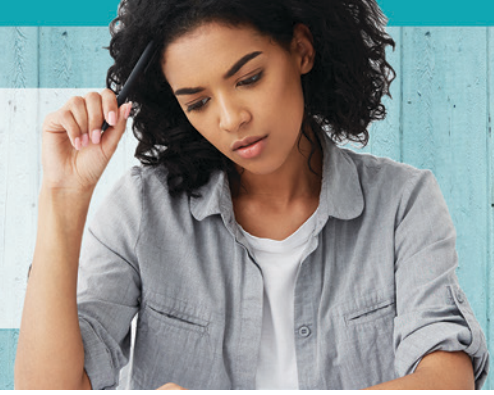


Before You Write

Use the tips below before you begin drafting your material. Just a little preparation will help you create a clear, effective product.



Answer 4 Key Questions

Before you begin writing, answer 4 important questions. You're not ready to start drafting content until you've written down clear answers to all 4 of these questions:

- 1. Who is your target audience?**
- 2. What do you know about their health literacy skills?**
- 3. What is your communication objective?**
What do you want your readers to do, think, or feel after they read your material?
- 4. What is your main message?**
What is the most important thing for your readers to remember? They may only remember 1 thing — what do you want that to be?

Sample Answers to 4 Key Questions

1. Parents of young children in Jonesville
2. Non-scientific audience with average to low health literacy skills
3. Get parents to take their children to the health department for blood lead testing
4. Some children in Jonesville have high levels of lead in their blood. This can cause learning and behavior problems. Children living near the study site need to get routine blood lead tests.

Use Your Answers

Be sure to use your answers from all 4 questions as you develop your material.

Target Audience

Clearly identify your target audience — and get specific. The more you think about who you're trying to reach, the more you can tailor your content to that audience. Remember to drill down — you want something like “parents of young children in Jonesville,” not “the public.”

Health Literacy Skills

Think through what you know about your audience's health literacy skills. Then use that information to guide your word choice, sentence length, and other [plain language considerations](#). According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, almost 9 in 10 people struggle to understand health information. So keep it short, simple, and clear:

- ✓ **Short:** Write sentences that are 20 words or fewer. Limit paragraphs to 3 to 5 sentences. Cut out any words you don't need.
- ✓ **Simple:** Avoid jargon and complex technical terms. Define any scientific terms that you need to include in plain language.
- ✓ **Clear:** Be straightforward and direct — clearly tell your audience what they need to know. Always write in the active voice. Keep the subject and verb close together in your sentences.

If you don't know anything about your audience's health literacy skills, it's best to assume they're average to low. And remember that a person's reading skills may drop 4 grade levels when they're stressed or reading about a stressful topic.

Communication Objective

Figure out what you want your audience to think, feel, or do after reading your material. Use your communication objective to guide decisions about what information to include in your material — and, more importantly, what to leave out. Remember, **the more you write, the less they'll read**. Only include content that helps you reach your communication objective.

Main Message

Write a short, clear main message and highlight it. Aim for 1 to 3 short sentences. This helps your readers quickly and easily understand the most important information in your material. It also gives readers context for how to interpret the material.

Place the main message at or near the top of your material. Make it stand out — use bold text, color blocking, or a larger font. Note that this material has a clearly visible main message at the top. Here's another example of an effective main message: ATSDR found that levels of chemicals currently in the air from the Baker Landfill aren't high enough to cause health problems.

Before You Write: Answer 4 Key Questions

1. Who is your target audience? Remember to get specific! Always write with this user in mind.

- **Example:** Parents of young children in Jonesville
 - **Example:** Partners who can help us promote a National Health Observance
-
-
-

2. What do you know about your audience's health literacy skills?

Now take a few minutes to think through what you know about their health literacy skills. Do you have any point of reference for literacy and numeracy skills? Health-related concepts they might be familiar with? Topics they may have run into before? Jot down some notes.

- **Example:** Non-scientific audience with average to low health literacy skills
 - **Example:** May be a little bit familiar with the topic — this is the second health assessment in their community
 - **Example:** May struggle to understand how my data is relevant to them
-
-
-

3. What is your communication objective?

What do you want your audience to think, feel, or do after reading your material? This should be a **single statement** — if you think your material has multiple communication objectives, figure out which is the most important (1 of them will be!).

