Warning Message Construction: Choosing your words

Key considerations for writing effective warning messages

Australian Institute for
Disaster Resilience

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Additional guidance to support users of the Public Information and Warnings Handbook

Acknowledgements

Australian Disaster Resilience Handbook Collection

The Australian Disaster Resilience Handbook Collection provides guidance on national principles and practices for disaster resilience.

The Handbook Collection:

- provides an authoritative, trusted and freely available source of knowledge about disaster resilience principles in Australia
- aligns national disaster resilience strategy and policy with practice, by guiding and supporting jurisdictions, agencies and other organisations and individuals in their implementation and adoption
- highlights and promotes the adoption of good practice in building disaster resilience in Australia
- builds interoperability between jurisdictions, agencies, the private sector, local businesses and community groups by promoting use of a common language and coordinated, nationally agreed principles.

The Handbook Collection is developed and reviewed by national consultative committees representing a range of state and territory agencies, governments, organisations and individuals involved in disaster resilience. The collection is sponsored by the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs.

Access to the Handbook Collection and further details are available on the Australian Disaster Resilience Knowledge Hub (the 'Knowledge Hub'; https://www.knowledge.aidr.org.au/handbooks).

Handbook 1   Disaster Health

Handbook 2   Community Recovery

   Toolkit 2-1   Community recovery checklists

   Toolkit 2-2   Further resources for community recovery

   Toolkit 2-3   Community recovery case studies

Handbook 3   Managing Exercises

Handbook 4   Evacuation Planning

Handbook 5   Communicating with People with a Disability: National Guidelines for Emergency Managers

Handbook 6   National Strategy for Disaster Resilience: Community Engagement Framework

Handbook 7   Managing the Floodplain: A Guide to Best Practice in Flood Risk Management in Australia

   Guideline 7-1   Using the National Generic Brief for Flood Investigations to Develop Project Specific Specifications

   Guideline 7-2   Flood Emergency Response Classification of the Floodplain

   Guideline 7-3   Flood Hazard

   Template 7-4   Technical Project Brief Template

   Guideline 7-5   Flood Information to Support Land-use Planning

Australian Emergency Management Manual Series

Publications in the Australian Emergency Management Manual Series have not been reviewed since 2011 or earlier. The Manual Series is undergoing a review which will see relevant manuals either moved into the Handbook Collection or other collections or archived. Current and past manual editions will remain available on the Knowledge Hub.

Contents

Guideline 1: Warning Message Construction: Choosing your words

Introduction

This guideline is a companion document to the *Public Information and Warnings Handbook* (AIDR 2018).[1] It provides guidance on key considerations for writing effective warning messages, a proposed structure for a warning message, specific language to use when constructing messages, and suggestions for constructing warning messages for non-English speaking audiences.

The words and principles identified in this guideline have been developed from related literature and from the preferences of community members. It is not, and cannot be, a totally prescriptive template for writing a warning message. Rather, it offers specific advice on effective words to use in constructing a warning message.

It is not intended that this guideline contradict or determine local guidelines and systems; rather, it is intended to provide advice about word choices that are most effective in conveying particular concepts. It is expected it will provide practical word choice advice to complement existing systems relating to the issuing of warnings.

Where groups of words are provided to convey changing degrees of seriousness or probability, these groupings reflect intuitive 'levels' for the community. They can be selectively integrated with existing categories or scales, in use by statutory providers of warnings.

It is recommended that consideration of appropriate wording against a variety of scenarios and incident levels be regularly undertaken as part of planning, preparation and training programs. In this way, the information provided in this guideline can be considered in conjunction with the local circumstances and expertise of the emergency services to develop the best possible 'template messages', which can be quickly amended and used in times of emergency.

As further information and research becomes available, future publications in the Australia Disaster Resilience Handbook Collection may provide additional guidance on how words and phrases can be supported by colour, symbols, and graphics such as maps to make warning messages more effective.

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1   This guideline replaces the former *Emergency Warnings Choosing Your Words* (Attorney-General's Department 2008). An archived copy, for reference only, is available at: https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/archived-documents/

Context

A **warning** provides point-in-time information about a hazard that is impacting or is expected to impact communities. It describes the impact and expected consequences for communities and includes advice on what people should do. Warnings are a specific form of public information, which is information provided to the public immediately before, during and after an emergency to reduce the potential impact of an emergency or hazard.

