

Ros Atkins

McKinsey's 2024
Annual Book Recommendations

THE ART OF EXPLANATION

How to Communicate with
Clarity and Confidence



"PRECISION, DEFTNESS AND A CALMING EXPERTISE"
-TIMES

These **InsightBites** were produced by: *InsightBites.io* Number of Text Pages: 12



13 min read



6 key insights

Contents

INTRO.....	3
Bite 1: Ten Key Attributes of a Successful Explanation ...	4
Bite 2: Know Your Audience	6
Bite 3: The 7-step Framework.....	8
Bite 4: Prepare for Dynamic Explanations	10
Bite 5: High-Impact Phrases Are Valuable	12
Bite 6: You Need To Tell Stories.....	14

INTRO

The Art of Explanation by Ros Atkins is an insightful guide on the science and craft of clear communication. Atkins, a BBC seasoned journalist and presenter, delves into the vital role of effective explanation in our everyday lives, from professional presentations to casual conversations. He breaks down the art of making complex ideas accessible, providing a structured approach to crafting explanations that resonate, engage, and leave a lasting impact on the audience.

Atkins emphasizes the importance of understanding your audience, organizing information strategically, and using storytelling and high-impact phrases to deliver clear, memorable messages. He explores how explanations are not simply about transferring knowledge but about building connections and helping others make sense of information in a way that feels intuitive and engaging. Throughout the book, he offers practical frameworks, such as the seven-step explanation process, which guides readers in developing their skills in both formal and spontaneous communication settings.

With examples from his career at the BBC and insights from real-world communication challenges, *The Art of Explanation* equips readers with tools to become better communicators, helping them break down barriers to understanding and enhance their ability to explain anything—from the everyday to the extraordinary. This summary distills Atkins' core principles, offering readers a roadmap to mastering the art of clear, concise, and impactful communication.

We strongly encourage you to buy the full-length book.

This Book Belongs to the List:

McKinsey's 2024 annual book recommendations

Find full-length book on: [Adlibris](#)

Bite 1: Ten Key Attributes of a Successful Explanation

Ros Atkins emphasizes that a successful explanation hinges on **ten key attributes**, each aimed at making communication clear and impactful. Atkins identifies these attributes as *simplicity, essential detail, complexity, efficiency, precision, context, lack of distractions, engagement, usefulness, and clarity of purpose*. These elements serve as a foundational framework for any form of explanation, whether it's a short conversation, an email, or a formal presentation.

At the core of Atkins' approach is simplicity. He argues that explanations should minimize unnecessary complexity, as overloading information creates obstacles to understanding. Simplicity, in this context, is about choosing short words and concise sentences, allowing the core message to come through without confusion. This principle is illustrated in a real-world example from his journalism career, where avoiding unnecessary detail and jargon helped him communicate complex news stories in a way that was accessible to diverse audiences. Atkins describes how even something as mundane as including a non-essential fact, such as the name of a minor official in a news story, can dilute the clarity of the message and distract the audience from what truly matters.

Another key attribute is engagement, which Atkins links to capturing and maintaining the audience's attention. He emphasizes that a good explanation should be interactive and engaging, whether through storytelling, high-impact phrases, or focusing on what the audience genuinely cares about. Engagement is crucial in keeping the listener invested in the explanation. Atkins gives examples from his own experiences as a BBC journalist, where engaging storytelling was key to explaining complex events like the European debt crisis. By making the story relatable and focusing on its impact, he was able to hold the audience's attention and convey essential details effectively.

Clarity of purpose is the guiding principle for the entire explanation process. Atkins emphasizes that, before crafting any explanation, one should ask: "What am I trying to explain?" This question ensures that the communication is focused and that every piece of information directly supports the overall goal. For example, when preparing a news report or email, Atkins suggests evaluating each sentence or detail against the core purpose. If any element does not contribute to the clarity of that purpose, it should be removed. This sharp focus helps in eliminating distractions and maintaining precision throughout the explanation.

Context is also critical, as it allows the audience to understand why the information matters to them. Atkins stresses that placing the explanation in a relevant context enhances its usefulness. Without context, even the most precise and simple explanations may fail to resonate with the audience. For instance, in explaining a new policy at work, it's important not just to relay the policy but also to clarify how it will affect the team and their workflow, which gives the explanation immediate relevance.

