

## Paved with good intentions: Words of advice for the rocky road of bureaucratic language

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Those who have lived inside the comfortable confines of the Washington, D.C. beltway often find it difficult to appreciate the degree of disdain with which bureaucracies are held by the rest of the country. When one has not had bureaucrats as neighbors, associates, and friends, it may be easy to think of them as purveyors of the sump hole into which unjust taxes are funneled. It may not be difficult to believe that their main purpose in life is to see to it that communications from the government are deliberately unclear, that their tasks are to withhold information from the public, or that they really want to prevent constituents from receiving what is due them. Perhaps because I recently moved two thousand miles from D.C., I have begun to realize the utter contempt that distant, unsympathetic, frustrated outsiders to Washington can have of the bureaucracies of the federal government.

Most businesses use printed language to convince consumers to buy their products, to instruct them about how to use these products, and, when mandated, to warn them about the potential dangers when the products are used. In contrast, much of a government's use of language has a more limited range, primarily to advise people about their rights and what to do about them. Unfortunately, this attempt to be advisory is frequently unclear, and it sometimes even appears to be unnecessarily negative, even threatening. Even worse, the effort can be interpreted as an attempt to disguise constituents' rights or to withhold information rather than to provide it.

This paper, based on research on legal disputes between various federal bureaucracies and constituents, points out some of the difficulties government employees have in communicating with recipients of their services. But it also tries to get beneath these assumptions of ill will and to identify the real points of difficulty in past misunderstandings about the actual intentions of federal bureaucracies. It is my belief that the intentions of most bureaucrats are honorable and that their problems in delivering messages to the public are the result of other factors, many of which can be resolved with the help of linguistic knowledge. Although this paper is addressed to the problems of federal bureaucrats, it also has salience for others who try to communicate helpful written messages of advice in nonbureaucratic settings.























