

Smart Brevity® 101

How to optimize an internal communication



AXIOS HQ

“Headline — What’s new — Why it matters”

These three details are the most consequential, interesting, and engaging elements in any Smart Brevity communication. They have the greatest impact on a reader's ability to quickly grasp and remember your message.

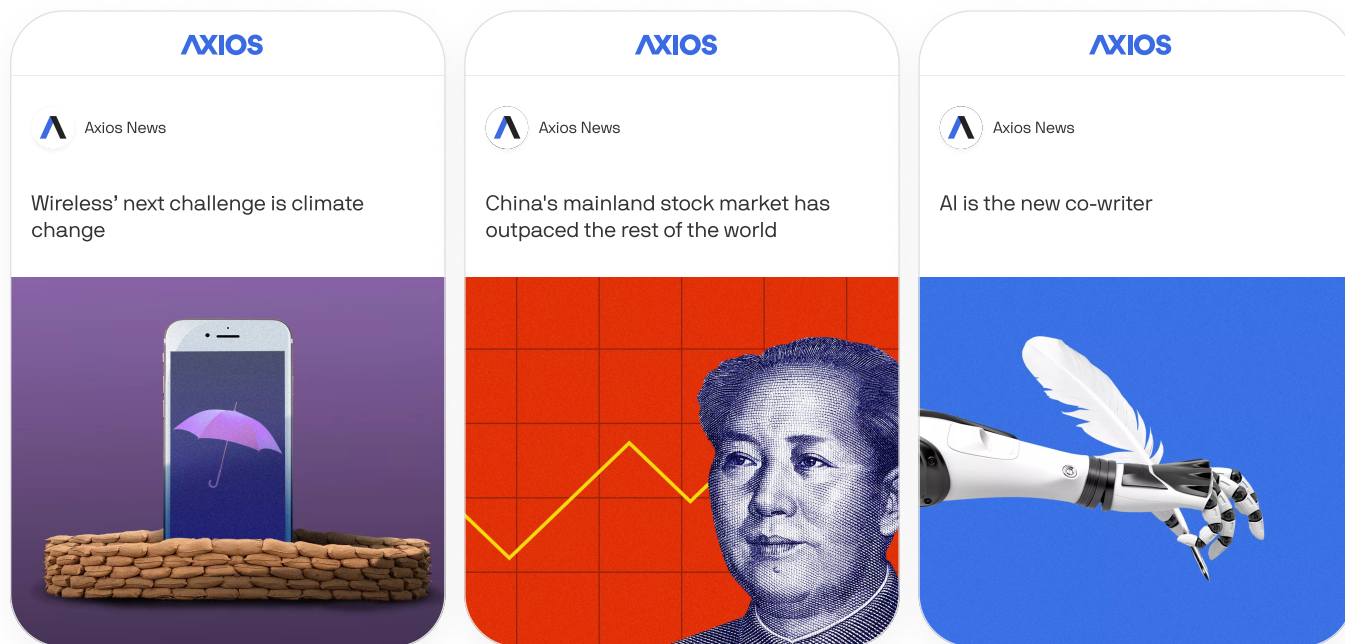
- For fast-moving readers — like executives — sometimes it’s all they have time to read.
- For everyone else, it’s the upfront context they need to be willing to keep reading.

Below, we’ll help you see why it’s so impactful for any communication.

1. Optimize your headline

This step can mean the difference between five clicks and 5,000. A good headline — or title, or subject line — is direct, specific, and emphatically clear. It is never clickbait.

Take a moment to look at these examples:



Three qualities connect them:

1. **The length:** Smart Brevity headlines have a 10-words or 60-character max. Aesthetically, it'll keep your text to about two lines on a phone — tidy. Practically, it's about the maximum length a busy person can read and immediately repeat — memorable.
2. **The specificity:** In our data, we've seen 59% of readers will share an article on social media without ever clicking the link. Headlines should teach your audience something new. Keep it declarative, with at least one concrete piece of information your readers can take away.
3. **The simplicity:** Short, simple words carry a lot more information and emotion than we realize. Studies have even [linked long, SAT words with insecurity](#) and a less sophisticated understanding of the topic. Whenever you can, opt for short, conversational language.

Let's look at two before-and-after examples:

Before	After
Healthcare has the power to keep the labor market afloat even if we face a recession in the future	Healthcare hiring is recession-proof

Takeaways

Be brief: Don't use 19 words when 5 are sharper and more memorable.

Be bold: Authority instills trust. If something is true, say it confidently.

Before	After
Update on our plans	Our remote work plans through year-end

Takeaways

Be specific: Don't use vague language when you have the space to be precise.

Be honest: At times, longer is better. Smart Brevity should maximize the value of every word, without sacrificing the context readers need to understand your message.