Atkins provides practical steps for ensuring that these ten attributes work together harmoniously. He explains how stripping away non-essential details, focusing on the main point, and choosing the right language can make explanations not only clearer but also more persuasive and memorable. The combination of these elements allows anyone to craft explanations that are easy to understand, efficient, and engaging.

In conclusion, The Art of Explanation presents these ten attributes as a practical guide for creating high-quality explanations. Whether you're preparing a formal presentation or writing a quick email, the anatomy of a good explanation—rooted in simplicity, engagement, and clarity of purpose—removes barriers to understanding and enhances communication.



Bite 2: Know Your Audience

Atkins says that knowing your audience is fundamental to delivering an effective explanation. Understanding who you are speaking to, what they know, and how they prefer to receive information significantly shapes the explanation process. Atkins argues that no explanation exists in isolation; it must be tailored to the audience's level of knowledge, interests, and expectations. Whether you're explaining a complex idea in a meeting, writing an email to colleagues, or presenting to a large audience, knowing the audience enables you to choose the right language, examples, and level of detail to make the message resonate.

Atkins introduces five essential questions to ask before any explanation: Who is your target audience? What is their prior knowledge? What do they want to know? How do they like to receive information? What specific questions will your explanation need to answer? These questions provide a roadmap for assessing the audience's needs and adjusting your explanation accordingly. For instance, if you're speaking to a group of industry experts, you can skip basic information and dive straight into the complexities of the subject. Conversely, if the audience is less familiar with the topic, starting with foundational concepts ensures that everyone is on the same page.

A personal example Atkins shares is from his time as a contributor to British Airways' inflight radio. Tasked with describing cultural events happening around the world, he initially filled his segments with every possible detail. But upon reflection, he realized that his audience—people on a plane, most of whom wouldn't be attending the events—didn't need exhaustive information. What they valued more was an enjoyable, easy-to-follow description that gave them a sense of the event's atmosphere. This experience taught him that knowing what the audience wants—and doesn't want—makes a significant difference in crafting an explanation that lands effectively.

Atkins also highlights the importance of tailoring the method of communication to audience preferences. For example, in a high-stakes meeting with a busy executive, delivering a brief, focused explanation that gets to the point quickly is often more effective than a lengthy, detailed presentation. He recounts an experience meeting with James Harding, then Director of BBC News, where he condensed his pitch into short, sharp presentations, knowing that Harding preferred quick, to-the-point discussions. By understanding Harding's style, Atkins was able to communicate his message efficiently, leading to a productive outcome.

In situations where the audience's preferences are unclear, Atkins advises gathering as much information as possible through research or direct questioning. Even asking simple questions during a conversation or meeting can help clarify the audience's expectations and knowledge level. This active engagement not only ensures that your explanation is relevant but also shows the audience that you're invested in meeting their needs.

Also, it is worth noting that no magic tricks are needed. As well-known keynote speaker Mike Hourigan says¹:

‘Know your audience.

Audiences are interested in your credibility. It does not matter if it is a sales presentation or a speech to a Rotary club. People want to know what gives you the right to speak to their group. The good news is, unless you are a professional speaker, you are not expected to make the audience cry, laugh, or give you a standing ovation. What you are expected to do is present information in a relevant fashion for their group.’

In summary, Atkins’ guidance on knowing your audience revolves around one core principle: the more you understand your audience, the more effectively you can communicate with them. Tailoring explanations to fit the audience’s knowledge, preferences, and expectations increases the likelihood that the message will be understood, remembered, and appreciated. By focusing on the needs of those you’re communicating with, you can transform a good explanation into a great one.



¹ <https://www.gitomer.com/presentation-skills-understanding-the-three-knows-of-presenting-to-any-audience/>

Bite 3: The 7-step Framework

The book introduces a **seven-step framework** designed to simplify and improve how we deliver complex information. This method offers a structured approach to crafting clear and impactful explanations, making it particularly useful for presentations, interviews, reports, or any scenario requiring a coherent communication of intricate ideas. Atkins' seven steps—*Set-up, Find the Information, Distil the Information, Organise the Information, Link the Information, Tighten, and Delivery*—serve as building blocks for effective explanations, ensuring each step progressively refines the content while keeping it focused and accessible.

The first step, **Set-up**, revolves around clarifying what exactly you want to explain and understanding your purpose. Atkins suggests beginning by defining the scope of your explanation: Who is it for? What are you trying to convey? How much time or space do you have? By answering these simple but vital questions, you build a foundation for the explanation. This stage is about creating a clear roadmap so that your message remains focused on its goal and relevant to the audience's needs.