The provision of public information and warnings is a priority for any organisation with responsibility for community safety in an emergency.

Providing consistency of structure, language and warning levels can assist with recognition or comprehension of a message, particularly in dynamic emergencies where multiple warnings are issued.

Wherever possible and appropriate, consistent approaches should be shared by agencies providing warnings, minimising the need for warning recipients to get to know each agency's terms and approach to warnings.

> See *Public Information and Warnings Handbook* (AIDR 2018) for further information.

Purpose of warnings

During an emergency, the provision of warnings plays a significant role in making communities safer.

Warnings intend to achieve two outcomes:

- inform the community of an impending or current threat, its impact and expected consequences
- promote appropriate protective action(s) by advising what people should do.

Key considerations

Before you write a warning message, consider the following guidance.

Do not make assumptions about the recipients of a warning

Recipients may:

- have different knowledge of the local area
- have different previous experience with the type of threat and emergencies in general
- have a different understanding of the meaning of specific technical or local terms
- be in different social situations (e.g. at home, at work, in the car, visiting an area, separated from family)
- have different social and economic resources (e.g. local connections to the community, access to a car)
- have different levels of literacy and understanding of English.

Writing warning messages for non-English speaking audiences

For some audiences where English is a second, third or fourth language, for example, remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) communities and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, warnings written for mainstream audiences may not be effective.

In these cases, it may be necessary to:

- prepare warning messages specifically tailored for these audiences
- consult with these audiences and community service providers (such as settlement services) before, during and after an event to obtain specific advice as to how to communicate effectively with them
- identify cues to assist these audiences in building awareness of warnings, when to expect them and how to action those warnings

- identify, prior to an event, likely communities where tailored messages will be required to effectively construct and deliver these warnings.

It is important to note, messages tailored specifically to a community, for example a remote Indigenous community, may not then be effective for a broader mainstream audience.

> Booklets, drawings and posters, detailing what actions they should take before, during and after an emergency, may also be an effective and appropriate means of delivering warning messages to non-English speaking audiences.

Responding to a warning is an iterative process, not a single step

There is not an automatic 'stimulus-response' reaction to warnings. Do not expect recipients of a warning to immediately take the recommended action.

Recipients generally go through a series of iterative steps before they decide to take protective action. They:

- receive the message
- understand the message
- believe the message is credible
- personalise the message (i.e. decide whether it applies to them and their circumstances)
- confirm (or acknowledge) the message
- determine whether/what action is required
- determine whether action is feasible.

During this process, recipients of a warning will typically try to confirm the message before they take protective action. They may seek to confirm:

- that the threat exists
- that the threat applies to them
- how they should respond to the threat.

People confirm warning messages in several ways:

- personal observation
- speaking to other people (e.g. in person, by phone, online)
- seeking additional information (e.g. using internet, radio, television).

If recipients cannot confirm the threat, they are unlikely to engage in protective action.

> If possible, direct recipients to other trusted sources to allow them to quickly confirm the information in the warning message.
>
> As long as key elements of the message are consistent or complementary, warnings issued from two or more relevant government agencies may help to confirm and reinforce the messages.

Recipients may receive messages while stressed

Under time pressure or stress, people's capacity to process information and then make appropriate decisions may be reduced than in less time-poor, stressful conditions.

You may need to reassure people of their ability to execute normal skills.

Simple language and structure improves readability

Audiences are diverse, so simple language is required.

Simplifying language means:

- using shorter, more common words where possible
- removing operational language or jargon (e.g. mention a fire truck rather than a fire appliance)
- using short, to-the-point sentence construction
- keeping instructions brief and specific.

To improve the structure and readability of a message, consider:

- ordering information so that the most critical information is first
- providing instructions in a logical sequence
- using headings to break up text and help people navigate to the information they require.

Messages are easier to understand when they are written in active voice. Active voice ensures that a subject (i.e. who is doing the action) is present in each sentence. Convert sentences without subjects, such as 'Evacuations are in progress' (by whom?), to active sentences, such as 'Community members in Pebble Bay are evacuating now'.

