

Writing for a Lay Audience

Karen Swaffield and Sian Rees

Top Tips: general

- **Clear, concise, understandable**
- **Think of the audience not yourself**

Lay out and design



Short chunks of text with white space
Background colour – blue and purple
particularly difficult

Top Tips: making sense

- **Create logical stepping stones to make things easy to follow**
 - **Bullets points**
 - **Columns - good as long as well spaced or lines between**
 - **Headings and new sections at top of pages**
 - **Short sentences, avoid lots of clauses, commas, brackets**

Ordering ideas eg for a trial leaflet:

audience, purpose, message

- Start with the problem – what it aims to do
- How does this fit the bigger picture
- Why should the reader care

Next

- What does the research consist of
- Who can be involved
- What might the participant gain
- What will happen next

Ordering ideas eg for a trial leaflet:

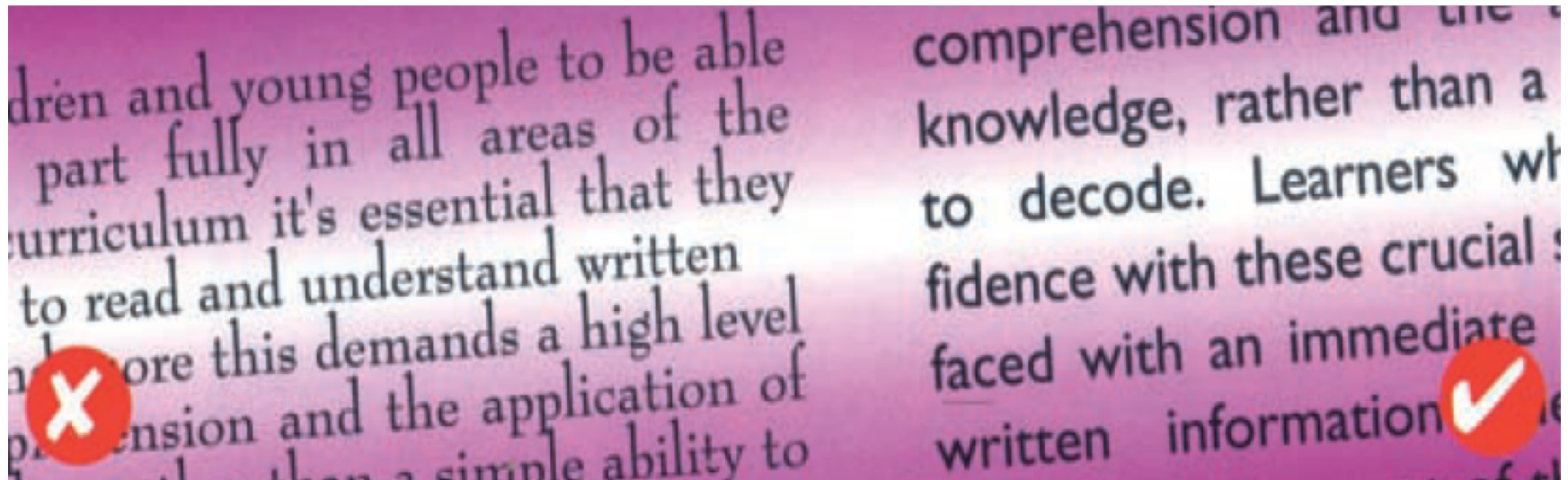
audience, purpose, message

- Start with the problem – what it aims to do
- How does this fit the bigger picture
- Why should the reader care

Next eg for research leaflet

- What does the research consist of
- Who can be involved
- What might the participant gain
- What will happen next

Top tips: line spacing



Top Tips: Font Size and Type

Sans Serif – eg Arial or Calibri
12 or 14

t started
utside and

Top Tips: how to emphasise a point?

- Not underline
- NOT CAPITALS
- *Not Italics*
- **In bold**

Top tips: words and phrasing

- **Use everyday words**
Avoid technical language and acronyms
- **Repetition of easily understood words is ok**

Use **said**, rather than **stated**, **revealed**,
declared, **claimed**

in most cases **said** would do!