Try it

Who is a priority reader you hope to reach: _____

What is an update or other topic you're familiar with that they need to know about: _____

Why is it significant? Jot down a few details. We'll come back to them later:

2. Optimize “What’s new”

Think back to the last conference you attended, or maybe the last long podcast you listened to. So much flies at you so fast, you’re lucky if you can remember one or two big ideas, long-term. “What’s new” — the first sentence in every Smart Brevity communication — helps your readers discover and digest the most important detail you have to share with them, and makes it easy for them to remember it, too.

Once you find it, say it in one sentence only — then move on to your second paragraph. Why it works:

One sentence forces you to be clear-eyed about what detail is most critical.

It also keeps your first paragraph short. It adds great white space into the first screen of text your reader sees — critical because 60–80% of readers are scanning what you put in front of them, not reading, according to University of Maryland research. White space helps break them out of that fog.

Yes, but: Deciding what that sentence should be isn’t always easy. There are often half a dozen details or more you could build this update around. How do you choose?

We use something called the barstool test — this idea that there’s never been a single person who was more interesting on paper than they are over a coffee or a cocktail. The way we tell a story is always more interesting, vibrant and to-the-point than anything that comes out when we sit down at a keyboard. But with a little role playing, you can break through the mental fog to write the next best thing.

Imagine:

*You just got off the phone with an important client.
Finally, after months of work, they signed a massive contract — your biggest ever.
Your VP is about to walk into a status meeting with your executive leadership team.
The door is swinging closed, but you sprint over to share the news.*

When your VP turns around to hear what’s happened, the first thing you say to them will never be...

“We’ve been working on Acme’s contract for months, and it’s been a wild ride. They’ve changed leadership, we’ve hit road bumps, but we never gave up. And I’m so glad we didn’t! They finally signed a new contract today.”

It’ll be something like, “Acme just signed a \$2 million contract!” That is the most direct, urgent, and conversational way to say the thing that just happened.

The same thinking can help you unearth “What’s new” in any update. What would you shout at your boss as the elevator closed and an important piece of business came in? Or what would you blurt out excitedly to a friend after you just got a bit of good news?

Those same, short simple words are the ones you want to capture.

Once your headline and “What’s new” are in place, take a step back to look at them together. Make sure they build on each other, rather than repeat one another because you may catch yourself with something like what’s on the left — vague and repetitive — rather than what’s on the right.

Before	After
<p>Update on our plans</p> <p>We continue to closely monitor the impact of COVID, and we are writing today to provide an update on our plans for the rest of the year.</p>	<p>Our remote work plans through year-end</p> <p>Given the uncertainty around us, everyone will have the option to work from home for the rest of 2023.</p>

The logic: If someone clicked on your headline, it’s because they liked what they saw and are ready for more — not more of the same. The more clear, specific, and new value you can offer them immediately, the more likely you are to keep them engaged.

Try it	
<p>Look back at your notes in the last section. Using what you know about Smart Brevity, write a headline and “What’s new” for the smart reader you chose.</p>	
<p>Headline:</p>	<p>Is it...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> 10 words or fewer?<input type="checkbox"/> Clear and specific?<input type="checkbox"/> Conversational with muscular words?
<p>What’s new:</p>	<p>Is it...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> One sentence only?<input type="checkbox"/> What you need your reader to remember?<input type="checkbox"/> Distinct detail from your headline?

3. Optimize “Why it matters”

The third critical detail for readers to see is “Why it matters” — the bigger picture, connective tissue that explain the impact of “What’s new.”

In Smart Brevity, we write the whole phrase — “Why it matters:” — on the page and try explain that in one or two tight sentences. Here’s what’s key: You’ll know why the update matters to you, but that’s not what’s important.

The goal is to say why it matters to that smart reader you chose to prioritize. Picture them. Answer this for them because this is the sentence that will change the most dramatically depending on who you pick.

For example: Imagine your company just signed on for a new Green partnership, and you need to share that news with an executive, a peer, and in a press release to the outside world. For each one, your “Why it matters” changes:

Your executive:

“**Why it matters:** This takes us 10% closer to our H2 revenue goal.”

Your peer:

“**Why it matters:** We need to ramp up hiring. We're overbooked and understaffed to deliver on this work.”

The world:

“**Why it matters:** This brings us one step closer in our pledge to hit net zero by 2050.”

“Why it matters” becomes your early and urgent reminder to keep your priority readers at the heart of the decisions you make. And with it in place, you’ve now selected, structured, and sharpened the most important details in your communications — the ones that will empower your audience to keep reading.

Go deeper

See how Axios HQ is helping leaders everywhere use Smart Brevity to sharpen their most important workplace communications. [Learn more.](#)

Smart Brevity® 101

How to optimize an essential communication