



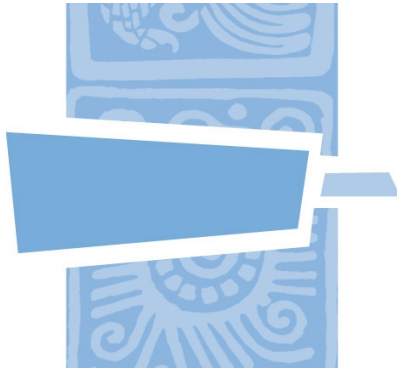
TOOLKIT for Making Written Material Clear
and Effective

SECTION 2: Detailed guidelines for writing
and design

PART 3

Summary List of the “Toolkit Guidelines
for Writing and Design”

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services



TOOLKIT Part 3

Summary List of the “Toolkit Guidelines for Writing and Design”

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This document is Part 3 of the *Toolkit for Making Written Material Clear and Effective*. The Toolkit has 11 Parts. It was written for the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) by Jeanne McGee, McGee & Evers Consulting, Inc. The guidelines and other parts of the Toolkit reflect the views of the writer. CMS offers this Toolkit as practical assistance to help you make your written material clear and effective (not as requirements from CMS).



Introduction

About the Toolkit

The *Toolkit for Making Written Material Clear and Effective* is a health literacy resource from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). It has practical tools to help you improve printed material you develop for people who are enrolling in or receiving services from CMS programs such as Medicare, Medicaid, or Children’s Health Insurance (CHIP). These CMS audiences are culturally diverse and they include people with limited reading skills and older adults such as people with Medicare.

To learn more about the Toolkit, see Toolkit Part 1 (*About this Toolkit and how it can help you*) and Toolkit Part 2 (*Using a reader-centered approach to develop and test written material*).

About the Toolkit Guidelines for Writing and Design

To help you develop or revise your written material, the Toolkit includes detailed guidelines for writing and design. This document, Toolkit Part 3, gives you the full list. Each Toolkit Guideline focuses on a particular aspect of writing or graphic design, such as writing with a friendly tone, making headings easy to skim, and checking on cultural appropriateness of photographs and other visual elements. Some guidelines for design are unique to specific types of material, such as charts, forms, or questionnaires.

This document (Toolkit Part 3) gives the full list of *Toolkit Guidelines for Writing and Design* and offers general tips for ways to use them. For the details on how to apply each guideline, see Toolkit Part 4 (guidelines for writing) and Part 5 (guidelines for design).

The Toolkit Guidelines apply broadly across literacy levels

While the guidelines are geared to the needs of CMS audiences, most of them reflect general principles for effective communication of information to *any* audience.

- Most of the guidelines can be used to help create material that is clear and effective for people who have a broad range of literacy skills, ranging from those with low (but not marginal) literacy skills through those who are skilled readers (see Toolkit Part 1 and Toolkit Part 2).
- All readers can appreciate getting information that is written in plain language. Readers want a document to be well organized and easy to skim to pick up the main points. Material that is well written and designed will not be condescending or oversimplified (www.plainlanguage.gov).

- “Plain language” is defined from the perspective of the reader; plain language means that the intended readers find it clear and effective. When you write in plain language, you adapt the material based on the literacy skills of your intended readers. For example, one of the Toolkit Guidelines urges you to use words that are familiar to your intended readers. If your intended readers are skilled readers, you will have a wider choice of words that are familiar.



Tips on how to use the Toolkit Guidelines

The *Toolkit Guidelines for Writing and Design* are not hard and fast rules, and they are not set up to “score” documents with overall ratings of suitability. Rather, they are practical, flexible tools to help you improve your written materials. Here are some ways you can use the guidelines:

1 Use the guidelines to learn what makes materials suitable and effective for culturally diverse CMS audiences

- **Cultural suitability for diverse audiences:** you can use the guidelines to draw attention to the needs of a culturally diverse audience.
- **The needs of less-skilled readers:** you can use the guidelines and other discussion in this Toolkit to focus on the needs of less-skilled readers.
- **Attention to older readers:** you can use the guidelines to draw your attention to the needs of older adults who often experience the normal age-related declines in vision and the ability to read and process written information (see Toolkit Part 9, *Things to know if your written material is for older adults*).

2 Use the guidelines as a flexible tool to help you select, improve, or create written material

When you use the guidelines, it’s up to you to decide which ones are most salient and consequential for your particular materials and intended readers, and how to apply them. Use some or all of the guidelines at any stage of developing your material. CMS offers the Toolkit and its guidelines as practical assistance for making your written material clear and effective (not as requirements).

