

The Sticky Learning Message Makeover Guide

Turning training content into messages learners remember

The best training messages do more than explain. **They help learners notice, remember, and act.**

A practical reference guide for slides, eLearning screens, job aids, openings, learner communications, and scenarios.

For L&D professionals, instructional designers, training managers, facilitators, and workplace learning consultants



Make it visual



Cut the copy



Show why it matters



Use humor carefully

Overview

What's inside

Nine sections you can skim, save, and use when improving training messages.

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Use the section number in the page title to see where you are in the guide. This is a reference guide, not a workbook.

What this guide helps you fix

Use it when a message is accurate, but not yet easy to notice, remember, or use.



A slide that feels dense

Find the one message and cut the copy



A visual that feels decorative

Show the idea, choice, consequence, or workplace moment



A course opening that feels flat

Start closer to the real problem or learner benefit



A scenario that feels obvious

Add a realistic objection, pressure, mistake, or trade-off



A job aid that gets ignored

Make the first line action-oriented

Core idea

A training message sticks when learners can quickly understand what matters, connect it to real work, and see what to do differently.

01. The Sticky Learning Formula

A sticky learning message is easy to understand, easy to remember, and easy to connect to a real workplace moment.



Make it visual

Show the point instead of only explaining it.



Cut the copy

Make the message easy to skim and remember.



Show why it matters

Connect the message to something that matters in their work.



Use humour carefully

Use humour only when it reinforces the learning point.

Sticky learning is not about making training flashier. It is about making the message easier to understand, remember, and use.

Formula at a Glance

Use the four principles together. A visual will not save a weak message, and concise copy still needs relevance.

Training content often starts with “What do we need to cover?”
Sticky learning starts with **“What does the learner need to remember and use?”**

The order matters: find the message before polishing the slide.

1

Find the one message

2

Show it visually

3

Cut anything that dilutes it

4

Connect it to work

5

Use humor only if it helps



02. The 5-Second Sticky Message Test

Use this quick test when reviewing a slide, eLearning screen, job aid, course opening, communication, or scenario.

- Can someone understand the main point in 5 seconds?
- Is the message written the way the learner would say it?
- Does the visual explain the point, or is it just decoration?
- Could 20% of the words be removed?
- Is there a clear reason the learner should care?
- Does the message connect to a real workplace moment?
- Is the learner clear on what to do differently?

If the answer is “no” to two or more questions, the message likely needs a makeover.

If the Message Fails the Test

Do not start by adding more content. First, diagnose what is making the message hard to understand or remember.

If the issue is...	Try...
Too much text	Turn the title into the main message and cut body copy by 20%.
Too abstract	Add a workplace moment, decision, consequence, or example.
Too formal	Rewrite it the way a respected manager would say it.
Weak visual	Replace decoration with a diagram, comparison, or decision point.
Low relevance	Show what gets easier, safer, faster, or better when the learner applies it.

Do not ask, "Is the content complete?" first. Ask, "Will the learner know what matters?"

03. Make It Visual

In the session, the visual strategy was simple: make the image or interaction carry the message, not decorate the page.

Instead of asking, “What image should we add?” ask, “What concept do we need to convey?”

Strategy	How to use
Convey the message concept	Choose a visual that communicates the idea itself, not just the topic.
Use analogies	Use a comparison that helps learners understand the point faster.
Make images work harder	Select or design visuals that carry part of the explanation.
Create teaching interactions	Let learners click, sort, choose, compare, or notice the message.
Replace words	Remove text when the image or interaction can communicate the point.

A useful visual helps learners understand faster and can reduce the amount of text, audio, or explanation needed.

Visual Design Questions

Use these questions when a visual needs to do more teaching work.

- What does this problem look like in real life?
- What would help someone understand this faster?
- What analogy makes this concept easier to grasp?
- What could the learner click, sort, choose, compare, or notice?
- What can the visual communicate so the text does not have to?
- Could a diagram explain this better than a paragraph?
- Could a scenario image make the message feel more real?

Do not use the visual to decorate the page. Use it to clarify the message.

04. Cut the Copy

Training copy usually gets stronger when it gets shorter. The goal is not to remove meaning. The goal is to remove anything that makes the message harder to notice, understand, or remember.

Red pen challenge: Cut 20% of the words before you add anything new.



The test is not whether the learner could understand the message after rereading it.
The test is whether they understand the point quickly enough to remember it.

What to Cut

Look for words that slow the learner down or hide the point.

