



# **Crisis Communications for City and County Leaders**



1

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2

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3

# A crisis brings serious **legal threats** and **reputation and credibility threats**



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## **Bad stuff happens** and reporters want to know about it



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## **A few key structural points**



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# Legal Counsel



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# PIO or Press Person



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# Subject Matter Expert



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# Editing by Committee Hurts our Message

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## **4** Basic Principles

- 1. Listen.**
- 2. Act quickly.**
- 3. Be transparent.**
- 4. Do the right thing.**

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**Thinking Like a Reporter**

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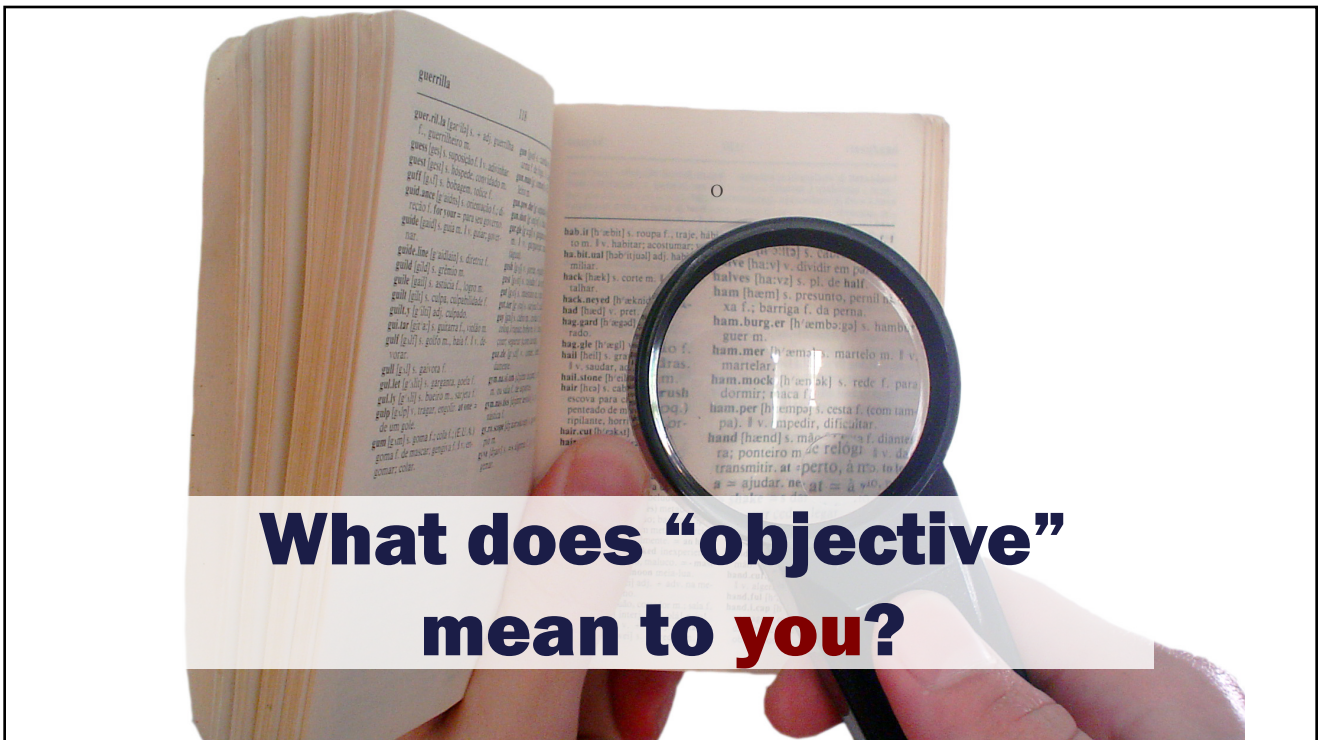
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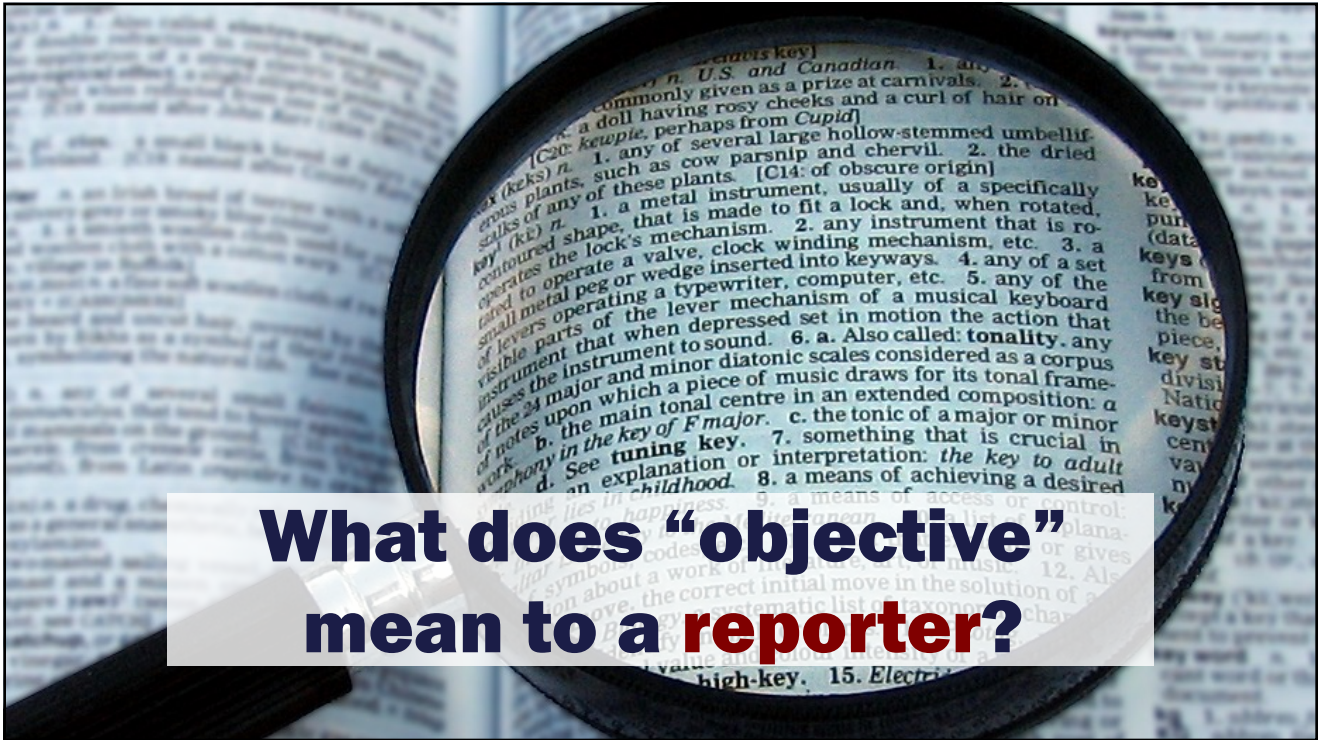
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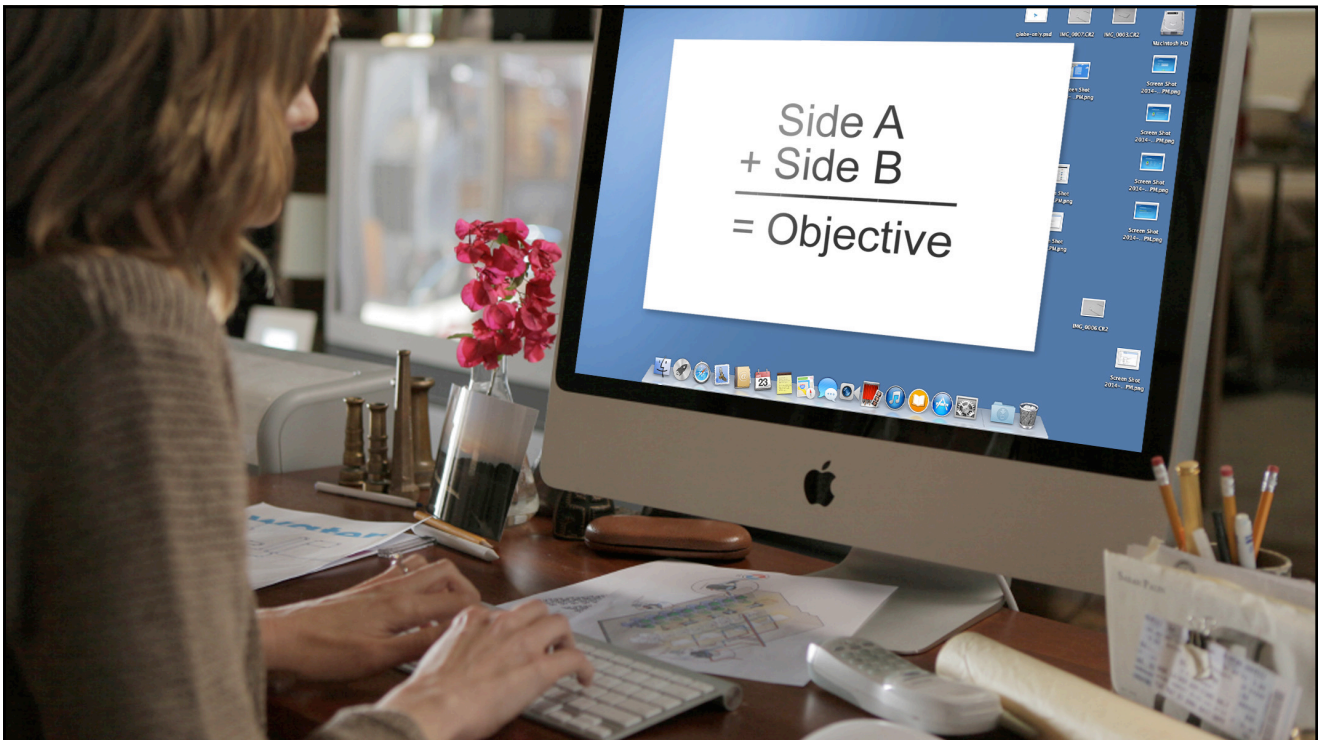
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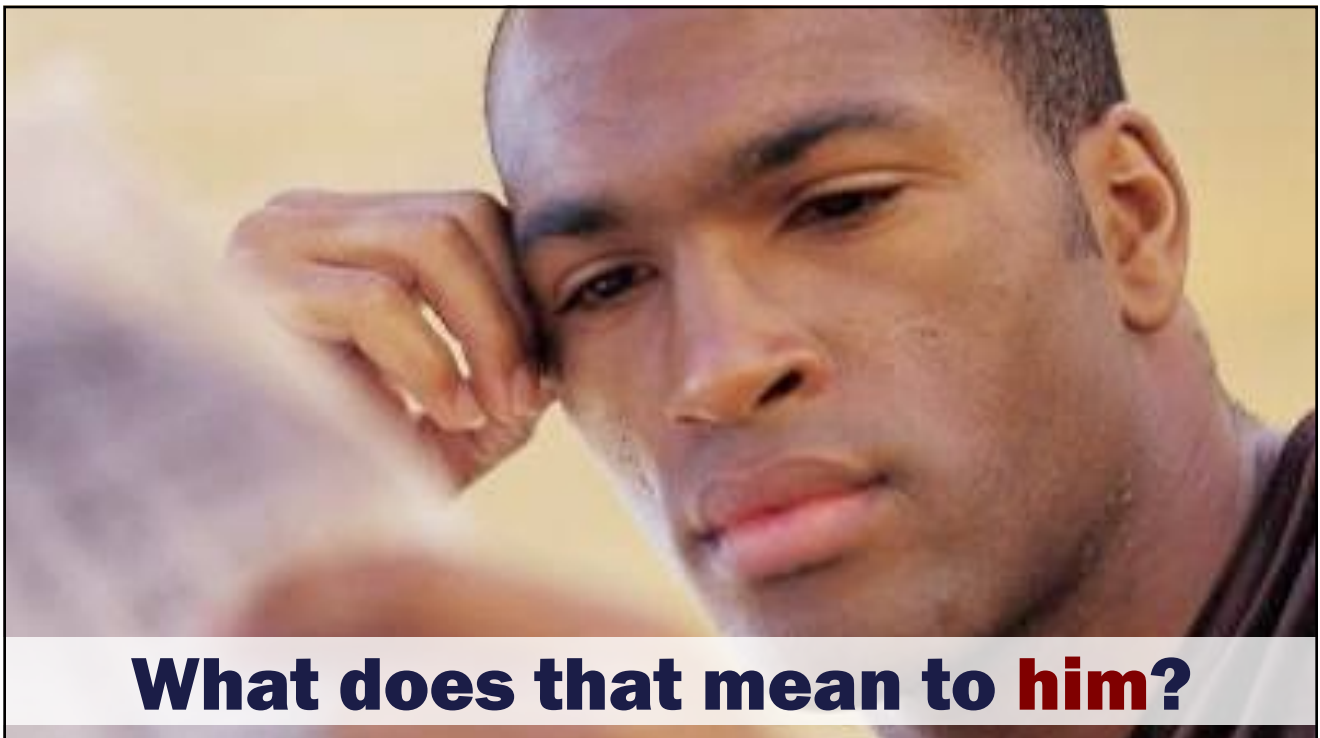
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# Flesch-Kincaid Readability Score