- **Selection of materials:** you can use the guidelines as an assessment tool to help you evaluate a group of existing materials and pick the most effective ones.
- **Revision of materials:** you can use the guidelines to identify strengths and weaknesses of your own materials and help guide revisions.
- **Creation of materials:** you can use the guidelines as a tool for developing effective new materials.

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Use the guidelines as a resource for staff training or development of standards

- **Staff training and development:** you can use the guidelines as a basis for training sessions to promote awareness and skill development among staff in your organization.
- **Guidance for vendors or contractors:** you can use the guidelines as a resource for setting specific standards for written materials produced by vendors or contractors.

Keep the focus on improvement

When you are developing written material, there’s always something new to learn about what works and what doesn’t. By sharing these detailed guidelines, we hope to give you a fresh perspective and some insights into things you might do to make your material more effective. The Toolkit Guidelines work best when you have a positive and constructive attitude that focuses on improvement:

- **Be tactful and constructive.** If you are using the guidelines to assess existing materials, emphasize that you’re using the guidelines to judge the written material, not the people who sponsored or produced it. If you have a team of reviewers who meet as a group, a positive and constructive spirit is crucial, so that no one feels put on the spot and defensive about any shortcomings identified by the assessment.
- **Don’t get discouraged.** This book has many detailed guidelines, and you may see many opportunities for improvement when you apply them. Just remember that no document is perfect, and certain trade-offs are inevitable. As you think about revisions, focus on the areas that seem most consequential and those that lend themselves most readily to improvement. Pay special attention to the factors that affect ease of reading, comprehension, and overall cultural acceptance.

Use a team approach

When you are ready to use the guidelines to guide improvements, it can be very helpful to get a group of people involved. Try for a good mix of people:

- **People who differ in their familiarity with the material.** It’s wise to include people who have never seen the document before, because they will come to it with fresh eyes. It’s also good to involve people who are familiar with the document or who helped create it. They know its history, including results from any testing that was done and why certain decisions were made.
- **People who reflect a broad range of knowledge, skills, and interests.** To apply the guidelines to your materials, you need subject matter experts and people who are knowledgeable about cultural and linguistic patterns among your intended readers.
- **People who tend to focus on different features of the materials.** Most people tend to be more attuned to certain features of a document and less attuned to others. For example, people who are highly visual may have stronger or different opinions about layout and formatting than those who are not. Those who have struggled to write clear and simple language may be more insightful and demanding in their evaluation of the writing style than those who have not.

Use the guidelines for a formal assessment

If you want to do a formal assessment with multiple reviewers, you can turn the guidelines into a systematic tool for assessments. Here are some suggestions:

1. **Choose which guidelines to include in your assessment.** You may want to focus your review on just a few sections or items in the guidelines:
 - For example, if you think there are problems with the way you’ve organized the material, you could use Guidelines 2.1 through 2.5 that tell how to sequence, group, and label the information.
 - If you have concerns about whether the material is culturally appropriate, you could focus on the guidelines that address cultural issues. There are guidelines that address different aspects of cultural suitability under many of the topics covered in the Toolkit Guidelines. For more about this, see Toolkit Part 2, *Using a reader-centered approach to develop and test written material*.
 - Since the guidelines are extensive and detailed, you may find that some of them are not applicable to your material. For example, if you are assessing a document that is printed in black and white, you would drop the entire section of guidelines on use of color.

2. Decide how to structure the collection of feedback from reviewers. There are several possibilities:

- You can leave blank lines for comments. The simplest way to collect feedback from reviewers is to list the guidelines you have chosen and leave a space after each one for reviewers to make comments.
- If you are doing a systematic review, you may find it helpful to create a rating form. Below, we use Guideline 3.5 as an example to show how you could convert a guideline into a rating item. The sample format shown below includes space for comments, urging reviewers to be as specific as they can. You can tally the ratings for each guideline to identify areas that need improvement. Whether you use a rating form or not, comments from reviewers are the most informative and actionable part of using this Toolkit’s guidelines to assess written material.

Guideline 3.5

Create cohesion by making strong, logical connections among your sentences and paragraphs.

Develop ideas in a logical progression that makes the connections between ideas explicit. Repeat key words and phrases to reinforce learning and create continuity.

