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Commentary

Half-Life Your Message: A Quick, Flexible Tool for Message Discovery

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Abstract

Academic writers and presenters need concrete activities to help them learn how to communicate more effectively. We describe such a tool, called "Half-Life Your Message," which is adapted from a commonly used improvisational theater game and can be applied in three minutes to distill a central thesis for any communication effort. Users can increase the value provided by Half-Life Your Message by scaffolding its application with an introduction and opportunity to self-reflect and debrief. We emphasize the tool's utility based on our experiences in using it ourselves and in teaching it to undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty.

Keywords

science communication, public engagement, messaging, idea prioritization

Effective communication is critical to information transfer and the ability to engage others in meaningful discussion. Every communication effort, from technical manuscripts to public engagement efforts, requires appropriate focus and framing to achieve the communication goal. Both academic and professional organizations are increasingly calling for access to training

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resources that promote effective communication (COMPASS Science Communication, Inc., 2012; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017). Several groups have advanced guidelines or tools focused on improving academic messaging (Baram-Tsabari & Lewenstein, 2017; COMPASS Science Communication, Inc., 2017).

Unfortunately, these guidelines frequently make a critical, yet often false, assumption: the communicator has already identified the core message that he or she wishes to communicate. Put simply, a necessary precursor to using a messaging tool or guideline is first being able to effectively identify and distill a message.

Message prioritization is a major challenge for experts across fields (Heath & Heath, 2007). An expert knows many different ideas that influence and relate to given topics. However, this knowledge of all potentially relevant information also makes it especially hard for him/her to determine what limited information set needs to be communicated to others in any given situation. This difficulty is exacerbated when communicators fall into the "Curse of Knowledge," the phenomenon of overestimating an audience's understanding of a particular topic (Pinker, 2014). Complicating the situation even further, communicators must maintain accuracy and clarity of complicated scientific messages. Despite these challenges, defining a limited scope and concise message for a given communication effort is a critical step in executing effective communication.

While there is an understandable desire for experts to pass the challenging task of shaping complex scientific communications along to communications professionals, experts should be involved in identifying the core message of any communication. Experts have a uniquely relevant understanding of why particular facts are important, how findings were obtained or projects were conducted, and who most needs to hear about a result. Thus, experts need to maximize the value of their knowledge, efforts, and expertise and take on the challenge of defining the core message for outgoing communications.

Low-barrier opportunities to develop message prioritization skills without sacrificing accuracy or clarity are therefore critical to encourage experts to improve their ability to message effectively for communication efforts. These opportunities must be quick to use, easy to implement, and extremely effective to have utility for busy academics and professionals. Ideally, these opportunities would also be flexible and could be used with constituencies both inside and outside academia.

While developing curricula to teach communication skills, we learned of a theater improvisation ("improv") activity called Half-Life that requires participants to repeatedly shorten the same multiperson scene (Hall, 2014; McKnight & Scruggs, 2008). We adapted this exercise for individual communicators. Our

adaptation is particularly useful for teaching the principles of—and in practice helping to uncover—the central or core message of a communication effort, because it teaches and enforces the practice of idea prioritization. We believe this activity meets all of the above criteria to make it a particularly useful exercise in message identification.

The 3-minute Half-Life Your Message exercise involves iteratively shaping a single, core message by progressively compressing a self-imposed time constraint during a spontaneous oral presentation. During Half-Life Your Message, a communicator first takes 60 seconds (and no more) to speak aloud without prior preparation on a topic of interest. Immediately following the completion of the 60-second task, the communicator starts again and communicates the same core idea but this time in only 30 seconds. The process is repeated in two additional iterations with durations of 15 seconds and 8 seconds.

There are several critical elements that enable this activity to be maximally effective.

1. Swift progression through the entire activity is critical for two reasons. First, because adrenaline forces focus; pausing between iterations generally creates space for judgment, self-doubt, and erosion of confidence, which are best avoided. Second, pausing between iterations often triggers critical analysis of what should be said, which inhibits expression of what the communicator instinctually wants to say. Thus, we recommend that pauses should only be as long as is necessary to reset the timer.
2. Allowing people to manifest nervous or excited energy promotes fluency and creativity. We therefore recommend that communicators be encouraged to stand and move throughout the exercise.
3. Throughout the entire activity, the communicator focuses on the same idea, rather than progressing through different ideas. When implemented fluidly, Half-Life Your Message works to distill this single message into a clearer, more compact form *before* one can even begin to evaluate its utility. It is a process of *message discovery* rather than message refinement. The communicator learns by doing. Often communicators discover that they need to start the message in a different place or that an idea previously thought critical no longer seems important.
4. Half-Life Your Message requires so little time that it overcomes many communicators' inhibitions. At worst, it is only 3 minutes. Furthermore, the exercise can always be quickly and easily repeated if the communicator finds that the message she/he uncovered does not meet her/his needs.