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Readability Statistics	
<b>Counts</b>	
Words	763
Characters	3,849
Paragraphs	18
Sentences	46
<b>Averages</b>	
Sentences per Paragraph	2.5
Words per Sentence	16.5
Characters per Word	4.9
<b>Readability</b>	
Flesch Reading Ease	50.5
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	10.3
Passive Sentences	13%

27

## Result

first attempts at writing involved **wielding a crayon** like the **proverbial blunt instrument**. The **remnants** of that work survive in **crumpled** form, dismissed into odd corners of boxes otherwise **groaning** with the **detritus** of my childhood. It is best left **undisturbed**.

Later, despite my very best effort at being **unnoticeable** in class behind an open copy of The Hockey News, my eighth-grade English teacher (an **avid Philadelphia Flyers** fan himself) saw something in my writing. He asked me to serve as the editor of our school newspaper. Anyone who knew me well back then was as surprised as I was. My contributions to the **Abington Junior High School Informer** were **pedestrian** and as **unmemorable** as an hour of detention. Perhaps the sole exception was my internationally-acclaimed work as the newspaper's anonymous advice **columnist "Dear Gabby."** Such **brilliance** of **composition** would not go **unnoticed**.

In high school, few people would have **pegged** me as much of a writer, particularly since I could neither type well nor **handwrite legibly**. The **advent** of computers and word processing software helped that along and, by the time I finished graduate school and law school, my ability to write in a format for mass distribution was supported and **enhanced** by technology.

Early on, my writing was almost always on behalf of others. While I'd written a few letters to the editor in my own name (the first being published in the now-**defunct Philadelphia Bulletin** daily newspaper when I was 16), I was mostly a **ghostwriter** for public officials and politicians. Word got around that I was available to write news **releases**, opinion **columns**, and **speeches** and I soon **cobbled** together a small income from it.

Even while going to law school at night, which requires a significant amount of writing in itself, I **shunted** leisure **pursuits** aside and made time to tackle several writing projects every week. The **prose** was **workmanlike** and **passable** for the tasks **assigned**. Some projects were fun to write. Others felt like ten miles of bad road. For example, while I was glad to cash the checks, I was not particularly **enamored** of my **toil** doing technical writing for a ball bearing manufacturer. Did you know that a **chromium** steel **shielded** ball bearing can help protect against **leaks**? Of course, you **didn't**. But I had to. And so, I wrote.

Years later, after a **stint** as a national spokesman for the United States Department of Justice, I worked as a communications and media consultant in Washington, D.C., where instead of writing for state **legislators**, commissioners, and judges, I found myself **drafting** work for **congressmen**, **senators**, and **governors**. During those five years, the highlight was writing, **directing**, and producing a television special that was hosted by former president **Ronald Reagan**. That media project, which including spending a morning with Mr. **Reagan** helping him with his television delivery, remains the **stellar** highlight of my communications career. I **penned** the **script** in the best **Reaganesque** style I could manage, and I was proud to see President **Reagan's** own copy of my **script underlined**, highlighted, and dog-**eared**. A previously-published **firsthand** account of that session is featured here in this book. Later, when I moved to **Ohio** in 1995 to become the state's Deputy Attorney General, I found the kind of work I do much in demand. Legal **drafting**, **composing** high-profile **editorial** work, and **persuasive** writing in the policy arena became my daily tasks. Many days, I wrote as much as a working journalist would. Other days, I spent hours **editing** the work of my staff and colleagues.