<input type="checkbox"/> Meets this guideline	Comments (<i>please be as specific as you can</i>):
<input type="checkbox"/> Needs minor improvement	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Needs major improvement	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Don't know or not sure	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	_____

Look at the material from the reader’s point of view

Whatever process you use to apply the guidelines to your materials, do your best to adopt the mindset of a reader who is part of the intended audience. As much as you can, try to suspend your own reading habits, subject matter knowledge, and taken-for-granted assumptions.

For example, if you are assessing a document written for readers with low literacy skills, you know that these readers will approach the material differently than you would (see Toolkit Section 2, *Using a reader-centered approach to develop and test written material*). As you apply the guidelines to the material, think about how it might seem to less skilled readers, and how they are likely to navigate

through it. This will help you spot the things that will challenge poor readers, such as difficult words (even though *you* know them) and connections among concepts that need to be spelled out specifically (even though *you* could easily fill them in on your own).

Make notes on your reactions

- **Try to capture first impressions.** When you look at written material for the first time, skim quickly without reading to form a general first impression. Jot down your impressions before they fade. It is hard to recapture first impressions once you begin to read material closely and study it critically.
- **Taking notes.** It is easier to make certain types of comments by writing directly on the document, such as comments about layout, fonts, color, and other visual elements. It is also helpful to have self-stick notes handy for making longer comments directly on the document.
- **Consolidating notes and making plans for revision.** If you have a longer document, it can be helpful to make a cut-and-paste display of it for use when you are deciding on revision. Just cut the document apart and mount the pages in sequence on a long roll of paper. You can tape this to a wall for reference. This display makes it easier to analyze the overall flow of the document, and to address problems with organization and navigation. It also makes a handy spot to consolidate notes and record decisions about plans for further consumer testing or revisions.

Remember that readers’ reactions are the ultimate test

While the *Toolkit Guidelines for Writing and Design* are a useful tool for developers and sponsors of written materials, they don’t replace the need to get feedback directly from the intended audience. The guidelines will give you a big head start in producing effective materials, but impact on the behavior of the intended audience is the ultimate test.

To know whether your intended readers are noticing, understanding, and using the materials, you need to do testing and evaluation that include getting feedback directly from them. For help with this, see Toolkit Part 6, *How to collect and use feedback from readers*. Written for people without a research background, this Part is a book-length guide with step-by-step instructions for collecting and using feedback from readers to improve written material.



A list of the “Toolkit Guidelines for Writing”

As shown below, the Toolkit Guidelines for Writing cover four areas: (1) content; (2) organization; (3) writing style; and (4) engaging, supporting and motivating your readers.



Content

Toolkit Part 4, Chapter 1 shows how to apply these guidelines

- 1.1 Make the purpose and usefulness of the material immediately obvious.**
Use the title and other upfront text to make clear to readers what the material is about, who it is for, and how to use it. Remember that readers skim and make quick judgments about what’s worth reading.
- 1.2 In choosing which content to include, be guided by the *readers’* interests, knowledge, and needs (which may be quite different from your own).**
Focus on what matters most to the intended readers. Address their issues and concerns, as well as areas of possible misunderstanding.
- 1.3 Show awareness of and respect for diversity among intended readers.**
Choose content that is culturally appropriate for the intended readers, reflecting and responding to differences in their experiences and situations.
- 1.4 Repeat new concepts and summarize the most important points.**
All readers need time to absorb new information. Repetition helps them remember it.
- 1.5 Make sure that the information is accurate and up to date.**
Check the facts. Involve subject matter experts from the beginning, and have reviewers check on accuracy. Proofread carefully at the end, not relying just on a spell-check program.

1.6 Limit the information to an amount that is reasonable for the intended readers.

Too much text can be overwhelming, especially to less-skilled readers. If the material is too long, consider other ways to package it. If you condense it, don't oversimplify or drop the examples and explanations that readers really need.

1.7 Identify the organization that produced the material, and include a publication date and contact information.

Including contact information makes it easy for readers to follow up with questions or ask for permission to reprint the material. Including the date will help remind you when it's time to update the information.



Organization (sequencing, grouping, and labeling)

Toolkit Part 4, Chapter 2 shows how to apply these guidelines

2.1 Group the information into meaningful “chunks” of reasonable size.

Readers can handle only a limited amount of information at one time. To avoid information overload, divide the text in ways that will make sense to the readers. Keep each segment or section of text relatively short. When you use bulleted lists, limit the number of bulleted points (group the points into sections if the list is long).