- Long openings before the point
- Repeated ideas
- Filler words
- Policy language that does not help the learner act
- Formal phrases learners would not use
- Abstract nouns
- Nice-to-know explanations
- Overexplaining before the point is clear
- Internal language that matters more to the organization than to the learner

A shorter message is not automatically better. It is better when it makes the important point easier to notice.

Use This Instead

Plain language makes the message easier to skim and remember.

Instead of	Try
It is important to ensure that...	Make sure...
Employees are required to...	You need to...
In the event that...	If...
Prior to beginning...	Before you start...
Utilize	Use
Demonstrate an understanding of...	Show you can...
It is critical to be aware of...	Watch for...
At this point in time	Now
In order to	To
Due to the fact that	Because

Copy-Cutting Example

Keep the meaning. Remove the drag.

Before

Employees should demonstrate empathy when interacting with customers who are frustrated or dissatisfied.

After

When a customer is frustrated, acknowledge them before you explain the process.



The revised version tells the learner what to do in the moment.

05. Show Why It Matters

Emotion in training does not mean drama. It means helping learners understand why the message matters.

A message lands better when learners can see what is at stake.

- What happens if it goes wrong
- What improves when it goes right
- Who is affected by the behaviour
- What risk becomes more real
- What gets easier, safer, faster, or better

The goal is not to just make the message more emotional. The goal is to make the relevance easier to see.

Emotional Relevance Angles

Choose an angle that fits the topic and the learner's work.

Learning goal	Useful emotional angle
Safety	Concern, responsibility, prevention
Customer service	Empathy, trust, respect
Sales	Confidence, relevance, urgency
Compliance	Accountability, consequence, judgment
Leadership	Trust, fairness, credibility
Change management	Clarity, control, confidence
Onboarding	Belonging, pride, direction
Coaching	Support, growth, confidence
Difficult conversations	Respect, courage, clarity
Process adoption	Ease, efficiency, reduced rework

Questions That Make the Message Matter

Use these questions when the content is accurate but flat.

- Who is affected if the learner gets this wrong?
- What does the learner gain by doing this well?
- What risk becomes more real when the message is ignored?
- What would make this feel less like content and more like a workplace moment?
- What do you want learners to feel: confidence, concern, empathy, pride, urgency, accountability, or relief?
- What would a respected manager say to make this feel relevant?
- What would the learner recognize from their actual workday?

This section uses questions, not AI prompts. AI prompts appear only in section 8.

Relevance Example

A meaningful message shows the consequence or benefit without becoming dramatic.

Flat

Complete all required documentation accurately.

More meaningful

Accurate safety steps protects the next person's life during their shift.



The revised version gives the learner a reason to care.

06. Use Humour Carefully

Humour can make a message more memorable, but only when it supports the learning point.

If people remember the joke but forget the message, the humour failed.

Humour Decision Guide

Use humour only when it supports the message and fits the risk level of the topic.

Humour may work if	Avoid humour if
• The topic is not too sensitive • The humour is about the learning point • The learner is laughing with the situation, not at a person • The message would still be clear without the joke • The humour helps people see the problem in a new way	• The topic involves trauma, harassment, discrimination, safety incidents, job loss, or serious consequences • The humour makes a person or group the punchline • The joke requires too much explanation • The humour competes with the point • The tone could reduce trust in the message

The best humour helps learners recognize a problem, mistake, or choice in a new way. It does not compete with the point.

Humour Example

Do not use humour for decoration. Use it to clarify the learning point.

Weak use of humour

Adding a funny stock photo that has nothing to do with the learning point.

Stronger use of humour

Exaggerating a common mistake in a way that helps learners recognize and avoid it.



The humour works only if it makes the concept easier to remember.

07. Move From Message to Practice

A sticky message helps learners remember what matters. Practice helps them use it when the moment is messy, emotional, or hard to predict.

A clear slide, job aid, or course opening can help learners understand the right behaviour. Conversation skills, judgment, and confidence often need a chance to apply the message before the real moment.

- Handling objections
- Coaching a team member
- Responding to a frustrated customer
- Asking better discovery questions
- Giving feedback
- Navigating resistance
- Applying a policy in a conversation

When the skill depends on what the learner says next, practice can make the message usable.

When Practice Is the Better Follow-Up

Some learning messages are not meant to stay as a slide. They need to become a decision, a response, or a conversation.

