

Guidelines for Rewriting Materials

Resources for Developing and Assessing Materials

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Online Resources:

www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy

Many of us have been in position to review materials that are to be posted on the web or prepared for printing and dissemination and need to consider revisions when our reviews are less than stellar. How do we begin to revise rather than reinvent? How do we rewrite?

1. First, we must set a strong foundation for our work and garner needed support. Consider the following:

- Support of administration
- Institutional commitment to adhering to new guidelines
- Team comprised of professionals from various departments responsible for writing materials [forms, instructions, direction, educational materials]
- Committee to whom the team presents

2. Next, we need to consider all the review elements to determine why existing materials are being rewritten. Perhaps the audience was not fully considered; perhaps there is a new audience for the materials. Be sure you can describe your intended audience and their needs.

- Be sure to include their main concerns *
- Be sure to answer their most important questions *
- Be sure that the materials is useful *

* Interview a sample of intended users or hold a focus group discussion

3. Analyze the Old Material

Many reviews are based on readability assessments alone. Certainly, a readability assessment is helpful. At the same time, readability

assessments primarily focus on word length. Some, like the SMOG, also focus on sentence length. We know that longer words are more challenging in English. At the same time, we have many short words that are hard to pronounce and many short words that are rarely used in common speech. We know too that long sentences often include several ideas and are more difficult to follow than are shorter sentences. Consequently, readability assessments give us some directions for change.

- Conduct a readability assessment and be sure that materials are at or below reading grade level 8 [the average reading level for high school graduates]
- Highlight all long words and find easy substitutions when possible
- Highlight all long sentences [any sentence that exceeds 3 lines of type or contains more than 12 to 15 words.
- Highlight all medical words and jargon *
- Highlight all passive sentences. People prefer an active voice.
- Check to see that information is up-to-date
- Check to see that pictures and photographs look current

* Interview a sample of intended users and ask them to help you update materials. Ask them to highlight any words that their family members or friends may not fully understand.

4. You might need to restructure the old material

Check for clear purpose, design, organization, and tone

- Make sure your purpose is clear
 - State *what* you will write, *why* the material is important to have and to read, and *how* it will best be used

- Let the reader know the purpose when he or she reads the title and/or the introduction
- Use design elements to make reading easier on the eye
 - Use a font size of 12-point type or above
 - Use a font with serifs
 - Use plain text instead of italics, all capitals, fancy fonts, or cursive
 - Use organization principles to make the text easier to follow
- Be sure the sequence of information is logical
 - Group large chunks of information into smaller, meaningful sections
 - Use headings
 - Highlight key points so that they stand out to the reader. It may be helpful to state key points at the beginning of your material, and then repeat them again at the end
- Consider the tone to make reading enjoyable
 - Keep your message positive: focus on the **do** and **can** instead of the *do not* or *should not*.
 - Make your tone friendly by replacing impersonal pronouns with *I, you, we, and our*
 - *Engage your readers by involving them in activities while reading. Consider adding techniques used in popular reading materials such as:*
 - Short quizzes
 - Vignettes
 - Fill in the blanks.

5. You may need to rewrite sections

- Replace complex words and phrases with simple, everyday words [such as *use* instead of *utilize* OR *talk with your doctor* instead of *consult with your physician*]
- Break up long sentences into two or more sentences. Try to have 15 words or less in most sentences
- Consider adding a glossary with plain language “translations” for scientific terms or professional jargon
- Rewrite sentences using the active voice instead of the passive voice
- Use the present tense.

6. Consider Visuals

- Use simple graphs, tables and charts
 - Break up one large graph into two smaller graphs
 - Color code or shade charts so that they are easier to understand
- Be sure that pictures enhance the message
- Choose visuals that represent your audience and are appealing to them
- Keep visuals simple and uncluttered
- Label all visuals so that their purpose is clear
- Keep visuals close to the linked text so that they make sense.

7. Test and revise before production

You want to test out the materials with members of your intended audience. **Always** try out the materials and revise as needed. Focus groups or cognitive interviews are strong piloting activities. However, you can also test out materials with people in intercept interviews and through

other informal means – as long as you work with people who offer a close match to members of your intended audience.