2.2 Organize the information in an order that will make sense to the intended readers.

Topics should build in a natural way, giving readers the background and context they need to understand new information.

2.3 Use headings, subheadings, and other devices to signal what's coming next.

These devices are “advance organizers” that show readers how the material is grouped and sequenced, and prepare them for the next topic.

2.4 Use specific and informative wording for sections, headings, and subheadings.

To reinforce the main points and help readers skim, compose text for headings that is meaningful and explicit.

2.5 Use navigational tools to help orient readers and make important information easy to find.

For printed material, these tools include page numbers, headers and footers, table of contents, and index. Choose navigation tools that are appropriate for the intended readers and type of material.



Writing style

Toolkit Part 4, Chapter 3 shows how to apply these guidelines

3.1 Write in a conversational style, using the active voice.

To make your message informal and appealing, use “we” and “you.” To make it direct and easy to understand, write in the active voice.

3.2 Keep your sentences simple and relatively short.

Don’t pack too much information into a single sentence. Keep most of your sentences relatively short, and use simple conjunctions (*or, but, and*). To create good rhythm and natural tone, and avoid sounding choppy, vary the length of your sentences.

3.3 Be direct, specific, and concrete.

To help readers understand and use the information, spell out its implications, and be direct in saying what they should do.

3.4 Give the context first, and incorporate definitions and explanations into the text.

To help readers understand new information, give the context first. Most readers don’t use a glossary, especially poor readers, so explain a new term or concept when you use it. Then continue to include some context to help readers remember what it means.

3.5 Create cohesion by making strong, logical connections among your sentences and paragraphs.

Develop ideas in a logical progression that makes the connections between ideas explicit. Repeat key words and phrases to reinforce learning and create continuity.

- 3.6 Choose words that are familiar and culturally appropriate for the intended readers.**
Tailor your vocabulary to your readers, using simpler words whenever possible. Be cautious about using professional jargon, slang, figures of speech, and words that may differ by region.
- 3.7 Use technical terms and acronyms only when readers need to know them.**
Technical terms can be difficult and intimidating; use simpler words whenever you can. It takes extra effort for readers to learn and remember a new acronym, so don't use acronyms just out of habit.
- 3.8 Write as simply you can, taking into account the reading skills of your intended audience.**
As a general goal, whatever your audience, write as simply as you can without sacrificing content or distorting meaning. (Be very cautious about using readability formulas or setting goals based on reading grade levels. Readability formulas predict the difficulty of words and sentences, usually based only on their length. Despite their name, readability formulas do not measure ease of reading or comprehension, and the scores from these formulas are not good indicators of overall suitability of material. For concerns and recommendations about using formulas to score written material, See Toolkit Part 7, *Using readability formulas: a cautionary note.*)



Engaging, supporting, and motivating your readers

Toolkit Part 4, Chapter 4 shows how to apply these guidelines

- 4.1 Be friendly and positive.**
When your messages have a supportive tone, readers will be more receptive, especially if you are urging them to do something difficult or unfamiliar.
- 4.2 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.**
When you get people actively involved with the material, they become more interested and learn more easily.

- 4.3 When you give suggestions or instructions, make them specific, realistic, and culturally appropriate for your intended readers.**
To keep people from feeling frustrated or discouraged, be sure that the behavior you are urging seems feasible to them. If you raise awareness of risks or problems, tell people what they can do about them.
- 4.4 Base your material on information sources that your intended readers will trust.**
To check on credibility of different sources, ask members of your intended audience and informants.
- 4.5 Match health statistics and similar information as closely as you can to the characteristics of your intended readers and their communities.**
A close match makes it easier for people to relate to the material.
- 4.6 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.



A list of the “Toolkit Guidelines for Design”

As shown below, the Toolkit Guidelines for Design cover the following seven topics: (1) overall design and page layout; (2) fonts (typefaces), size of print, and contrast; (3) headings, bulleted lists, and text emphasis; (4) use of color; (5) use of photographs, illustrations, and clip art; (6) tables, charts, and diagrams; and (7) forms and questionnaires.



Overall design and page layout

Toolkit Part 5, Chapter 2 shows how to apply these guidelines

- 5.1 Design the size, shape, and general look of the material with its purpose and users in mind.**
Consider whether there are ways to change features such as size and shape to make it more functional, more eye-catching, or more appealing to your readers. Also, consider possible ways to make it easier or more cost effective to produce and distribute.