Common: 86%, 1242

Mid-Frequency: 10%, 138

Rare: 4%, 60

Suitability for general audience score: 91

Number Of Words: 1440

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28



29



30

# Crisis Communications



31



32



33



34



35



36



**Controlling the NARRATIVE**

37



38



39



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41



**aka "holding statements"**

42

**Categories:**

**Aspirational**

**Procedural**

**More to Come**

**Gag Order**



43

**Ask Yourself:**

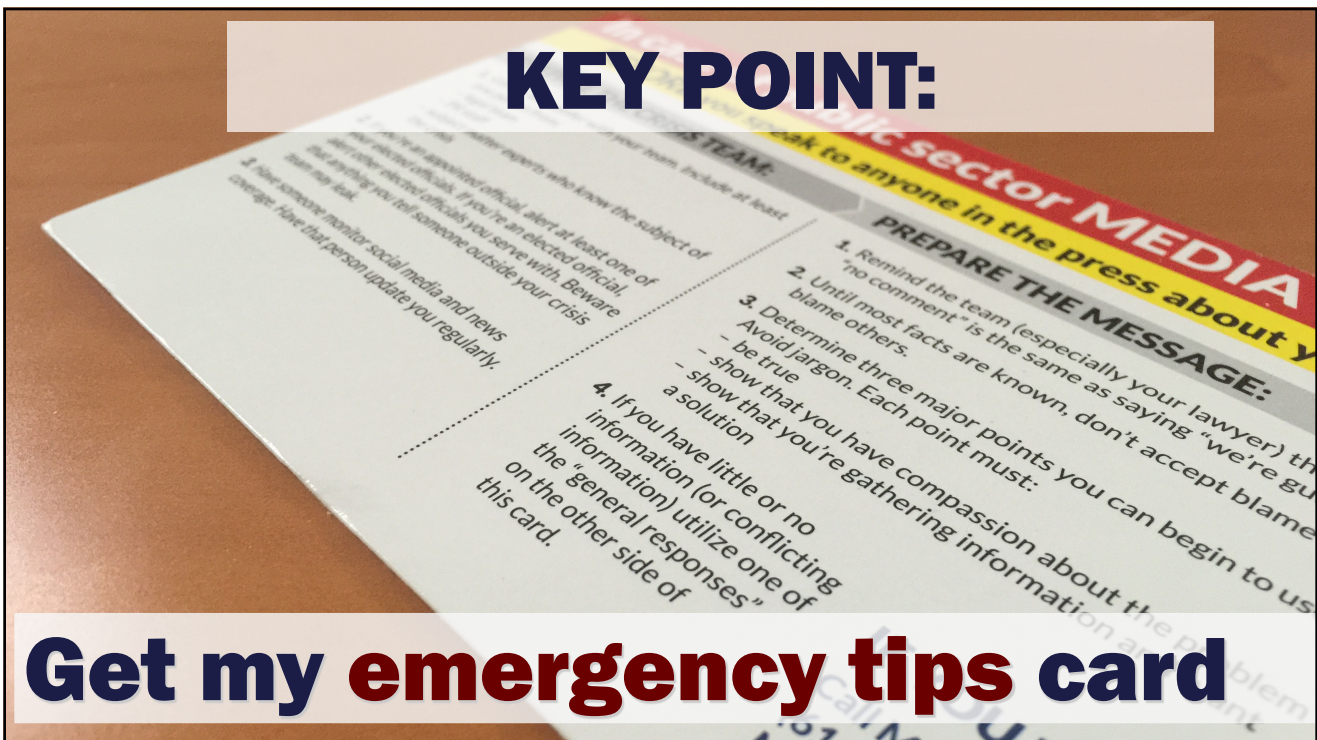
**What can you say  
that **WON'T**  
change?**



44



45



46

# tinyurl.com/MediaCard2021



**In case of a MEDIA emergency...**  
**BEFORE you speak to anyone in the press about your incoming crisis, review this card.**

**PREPARE THE CRISIS TEAM:**

1. Meet with your team. Include at least one person from:
  - Legal team
  - HR
  - Public relations
  - Senior leadership of the crisis
2. Prepare an approved official, clear and concise statement of facts. Practice as a group. Assign roles and responsibilities. Review the script and call together within your crisis room to rehearse.
3. Have someone review your script and give you updates.

**PREPARE THE MESSAGE:**

1. Review the human impact, your (event) statement and prepared to be ready to "speak" with the public.
2. Don't speculate on what you know. Don't script blame or assign others.
3. Determine key messages. Avoid jargon. Each person reads:
  - the same
  - the same core messages
  - show that you're gathering information and have a solution
4. If you have little or conflicting information, report of the "General Response" (aka "Holding Statement") on the other side of this card would be an option.

**BEGIN COMMUNICATING:**

1. Write a short statement (100 words or less) and have the crisis team review it.
2. Read your script aloud and send it to your media contacts using the statement & from.
3. Ask reporters to follow your social media handles for updated information. Update the text as needed.
4. Consider participating, prepare a social media/press area. Plan for visuals. Don't have any staff or team members wear the word "your" on any statement. In public opinion, that answers to the question of "your" statement and person to provide more information in a conference.

**IF YOU NEED QUICK HELP**  
 Call Mike, Director of Communications, at 800-368-5838 or visit [www.CommunicationsCounsel.com](http://www.CommunicationsCounsel.com)

**Communications COUNSEL**

**General Responses (aka Holding Statements)**  
 Use something like one of these responses when you don't have the facts.

**ASPIRATIONAL responses:**

"This is a tragedy for all involved. We understand and agree that the public's interests whenever an officer is faced with the difficult, often sudden decision to arrest, detain, and others agree as governed by a good faith. Police work hard every day to protect the public and agencies. And there are times when an officer is faced with no other option but to use deadly force."

"Our goal is to make our organization a safe and fair place to work for everyone. We expect everyone here to follow the law."

**PROCEDURAL responses:**

"We understand how important this case is. There is a public hearing process in place and we will continue to monitor the progress of the case. We will continue to monitor the progress of the case and determine whether the officer acted within the law."

"Our organization has policies in place that make sure there is a fair and impartial review of all allegations. We take complaints seriously and are working to guarantee we have all the information surrounding this incident. This will ensure a fair process for everyone."

**"NO RE TO COME" or "TRANSPARENCY" responses:**

"We know the public wants to know more about what happened. We will continue to gather facts. The most professional response is to take the time to get this right. We will provide more information as soon as it is confirmed."

"We understand and agree the public has a right to know what happened. We're moving quickly to gather and verify facts for release as soon as possible."

**GAG ORDER responses:**

"Much of the information is confidential by law. We must follow the law that we want the public to know that we'll have much more to say as soon as we're able."

