4

Questions to ask before you send

Take a policy brief, campaign draft or project update. Start with the question your draft needs most.

Illustrated translations start on page 7.



VERSION 2.6 / NOVEMBER 2026

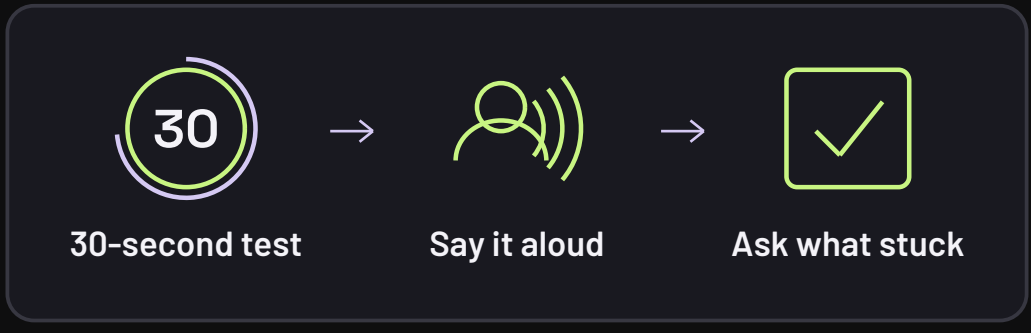
Space Communication Toolkit

The way we talk about a space mission affects how people understand it long before they see its results. It can influence what policymakers ask a project to demonstrate, what partners are willing to support and what the public expects a service to deliver. Those expectations can be hard to reset once a project is under way.

Framing begins with a choice about where to start. A satellite team might lead with what its instrument can measure. A city planner using those measurements might begin with a question about which streets to visit before deciding where to add shade. Both accounts can be accurate. Over time, choices like these build a wider narrative about what space is for and whose problems it can help solve.

I put this toolkit together for the practical side of strategic communication. The translation examples show how to make technical language easier to follow while keeping its meaning intact. The briefing exercises help you decide what to lead with, how far the evidence takes you and what to ask of your reader. The public participation exercise looks at what happens when people are invited to help shape a decision. Together, these tools help you refine a message so others can understand it and carry it further.

Could a neighbour understand why this matters in thirty seconds?



Say one technical sentence aloud. Ask a listener to explain it back to you. Revise any part they had to guess.

TECHNICAL LANGUAGE

Galileo's Return Link Service acknowledges receipt of the distress alert.

AT THE DINNER TABLE

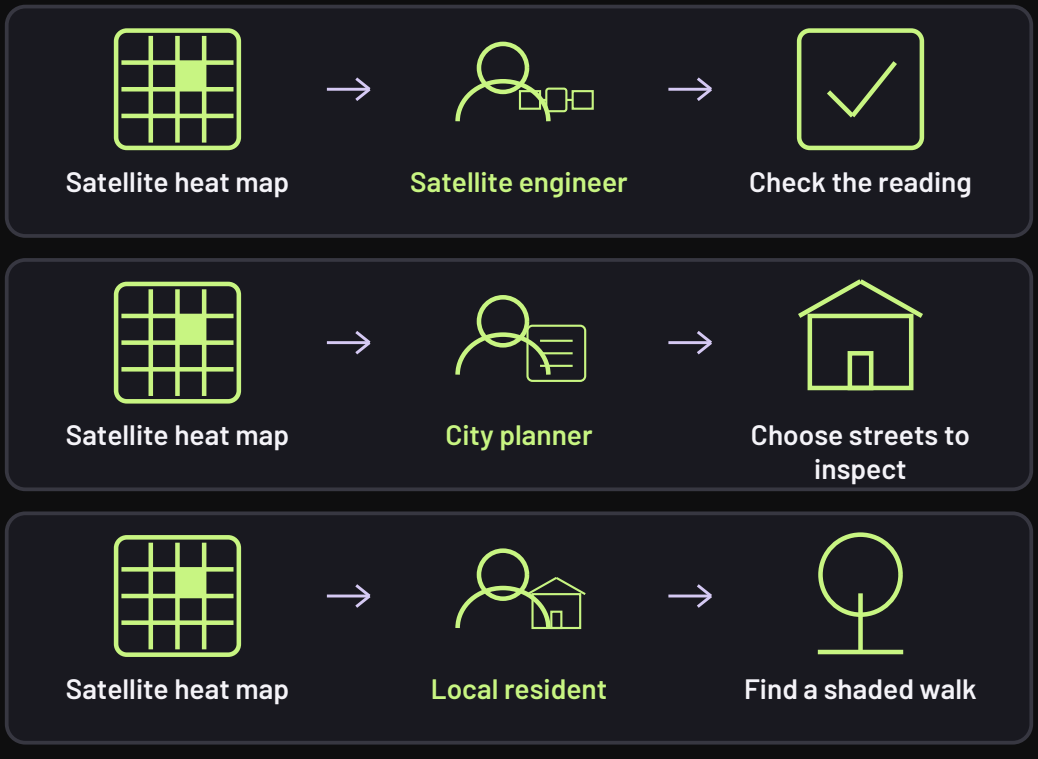
If a sailor sends a distress signal from a compatible emergency beacon, a confirmation appears on the device. It tells them the rescue system has received and located their signal.