- 5.2 Make the material look appealing at first glance.**
Create uncluttered pages with generous margins and plenty of white space. Include something to catch the reader’s eye but not confuse it. A clean, crisp layout encourages readers by making the material look as if it’s going to be easy to read.
- 5.3 Create a clear and obvious path for the eye to follow through each page.**
Design your layout to fit with a reader’s natural and deeply ingrained way of progressing through a printed page (called “reading gravity”). Place the headings, text, and images in a way that guides readers smoothly through all of the material without diverting or distracting them.
- 5.4 Create an overall design for the material that has a clear and consistent style and structure.**
For a clean and well-organized look, 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, and contrast**

Toolkit Part 5, Chapter 3 shows how to apply these guidelines

- 6.1 For the regular text in printed materials, use a “serif” font 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. For extended amounts of text, serif fonts work better than fonts without serifs (which are called “sans serif” fonts). Since readability of fonts differs greatly, pick a serif font that is highly readable as your basic text font. This text font should show good contrast between its bold and regular versions, and should remain easy to read when italicized.
- 6.2 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).**
To help readers skim and pick out the main points in your material, be sure that there is good contrast between the serif font you use for text and the sans serif font you use for headings. Choosing a font for headings that offers variations in weight is helpful because it gives you better options for creating good contrast.

6.3 In general, use no more than two or three different typefaces in a single piece of material.

Limiting the number of fonts will give your material a cleaner look and greater unity. 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. Experiment a bit to be sure the fonts you have chosen work well together. You may want to add an additional font or two for a particular purpose, such as using a special font to accent the title.

6.4 Make the type size large enough for easy reading by your intended audience.

The best way to know whether your type is large enough is to get feedback from your intended readers. Older readers will need somewhat larger type than younger ones. You can use point size (such as “12 point font”) as a rough guide, but keep in mind that fonts in the same point size can vary a lot in actual physical size due to differences in style of the letters. These differences in lettering style can affect ease of reading as much or more than point size.

6.5 For all of your text, including titles and headings, use upper and lower case letters in combination --nothing written in “all caps.”

Text in all capital letters is hard to read, so use capital letters only at the beginning of sentences and other places where they are required. For ease of reading, try capitalizing only the first word in titles and headings (rather than capitalizing all of the important words).

6.6 To emphasize words and short phrases that are part of your regular text, use italics or boldface type.

Do not use underlining or put the text into all capital letters, because these make text hard to read. Be restrained in using italics, boldface, and other devices such as contrast in size or color accents on text. If you use these devices too often, they lose impact. If you use them on longer blocks of text, they make it hard to read.

6.7 For ease of reading, use dark colored text on a very light non-glossy background.

Make sure there is enough contrast between the printed text and the paper to be able to read everything easily. Black text on a white or cream-colored non-glossy background is best. Don’t use light-colored text on a dark background (this is called “reversed out” text), because it is too hard to read.

6.8 For ease of reading, do not print text sideways, on patterned or shaded backgrounds, or on top of photos or other images.

Printing a title or heading that runs vertically rather than horizontally puts a burden on readers to tilt their heads or twist the page in order to read it (and most won't). When you put words on top of an image or pattern, the words and the background compete for attention, and both lose. The words are harder to read because of reduced contrast and distraction in the background, and the impact of the image is undermined by the words on top of it. Even a plain shaded background makes words harder to read, because it reduces the contrast between the text and background.

6.9 For ease of reading and a cleaner look, adjust the line spacing in your material.

To make blocks of text easier to read, add a little extra space between the lines. To help readers connect a heading with the text that follows it, leave a little less line space after the heading than you leave before it. To make bullet points stand out more clearly, put a little extra space between them. Keep these line spacing adjustments consistent throughout the document.

6.10 For ease of reading, use left justification throughout the material, for both text and headings.

Left-justify the basic text, leaving the right margin uneven (“ragged right”). Don't use “full justification” because forcing even margins on both sides of a block of text inserts uneven spaces between the words, making them harder to read. Don't center blocks of text, because centering makes it harder to read. To make headings prominent and easy to skim, left justify them (rather than centering them).

6.11 Keep your lines of text to an appropriate length for easy reading – neither too short nor too long.

For many materials, a line length of about five inches long works well. If the paper is wide, set the text in columns to maintain a readable line length. Avoid “wrapping” your text in awkward ways that make it hard to read.

6.12 For ease of reading, watch where the lines break (avoid hyphenation; split long headings carefully to reflect natural phrasing).

