

Key Elements of Clear Writing and Design

Material presented below is based on the much more detailed content presented in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's [Simply Put: A Guide for Creating Easy-to-Understand Materials](#) and the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services' [Tool-Kit for Making Written Material Clear and Effective](#). It is organized into the same format used in the *Tool-Kit*. In all situations in which you are responsible for producing and publishing the document, you should check with your department's Office of Public Relations to determine whether your agency has a style guide that controls the style and appearance of documents.

Content

- Make the purpose and usefulness of the material immediately obvious.
- In choosing which content to include, be guided by the *readers'* interests, knowledge, and needs (which may be quite different from your own).
- Show awareness of and respect for diversity among intended readers.
- Make sure that the information is accurate and up to date.
- Limit the information to an amount that is reasonable for the intended readers.
- Identify the organization that produced the material, and include a publication date and contact information.

Organization (Sequencing, Grouping, Labeling)

- Organize information and messages so they are easy to act on and recall.
- Give the most important information first.
- Place the most important information at the beginning and restate it at the end of the document.
- Group the information into meaningful "chunks" of reasonable size by using headings and subheadings.
- Limit the amount of information per "chunk" – give your audience no more than three or four main ideas per section of your document.
- To make the material easy to skim and show how it is organized, create a clear hierarchy of prominent headings and subheadings.
- Use navigational tools such as page numbers, headers and footers, tables of context, index, and appendices to help orient readers and make important information easy to find.

Writing Style

- Write in a conversational style, using the active voice.
- Keep your sentences simple and relatively short.
- Be direct, specific, and concrete.
- Use grammatically correct punctuation.
- Choose your words carefully. Choose words with a single definition or connotation.
- Be consistent with word use.
- Use analogies familiar to your audience.
- Avoid unnecessary abbreviations and acronyms.
- Create cohesion by making strong, logical connections among your sentences and paragraphs.
- Limit use of jargon, technical, scientific, or medical language. Use technical terms and acronyms only when readers need to know them. Define them in the text.

Engaging, Supporting, and Motivating Your Readers

- Be friendly and positive. Communicate as if you were talking to a friend.
- Respect and value your audience.
- Tell your audience what they will gain from understanding and using the material.
- Use devices that engage and involve your readers, such as stories and quotations, questions and answers, quiz formats, and blank spaces for them to fill in.
- Base your material on information sources that your intended readers will trust.
- Match health statistics and similar information as closely as you can to the characteristics of your intended readers and their communities.
- Tell readers how to get help or more information. Make it easy for people to follow up on what they've just read by telling them what additional information or assistance is available and where they can get it.

Overall design and page layout

- Design the size, shape, and general look of the material with its purpose and users in mind.
- Make the material look appealing at first glance. Create uncluttered pages with generous margins and plenty of white space.
- Create a clear and obvious path for the eye to follow through each page. Place the headings, text, and images in a way that guides readers smoothly through all of the material without diverting or distracting them.
- Create an overall design for the material that has a clear and consistent style and structure. Use a page grid and style sheets to guide your design. Line up your headings, blocks of text, lists, illustrations, and other design elements in a clear and consistent way.
- Keep the same style or "look" throughout the material.

Fonts (typefaces), size of print, contrast, and justification

- Use font sizes between 12 and 14 points. For headings, use a font size at least 2 points larger than the main text size.
- For the regular text in printed materials, use a font with serifs that is designed for ease of reading. Serif fonts are fonts that use the small lines called "serifs" to finish off the main strokes of letters. This is a serif font.
- For the headings in your printed materials, use an easy-to-read "sans serif" font, preferably one that is a "font family" with different weights (some bolder than others). This is a Sans Serif font.
- Use no more than two or three different typefaces in a single piece of material. For most information materials, it works well to use just one serif font for the text and one sans serif font for the titles and headings.
- Use both upper and lower case letters. Do not use ALL CAPS. ALL CAPS ARE HARD TO READ.
- Use **bold type** to emphasize words or phrases. Limit the use of *italics* or underlining. They are hard to read.
- For ease of reading and a cleaner look, adjust the line spacing in your material to add a little space between the lines.
- Use left justification with a "ragged right" edge throughout the material, for both text and headings.

Use of Color

- Choose colors that are appealing to the intended readers and free from unwanted connotations or problematic cultural significance.
- Use color sparingly, in a consistent and deliberate way that reinforces the meaning of your messages and enhances their impact.
- Verify that the color scheme and shades of color work well from a design standpoint (including when the material is photocopied or printed in black and white).
- Take into account that some readers are likely to have diminished or limited color perception.

Visuals: Photographs, Illustrations, Clip Art, and Symbols

- Use images that are clear, uncluttered, and consistent in style.
- Use photos, illustrations, symbols, and other visuals that are culturally appropriate for your intended readers.
- Use visuals to help communicate your messages. Present one message per visual. Label visuals with captions. Use visuals that help emphasize or explain the text.
- Place images in positions that fit with the natural progression of reading so that they do not cause your readers to overlook parts of the text. Keep images close to the text they reinforce.
- Use high quality visuals that have sharp resolution, true color and contrast, and good composition. Make each visual large enough for good impact. For best impact, limit the number of visuals you use.
- When images include people, make sure that their poses, facial expressions, and body language are appropriate to the situation and appealing to the intended audience.
- If you are including photographs of individuals who are not professional models, be sure to have signed releases allowing you to publish and circulate their image in all of the channels you intend to release the document – hard copy, CD/DVD, on-line, or in press releases.

Tables, Charts, and Diagrams

- Take a reader-centered approach to the use of tables, charts and diagrams.
- Make titles, headings, and other labeling specific and complete enough for easy understanding.
- Create a clean, uncluttered layout with strong visual and written cues to guide readers and help them interpret the information correctly.
- If there are any numbers or calculations, explain them carefully and give examples.
- Test your tables, charts, and diagrams to be sure that your intended readers can understand and use them.
- Limit the number of categories or components displayed in your graphs; combine sections with smaller numbers into an “Other” category. More than 6 different columns in a bar chart or slices in a pie chart look too cluttered and require labels to have print too small to read.
- Keep the sizes of your graphs similar throughout your text. Use the same color schemes for your graphs throughout the text, so that readers associate each different colors with the same category (e.g. people with diabetes versus people with pre-diabetes, men versus women).
- Double-check all graphs and charts to be sure that nothing has been transposed or incorrectly labeled.
- Graphs and maps are much more attractive and understandable than any data table. Charts showing trends over time are useful but the lines need to be clearly labeled. Make all graphs, charts, and maps large enough so that you do not have to use very small font sizes for labeling.
- Be consistent in formatting across maps, graphs, and charts when using legends and labels. Avoid abbreviations and acronyms.