

Message Creation



Mission Critical Knowledge

Fear of pressing “send” often stems from worrying about whether your alert is accurate and effective. Alerts should be written for someone who doesn’t know what’s going on in order to avoid ineffective alerts. Recipients can be paralyzed if they receive enough information to worry, but not enough information about what actions they should take.

These best practices can help officials create clear and concise messages that mitigate the impact of an emergency.

Mindset Shift Reminder!

Jeanette Sutton, Associate Professor in the College of Emergency Preparedness, Homeland Security, and Cybersecurity at the University at Albany, SUNY, specializes in emergency alerts. [She admits](#), “there is little guidance for agencies on how to formulate the alerts, so they can sometimes go out with missing information (no location identified) or incorrect information or confusing instructions. They are often left to be sent by emergency personnel who are busy trying to fight fires or control floods.” But when the system is used properly, “it acts like a siren in thousands of pockets, giving the authorities the ability to warn the right people at the right time.”

Ask yourself: Does my team have a checklist and/or templates in place to improve the effectiveness of emergency alerts without sacrificing precious time?

Coordinate Locally

Interagency cooperation and communication are the basis for effective alerting. A checklist can help your local counterparts supply the details for alerts. A standardized form for the uniform gathering of information should outline all of the details to create a given alert. This will prevent delays and confusion caused by going back and forth to obtain the necessary information.

Alerts Should Be Community-Driven

The onus is still on the local emergency manager to send out information and take ownership. Emergency managers might rely on the National Weather Service to do their job for messaging, for example, but this creates a disconnect. Why? Because they live in the community. Owning alerts helps enhance this local relationship and builds trust — which can help strengthen communities.

Have Message Templates Ready & Be Clear

When crafting alerts, remember they should be brief and instructive. It's important to create templates or pre-scripted messages in advance to streamline your alerting process. This alleviates some of the pressure during an already stressful situation.

When an emergency happens, you can fill in the blanks and make tweaks where needed, rather than starting from scratch under stress. Be sure to make any necessary adjustments to make the alert appropriate for your jurisdiction and the event at hand. The CodeRED IPAWS tool can help you build templates, and you can also monitor the national alerts feed to see how other agencies are constructing messages. FEMA also provides [templates](#).

We want to empower the community by providing actionable information, rather than cause fear. Fear doesn't generally lead to good decision-making.

Leverage Technology

WEA messages to cell phones can now include hyperlinks, so recipients can click for more detailed information, such as posters, photos and ongoing updates. The content can then be texted and posted on other platforms and community pages. This helps to engage and empower people during critical events while simultaneously preventing frustration caused by alerts containing only enough information to be frightening.

Double check to make sure the link is accurate before you send it!!!

The Warning Lexicon and Message Design Dashboard

Dr. Jeanette Sutton played a lead role in a research project that developed a Warning Lexicon to address the lack of training and education around alert creation among many emergency managers. The product of that research — [The Warning Lexicon: A Multiphased Study to Identify, Design, and Develop Content for Warning Messages](#) — is an extremely useful resource for overcoming the fear and hesitation of pressing the send button by helping emergency managers write effective warning messages quickly when a threat occurs.

The Warning Lexicon covers 48 hazards and includes information on the impacts of each hazard, as well as 112 protective action statements that can be used to write concise and clear alerts while reducing delays in the sending process.

Each hazard contains three content areas in the lexicon:

- 1 Hazard:** The specific name of the hazard posing a threat
- 2 Hazard impacts:** The consequences of the hazard on the population and infrastructure
- 3 Protective action guidance:** Recommended actions for message receivers.

When appropriate, certain words are written in all caps, so recipients can quickly see the most important information in the alert. The use of capital letters also expresses a stronger sense of urgency for protective action guidance requiring immediate attention.

Specific phrases are presented in brackets to let message creators know they need to make a selection (i.e., [do/do not]). Other copy that needs to be completed with the specific details of the event (location, time) are written in italics for easy identification.

The Warning Lexicon makes it easier to create alerts during stressful crisis events. The research also provides several best practices and tips to further speed up the creation of effective alerts:

- Create a list of the threats and hazards most likely to occur within your community in advance.
- Make a list of the trusted organizations and agencies you will include as the message source in your alerts.
- Establish a list of the most well-known locations where a threat or hazard may occur. The list should include popular landmarks, major roads and intersections, and the names of the towns, cities and counties in your jurisdiction.
- Set up a webpage or social media presence where you will post updates as a threat or hazard situation evolves.
- Practice writing alerts that fit within the character restraints through character counters in Excel or Google Sheets. Software applications like [Hemingwayapp](#) and [Grammarly](#) are also useful for this purpose.



The Warning Lexicon is the foundation for the [Message Design Dashboard](#) (MDD), which was developed by Dr. Sutton to provide templates to help emergency managers write effective messages for public alert and warning.

The MDD project outlines five key components of an effective and complete warning message:

- 1 Local, familiar, authoritative message source.
- 2 Description of the threat/event and consequences.
- 3 Location of the threat.
- 4 Protective action to be taken.
- 5 Message expiry time.

In practice, a message would use the following construction.

[Local, familiar, authoritative message source].

[Description of threat/event] in [location of threat] [consequences]. [Protective action].

Message expires [time].

The MDD guides users through the alert creation process with an interactive design that lets the user select whether to create a 90-character or 360-character WEA. From there, a series of screens walks the alert creator through the entire process through the use of drop-down menus and prompts to edit any text in brackets. A character count, review checklist and a final message preview that can be copied to the creator's clipboard make it easy to create alerts that include all of the essential details of an emergency so an alert can be sent with confidence.



Continuing Education

Additional Message Creation Tips

Public alerts, warnings and notifications should include:

- [Local, familiar, authoritative message source]:
[Description of threat or event] in [location and consequences]. [Protective action].

For example, a 90-character alert sent to cell phones would include only pressing details:

- NWS: FLASH FLOOD EMERGENCY this area til 11:00 a.m. EDT. Avoid flooded areas.

Be very specific regarding the location and protective actions involved in WEA alerts. Specifying a location takes the message one step further:

- NWS: FLASH FLOOD Lake Winona area til 11:00 a.m. EDT. Take appropriate actions. Avoid flooded areas.

An alert sent to devices capable of receiving messages up to 360 characters can contain more information:

- National Weather Service: A FLASH FLOOD EMERGENCY is in effect for the Lake Winona area until 11:00 a.m. EDT. This is an extremely dangerous and life-threatening situation. Do not attempt to travel unless you are fleeing an area subject to flooding or under an evacuation order.

The most effective alerts are simple and easy to understand, with actionable directives, location impacted and additional sources of information if possible. Basic templates like this ensure that everyone affected by the situation receives important information.