Do not hyphenate words at the end of a line, because splitting a word over two lines makes it harder to read, especially for less-skilled readers. When headings are long, split them over two lines in a way that reflects natural phrasing and avoids the awkwardness of leaving a single word by itself on the second line.



Headings, bulleted lists, and emphasizing blocks of text

Toolkit Part 5, Chapter 4 shows how to apply these guidelines

- 7.1 To make the material easy to skim and show how it is organized, create a clear hierarchy of prominent headings and subheadings.**
Left-justify the headings and subheadings, because readers sometimes miss headings that are centered. To emphasize how the material is structured, use contrast in fonts and maintain clear and consistent alignments, indentations, and spacing between headings and the text that follows.
- 7.2 Use contrast and other devices to make the main points stand out on each page.**
Remember that your readers are skimming and looking for information of personal interest. Help them by using devices such as bulleted and numbered lists, captions for illustrations, emphasis on key words and phrases, and summaries of main points. Use design elements or images to accent important information, such as putting a picture of a phone next to the helpline number.
- 7.3 For ease of reading, use care in formatting bulleted lists.**
To set off a list of bulleted points and connect it more closely with the sentence that introduces it, indent the entire list slightly. To make the bulleted points stand out clearly, add extra line space between them and use hanging indents. To set off each point without distracting readers, use bullets that are simple solid shapes. Bullets should be large enough to notice but not so large that they are distracting. Place bullets close to the text that follows them.
- 7.4 Choose effective ways to emphasize important blocks of text.**
Outline boxes are often used to emphasize text, but they clutter your layout and readers sometimes ignore text that’s enclosed by a box. Shaded backgrounds tend to attract the eye, but they also reduce the contrast, making text less legible and therefore less likely to be read. Instead of using outline boxes or shaded backgrounds, try other methods that tend to work better for emphasizing blocks of text.



Use of color

Toolkit Part 5, Chapter 5 shows how to apply these guidelines

8.1 **Choose colors that are appealing to the intended readers and free from unwanted connotations or problematic cultural significance.**

Depending on your audience, there can be much variation in the appeal and cultural connotations of various colors and color combinations. To avoid possible problems, get audience reactions to your color choices.

8.2 **Use color sparingly, in a consistent and deliberate way that reinforces the meaning of your messages and enhances their impact.**

Resist the impulse to use color in decorative ways that may distract people from the text. For greatest impact, use color with restraint, since using too much color creates “color overload” that can overwhelm and distract your readers. Be cautious about using color coding as a device. If you use color coding, do it in a consistent way and make the meaning clear to readers. Get feedback from readers to verify that they understand the color coding and find it helpful.

8.3 **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).**

While color selection is partly a matter of taste, certain colors are less effective than others for text, shaded areas, and other design purposes. Check to be sure that the colors reproduce well when photocopied. If material with color is downloadable from a website, it may work best to produce a separate version for users who will print it in black and white. If you are using two colors in your material, it works best to make one of them black and use it for the text.

8.4 **Take into account that some readers are likely to have diminished or limited color perception.**

Check to be sure that your color scheme works well for people who do not perceive the full range of colors, and for older adults who may perceive color less vividly. Be cautious about using color coding in your materials.



Photographs, illustrations, clip art, and symbols

Toolkit Part 5, Chapter 6 shows how to apply these guidelines

- 9.1 Use photos, illustrations, symbols, and other visuals that relate directly to the information in the material and reinforce your key messages.**

Images have great impact, so select them carefully and use them to highlight key points. Instead of using images to decorate the pages, choose images that reflect the subject matter of your materials. Try to show only the behaviors you want to encourage. Avoid using images that are too abstract or hard for readers to understand, such as parts of the body shown in isolation, cross-sections, and highly magnified images.
- 9.2 Use images that are clear, uncluttered, and consistent in style.**

For greatest appeal and impact on your readers, keep the images clear and simple, with good contrast that emphasizes the main subject. Avoid using photographs or illustrations with cluttered backgrounds or distracting detail (or edit them to remove the clutter). For a unified look, choose images that are compatible in style and color.
- 9.3 Use photos, illustrations, symbols, and other visuals that are culturally appropriate for your intended readers.**

Choose images of people and activities that are contemporary and representative of the intended audience in their demographics, physical appearance, behavior, and cultural elements. Check to be sure that the images you use are free from unwanted connotations or problematic cultural significance.
- 9.4 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.**

Poses that show people engaged in doing something may be more effective than stock photography shots of people smiling directly at the camera. If there is more than one person in the image, poses that show the people relating to each other tend to have more impact.