- **Example:** Get parents to take their children for blood lead testing
 - **Example:** Get partners to share our content with their networks
-
-
-

4. What is your main message?

If your readers are going to remember 1 thing after reading your material, what do you want it to be? Remember, a main message can have a few sentences — but it should be focused on a single concept.

- **Example:** Some children in Jonesville have high levels of lead in their blood. This can cause learning and behavior problems. Children living near the study site need to get routine blood lead tests.
- **Example:** Everyone age 6 months and older needs to get a flu vaccine every season.

8 Tips for Clear & Effective Writing



Most readers hate excess words and meandering sentences in any form of writing. Most readers also hate the bureaucratic jargon we sometimes use in public health (think: “A comprehensive assessment was conducted prior to implementation of...”).

Audiences respond well to logically organized, clearly written, and effectively designed information — regardless of their literacy level or ability to understand complex information. The fact is that PhD-level scientists appreciate clear writing as much as someone who struggles with reading comprehension. **Clear writing is for every audience and every material.**

Use the tips below to create clear, effective materials that your readers can understand and use.

1 Write for Your Reader

Identify a specific audience and write directly to that audience. Good writers always keep their readers in mind. Follow these tips:

- Keep asking yourself what your target audience needs to know (not what you want to say).
- If you have multiple audiences, consider writing multiple materials.
- Use “you” to connect with your reader.

2 Change Your Style

Public health writing is all about your audience. It’s not about demonstrating your linguistic mastery. Don’t write to impress your readers — write to reach them. Get right to the point and remove unnecessary content. And it’s okay to be conversational. Remember to:

- Use contractions (write “aren’t,” not “are not”).
- Use pronouns (like “you” and “we”).
- Use simple words (write “use,” not “utilize”).
- Be direct (write “analyzed,” not “conducted an analysis”).

3 Spell Out the Main Message

An effective material has a clear main message. Don't put the burden on your reader to figure out the main message — spell it out. Put that clear, succinct main message near the top of the material. Bold it and highlight it. Stay focused on it. And don't include content that detracts from it.

Check out these examples of clear main messages:

- Everyone 6 months of age and older needs to get a flu vaccine every season.
- The soil has high levels of lead. This can cause health problems, especially for children. ATSDR recommends blood lead testing for children under age 6 who have come in contact with lead.

4 Be Brief

We're bombarded with thousands of messages a day, and this has changed the way we read. Readers tend to skim or scan materials now.

Include just the essential information. Remember, **the more you write, the less they'll read.**

Keep your materials short and to the point:

- Sentences — no more than 20 words
- Paragraphs — no more than 5 sentences

5 Get Back to Basics

The easiest structure to understand in English is subject → verb → object. Don't convolute writing with complicated grammatical patterns. Remember to:

- Write in active voice.
- Keep the subject and verb close together.
- Use a strong clear verb (when a sentence is unclear, the culprit is often a missing or unclear verb).

Check out these examples of clear structure:

✗ **Passive:** About 500 homes were left without water as a result of the chemical spill.

✓ **Active:** The chemical spill left about 500 homes without water.

✗ **Weak:** The *training* (subject), which was attended by 60 staff members and got over 95% approval ratings, *was* (weak verb) a huge success.

✓ **Better:** The training succeeded: 60 staff members attended and gave approval ratings of over 95%.

6 Carefully Craft Your Title and Subtitle

The first thing your readers see is your title. It draws them in. And a subtitle can serve as a primer for what comes next. Carefully craft a title and subtitle using the following guidelines:

- Title — no more than 8 words to grab attention
- Subtitle — no than 1 line to offer more context

Check out this example of an effective title and subtitle:

✗ **Instead of:** National Safety Month

✓ **Try this:** Spread the Word About National Safety Month! (*title*)
Learn 5 Ways You Can Make a Difference (*subtitle*)

7 Use Meaningful Headlines

“Chunk” content into short paragraphs and use lots of meaningful headings — 1 heading for every 1 to 3 paragraphs is a good rule of thumb.

Skip generic headings like “Overview” and “Background.” If readers scan your material and just read the headings, what do they learn? Use headings to communicate messages (like short, bolded topic sentences for the text that follows).

