

Finishing Touches

Writing Style

In general, most publications, such as community health assessments and grants, should be written in a formal style using third-person point of view (he/she) rather than second-person point of view (you). The use of contractions (can't, didn't) and slang should be avoided. However, sometimes a less formal, or more personal, tone may be appropriate, depending on the nature of the material and the intended audience. For example, materials that will be used for health education or health interventions may be written at a lower language level but also use second-person point of view and slang in order to be more relatable and engaging to readers.

Regardless of the style used, all writing is easier to read and follow if appropriate transitions are incorporated. Transitions are words and phrases that help readers flow from one topic to the next. A writer should anticipate points in the material where readers may become confused and attempt to guide them through difficult passages using transitions. Transitions can also be used to subtly emphasize different points the author wishes to make. Compare the effectiveness of the following paragraphs:

Example 1: Many people find writing about data to be difficult. The process can be simplified. Keep the audience in mind. Present the data in multiple formats. Provide adequate context.

Example 2: Many people find writing about data to be difficult, but the process can be simplified. First, keep the audience in mind. Then, present the data in multiple formats. Finally, provide adequate context.

Example 3: Many people find writing about data to be difficult. However, the process of writing about data can be simplified if principles of clear communication are followed. Most importantly, always keep the audience in mind. Also, present the data in multiple formats to help readers with different learning styles understand it. Finally, provide adequate contextual information so that readers can interpret the true meaning of the information.

A good resource for writing with effective transitions can be found at:

<https://www.msu.edu/~jdowell/135/transw.html>. This website briefly explains transitions, lists a large number of transitional words and phrases, and describes when each would be used.

Like transitions, active voice can also strengthen writing. Active voice refers to the use of an active verb (increased, expanded) rather than a passive verb (is, was). In active voice, the subject of the sentence is actually performing the action of the verb, whereas in passive voice, the subject receives the action of the verb.

Passive Example: The nutrition class is taught by a health educator.

Active Example: A health educator teaches the nutrition class.

Passive voice is not technically incorrect and may be the only option for some sentences. However, if overused, passive voice becomes repetitive and boring to readers. Furthermore, active sentences tend to be more direct and clear. Therefore, passive voice should be used only if absolutely necessary.

The following website explains the process of converting a sentence from passive voice to active voice: <http://www.towson.edu/ows/activepass.htm>.

Not all sentences containing *is* or *was* are written in the passive voice. Often these terms are used to indicate past tense.

Example 1: Missouri's heart disease mortality rate was declining from 2000 to 2007.

Example 2: Missouri's heart disease mortality rate declined from 2000 to 2007.

However, be cautious of overusing *is* and *was* even in past tense sentences. In general, writing will be stronger and more interesting if *is* and *was* are used sparingly. Consider the impact of the following two paragraphs.

Paragraph 1: Lack of health insurance is a major problem in Adams County. The number of uninsured residents in 2007 was 3,257. This was a large increase over 1997, when only 1,129 residents lacked health insurance. Over the past ten years, health care costs have increased dramatically. As a result, health care costs are a major concern for Adams County residents.

Paragraph 2: Over the past ten years, lack of health insurance emerged as a major problem in Adams County. The number of uninsured residents grew from 1,129 in 1997 to 3,257 in 2007. During this same time period, health care costs increased dramatically. As a result, health care costs continue to be a major concern for Adams County residents.

Executive Summary, Table of Contents, and Index

If a written report is lengthy, adding an executive summary, a table of contents, and an index may help readers to more easily navigate the document.

Executive summaries are useful for audience members who wish to gain a general understanding of the contents of a report but lack the time to read the entire document. “No more than one to two pages, the executive summary provides a very brief description of the methodology, results, and implications of the study. The executive summary is intended to stand alone from the report as well as to be a first section within a more comprehensive document. Consequently, the executive summary needs to be tightly written, present only the most meaningful elements of the research design and significant numerical data, highlight overall conclusions and implications, and tell the reader where to obtain the full report or more information.”¹ An example can be found at <http://health.mo.gov/data/pdf/2016NosocomialReport.pdf>.

A table of contents can be placed at the front of a document to guide readers to major sections of the report. In most cases, entries in the table of contents should exactly match the section labels. Word processing programs, such as Microsoft Word, often contain a feature that quickly generates a table of contents based on label formats. Any text that is formatted in a specified style is automatically included in the table of contents.

An index can be placed at the end of a document to guide readers to key terms used in the report. In Microsoft Word, users must mark the terms to be included in the index. The index feature then finds all instances of each term and includes the appropriate page numbers in the index section.

Internet Publications

Reports can now be published very inexpensively via websites. If a report is to be posted on the internet, be sure that the colors and fonts are still clear on a variety of monitors and browsers. If a report is very large, consider separating it into different sections so that readers can download it more easily. If an organization is required to be ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliant, it should make certain that its website can be read by those with visual disabilities.

¹ Bers T. H., with Seybert, J. A. *Effective reporting*. Tallahassee, FL: The Association for Institutional Research. 1999.

Presentations

Presentations require a few additional considerations. When preparing a narrative report, clear, concise writing is important, but an author has more of an opportunity to fully explain himself or herself in writing. During a presentation, however, the presenter and visual aids must be especially clear and concise in order to convey the intended message in a limited amount of time.

Similarly, although a clear, readable font is necessary in a written report, font size and type become especially critical during a presentation to ensure that all participants can read the information. One of the most common failings of PowerPoint presentations is the use of fonts that are too small or in colors that do not contrast well against the background colors. If large tables of data need to be presented, consider including these tables in a handout so that participants can read them more easily. Handouts are also helpful if participants may need to take notes or if a presentation will be given in a large room in which it may be difficult for all participants to clearly see the visual aids.

No matter how effective visual aids may be, presentations will not be successful if they are not well-organized and polished. Practice is important. Before the main event, practice in front of a small group of people willing to provide constructive criticism and interaction during the rehearsal. “Effective oral presentations frequently require the presenter to make real-time, instant modifications in the material or delivery to accommodate audience responsiveness, or lack thereof.”² Such a rehearsal allows the presenter to practice observing nonverbal cues from the audience and responding to spontaneous questions.

Proofreading

Allow adequate time to proofread reports and presentations before publishing or presenting them. Take advantage of the spelling and grammar review function that is now available in most word processing software packages, but be aware that these review functions do not catch all mistakes and sometimes flag text that is actually correct. Publications should always be proofread by someone other than the author. Proofreading involves more than simply looking for mistakes in spelling and grammar. Proofreaders should also look for passages that are unclear and sections that lack citations.

Ideally, request that someone with characteristics similar to those of the target audience review the publication. For example, before making a presentation to the general public, ask someone who is not familiar with health data to listen to the presentation and review the visual aids or handouts. Such a person can provide insight into what terms and information the general public might not understand.

² Bers T. H., with Seybert, J. A. *Effective reporting*. Tallahassee, FL: The Association for Institutional Research. 1999.

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