9.5 Be very cautious about using symbols or icons to represent concepts or to serve as markers to guide readers through the material.

Symbols and icons can be ambiguous or confusing to your readers. Using symbols as shortcuts can hinder more than help by giving less-skilled readers something additional to notice, learn, and remember. If you use symbols or other visual means of marking or representing topics, check to be sure that your readers understand the meaning you intend and find the use of symbols helpful.

9.6 Avoid using cartoons, “cute” or humorous images, and caricature, because these kinds of images may bewilder, confuse, or offend some of your readers.

Since humor does not translate well across cultures, attempts at humor may puzzle or confuse some readers. Humor based on irony is especially problematic, because readers who take it literally will completely misinterpret what you mean. In addition, individuals differ in what they may find amusing. When you are choosing images, avoid those with strange camera angles, exaggerated features, or a “cute” look. Distorted or coy images distract readers by drawing too much attention, and people find them unappealing or culturally offensive.

9.7 Pay careful attention to the total number, quality, size, placement, and labeling of the images you use.

For best impact, limit the number of images you use. Use images of high quality that will reproduce well, and make each one large enough for good impact. 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.

9.8 Check for accuracy, if applicable, and pretest the images with your intended readers.

If your images include technical or medical subject matter, check to be sure that the details are correct. Check on the appeal, cultural appropriateness, and comprehension of the images by getting feedback directly from members of the intended audience.



Tables, charts, and diagrams

Toolkit Part 5, Chapter 7 shows how to apply these guidelines

- 10.1 Take a reader-centered approach to the use of tables, charts and diagrams.**
In deciding whether and how to use these formats, take into account the literacy skills and needs of your intended readers.
- 10.2 Make titles, headings, and other labeling specific and complete enough for easy understanding.**
To help readers understand and interpret the meaning of charts and diagrams, use informative text in all labeling. To reduce cognitive burden and the possibility of misinterpretations, avoid using abbreviations, acronyms, footnotes, and cross-references.
- 10.3 Create a clean, uncluttered layout with strong visual and written cues to guide readers and help them interpret the information correctly.**
Keep the layout tidy and uncluttered, with ample margins and white space. Help readers understand and absorb the information in a chart or diagram by using devices such as taglines, examples, captions, and step-by-step instructions. If you use symbols in a comparison chart, make them as self-explanatory as possible, tell what they mean, and design them with good contrast.
- 10.4 If there are any numbers or calculations, explain them carefully and give examples.**
Since math is hard for many people, and can be especially hard for people with low literacy skills, take special care with explanations that involve numbers. With calculations, use examples that show each step and explain it clearly. Simplify numeric examples by using rounded whole numbers as much as you can. To help people understand weights and measurements, make comparisons to familiar objects.
- 10.5 Test your tables, charts, and diagrams to be sure that your intended readers can understand and use them.**
Direct feedback from readers is the best way to check on comprehension, cultural appropriateness, and usability of the information you present in a table, chart, diagram, or graph.



Forms and questionnaires

Toolkit Part 5, Chapter 8 shows how to apply these guidelines

11.1 **Begin a form or questionnaire with an informative title and brief explanation of its purpose.**

At the beginning of the form or questionnaire, tell what the document is for and what people should do with it, using words they will understand. Explain any program titles or agency names that may be unfamiliar to them. Explain how the information will be used and, if applicable, how privacy will be protected.

11.2 **Ask only for information you really need and will definitely use.**

Filling out a form or questionnaire can be burdensome and time consuming, so keep it as short as you can. Don't collect information that is unnecessary or readily available elsewhere. Ask for each piece of information only one time.

11.3 **Make the layout clear, uncrowded, and appealing.**

Do not crowd a form or questionnaire into space that is too small for easy reading and writing. Spreading it out into the amount of space required for easy completion will work better than forcing it to fit into some predetermined length (such as “no longer than one page”).

11.4 **Integrate instructions and explanations into the form or questionnaire, placing them right where they are needed by the reader.**

Integrating the instructions into your form is a powerful way to show consideration for your readers and improve ease and accuracy of response. Do not use footnotes or asterisks, because many less-skilled readers do not understand their function, and using them adds an extra burden for any reader. At the end, tell readers what to do with the completed form or questionnaire

11.5 **Limit the number of formats for collecting answers and use them in a consistent way.**

Make the task of supplying information as simple and intuitive for your readers as you can, so that they don't have to stop and think about what you are asking or how to answer. To encourage full and accurate completion, provide clear, complete labels on the fields to be filled in.