Check out these examples of meaningful headings:

✗ **Weak:** Introduction

✓ **Better:** CDC Will Study Asthma Triggers in [City, State]

✗ **Weak:** Background

✓ **Better:** Emergency Room Visits Increase for Asthma Attacks

8 Pay Attention to Design

Design elements can help readers understand and remember your messages.

Remember to:

- Use images that reinforce your message. Never use an image that demonstrates something you don’t want readers to do.
- Limit lists to no more than 7 bullets. And stay away from sub-bulleted lists.
- Use call-out boxes or bold for key messages, relevant related information, or content that helps spark interest.
- Make sure there’s plenty of white space.



To access Your Guide to Clear Writing online, visit:

<https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/clearwriting/docs/clear-writing-guide-508.pdf>

Writing Models

Sometimes it's difficult to organize content into a clear, effective material. Writing models can help. Consider using one of the following models when you're working on your next writing task, and use the samples for each model to guide you. Check out the [Health Communication Playbook](#) for more ideas and samples.



Model 1: Storytelling

This is one clear, effective way to structure success stories or to deliver a message by presenting it as part of an engaging story. Try to keep stories short (about 800 words or fewer).

Structure of the Story

- **Title and Subtitle:** Write a short title (no more than 8 words) to grab your readers' attention. You can also choose to include a subtitle (no longer than 1 line) to offer more context.
- **Problem:** Write 1 to 2 short paragraphs. Start with the most dramatic moment. Explain the problem that you encountered in narrative form.
- **Intervention:** Write 1 to 2 short paragraphs. Describe what you did.
- **Outcome:** Write 1 to 2 short paragraphs. Discuss how your intervention helped.

Writing Tips for All Models

- Limit sentences to no more than 20 words.
- Limit paragraphs to no more than 5 sentences.
- Use a meaningful heading every 1 to 3 paragraphs.
- Keep your materials short — the more you write, the less they'll read!

Storytelling Sample

Disease Detectives in Ethiopia | _____ → **Title**
CDC Investigates Mystery Illness Spreading Across Northern Region | _____ → **Subtitle**

Disease Spreads to Remote Villages | _____ → **Problem**

In Northern Ethiopia, villagers developed stomach pain and swelling. Some even had trouble breathing. In a single household, 3 or 4 people would get sick — while others would not. In other families, everyone died from the sickness, but their neighbors did not. The symptoms were similar to liver disease. What was causing it?

CDC Investigates

From 2005 through 2007, more than 1,200 people were diagnosed with this “unidentified liver disease,” or ULD. Many of them died. In 2007, the Ethiopia Ministry of Health and Ethiopia Health and Nutrition Research Institute (EHNRI) asked CDC and other partners to help look into the outbreak.

A study ruled out infectious diseases as the cause and suggested the disease might be related to food. To find out more, scientists sometimes had to walk 4 hours each way to remote households. Investigators also tested grain samples grown in villages — and they found low levels of a plant-based toxin called pyrrolizidine alkaloids (PAs) in weeds harvested with the grain. Could that have anything to do with the outbreak?

Important Discovery about Separating Weeds

Following a recommendation from CDC, in 2009, EHNRI created a ULD surveillance system. CDC developed tools to take medical histories and collect physical and environmental samples. In 2011, CDC staff returned to Ethiopia and joined partners to:

- Visit villages
- Do physical examinations and ultrasounds
- Collect blood and urine samples
- Gather environmental samples for PA testing

Of the ULD patients sampled, 50% tested positive for PA. Testing showed that other family members and villagers had also come in contact with PA, but ULD patients had higher PA levels. Although households with and without ULD ate and drank the same foods and beverages, non-ULD households were more likely to separate the weeds from their crops before and after harvest.

Eradicating ULD

The study helped researchers pinpoint the cause of ULD more accurately, but there’s no cure — so getting rid of the source of PA was the only option. The health ministry began a “zero tolerance” policy for weeds, and EHNRI and health workers taught householders how to separate weeds from grain. They also encouraged villagers to check their livestock for ULD symptoms to protect themselves from contact with PA through milk or meat.

Thanks to the partners’ skill, knowledge, and persistence, we know the cause of ULD. It’s now called pyrrolizidine alkaloid-induced liver disease, or PAILD. More importantly, grain farmers in Ethiopia can now protect themselves and their families from this deadly disease.

→ Intervention

→ Intervention continued...

→ Outcome