Next comes **Find the Information**. Whether you're familiar with the subject or not, gathering the right information is essential to forming a robust explanation. Atkins likens this process to collecting raw materials before construction begins. At this stage, you are not yet concerned with organizing or refining the data but simply compiling everything relevant, allowing you to later sift through it for the most valuable insights.

Once the information is gathered, the next step is to **Distil** it. This is where the initial flood of information is broken down into its most essential parts. Atkins offers a vivid analogy for this phase, comparing it to the work of miners who refine raw ore into usable materials. During distillation, you strip away unnecessary details, focusing only on what directly contributes to the core message. The goal is to reduce the content to the simplest, clearest, and most impactful elements.

The fourth step, **Organise the Information**, involves structuring the distilled content into a logical flow. Atkins emphasizes that even the best information needs to be presented in a way that makes sense to the audience. Grouping related concepts, building a narrative, or using a step-by-step approach can make complex information more digestible. For example, in a presentation about a new product, you might organize your information by outlining the problem it solves, how it works, and its benefits in sequential order.

Linking the Information is about creating smooth transitions and connections between the points in your explanation. Atkins highlights that each idea should flow naturally into the next, guiding the audience through the narrative. Just as links in a chain hold the structure together, effective transitions prevent your explanation from feeling disjointed, helping the listener follow along without confusion.

In the **Tighten** stage, Atkins advises cutting out any unnecessary repetition or redundant information. This step is about fine-tuning the explanation, ensuring it remains concise and to the point. Revisiting the content allows you to refine language and make sure that every element serves a clear purpose. For instance, in a speech, overly complex sentences or irrelevant details can be distracting; tightening the material ensures your message is sharp and impactful.

Finally, the **Delivery** step focuses on the presentation of the explanation. Whether written or spoken, the delivery should match the needs of the audience and the context of the explanation. Atkins emphasizes rehearsing presentations, refining email structures for clarity, or even practicing verbal explanations for spontaneous conversations. Effective delivery is the culmination of the earlier steps and ensures that the message not only reaches the audience but resonates with them.

In conclusion, Atkins' seven-step process provides a comprehensive method for crafting explanations that are both detailed and easy to follow. By focusing on each stage—from preparation to delivery—you can ensure that your explanations are coherent, engaging, and well-received by your audience



Bite 4: Prepare for Dynamic Explanations

Atkins talks about the concept of **dynamic explanations** to address situations where real-time, impromptu communication is essential. Dynamic explanations come into play during meetings, interviews, or unexpected conversations where there is little to no time for preparation. Atkins builds on the principles of his seven-step framework but adapts them for fluid, unpredictable environments. The key is maintaining clarity and coherence while quickly organizing your thoughts and responding on the spot.

One of the first principles of dynamic explanation is to stay flexible yet structured. Atkins emphasizes that, even in spontaneous situations, it's crucial to have a mental map of the core points you need to convey. This allows you to steer the conversation without losing focus, ensuring the explanation remains clear and relevant. To achieve this, Atkins advises that communicators be familiar with the core content they might need in various contexts, such as a job interview, a project meeting, or a client call. By rehearsing and internalizing key information, you're better equipped to adapt your message in real-time.

Atkins also highlights the importance of anticipating questions. When entering a meeting or conversation, think about the kinds of questions that might come up. This prepares you to respond confidently and avoid being caught off guard. For example, during interviews or Q&A sessions, practicing how to link key concepts together smoothly and anticipating potential areas of interest or confusion can make a huge difference in delivering a well-organized, thoughtful answer. This approach allows you to guide the conversation while giving the appearance of calm control.

A significant aspect of dynamic explanations is verbal fluency. Atkins stresses the importance of rehearsing how to verbally link ideas on the fly. In these situations, bridging phrases—like “That’s one perspective, but another key point is...” or “This connects directly to...”—help in transitioning between ideas seamlessly. Such verbal tools not only improve fluency but also enhance the flow of conversation, making the explanation more natural and persuasive. Atkins suggests practicing with bridging phrases so they become second nature when you need to shift between different pieces of information.

For quick communication, brevity is key. Atkins illustrates this with examples of concise emails and brief conversations. Just as in longer explanations, clarity and purpose must be maintained, but here they are distilled down to the essential points. He advises structuring short explanations by front-loading important information, similar to a headline, to capture attention right away. Whether it's a quick meeting or an email, the goal is to avoid unnecessary details and focus on the crux of the message to ensure the audience receives and understands the core point.