> Guides that discuss simple, inclusive and accessible language are available at:
>
> https://guides.service.gov.au/content-guide/writing-style/
>
> https:// guides.service.gov.au/content-guide/accessibility-inclusivity/
>
> https://www.scopeaust.org.au/service/accessible-information/

Warnings should be timely

Messages should be provided in a timely manner with best information available at the time.

If your best information is unlikely to match recipients' personal observations or other confirmation sources (e.g. you are warning about a flood on a sunny day), the warning may be ignored, and protective action is likely to be delayed or dismissed. If the information contained in the warning will vary from personal observations, try to explain how and why.

Avoid information gaps in warnings, but keep warnings succinct

People are 'information hungry' during emergencies, so they are likely to want as much information as possible about:

- where the threat is
- when it will occur
- who will be affected
- how they will be affected
- what they can/should do to respond.

Try to keep warnings succinct. Long messages are time-consuming to read, and people are more likely to abandon a message if it has too much text.

Use additional sources of public information (e.g. community noticeboards, prominent members of the community, other agency webpages, social media channels, media releases) to provide additional information.

If some information is not available, state this specifically rather than leaving 'holes' in the information that may discredit the warning (e.g. 'the spread of the disease is unknown'; 'the number of hostages is unknown'). Where information gaps exist, try to describe what is being done (e.g. 'emergency services are still gathering information about...').

If people are likely to be familiar with similar previous emergencies, you can use these to benchmark the impending situation. Not everyone will have experienced the past emergency (and some will have had different experiences of it), but this can help to create a sense of scale for some people in the community. However, this strategy is risky if the emergency is more severe than initially predicted.

Warning should be as consistent or complementary as possible

Consistency of structure and language is required:

*   within each warning message you issue
*   between each warning message you issue

However, consistency should not be sought at the expense of tailored, targeted information for at-risk communities.

If two or more relevant government agencies are issuing warnings, the key elements of the messages should be consistent or complementary. Conflicting content will erode public trust in the messages.

Where the situation has changed, be explicit about what the changes are and why things have changed, rather than allowing changes to look like inconsistencies.

There are different ways to encourage action

There are many ways to write a message in order to encourage the recipient to comply with the action requested. For example, a message early in an emergency might request the recipient to prepare to evacuate, whereas another message later in an emergency might order the recipient to evacuate.

You can use one or many of the following techniques to encourage compliance:

*   forcefully assert or demand the recipient do something when the situation requires (e.g. 'You must evacuate now')
*   request the recipient do something based on the emergency services' authority (e.g. 'Emergency services advise you to evacuate now')
*   explain the benefits of compliance for the recipient and for others, including emergency service providers (e.g. 'Avoid danger by evacuating now')
*   explain how the recipient could work with emergency services to achieve a goal such as avoiding fatalities or expediting evacuation (e.g. 'Assist emergency services by evacuating now to avoid overloading evacuation routes)
*   signal that other recipients are already complying with a requested action, which makes compliance seem like the norm (e.g. 'People in your area are already evacuating. Evacuate now.')
*   signal that the choice of compliance is up to them, which aligns with the shared responsibility principle of emergency management and allows for reactant responses (i.e. when people do not like being instructed what to do) (e.g. 'The choice is up to you: leave for an evacuation centre or leave to stay with friends and family.').
*   present a logical argument for compliance (e.g. 'Evacuate before 5pm to avoid your access to safe evacuation routes being cut off.')
*   alert recipients to the negative consequences of not complying (e.g. 'If you do not evacuate now, you will be without power, sewerage, and access to clean drinking water')

No one technique is better than another, but each will likely suit a different situation.

Whatever the technique used, a warning will be most compelling when recipients are convinced that the proposed course of action is the best one for them to take.

In general, your role is not to issue orders but rather to 'sell' the protective action. As an event becomes riskier, recipients will be more likely to accept more forceful techniques such as demands. Demand compliance only when the situation is severe enough to warrant it.

Structure of a warning message

There are a number of specific pieces of information that should be included as succinctly as possible in a warning message:

- the name/title of warning
- who is issuing the warning (which might be evident from the delivery channel, such as a social media profile name or official government web address)
- a clear call to action (i.e. what to do to protect life and property)
- the type of threat (and preferably a description)
- how likely it is to happen
- how bad it is expected to be
- where the threat applies/who is affected
- when it is expected to happen
- where to get more information or to report events
- when to expect the next update.

