

Making Your Message Clear

Creating materials that lead to increased knowledge or a change in beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors requires messages that are clear, relevant, and appropriate for the intended audience.

- Give the most important information first
 - To quickly engage the audience:
 - Give the most important information first
 - Tell them what actions to take
 - Explain why it is important to them
- Limit the number of messages
 - Give your audience no more than three or four main ideas per document or section of your document.
 - Stick to one idea at a time
 - Focus on what your audience needs to know and do. Skip details that are only nice to know. Stick to one idea at a time. Develop one idea fully before moving to the next idea. People are confused when materials skip back and forth between topics.
 - Avoid lengthy lists. Create short lists (3-7 items) with bullets, not commas. People with limited reading skills tend to forget items in longer lists. If you have a long list, break it into subheads.
- Tell audiences what they need to do.
 - Clearly state the actions you want your audience to take.
 - Use concrete nouns and an active voice. Active voice is where the subject does the action.
 - Highlight the positive.
 - Tell your audience what they should do rather than what they should not do.
- Tell your audience what they will gain from understanding and using the material .
 - Tell your audience how your materials will benefit them. Answer the question, “What’s in it for me?”
- Choose your words carefully.
 - Keep it short. Use words with one or two syllables when you can. Keep most sentences, if possible, between eight to ten words and limit paragraphs to three to five sentences.
 - Communicate as if you were talking to a friend. A conversational style has a more natural tone and is easy to understand. Write as if you were talking to a friend.
 - Respect and value your audience. Don’t talk down or preach. People are less likely to act on information if they are made to feel bad about their current behavior or health situation.
 - Use a tone that encourages the audience. Emphasize small, practical steps. Offer concrete examples of successful action steps.
 - Limit use of jargon, technical, or scientific language. Define necessary jargon or technical terms first. Then explain them in language your audience will understand.
 - Choose words with a single definition or connotation. People with limited literacy skills may not be able to figure out the meaning from the context.
 - Be consistent with word use. Pick the most familiar words and use them throughout your text.

- Use analogies familiar to your audience. When making comparisons, use references that your audience will recognize.
 - Avoid unnecessary abbreviations and acronyms. Provide the acronym first and then spell the word (s) out in parentheses when using a familiar abbreviation or acronym.
 - Apply this rule also when creating content that will be spoken in video or audio materials.
 - Provide the term before the acronym when using unfamiliar abbreviations.
 - Limit use of statistics and use general words like most, many, half. If you must use statistics, try putting them in parentheses.
 - Mathematical concepts, such as risk, normal, and range, may not have meaning to your audience. If possible, use words such as “chance” or “possibility” instead.
 - Limit the use of symbols. What is meaningful and natural for one audience may be confusing or misleading to others. Pretest any use of symbols.
 - Use symbols sparingly
 - Limit use of quotation marks. Choose other formats to show who is speaking when writing dialogue.
 - Visuals can improve your communication materials when used correctly. Pictures help grab an audience’s attention and help tell a story. Be sure to test visuals to ensure there are acceptable with the intended audience.
- Exercise Handouts:
 - Watch abbreviations
 - Watch terminology
 - Don’t have too much writing
 - Be clear about the order of the exercises
 - Use common words – not “passive ROM” or “knee flexion”
 - Don’t use too many pictures – consider simply pictures for start and end position

Exercises learned only from a brochure without being monitored by a physical therapist were done properly by only about half of the patients and appeared to result in fewer improvements in impairments.

- Choose the best type of visual for your materials
 - Photographs work best for showing “real life” events, people, and emotions. Photographs tend to be more compelling to audiences. When choosing a photo, be sure any background images will not distract your audience from the image you wish to highlight.
 - Simple illustrations or line drawings may work best in some instances. An illustration or drawing can simplify complexities and highlight key components of an idea.
 - Use simple drawings and avoid unnecessary details. Steer clear of abstract illustrations that could be misinterpreted. Simple drawings are useful for showing desired actions or to address abstract subjects. They can be useful among disparate audiences, especially mixed cultural groups.
 - Cartoons may be good to convey humor or set a more casual tone.
 - Use cartoons with caution; not all audiences understand them or take them seriously.
 - Present one message per visual. When you show several messages in one visual, audiences may miss some or all of the messages.
 - Label visual with captions. Be sure visuals and captions are placed near related text.
 - Use visuals that help emphasize or explain the text.
 - Consider the space available and potential use of the visual. Steer clear of visuals that merely decorate or are too abstract.

- Show the actions you want your audience to take. Avoid choosing images that show what the audience should not do.
- Make visuals culturally relevant and sensitive
- Use images and symbols familiar to your audience
- Clearly label