"The judge has ordered us not to discuss the case until our court case is resolved. We will respect the judge's decision. We will report the facts to court."

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47

# Who will talk to the press?



48

**-Competent**

**-Credible**

**-Caring**



49



**GOAL: "they get it"**

50

## KEY POINT:



51

**Tell the FACTS as soon you  
know they are FACTS**

**FACT**

52

**TELL IT:**

**Fast**

**Truthfully**

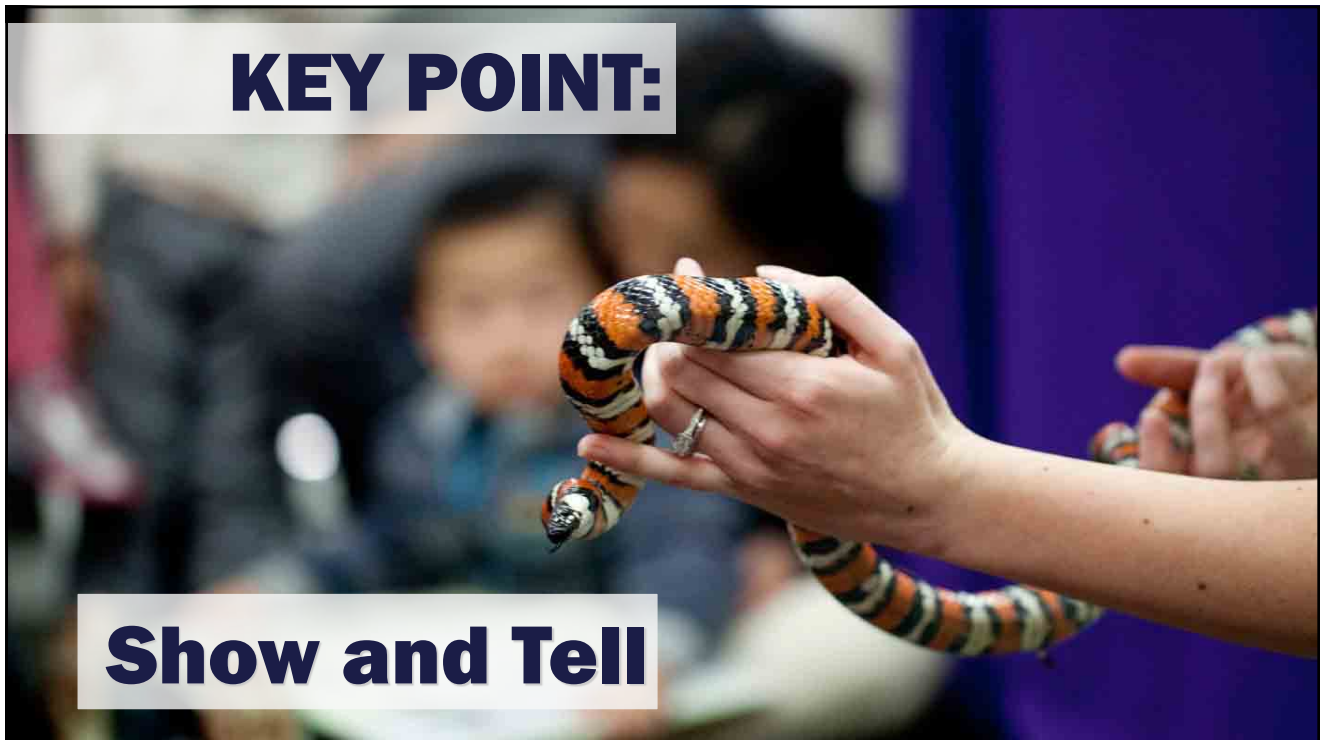
**All at once**



53

**KEY POINT:**

**Show and Tell**



54

## KEY POINT:



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**While we're waiting for approval of our message...**



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## KEY POINT:



**Give our side first or fast**

57



**Key Point**

**Reporters will go to air/print even when they don't know the facts**

58



**Getting the Human Element  
Into A Crisis**

59



**Message Discipline**

60

# Traffic Light



## Red Light

Information you **MUST NOT** talk about –  
illegal, unethical, unprofessional

## Yellow Light

Information you'd **RATHER NOT** talk  
about – not important or distracting  
from message