Hodge · The dinner-party explanation

EU Agency for the Space Programme · Galileo Return Link Service (PDF)

Whose experience or decision does your story follow?

A satellite heat map shows how warm surfaces were when the satellite passed. Choose a person to see where you could start the story.



In your own draft, ask whose experience or decision you want the reader to understand.

Copernicus Land Monitoring Service · Land surface temperature

What does the evidence show, and what remains uncertain?

Name how a number was obtained and the date it refers to. ESA's 2025 report gives two different kinds of figures for Earth orbit.

TRACKED IN EARTH ORBIT

About 40,000

About 11,000 of these objects were active satellites.

MODELLED ESTIMATE

Over 1.2 million

Debris objects larger than 1 cm.

What did networks track?

About 40,000 objects, including about 11,000 active satellites.

How much debris did ESA estimate?

The model put debris larger than 1 cm at over 1.2 million pieces.

Can I subtract the figures?

The tracked total includes working satellites. You'd need debris counts for the same size range and date.

ESA Space Environment Report 2025
Fischhoff & Davis on scientific uncertainty
van der Bles et al. on uncertainty and trust

What can this reader decide or do next, and by when?

A project team needs recommendations by noon on Thursday. Number the actions in the order a reviewer would carry them out.

- [ ] Send a recommendation to the project team
- [ ] Read the one-page options brief
- [ ] Choose which option to recommend

WORKED REQUEST

Read the one-page options brief, choose the option you recommend and send your recommendation to the project team by noon on Thursday.

Use the same check on the last line of your own brief.

Active debris removal



Robotic capture → One target satellite → Remove from orbit

INSTEAD OF THIS

The mission will demonstrate robotic capture and deorbiting of a target spacecraft.

SAY THIS

The mission will test whether a robot can grab one satellite and take it out of orbit.

ESA · ClearSpace-1

TECHNICAL-TO-POLICY TRANSLATION

Making supplies on the Moon



INSTEAD OF THIS

The prototype extracts oxygen from simulated lunar regolith.

SAY THIS

In a test on Earth, the prototype extracted oxygen from material that imitates lunar soil. The next question is how much it could produce on the Moon and what equipment a mission would need.

ESA · Oxygen from simulated lunar soil

Satellite broadband



INSTEAD OF THIS

The pilot will evaluate a satellite broadband terminal at each site.

SAY THIS

We'll test whether schools beyond the reach of ground networks can hold classes online using a satellite connection. The trial should show how often calls drop and what the service costs each school.

Illustrative example · school broadband pilot

Independent access to orbit



INSTEAD OF THIS

The programme will use European launch capacity to deploy spacecraft.

SAY THIS

The programme will use a European rocket to put its satellites into orbit. Keeping the service available will also depend on who runs it on the ground.

Illustrative example · launch and service operation

Give readers a say

A request for public input should match the decision people can still influence. In this fictional example, a city uses satellite heat maps to plan shade along walking routes. Choose a stage of the project to see how the invitation to residents changes.

The city is choosing routes

What's decided. The city will add shade along walking routes.

What's open. Which routes to prioritise.

"Tell us which walking routes you think need shade first. Mark a stretch you use regularly and tell us when it's hardest to find shade there. We'll use your suggestions to help shortlist routes."

The city is choosing spots along those routes

What's decided. The city has selected the walking routes.

What's open. Where to add shade along those routes.

"The routes have been selected. Mark a spot along one of them where you regularly wait or walk in full sun. We'll use your suggestions to shortlist locations for shade."

KU Leuven Space Studies research · Planning how people can respond

Four questions before you send

- [ ] **01 · Pass the Dinner Table Test**
  Could a neighbour understand why this matters in thirty seconds?
- [ ] **02 · Identify the Human Anchor**
  Whose experience or decision does your story follow?
- [ ] **03 · Say What the Evidence Supports**
  What does the evidence show, and what remains uncertain?
- [ ] **04 · End with a Decision**
  What can this reader decide or do next, and by when?

Conclusion

The challenge in space communication is getting a technically sound message to travel across teams and institutions. An engineering update may inform a funding decision or become the basis for a public announcement. As it moves, the people using it will pick out the details that matter to them. The question is whether they can tell what the evidence supports and what still needs to be decided.

Framing helps you make that distinction clear. If you're writing for someone who has to decide whether to extend a trial, tell them what the trial established and what a second round would help them find out. If you're inviting people to take part in a decision, explain what they can still influence and how their input will be used. Those choices give the reader a reason to pay attention and a way to respond.

For your next project, pick one message you need people outside your team to hear. Use the toolkit to refine it, then decide where it will have the most use. That could be a briefing ahead of a funding meeting or a short explanation shared through a group that already works with the people affected. See which part of the message people repeat and where they ask for more detail. Both can tell you what to work on in the next draft.

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