The order of information shown here is not definitive. This is a reasonably natural order of information, but variations that encompass the same range of information may be equally effective. You should aim to provide this information concisely to maximise the effectiveness of the message.

> Advice on wording for each of these points can be found in *Language to use*.

Integrating contributions from other official sources to the warning message

You may need to incorporate information from other official sources of warnings within a warning you are issuing. For example, the Bureau of Meteorology is responsible for warning about meteorological conditions that might lead to hazards such as floods, storms, and fires. A Bureau-issued warning will highlight the impact and nature of the hazard.

If your message aims to package another official source's warning with a call to action, you may choose to reduce some of the detail found in the other warning without reducing the effectiveness of your key message(s).

Language to use

Effective warnings use simple, intuitive language, not words that require taught meaning. They are specific, as accurate as possible, and unambiguous.

To encourage recipients to act, you need to ensure that they:

- receive the message
- understand the message
- believe the message is credible
- personalise the message (i.e. decide that it applies to them and their circumstances)
- determine what action is required
- determine that the action is feasible.

The name/title of warning

Ensure that every warning issued has a name or title. As the title is the first thing a recipient will read, consider using it to personalise the message and indicate appropriate protective action(s).

Who is issuing the warning

Include the full name of the agency or organisation that is issuing the message. Avoid using acronyms.

People are more likely to trust information coming from an agency that would be expected to be an authority on the emergency situation (e.g. a fire department agency for a bushfire, a health department for a disease outbreak, a road authority for an emergency relating to road travel). This might be evident from the delivery channel, such as a social media profile name or official government web address.

A clear call to action

Provide targeted and tailored instructions to at-risk community members about what protective action(s) to take and why these protective actions are necessary. Personalise the protective action(s) by using the word 'you' when describing the action. For example,

tell residents to 'create a reserve water supply using buckets, troughs and baths in case you need it to put out spot fires'.

If you include more than one protective action, provide them in the order they would logically be performed. Be aware that if you include a large number of protective actions in your message, the recipient is likely to assume there is time to complete the actions.

Recipients will hear the message in different situations and may need different instructions about what to do if they are:

- at home
- at work
- in the car
- in an area they are not familiar with
- separated from family (especially children)

Parents will attempt to reach children unless otherwise instructed and reassured the children are being taken care of. Some will attempt to reach them anyway.

The type of threat (and preferably a description)

Do not just name the threat. Describe why, how and when it is a threat using potential impact and consequences to aid community comprehension of the warning (e.g. 'thunderstorms capable of damaging houses and making travel dangerous'; 'release of gas which could be dangerous to breathe').

Personalise your message when describing a threat by using the following terms:

- 'you' rather than 'people' or 'residents'
- 'home(s)' rather than 'property(ies)'

Avoid using very strong language such as 'killed', 'kill', or 'death' except in catastrophic events. An alternative is to say 'there is a risk to lives and homes'.

How likely it is to unfold

Communicate the likelihood of an event occurring. The terms you use to indicate likelihood may differ depending on the type of event or the authority responsible for warnings. The Bureau of Meteorology, for example, uses terms and scales to communicate the chance of rain (see Figure 2). When indicating likelihood, aim to align the terms you use to indicate likelihood with terms appropriate for your type of event and an appropriate authority in your context.

it is important to note some terms are confusing and better avoided. For example, recipients may confuse the meaning of the words 'possible' and 'probable', so these terms should be avoided.

Bureau of Meteorology - Rainfall Forecast Terminology

The following terms and scales tell you how likely you are to receive any rainfall on a day:

Chance of rain*	Terminology used
0%, 10%	No mention of rainfall in forecast.
20%, 30%	Slight (20%) chance of... Slight (30%) chance of...
40%, 50%, 60%	Medium (40%) chance of... Medium (50%) chance of... Medium (60%) chance of...
70%, 80%	High (70%) chance of... High (80%) chance of...
90%, 100%	Very high (90%) chance of... Very high (near 100%) chance of...

*Chance of rain describes the likelihood of receiving a measurable amount of rain (>0.2mm) during the day at that location.