## Green Light

Information you **WANT** to talk about –  
your message

61

## MESSAGE DISCIPLINE =



## STICK TO THE **GREEN LIGHT**

62

# GOAL:



63




64



**1. Get/update a crisis communications plan.**

**2. Train senior leaders annually.**

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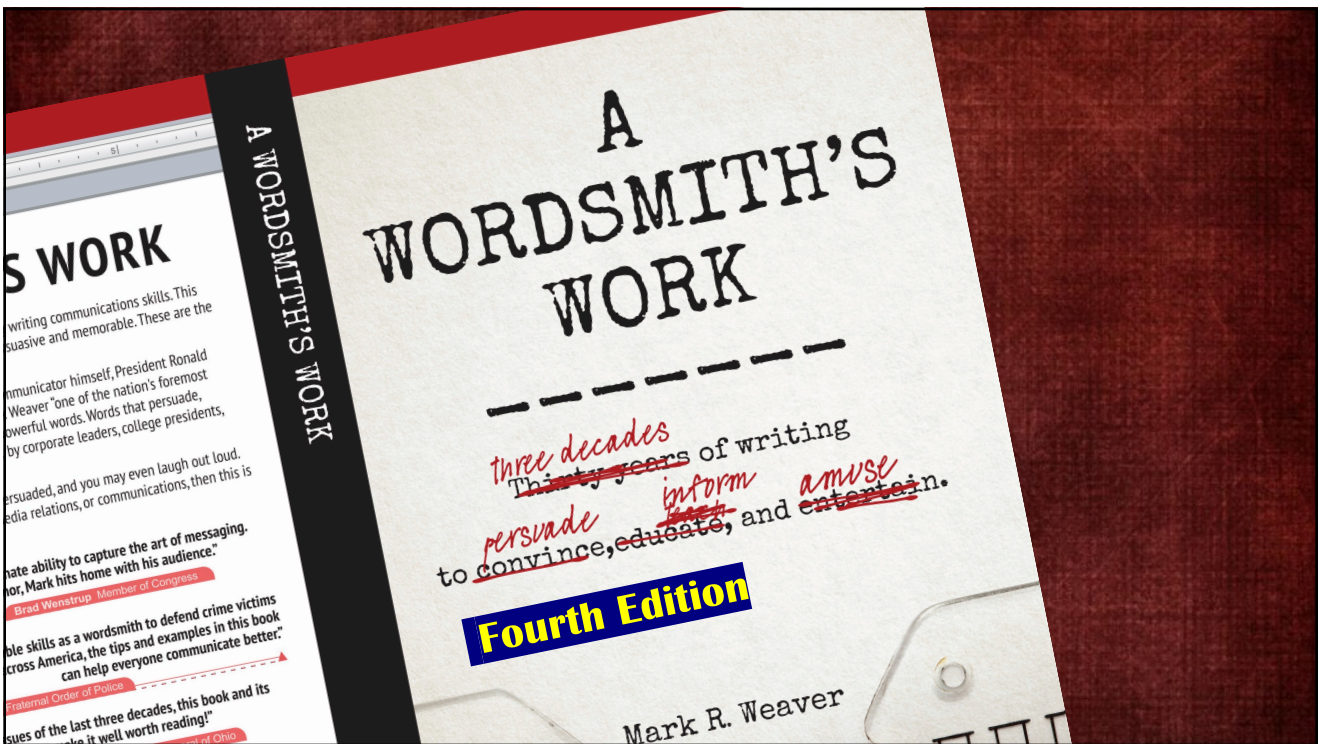
**3. Build your social media channels to be ready.**

**4. Develop community allies to support you in crisis.**

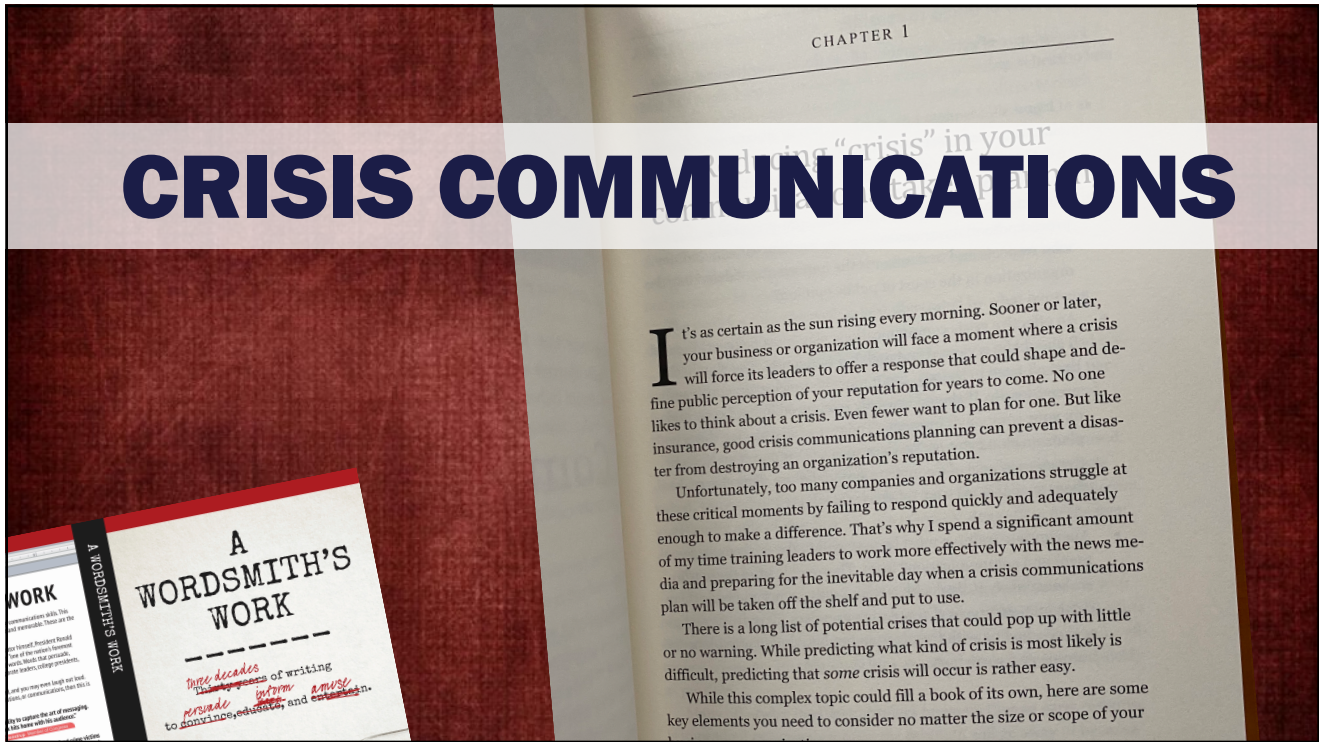
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67



