CITY OF ARLINGTON WINS THE GFOA FISCAL FLUENCY CHALLENGE

What they did and how you can too

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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USE OF GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN THIS REPORT

Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, primarily ChatGPT4, were used to help develop the report. Primary uses of the AI tools include:

- Development of ideas for the outline of the report
- Generation of text for a few specific purposes. Text generated directly from generative AI is clearly labeled as such in the report where the contribution from AI is material. Examples of immaterial contributions would be suggestions from AI on wording choices, grammar, etc.
- Review of final report and to give suggestions to make language more accessible for the intended audience.

GFOA acknowledges the limitations of AI-generated information, including potential biases and other limitations of generative artificial intelligence. All data, ideas, etc. from ChatGPT4 that were used in the report were independently verified/validated by the author(s) and not taken at face value.

ABOUT GFOA

The Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) represents over 21,000 public finance officers throughout the United States and Canada. GFOA's mission is to advance excellence in government finance. GFOA views its role as a resource, educator, facilitator, and advocate for both its members and the governments they serve and provides best practice guidance, leadership, professional development, resources and tools, networking opportunities, award programs, and advisory services.

ABOUT THE RETHINKING BUDGETING PROJECT

Local governments have long relied on incremental, line item budgeting where last year's budget becomes next year's budget with changes around the margin. Though this form of budgeting has its advantages and can be useful under circumstances of stability, it also has important disadvantages. The primary disadvantage is that it causes local governments to be slow to adapt to changing conditions. The premise of the "Rethinking Budgeting" initiative is that the public finance profession has an opportunity to update local government budgeting practices to take advantage of new ways of thinking, new technologies, and to better meet the changing needs of communities. The Rethinking Budgeting initiative will raise new and interesting ideas like those featured in this paper and will produce guidance for state and local policy makers on how to local government budget systems can be adapted to today's needs. We hope the ideas presented in this paper will spur conversation about the possibilities for rethinking budgeting. The Rethinking Budgeting initiative is a collaborative effort between the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) and International City/County Management Association (ICMA).

To learn more, visit **gfoa.org/rethinking-budgeting**.

The People in Front of and Behind the Camera

A group of committed people have made Arlington's success possible. It is impossible to recognize them all here, but three who have led Arlington's efforts are:

- **Jay Warren**, Director of Communications and Legislative Affairs
- **Mike Secrest**, Digital Media Editor
- **Kristen Waggener**, Marketing Communication Manager

GFOA is pleased to announce that the City of Arlington, Texas, ("the City" or "Arlington") has won the GFOA "Fiscal Fluency Challenge" for their videos that explain the City's budget. The Fiscal Fluency Challenge was a contest that asked GFOA members to show how local governments could better communicate public finances. Arlington emerged as the winner from a crowded field of fierce competition.

In this article, we'll describe how Arlington develops their budget videos; but more importantly, we'll describe underlying principles that local governments can use to improve their budget communications. Arlington has received much positive feedback on its videos, including from civics educators, the public, staff, and elected officials. The City has experienced noticeably higher quality discussion and more insightful questions during public participation in budgeting hearings, on social media, and via phone and email. The same principles Arlington relies on can bring these benefits to other local governments.

Arlington's Creative Process

Over the past few years, Arlington has made videos to explain their budget through simple stories. Each video uses a different theme to make the budget easy to understand. **"Build, Unite, Create"** explained the budget like a Lego set. Another video used the **metaphor of a grocery list**. In this article, we'll focus mostly on Arlington's FY2024 video, **"Budget Bites,"** that used a cooking show format to show the budget as the process of baking a pie.

The three videos may seem incredibly diverse in their themes. Perhaps, then, it is a great challenge for Arlington to generate ideas for their videos each year? Fortunately, Arlington has several insights that make the task easier than it might seem.

First, recognize a stable, underlying **plot structure**. In general, most stories follow a few basic plots. The authors of the book *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* have proposed that there are as few as three basic plots.[1] For instance, one is the "challenge plot."[2] This is where the protagonist faces a difficult challenge

Watch the Videos

Budget Bites

Build, Unite, Create

Shopping List

Are You Up for the Next Challenge?

The sequel to the Fiscal Fluency Challenge is the **Mental Model Makeover Challenge**. Mental models are representations of how we think about complex problems. By upgrading the mental models that elected officials and the public have available to them they more easily navigate public finance decisions. Help us make these upgrades and one lucky winner will receive an all-expense paid trip to the 2025 GFOA conference in Washington, DC.

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and overcomes the odds. This type of plot is particularly popular in movies and television and includes underdog and rags-to-riches stories.

Movie and television producers rely on stable, underlying plots, but they vary the details of the story to produce fresh and novel content. Similarly, Arlington has a stable, underlying plot for its videos but wraps the underlying plot in a fresh video theme each year. Here are key elements of Arlington's underlying plot:

- The budget is built to be in alignment with council priorities.

- Arlington's share of the local taxpayer's tax bill is smaller than you might expect.

- Arlington is keeping taxes and fees stable.

- The story is focused on spending in high-profile areas, like police and fire, and quality-of-life issues that are highly visible to residents.

- The story highlights something of timely or topical interest that year. For instance, in 2024, there had been several high-profile cyberattacks against private and public organizations in the region, so the video highlighted the City's spending on cybersecurity.

