

Clear Writing for a Construction Audience

When creating materials for a construction audience, it's not enough to be technically correct – you must also make sure your message is compelling and accessible to your target audience. Keep in mind that contractors, trainers, and workers may not have time to read a complex document, and the construction labor force includes workers who may have limited English language reading proficiency. Health communications researchers have identified a number of practices you can use to develop materials your audience can understand, remember, and act on.

Before You Begin Writing, Answer Four Key Questions...

1

WHO is your primary audience?

You should be able to identify your primary audience in just a few words.

Examples of a primary audience:

- OSHA outreach instructors
- Construction contractors
- Construction workers
- Ironworkers
- Immigrant workers
- Foremen

2

WHAT do you know about their reading skills?

The average worker or contractor is not a safety and health specialist.

Many terms you use every day may be unfamiliar to some or all of your audience. While many construction workers have strong reading abilities and higher education credentials, approximately 21% lack a high school diploma (2015 Census) and 27% speak a language other than English at home (CPWR Chart Book).

3

WHAT is your main message for your audience?

Your main message is what you want your audience to know after they read your material. It should be short, one to three sentences.

Examples of a main message:

- Falls kill more construction workers than any other type of injury.
- If you work in hot conditions, you are at risk of heat exhaustion and heat stroke. You can protect yourself by taking regular breaks for water, rest and shade.
- You can protect yourself from harmful dusts, fumes, and gases with the right respirator.

4

WHAT is your call to action for your audience?

Your call to action is what you want your audience to do after reading the material. In occupational health and safety, your main message and call to action may overlap.

Examples of a call to action:

- Use fall protection when working at heights higher than six feet.
- Take regular breaks for water when working in hot weather.
- Don't breathe in construction dust. Use water or vacuum systems to prevent the dust from getting into the air and into your lungs.

Your content should be tailored to your primary audience, support your main message, and promote your call to action. If you have more than one primary audience, consider making two separate materials.

Tips for Writing, Layout and Design

Use words your primary audience uses

Occupational safety and health researchers use words that many construction audiences don't. Use the words your primary audience uses. For example, the CDC's *Everyday Words for Public Health Communication* recommends...

- ▶ Instead of **IMPLEMENT** use **CARRY OUT** or **START**
- ▶ Instead of **INFORM** use **TELL**
- ▶ Instead of **REDUCE** use **LOWER**

Use active voice, not passive voice

Use the active voice in sentences whenever possible. The active voice is easier to read and makes clear WHO is called to act.

- ▶ Instead of “**Water must be provided**” use “**Employers must provide water**”
- ▶ Instead of “**Ladders must be inspected before use**” use “**You must inspect the ladder before using it**”

Make the *call to action* clear and concrete

Take steps to make your call to action clearer and more concrete for the reader by:

- ▶ Including one or more **visuals** of a member of your primary audience performing the action
- ▶ Including **specific examples** or **step-by-step descriptions** of the action
- ▶ Explaining why the action will benefit the reader

Avoid long blocks of text

- ▶ Break the text into small chunks with descriptive headings such as “Heat Kills” and “Take Water Breaks.” The headings will help the reader understand and remember the content.
- ▶ Use short bulleted and numbered lists (no more than seven items)

Test with members of your primary audience

Formulas, guides, and checklists are no substitute for feedback from members of your primary audience!

Build field testing into your writing and design process as often as time and resources permit.

Useful Resources

Clear Communication Index (CCI), www.cdc.gov/ccindex/. CDC health communications researchers developed this checklist/self-assessment to help writers create online and print health materials accessible to lay audiences. (The “Four Key Questions Before You Start” were adapted from the CCI.)

Everyday Words for Public Health Communication, <https://tinyurl.com/everydaywords>. This short CDC manual offers plain language substitutes for dozens of health and medical terms, many of which appear in occupational safety and health materials as well.

Federal Plain Language Guidelines, <https://tinyurl.com/Federal-Plain-Language>. The Guidelines offer a how-to and style guide for clear communications.

How to Write Easy-to-Read Health Materials, <https://tinyurl.com/readseasy>. This short webpage by the National Library of Medicine provides a quick review of clear communications tips and techniques, and links to many free online resources.