68



# CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

It's as certain as the sun rising every morning. Sooner or later, your business or organization will face a moment where a crisis will force its leaders to offer a response that could shape and define public perception of your reputation for years to come. No one likes to think about a crisis. Even fewer want to plan for one. But like insurance, good crisis communications planning can prevent a disaster from destroying an organization's reputation.

Unfortunately, too many companies and organizations struggle at these critical moments by failing to respond quickly and adequately enough to make a difference. That's why I spend a significant amount of my time training leaders to work more effectively with the news media and preparing for the inevitable day when a crisis communications plan will be taken off the shelf and put to use.

There is a long list of potential crises that could pop up with little or no warning. While predicting what kind of crisis is most likely is difficult, predicting that some crisis will occur is rather easy.

While this complex topic could fill a book of its own, here are some key elements you need to consider no matter the size or scope of your

69

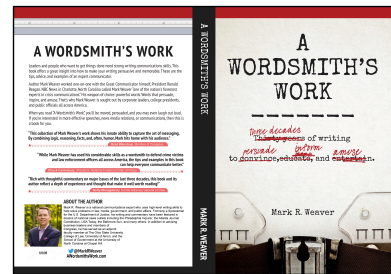
## SPECIFIC CHAPTERS ON:

### Crisis Communications for:

- Healthcare
- Law Enforcement
- Restaurant
- Higher Education

Writing Op-eds  
Better Speeches

Ghost writing  
Sharpen Writing Skills



70

**A WORDSMITH'S WORK**

Leaders and people who want to get things done need strong writing communications skills. This book offers a great insight into how to make your writing persuasive and memorable. These are the tips, advice, and examples of an expert communicator.

Author Mark Weaver worked one-on-one with the Great Communicator himself, President Ronald Reagan. NBC News in Charlotte, North Carolina called Mark Weaver "one of the nation's foremost experts in crisis communications." His weapon of choice: powerful words. Words that persuade, inspire, and amuse. That's why Mark Weaver is sought out by corporate leaders, college presidents, and public officials all across America.

When you read "A Wordsmith's Work," you'll be moved, persuaded, and you may even laugh out loud. If you're interested in more effective speeches, news media relations, or communications, then this is a book for you.

"This collection of Mark Weaver's work shows his innate ability to capture the art of messaging. By combining logic, reasoning, facts, and, often, humor, Mark hits home with his audience."

"While Mark Weaver has used his considerable skills as a wordsmith to defend crime victims and law enforcement officers all across America, the tips and examples in this book can help everyone communicate better."

"Rich with thoughtful commentary on major issues of the last three decades, this book and its author reflect a depth of experience and thought that make it well worth reading!"

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Mark R. Weaver is a national communications expert who uses high-level writing skills to help solve problems in law, media, government, and public affairs. Formerly a spokesperson for the U.S. Department of Justice, his writing and commentary have been featured in dozens of national news outlets including the Philadelphia Inquirer, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, USA Today, the Baltimore Sun, and many others. In addition to advising business leaders and members of Congress, he has served as an adjunct faculty member at The Ohio State University, College of Law, University of Akron, and the School of Journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

*Three decades of writing to persuade, inform, amuse, convince, educate, and entertain.*

Mark R. Weaver

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