When it comes to generating a fresh theme for the year, Arlington relies upon a few principles.

First, rather than a short, intensive creative process to generate ideas, **ideation is low intensity and prolonged over many months**. Participants are encouraged to let the question of "What theme to use?" percolate and to contribute ideas, as they come up, to a shared document and to play off the ideas of others. This relieves the pressure to produce an idea in a short time and provides space for unexpected inspiration and connections to be made, which are impossible to force into a short time window.

Second, **involve a wide circle of people**. Arlington has 10 or more people involved in contributing ideas. This includes not only budget staff but also outsiders. For example, the idea of the "Build, Unite, Create" Lego-themed video was suggested by one of the City's contractors.

Third, **use the "high-concept pitch."** This is a way to encapsulate a simple, core idea and is commonly used in movies and television.[3] Often (but not always), high-concept pitches use an old idea to explain the new idea.

Here are a few examples from some famous movies:

- ***Jaws:*** A horror movie...in the ocean.
- ***Alien:*** *Jaws*...in space.
- ***Speed***: *Die Hard*...on a bus.

Now consider Arlington's videos:

- **Budget Bites:** A cooking show...about budgeting.
- **Build, Unite, Create:** *The Lego Movie*...starring the City budget.
- **Grocery List:** Going shopping...for municipal services.

The great advantage of a high-concept pitch is that it conveys a lot in a small package. Even if you have not seen the City's videos, you can imagine what the look and feel may be based on the high-concept pitch. Another advantage is that there is a lot of information on the internet about how to produce content consistent with themes suggested by the high-concept pitch. For instance, Arlington was able to find advice online on how to reproduce the look and feel of a cooking show.

A "high-concept pitch" is a way to encapsulate a simple core idea and is commonly used in movies and television.

Arlington's Production Tips

Now let's explore the principles that Arlington uses to put together its content. Instead of focusing on the high production value of Arlington's videos, we'll focus on principles that are useful for budget communications across any medium.

First, Arlington **makes the script conversational**. This involves avoiding complicated government terms and acronyms that people might not understand. It also means using everyday, less formal language. Scripts, or other written content, can be put through algorithms that score readability. For instance, the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level test rates text on a U.S. school grade level. A score of 8.0, for example, means that an eighth grader can understand the document. Keeping the reading level between 8.0 and 10.0 is a good

This still shot from the City of Arlington's "Budget Bites" video shows the amount of ingredients in roughly proportional size to the amount spent on different City services.

goal to keep in mind.[4] This test, and others, are standard features in Microsoft Word, and there are many other ways to access these tests.

Next, ***be authentic***. This means keeping in line with the character of the community and the local government's larger communication strategy. Arlington is home to many corporate offices, so the City has favored a more "business-like" style. This can be engaging, as the videos show, but the videos stop short of what might be considered "whimsical" or "comedic." Other local governments have produced more playful styles of communication, which have worked well for those communities. So, budget communications can be playful...or maybe it is better to be more business-like: The style should fit the character of the community and the communication strategy of the local government, whatever that is.

Arlington's videos ***go easy on the numbers***. Most people find numbers hard to follow. So, Arlington's videos use few numbers, and when they do, they round them enthusiastically. This way, viewers don't get overwhelmed by too many details. A department budget is rounded to the nearest million dollars, for example. The GFOA report Fiscal Fluency Made Easy provides many strategies to make numbers easier to understand.

Finally, ***numbers are translated to the scale of everyday human experience***. In "Budget Bites":

- Spending on city services is proportionally scaled to the ingredients that go into making a pie. For example, police and fire are a majority of the

City's budget, so the amount of ingredients that signify "police" and "fire" in the video is larger, as we can see in the picture above.

- City services are likened to analogous ingredients in the pie. The crust is foundational for public safety services. The "sweet filling" is amenity services, like libraries and parks. Butter and water are utility services, like the City's "smooth roads" and "award-winning water."

- Coupons represent senior citizen exemptions on property taxes.

Conclusion

Arlington's budget videos are impressive, and their success is replicable by other local governments. The principles described in this video can recreate the benefits Arlington has in videos or any other medium. Arlington's staff points out that high-quality videos are within reach for most, if not all, local governments. The cost of equipment has become almost trivial, and the knowledge of how to shoot videos is becoming more widespread with the popularity of platforms like YouTube and TikTok. By embracing new technologies and media techniques, along with the timeless principles behind Arlington's success in the Fiscal Fluency Challenge, other local governments can take budget communications beyond a statutory duty and create an opportunity to foster trust and engagement with the communities they serve.

ENDNOTES

[1] Heath, C. & Heath, D. (2007). *Made to stick: Why some ideas survive and others die.* (1st Ed.). Random House. Other authors have proposed more than three, but the number is still finite. See, for example: Booker, C. (2004). The seven basic plots.

[2] Heath, C. & Heath, D. (2007). *Made to stick: Why some ideas survive and others die.* (1st Ed.). Random House.

[3] Heath, C. & Heath, D. (2007). *Made to stick: Why some ideas survive and others die.* (1st Ed.). Random House.

[4] Though there does not appear to be a widely accepted standard for the "right" grade level score to aim for, there does appear to be common belief among writing experts that around an 8th to 10th grade reading level will be best for reaching a general audience.

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