Figure 1: Bureau of Meteorology - Rainfall Forecast Terminology

For further information see http://www.bom.gov.au/NexGenFWS/rainfall-faq.shtml#q2

How bad it is expected to be

Communicate the likely impact or consequence of the event if it occurs. The example terms provided in Table 1 can assist you to simplify your message; however, some terms carry particular meaning in specific contexts or for particular hazards. The term 'severe', for example, has specific meaning when describing storms, while the term 'destructive' has specific meaning when describing wind. Try to avoid using terms that might be entrenched with particular contextual meaning.

Where the threat applies/who is affected

This is a difficult aspect of a warning message to craft, because there is no single way to describe a geographical area that will work for everyone.

You need to consider the:

- type of threat (e.g. coming from a direction or spreading from a point)
- local geography and landmarks (particularly dominant features that can be used as reference points)
- total area affected (as the larger the area, the more likely the apparent threat will be diffused)
- size of population centres (e.g. small towns, regional centres, major urban cities).

Specific information is preferable: naming a street, town or suburb named is most effective for gaining attention. However, anyone outside the named affected areas is likely to assume the warning does not apply to them, even if they are next to or surrounded by areas that are named.

When naming suburbs or towns, use a logical sequence (e.g. proximity to the threat) as this will create a mental map for people who are familiar with the area. For recipients not familiar with the area, provide a map (if possible). Use alphabetical order for place names if no other logical sequence is obvious.

If naming towns, state whether the warning is for the township itself and/or for surrounding areas.

Avoid using local government boundaries because this assumes the recipients are aware of their local government boundaries.

Consider using landmarks to help comprehension of the warning:

- Use only extremely well-known or visible landmarks.
- Use dominant local landmarks to defining specific areas (e.g. rivers, mountains, lakes, major roads).

Avoid using map grid references or compass point directions as many people are not able to orient themselves to a compass from where they are currently located. Compass directions might be used in conjunction with other area information (e.g. dominant landmarks, a map).

Table 1: Example terms to communicate likely impact or consequence

How bad	Standard terms	Simplified terms
Low	*Most people would not expect a warning at this level*	
Medium	Damaging	Damaging
High	Severe (suited to generic descriptions)	Dangerous
	Dangerous (suited to threats to people/manmade threats)	
	Destructive (suited to threats to property/natural disasters)	
Very high	Extremely severe (suited to more generic descriptions)	Very dangerous
	Extremely dangerous (suited to threats to people/manmade threats)	
	Extremely destructive (suited to threats to property/natural disasters)	

Avoid relying on distances as many people are not able to estimate distances accurately.

If possible, provide additional/more detailed geographic information to the media for use alongside official warning messages in news coverage.

There are other options to describe an area under threat:

Between [point 1] and [point 2]:

This description works for small distances and encourages people to have a 'linear' impression of the area described. This is most suited to areas with linear geography (e.g. coastlines, along a river or road).

Within X km of [place name]:

This description gives people an impression of a circular area. It may be good for threats that emanate from a specific site. People will not be good at estimating distances (e.g. 'within 5km of Parliament House').

Within X km to the [direction] of [place name]:

Adding a direction to this form gives the impression of a segment rather than a full circle, but relies on understanding of the distance, the direction and the landmark. (e.g. 'within 5km to the south-east of Parliament House').

When it is expected to happen

To express future time, use time of the day (e.g. between 2pm and 4pm, before 6pm). These times make it easier for people to visualise what they and their family will be doing at those times, and how they will be affected. They are also easier for most people to remember.

To express short times starting from now (especially if less than 1 hour), use relative time (e.g. anytime within 45 minutes). This type of time seems more urgent.

Using the word 'anytime' helps overcome a tendency for people to expect something to happen at the far end of the time specified. When this term is used, it is very important to include the time when the warning was issued.

To express that something is happening/needs to happen immediately, use the word 'immediate' or 'now'.

The word 'imminent' means slightly longer than 'immediate' to many people, but some people with lower language skills may not understand it at all.

For remote Indigenous communities, both the time of day and relative time may have little meaning. If possible, use these in conjunction with 'natural time' markers, such as sun-up, lunchtime and sunset.

Where to get more information or to report events

It is important, if possible, to provide a telephone number or web site address where people can get more information about specific incidents, or information about who to contact regarding developments relevant to the emergency.