- 11.6 In a form for people with low literacy skills, avoid using a grid or matrix format to collect information.**
A grid or matrix format has rows and columns. When you use a grid to collect information, readers have to keep looking up at the headings at the top of the columns to understand what you are asking for. To make it easier for people to give accurate answers, consider breaking each part of the grid into a fully labeled separate item.
- 11.7 Create a clear and obvious path through the form that minimizes cross-references and skip patterns.**
Arrange the items in an order that makes sense to readers and eliminates (or greatly minimizes) the need to skip around among the sections.
- 11.8 Conduct usability testing.**
To find out whether a form or questionnaire is working well, conduct usability testing with intended users. Have them fill it out, then debrief to get their reactions and suggestions.
- 11.9 Take into account how the form or questionnaire will be produced, distributed, and processed.**
Work with others to produce a form that is both easy to fill out and easy to process.



How were the Toolkit guidelines developed?

The Toolkit and its guidelines were written for CMS by Jeanne McGee, PhD, McGee & Evers Consulting, Inc., Vancouver, Washington. CMS offers the Toolkit as practical assistance to help you make your written material clear and effective, not as a requirement from CMS.

The set of *Toolkit Guidelines for Writing and Design* is an expanded version of the *Checklist for Assessing Print Materials*. This *Checklist* was part of a manual of technical assistance written for the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) (now known as CMS) by Jeanne McGee and titled *Writing and Designing Print Materials for Beneficiaries: A Guide for State Medicaid Agencies* (HCFA, 1999). The Toolkit is more inclusive than its precursor. The scope of the Toolkit has been expanded to include Medicare and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) as well as Medicaid.

To create the Checklist for Assessing Print Materials, the writer identified and synthesized themes and findings from research, field experience, and existing checklists. She also drew on the expertise and advice of numerous colleagues and subject matter experts across the nation. To help develop and refine

the items for the Checklist, she reviewed a number of checklists in resources that were available in 1999. These included Doak, Doak, & Root (1996); Root & Stableford (1998); Guidry & Larke (1996); Guidry, Kern-Foxworth, & Larke (1996); Ramirez, Stamm, Williams, Stevenson, & Espinoza (1996); the National Cancer Institute (NCI) (1994); and the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) Communications Team (1994).

Some of the checklists that the writer reviewed focus on specific types of materials or specific populations. For example, the Suitability Assessment of Materials (SAM) in *Teaching Patients with Low Literacy Skills* (Doak, Doak, & Root, 1996) was created for use with patient education materials. The cultural competency tools associated with the Texas Cancer Council (Guidry & Larke, 1996; Guidry, Kern-Foxworth, & Larke, 1996; Ramirez, et al., 1996) are focused on specific racial/ethnic groups and a specific type of disease. Some of the checklists she reviewed are scored to yield a numerical score or rating. For example both the SAM and the Cultural Sensitivity Assessment Tool yield a numerical score.

The *Checklist for Assessing Print Materials* published in *Writing and Designing Print Materials for Beneficiaries: A Guide for State Medicaid Agencies* (HCFA, 1999) is broad in scope and is not scored numerically. The Checklist has a descriptive section (“Part A”) with 12 items. The assessment section (“Part B”) has 22 items on writing, 34 items on graphic design, and 4 items on translation.

Using the existing *Checklist for Assessing Print Materials* as the starting point, the writer created the *Toolkit Guidelines for Writing and Design* by reviewing recent literature, seeking suggestions for improvement from colleagues, and responding to feedback from users of the original guide. The resulting Toolkit Guidelines preserve the same general content and reader-centered approach of the original Checklist. The format has changed: the items have been converted from a checklist (with each item posed as a question) into guidelines (with each item describing a desirable feature that helps make written material clear and effective). As before, the topic of cultural appropriateness is integrated throughout the guidelines, topic by topic. The biggest change is that the guidelines for graphic design have been expanded substantially (from 34 items to 46 items). Responding to feedback from users of the original Checklist, the new guidelines for graphic design are more detailed and more comprehensive, and so is the discussion that explains how to apply them (Toolkit Part 5).

The original Checklist included 4 items for language translation. Responding to feedback from users, these have been expanded for the Toolkit. There are now 10 guidelines for translation: see Toolkit Part 11, *Understanding and using the "Toolkit Guidelines for Culturally Appropriate Translation"*.



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