In conclusion, The Art of Explanation teaches that dynamic explanations require agility, clarity, and the ability to think on your feet. By preparing in advance, practicing how to connect ideas, and staying focused on the essentials, communicators can navigate fluid situations confidently and deliver explanations that resonate in any scenario.

Before we move on the next key idea, here is an additional tip in the words of John Baldoni for Inc. Magazine in May, 2012²:

'Simple, direct, and memorable, the Aristotelian triptych is a handy method to employ whenever you need to make a presentation, long or short, that you want people to remember.

1. Tell them what you will tell them. This is your opener, in which you lay out why you are speaking to the audience. Your message should be predicated on two things: what you want to say and what the audience needs to hear.

2. Tell them. This section is open-ended. It is the time when you pour out all your content and explain the details. As a leader, it is the best time for you to build your business case.

3. Tell them what you just told them. Reiterate your salient points. For leaders, this is the opportunity to give people a reason to believe in your idea and in you. And then demonstrate how you and your team are the ones to deliver on the message. That is, if you are a salesperson, how you will back up the product. Or if you are a CEO, how you will guide the company through troubled waters.'



² <https://www.inc.com/john-baldoni/deliver-a-great-speech-aristotle-three-tips.html>

Bite 5: High-Impact Phrases Are Valuable

Atkins presents the idea of **high-impact phrases** as powerful tools that can make explanations more memorable and effective. High-impact phrases are concise, well-crafted statements designed to encapsulate core ideas, making them stick in the minds of the audience. These phrases serve as anchors, helping listeners or readers grasp and remember key points in an explanation, especially when communicating complex or dense information. Atkins emphasizes that such phrases should be clear, impactful, and intentionally crafted, often developed through practice and refinement.

Atkins shares how he initially used longer, more detailed descriptions when pitching ideas at the BBC, such as his idea for the Outside Source program. While these descriptions were accurate, they failed to capture attention quickly. Over time, he learned to distill his message into shorter, more potent phrases like “A TV news bulletin for a digital world” and “Real-time collation.” These high-impact phrases allowed him to quickly convey the essence of his idea without overwhelming the listener with details. Such phrases can break through the noise of everyday communication, ensuring the main point of the explanation is understood, remembered, and discussed further.

Atkins highlights that high-impact phrases can also emerge from interactions. When working on the 50:50 Project, which aimed to improve gender balance in BBC reporting, he noticed certain phrases that resonated with colleagues and effectively communicated the project’s goals. By noting the phrases that worked best and reusing them, he was able to solidify the project’s message. This process of discovery, whether through intentional crafting or by observing what resonates in conversations, is critical to finding phrases that truly engage.

At times, borrowing or learning from others’ phrases can be just as effective. Atkins recalls adopting the phrase “**assertive impartiality**” from a BBC executive, which succinctly summarized the approach of his explainer videos. Though it wasn’t a phrase he originally coined, he recognized its power and started using it to describe his work. Atkins emphasizes that adopting strong phrases from others is a valuable strategy, as they may express an idea in a more impactful way than you originally could.

To create these high-impact phrases, Atkins advises trial and error. Start with a longer description of the concept you want to explain, then continually refine it until you have a phrase that captures its essence in just a few words. The process may require several iterations, but the result is a powerful communication tool that can cut through even the most complex topics. He also suggests paying attention to feedback—phrases that don’t work can be discarded, while those that catch on should be kept and reused. The goal is to develop a set of phrases that are ready to be deployed when explaining an idea to different audiences, ensuring the message is clear, concise, and memorable.

In conclusion, the book views high-impact phrases as critical elements in making explanations resonate. These phrases help distill complex ideas into simple, memorable statements that are easy for audiences to understand and retain. By consciously working to develop and refine these phrases, communicators can significantly enhance their ability to explain ideas effectively, leaving a lasting impression on their audience.



Bite 6: You Need To Tell Stories

Ros Atkins highlights **the power of storytelling** as a central tool for making explanations not only engaging but also easier to comprehend. According to Atkins, narrative structures have an almost instinctive appeal to human cognition, helping us process and retain complex information by giving it context and meaning. Whether you're explaining a business concept, teaching a class, or simply having a conversation, framing information within a story can guide your audience through the explanation in a way that facts alone often cannot.