5. Finally, we recommend that communicators undertake Half-Life Your Message with a few tools to reduce cognitive load, enabling the communicator to focus on idea prioritization. We suggest conducting Half-Life Your Message with a partner (or easily visible timing device). If the partner provides oral timekeeping cues (e.g., by stating aloud when 30 seconds, 15 seconds, and 5 seconds are remaining and the end time), the communicator can then focus their full attention to stating their idea or message. Similarly, using digital recording technology (such as that available on smartphones or computers) can alleviate worry about remembering exactly what was said.

We strongly advocate scaffolding the exercise with pre- and post-activities. Before beginning, it is often helpful if communicators nonlinear brainstorm or free-associate on the topic they intend to Half-Life, in order to promote mental access to relevant ideas and creative flexibility. (Note that brainstorming can double as an organizational tool after communicators apply Half-Life Your Message.) During this stage, communicators should not try to "practice" their speech or in any way conduct critical evaluation of ideas but rather create an opportunity for unfiltered, uncritical idea generation.

After completing the Half-Life Your Message exercise, critical reflection is crucial. Communicators should take the opportunity to reflect on the distilled message and ask themselves several questions: (1) Did they *like* the central message that emerged from Half-Life Your Message? If not, or if it simply did not convey the intended point, then the communicator can repeat the exercise with a new goal or different idea in mind. (2) Is the central message product of Half-Life Your Message appropriate for the communication context, target audience, and goal? (3) Did it illuminate which topics are critical to support the central message?

Once a communicator is satisfied with his or her central message, it is relatively straightforward to scaffold supporting themes or related talking points by revisiting prior brainstorms and prioritizing which ideas can be eliminated or grouped into supporting themes. In fact, Half-Life Your Message often gives communicators new insights into how concepts either fit or do not fit together in supporting their argument. Alternatively, communicators can apply tools such as the Message Box, a tool developed by COMPASS to help communicators define the problems, solutions, benefits, and significance associated with the central message of a communication effort (COMPASS Science Communication, Inc., 2017).

In addition to its obvious relevance to applied practice, we believe that Half-Life Your Message has particular utility as a teaching tool. In a teaching context, we recommend the introduction, application, and reflection on Half-Life Your Message using the following steps and prompts.

1. Ask learners to define a communication *context* (e.g., departmental seminar, Science Café, news article), target *audience* (e.g., expert faculty and trainees, drinking-age adults, news readers), and *goal* (e.g., to inform about latest research, to "edutain," to persuade to action). Learners need to be clear that a central message is necessarily audience- and context-specific. Hence, the same content usually needs to be reshaped for each specific communication.
2. Discuss why focusing communication efforts around a single central message is so important to motivate undertaking the (potentially awkward-seeming) exercise. Discussion points may include any or all of the following:
    - Message prioritization is important because there are *many* demands competing for attention. A central message serves as a point of focus for *both* the audience (what they take away from a communication effort) *and* the communicator (how ideas are prioritized and evaluated for inclusion, based on relevance to the central message).
    - Having a single central message to focus a communication effort does not mean that the message avoids complexity or uncertainty. Instead, a good central message is compact in that it alludes to related supporting ideas and can be unpacked into larger, more complex ideas.
    - The process of message prioritization is much like the process of sculpting: Michelangelo is attributed with saying that "Every block of stone has a statue inside it, and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it." The most effective way of discovering a central message is to triage, or eliminate all unnecessary detail, and distill the core thesis.
3. Run Half-Life Your Message. We recommend breaking learners into pairs or groups of three, with participants rotating who is speaking and who is listening. Ask the first learner in each group to complete the Half-Life Your Message exercise entirely (all four durations in sequence: 60, 30, 15, and 8 seconds). We strongly recommend controlling timing centrally, with instructors (loudly) providing cues to inform learners as time elapses (mark when 30 seconds remains, then 15 seconds, and count down during the final 5 seconds of each iteration of the exercise). Ask learners to jot down (or have them record) the version they most preferred. Repeat until all learners in each group have completed the exercise.
4. Conduct a debrief discussion on the *experience* of Half-Life Your Message. Discussion points: (1) What changed as learners progressed through the 60 seconds version to the 30 seconds, 15 seconds, and 8

seconds versions? What elements remained, and what fell out? (2) Which version did learners like best? Why? As part of the discussion, it may be beneficial to point out that all iterations in Half-Life Your Message have value: Shortest versions focus on the core takeaway, while the longer versions act as rough drafts and can hint at useful approaches to narrative structure or allow for additional context and nuance.