If the learner needs to...	Consider...
Choose words in a difficult moment	A scenario
Respond to resistance	A realistic conversation with feedback
Build confidence before real stakes	Repeated practice attempts
Apply judgment, not just recall	Branching decisions or role-play practice
Improve a conversation skill	A practice experience with clear criteria

08. AI Prompts for Improving Training Messages

Use AI to apply the same sticky message techniques from this guide: make the message more visual, cut the copy, show why it matters, or test whether humour would help.



Audience

Learner role, experience level, and work environment



Workplace moment

When they need to use this message on the job



Behaviour

What learners need to do differently



Current issue

Too long, abstract, formal, boring, generic, or not visual enough



Constraints

Legal wording, compliance accuracy, brand tone, screen size, required terms, accessibility

Before asking AI to revise content, give it the context it needs to apply the technique well. Then ask for a clearer, shorter, more visual, or more useful version of the message.

AI Prompt 1: Find the Core Message

Use when the content is too long, too detailed, or SME-heavy.

Copy-and-paste prompt

Act as a senior learning designer and marketing copywriter. Help me identify the one message learners most need to remember.

Audience: [Describe the learner role, experience level, and work context]

Workplace moment: [Describe when this matters on the job]

Behaviour needed: [Describe what learners need to do differently]

Current content: [Paste content]

Constraints: [List anything that must stay accurate, compliant, or aligned to brand/tone]

Please provide:

1. The core message in one clear sentence
2. The behaviour the message is trying to drive
3. What information is need-to-know versus nice-to-know
4. A learner-facing version of the message
5. A short version suitable for a slide title or eLearning screen
6. A warning if any important meaning may be lost by simplifying it

Use plain language. Do not add hype. Do not make the message sound like marketing copy.

AI Prompt 2: Make a Training Message More Visual

Use when the message is abstract or the visual is just decoration.

Copy-and-paste prompt

Act as a learning designer with strong visual communication skills. Help me turn this training message into something learners can picture quickly.

Audience: [Describe audience]

Learning message: [Paste message]

Workplace moment: [Describe where this shows up in real work]

What the learner needs to do: [Describe behaviour]

Current visual, if any: [Describe the current image, diagram, slide, or screen]

Constraints: [Describe format, brand, accessibility, tone, or content limits]

Please suggest:

1. What idea the visual needs to communicate
2. Three visual concepts that could show the point
3. One analogy that could make the message easier to understand
4. One simple diagram or interaction idea
5. What text could be removed if the visual does more work
6. Any visual ideas to avoid because they may be too generic, insensitive, or distracting

Keep the ideas realistic for workplace training.

AI Prompt 3: Cut the Copy Without Losing Meaning

Use when the content is too wordy, formal, or hard to skim.

Copy-and-paste prompt

Act as a senior learning designer and plain-language editor. Edit this training copy so it is easier to skim, understand, and remember.

Audience: [Describe audience]

Purpose of the message: [Describe what the learner needs to understand or do]

Current copy: [Paste copy]

Words or phrases that must stay: [List required terms, legal wording, product names, or policy terms]

Tone: [Describe desired tone, such as professional, direct, supportive, compliance-appropriate]

Please provide:

1. A version that is 20% shorter
2. A version that is 40% shorter
3. A version suitable for a slide or eLearning screen
4. A version suitable for a job aid
5. A list of the words or phrases you removed and why
6. Any risks created by shortening the message

Use plain language. Keep the meaning accurate. Do not make the tone overly casual.

AI Prompt 4: Make the Learner Care

Use when the message is technically correct but flat.

Copy-and-paste prompt

Act as a learning strategist. Help me make this training message feel more relevant without making it dramatic or manipulative.

Audience: [Describe audience]

Topic: [Insert topic]

Current message: [Paste message]

Workplace moment: [Describe when this matters]

Desired behaviour: [Describe what learners need to do]

What learners likely care about: [Examples: saving time, avoiding rework, helping clients, reducing risk, feeling confident, protecting relationships, doing the job well]

Constraints: [List tone, compliance, brand, or sensitivity concerns]

Please provide:

1. The most relevant reason this message matters to the learner
2. The consequence of ignoring it
3. The person or group affected by the behaviour
4. Three possible emotional angles, such as confidence, empathy, accountability, urgency, pride, or concern
5. A revised message using the strongest emotional angle
6. A version that is professional and not overly dramatic

Avoid guilt-based language. Keep the message respectful and workplace appropriate.