At the heart of Atkins' approach is the idea that stories add coherence and emotion to an explanation. By turning abstract facts into a narrative, the explainer can make even intricate topics relatable. Atkins encourages experimenting with various storytelling techniques to suit the situation. For instance, starting with the conclusion and working backward is effective when you need to clarify how a result came about. Alternatively, solving a problem step by step creates a logical flow that helps the audience follow the progression of events or ideas.

Atkins shares examples from his own work in journalism to show how stories can transform an explanation. In his early explainer videos for the BBC, Atkins and his team initially tried a segmented approach, with different sections labeled on screen to guide the audience through topics like Brexit or complex trade agreements. However, feedback revealed that these rigid "slates" disrupted the storytelling flow. Atkins realized that removing these visual cues and letting the narrative itself guide viewers improved engagement. A friend later remarked that his seven-minute explainer video felt like it was much shorter—testament to the power of narrative in maintaining the audience's interest.

In practical terms, Atkins suggests thinking about how you would explain the concept to a friend or family member in an informal setting. Humans are naturally inclined to tell stories, so tapping into this instinct can make explanations feel more fluent and natural. When stuck, he advises trying different starting points or story structures. For example, a chronological approach—where events unfold in time order—can be useful for topics that evolve over time. Alternatively, a "zoom-out" method gradually broadens the context around the explanation, helping the audience see how individual facts relate to a larger picture.

Storytelling not only engages the audience but also helps with memory retention. By linking new information to familiar structures, the audience is more likely to understand and remember key points. For example, an explanation of a complex economic concept might begin with a story about a relatable real-life situation, such as a family budgeting challenge, before transitioning to the broader economic principles. This method provides both clarity and relatability, making the explanation more memorable.

In conclusion, Atkins points out that narrative is not just an optional extra in explanations—it is a crucial tool that helps bring clarity, coherence, and emotional resonance to the message. By framing explanations as stories, communicators can make even the most complex topics accessible and engaging to their audience, ensuring that the message is not only understood but remembered.

To end this summary – here is a rhyme for you, dear reader:

The Power of a Story

**A story told with heart and grace,
Can take you to another place.
With words as wings, it sets you free,
To sail through time and history.**

**It paints a world both far and near,
Where dreams and truths become so clear.
Through every tale, the soul will learn,
And with each page, the spirit yearns.**

**So tell your stories, bold and bright,
Let them shine through darkest night.
For in a tale, there lies the key,
To shape the world, for you and me.**



LEGAL NOTICE:

*Legal Notice on Content Summarization for Commercial Use By **InsightBites.io**:*

Our **InsightBites** distill the main ideas and most important concepts from non-fiction books, but they are new, original works of their own, written in our Insight Bites style, and format. We work with publishing partners to select the most compelling ideas to **bite**, introducing customers to new books and authors they might otherwise miss.

Our commitment goes beyond offering quick summaries; we strive to respect the intellectual endeavors of all authors and publishers whose works we engage with. This legal notice serves to clarify our stance on copyright, the originality of our content, and our dedication to upholding the highest ethical and legal standards in our service. We urge all users, contributors, and interested parties to carefully read through this notice to understand our operational framework and values:

1. Original Content: All content under the "InsightBites" brand, including but not limited to summaries, interpretations, and analyses, is the original work of the InsightBites team. Our team undertakes extensive efforts to ensure that our materials are created from a fresh perspective, using original phrasing, structure, and presentation.

2. Transformative Nature: Insight Bites Content is not a mere reproduction of the source materials. Instead, it's a transformative work that provides a distinct and unique experience to our users, different from consuming the original content. Our purpose is to offer concise insights, breakdowns, and overviews, which are crafted independently, ensuring that they **don't replace** the original work **but rather complement** it or inspire further exploration.

3. No Infringement Intended: Insight Bites respects the intellectual property rights of authors, publishers, and all third parties. Our service operates within the parameters of both EU and US copyright laws, emphasizing the creation of original, derivative works rather than reproducing copyrighted materials. Our goal is to promote books and provide a new avenue for readers to engage with content, not to detract from the original works.

4. Feedback & Concerns: If you have concerns about any content on Insight Bites, please reach out to us immediately at sales@insightbites.com. We're committed to addressing all concerns promptly and ensuring that our platform remains compliant with all relevant copyright laws.

THE END

B