MaineHealth
Education and Training

A Plain-Language Checklist for Creating and Reviewing Your Materials

1. Do I need to create new materials?

☐ **Check for existing materials.**
Contact the Education and Training Program at Educationtraining@MaineHealth.org or 866-609-5183 for help with finding patient materials that are easy to read.

2. Do I know my audience?

☐ **Consider your potential readers.**
Who are your readers exactly? What are their beliefs and preferences? What challenges do they face? Remember, there is no "general public."

☐ **Evaluate the needs of your readers.**
What do they want to know? How much detail do they need? What is the right tone for these readers? What action do you want them to take?

☐ **Engage your readers.**
Use style, word choice, voice, organization and visuals to draw your readers into your message.

3. Did I organize my document for my reader?

☐ **Provide a clear take-away message.**
Your document should have a clear, specific message, such as, "What to Do on the Day of Your Surgery."

☐ **Put your main message first.**
Readers appreciate documents that begin with the main point.

☐ **Answer their questions.**
Before writing your document, write down the questions your readers have about your topic. Make sure each section or paragraph of your document answers a reader's question.

4. Have I used an easy-to-read style?

☐ **Use a conversational tone when appropriate.**
Using the pronouns, I, you and we, make your document more conversational and help your reader focus on your message.

☐ **Use familiar, concrete, non-technical words.**
Avoid medical jargon.

☐ **Consider whether each adjective and adverb adds meaning.**
Avoid padding your writing with words like very, really, actually or carefully.

☐ **Use the active voice whenever possible.**
The active voice makes it clear who or what (the subject) is doing the action (the verb). Passive sentences often do not clearly identify who is performing the action.

5. Have I written this as concisely as possible and kept the message?

☐ **Get to the point.**
Put the most important information first.

☐ **Keep sentences and paragraphs short.**
Write paragraphs with no more than 5 to 7 sentences of 10 to 20 words. Stick to 3 to 5 major points.

6. Have I explained the numbers?

☐ **Explain any numbers you used.**
Explain normal ranges. Do the math for the reader. Use whole numbers instead of percentages.

7. Have I used the right visuals?

☐ **Use illustrations or visuals appropriately.**
Visuals can help the reader understand your message. Images should support your message and help readers understand what they need to do. Do not use clipart.

☐ **Use typography and white space appropriately.**
Fonts and other typographical elements should make your document more readable, not fancier. Having enough blank space in the margins and between sections also increases readability. Other typographical elements to consider are:

- Left justification
- No more than 2 fonts. Check with your marketing staff on your organization's font preferences.
- Use **bold**, not ALL CAPITALS. Use *italics* and underline sparingly.
- In general, font size for text should be 12-14 point and headings should be 16-18 point.
- Dark fonts on a light background are easiest to read. Colored fonts should be limited to titles and headers.

8. Did I make my document "skimmable"?

☐ **Use headings.**
Headings enable your reader to skim your document. Write heading in the form of questions, statements or action phrases.

☐ **Use vertical lists with numbers or bullets.**
Lists, which group similar items, are easy for readers to skim. Choose numbers when presenting a list with items in a specific sequence or rank order. Use bullets when the items listed are equivalent in importance.

9. Have I gotten feedback?

☐ **Test for readability and user reactions.**
The Education and Training program can tell you the average grade level needed to understand your document. There is no required grade level for patient materials at MaineHealth but using the concepts in this checklist will make your document easy to read. Ask a few potential readers for their feedback.

☐ **Get approvals.**