AI Prompt 5: Improve a Course Opening

Use when the course starts with objectives, definitions, or corporate framing.

Copy-and-paste prompt

Act as a senior learning designer and facilitator. Rewrite this course opening so learners quickly understand why the topic matters and what they will gain.

Audience: [Describe audience]

Course topic: [Insert topic]

Current opening: [Paste opening]

Workplace problem this course addresses: [Describe the real problem]

What learners will be able to do: [Describe practical outcome]

Tone: [Describe tone]

Constraints: [Time, slide format, required language, legal or brand requirements]

Please provide:

1. A stronger opening paragraph
2. A version that starts with a workplace moment
3. A version that starts with a consequence or risk
4. A version that starts with a learner benefit
5. A short version for a slide
6. A note on which version is strongest and why

Do not start with "In today's workplace." Avoid generic statements about change, importance, or excellence.

AI Prompt 6: Turn Content Into a Scenario or Interaction

Use when the training is too passive.

Copy-and-paste prompt

Act as a scenario-based learning designer. Help me turn this training message into a simple learner interaction.

Audience: [Describe audience]

Learning message: [Paste message]

Workplace situation: [Describe when this happens]

Decision or behaviour learners need to practise: [Describe action]

Common mistake learners make: [Describe mistake]

Constraints: [Format, time, technology, tone, accessibility, compliance]

Please provide:

1. A realistic scenario setup
2. A decision point for the learner
3. Three answer options or possible actions
4. Feedback for each option
5. The key takeaway after the interaction
6. A simpler version if this needs to fit on one eLearning screen

Make the scenario realistic. Avoid obvious wrong answers.

AI Prompt 7: Check Whether Humour Would Help

Use only when humour is being considered.

Copy-and-paste prompt

Act as a learning designer reviewing whether humour is appropriate for a workplace training message.

Audience: [Describe audience]

Topic: [Insert topic]

Message: [Paste message]

Workplace context: [Describe where this appears]

Sensitivity concerns: [List any risks related to safety, discrimination, harassment, mental health, job loss, customer harm, compliance, or culture]

Please assess:

1. Whether humour would help or distract
2. Whether the topic is too sensitive for humour
3. What kind of humour, if any, could support the learning point
4. What humour to avoid
5. One example only if humour is appropriate
6. A non-humour alternative that would still make the message memorable

The humour must reinforce the learning point. Do not make any person or group the punchline.

AI Prompt 8: Review the Final Message

Use after the message has been revised.

Copy-and-paste prompt

Act as a senior learning designer and editor. Review this revised training message and tell me whether it is clear, memorable, and useful for learners.

Audience: [Describe audience]

Workplace moment: [Describe when they need this]

Revised message: [Paste message]

Visual or interaction idea: [Describe visual or interaction, if any]

Constraints: [List any required wording, brand, compliance, or tone requirements]

Please assess:

1. Can the learner understand the main point in 5 seconds?
2. Is the message concise enough?
3. Is it written in plain language?
4. Is the visual or interaction doing useful teaching work?
5. Does the learner have a reason to care?
6. What would you improve?
7. Provide a stronger final version if needed

Be direct. Do not praise the message unless it is actually strong.

09. Fast Fixes for Common Problems

Use these quick fixes when a message is close, but not strong enough yet.

Problem	Fast fix
The slide has too much text	Turn the title into the main message, then cut body copy by 20%.
The message feels abstract	Add a workplace moment or consequence.
The visual is decorative	Replace it with a diagram, comparison, scenario image, or decision point.
The copy sounds formal	Rewrite it the way a respected manager would say it.
The course intro feels flat	Start with the problem the learner recognizes.
The content is too technical	Lead with the decision or action, then explain the detail.
The job aid is ignored	Make the first line action-oriented.
The scenario feels fake	Add a realistic objection, mistake, pressure, or trade-off.
The learner may not care	Show what gets easier, safer, faster, or better when they apply it.
The message is accurate but forgettable	Add a visual, consequence, or workplace moment.

Sticky Message Cheat Sheet

Before you publish, ask these questions.

- What is the one message learners need to remember?
- Can they understand it in 5 seconds?
- Can I show the point instead of explaining it?
- Can I cut 20% of the words?
- Why would the learner care?
- Does any humour reinforce the learning point?
- What would make this feel like a real workplace moment?
- Is the message easy to act on?

Sticky learning is not about adding more content. It is about making the right message easier to notice, understand, remember, and use.