentences with a pleasing rhythm—make an idea more memorable and truthful to people.

Visual presentation of ideas also affects fluency. In studies, people were less trusting of information presented in hard-to-read typefaces. Cluttered design or overly complex infographics hinder trust and understanding, rather than enhance it. Studies show that "maximizing legibility," such as using bold fonts to make text easier to read, makes the information more believable.

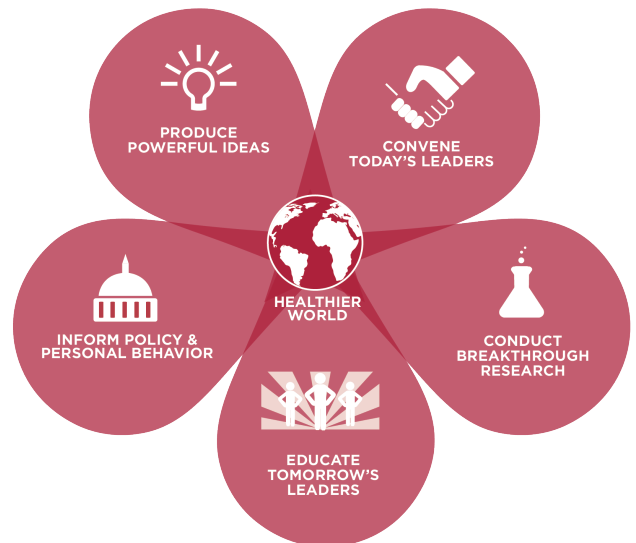


Figure 1: "It's smart to dumb things down." This simple infographic helped the Harvard School of Public Health communicate the role it plays as a global leader in its field.