5. Ask learners to self-reflect on the *central message that emerged* from Half-Life Your message. Discussion points: (1) Is the message appropriate for the context, target audience, and communication goal? What points are necessary to appropriately support the central message? (2) Do learners *like* the emergent central message? Point out that Half-Life Your Message requires just 3 minutes to complete; encourage learners to repeat the exercise as necessary until a satisfactory message is uncovered.
6. Scaffold supporting themes or talking points related to the central message by asking learners revisit their nonlinear brainstorms and prioritize which ideas can be grouped into supporting themes or eliminated.

Half-Life Your Message is easy to implement in both group and individual contexts, experiential but very quick, and highly spontaneous. It temporarily eliminates competing demands on attention and forces communicators to focus effort exclusively on the task at hand—critical aspects of idea prioritization. It frequently helps individuals who are unsure of what they want to communicate to uncover, crystalize, and self-reflect on a particular thesis. Half-Life Your Message is appropriate for any kind of communication effort, regardless of context, audience, or duration.

In our experience, learners and practitioners of Half-Life Your Message take away many lessons from the activity. Most discover that they can express their main point in less time than they originally thought. Many also experience an "ah ha" moment when they uncover an unexpected central message or discover that they need to start their argument from a different place than they originally thought. Some realize that their final message is not what they meant to say, which usually leads to a decision to repeat the exercise to distill a message that was different than their original direction. Finally, while Half-Life Your Message is not intended as a wordsmithing tool, communicators occasionally uncover a particularly effective or pithy way of communicating an idea concisely through its application.

While Half-Life Your Message has many strengths, we also note that it can be misused. While some improv games make for good icebreakers, we do

not recommend Half-Life Your Message be used for this purpose. The primary power of the tool is an *internal* process of learning, distillation, and self-reflection. It does not particularly support social interaction, and in fact it tries to inhibit concern about how external others perceive the message that is being developed. Similarly, Half-Life Your Message is not intended to be a mechanism to create sound-bites. While elegant phrasing and concise descriptions of ideas can sometimes emerge from its use, achieving those goals requires thought, revision, and application of style to be effective. In contrast, Half-Life Your Message works most effectively as a quick message discovery process.

Half-Life Your Message can be used to teach messaging and idea prioritization for both professional and public communication efforts with a variety of audiences. Recently, we introduced and demonstrated Half-Life Your Message in our freely available online Teach-Out, Stand up for Science: Practical Approaches to Discussing Science that Matters (https://www.edx.org/course/communicating-understanding-scientific-research-michiganx-teachout-3x). Because it is easy to apply, K-12 students, undergraduates, graduate students, research fellows, and faculty across disciplines have used Half-Life Your Message to discover central messages.

We have individually applied Half-Life Your Message to develop communication efforts for a variety of settings (including the content in Stand Up for Science!). Several of us (ELA, KEP, BP) performed Half-Life Your Message to identify the central message for each chapter in our doctoral dissertations, as well as for the dissertations overall. Another author (BZF) finds the exercise to be particularly valuable in shaping the significance section of grant proposals, because it frequently brings the urgency and importance of critical research questions or core findings into clear relief. We have all used it to prepare for important meetings, to focus papers, talks, or posters, to design figures or other visual aids, and so on. It is particularly helpful for communication in public contexts (e.g., for Science Cafés, writing public information or editorial pieces, developing content for use online, etc.), as Half-Life Your Message forces communicators to articulate the broad significance, application, or meaning behind the work that they describe.

We close our discussion of the Half-Life Your Message exercise with the following observation: The biggest barrier to its effectiveness is convincing people to try it. To encourage readers to find a way to apply this exercise in their own lives, we leave you with three routes for further exploration. You can watch an example at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8Q7QxJoPZU&feature=youtu.be and use a video-based timer at https://youtu.be/lF_6kOrC7HY. If you have a communication opportunity to prepare for, we encourage you to take 3 minutes to try Half-Life Your Message right now.

If not, hold on to the idea, and make it your intention to try it at the next opportunity. We think you will be glad you did.

Authors' Note

We acknowledge that other groups may have adapted the original Half-Life improv game in parallel as we developed Half-Life Your Message, our scaffolding pedagogy, and recommended sequence of activities. To our knowledge, there is currently no published documentation of such an adaptation. We further note that the phrase "Half-Life Your Presentation" has been previously described by Gilda Bonanno in a blog post describing the need to fit presentations into specific time constraints: http://gildabonanno.blogspot.com/2010/01/using-improv-comedys-half-life.html.

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Elyse L. Aurbach is the Public Engagement Lead with the Office of Academic Innovation at the University of Michigan. Specializing in dialogue models of engagement and curriculum development focused on communication skills, she is a co-founder and former director of RELATE (www.learntoRELATE.org). She directs communication courses and led a mixed student/faculty team to develop an interactive online short course, or "Teach-Out," on communication and public engagement. She holds a PhD in neuroscience from the University of Michigan.

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