Top tips: words and phrasing

Active voice not passive

I... **you**.. and second person **you** should be used in place of third person - **he/she**.

You will have chemotherapy.

Chemotherapy will be given to you.

A report will be sent to your doctor.

We will send the report to your doctor.

Top tips: words and phrasing

Positive phrasing rather than negative

You will have repeat appointments at least once a fortnight.

The usual practice is not to schedule repeat appointments more frequently than once a fortnight.

Readability scores

Eg SMOG – Simple Measure of Gobbledegook!

How do the papers write?

- The Sun:
 - under 12-14
- The Daily Express:
 - under 16
- The Telegraph and The Guardian:
 - over 17

Communicating numbers

Assessing and simplifying the numerical content of health materials

	Harder to understand	Easier to understand
Calculations	Raw figures, ambiguity	Example calculations, descriptions
Terminology	Maths: maximum or majority / minimum or minority / mean / median / diameter	Literacy: most / least or fewer / average / commonest / width or size
Fractions / ratios	Ratios / proportions / fractions / percentages	Absolute values, pictorial representation
Number size and complexity	Large numbers, decimal points	Small numbers, whole numbers
Figures vs. words	Words (e.g. Eighty-eight)	Numbers (e.g. 88)
Concepts	Abstract maths concepts	Real-life examples
Number of calculation steps	Multiple steps	No steps, or single steps with examples. If multiple steps are required consider tables.
Layout	Lots of numbers, small font, distracting information	Few numbers next to simple explanatory text, lots of white space, illustrations and tables may help.

Risk communication

- 1: An open two way exchange of information and opinion about harms and benefits.
- 2: Aims to improve understanding of risk and promote better decisions about health and care.

Communicating risk

Summary points from BMJ

- Strong evidence that format affects patients' understanding and perception of risk
- Emerging evidence that effective risk communication leads to more informed decision making in screening
- Decision aids can help and improve knowledge, awareness, and decision making
- The presentation of data uncertainty is one of the most difficult aspects of risk communication

Without statin









With statin



If 100 people each take a statin (such as simvastatin) for 10 years:

- About 5 people will be "saved" from having a cardiovascular event by taking the statin (the yellow faces above)
- About 80 people will not have a cardiovascular event but would not have done so even if they had not taken a statin (the green faces above)
- About 15 people will still have a cardiovascular event (the red faces above), even though they take a statin

Communicating uncertainty

Intervention	Icon	Description
Beneficial		For which effectiveness has been demonstrated by clear evidence from systematic reviews, randomised controlled trials, or the best alternative source of information, and for which expectation of harms is small compared with the benefits
Likely to be beneficial		For which effectiveness is less well established than for those listed under “beneficial”
Trade-off between benefits and harms		For which clinicians and patients should weigh up the beneficial and harmful effects according to individual circumstances and priorities
Unknown effectiveness		For which there are currently insufficient data or data of inadequate quality
Unlikely to be beneficial		For which lack of effectiveness is less well established than for those listed under “likely to be ineffective or harmful”
Likely to be ineffective or harmful		For which ineffectiveness or associated harm has been demonstrated by clear evidence

ALCOHOL AND BREAST CANCER RISK

Of 1,000 women in the UK

who each drink...



No alcohol



116 diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime



Up to 3 units a day



5 EXTRA CASES

121 diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime



3 to 6 units a day



27 EXTRA CASES

143 diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime



More than 6 units a day



70 EXTRA CASES

186 diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime



Source: CRUK estimates, May 2017, based on Bagnardi et al 2015 breast cancer risk, CRUK 2012 UK lifetime risk estimates, and Health Survey for England 2015 maximum alcohol units consumed on heaviest drinking day in past week.

LET'S BEAT CANCER **SOONER**
cruk.org



CANCER
RESEARCH
UK

How are you going to improve your writing?

1: What are you going to start doing?

2: What are you going to continue to do?

3: What are you going to stop doing?