

COMMUNICATION NOTES



SELF-EDITING: PUTTING YOUR READERS FIRST

Every report prepared for the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation has the same guidelines: start with one page of main messages, followed by a three-page executive summary, then present your findings and recommendations in no more than 25 pages of writing a bright, interested, but not research-trained person can readily absorb.

So how do you go about writing in a new way after a lifetime of conforming to academic standards for communicating ideas? It's not easy, but put simply, you have to step outside yourself: borrow the eyes, the need for clarity, the background knowledge, of the person you're writing for. What questions will the reader have, if he or she doesn't know much about health services research or what you're trying to do? Don't assume knowledge - check out the way newspapers tend to slide a little supporting information, or background, into every story to back up the new points. Take it as a model for your work.

No final report should be considered ready until it's been reviewed by one of your decision-maker partners. Let them decide if the writing suits your audience and the messages are what that audience needs to hear. But even before that, ask others to read your work: they'll see it more clearly than you ever will. However, a third party may not be available and in any case, you should always do a first edit yourself. Here are a few tips on how to edit your own work:

Give yourself a break

Don't try to do a self-edit of your work as soon as it's done. Finish a draft in time to let it sit a day or two before you go back to it; you'll do a better rewrite if you come to it with a fresh eye.

Print it out

To do your edit, print the piece. It's notoriously easy to skip over writing problems on a computer screen, but sliding over gaps in logic or grammar errors is much harder if you're reading a hard copy. And never mind that it was a big day when you finally read without moving your lips - always read your work aloud as you edit. It's hard to fool your ears into thinking a convoluted sentence or weak argument makes sense.

Cut wordiness

One of the most common flaws in research writing is its wordiness. In writing, as in many things, less is more, but the tendency instead is to pile on word after word, in the belief this will make the meaning more clear. Paradoxically, the result of this effort is usually to obscure your message. Ideas don't get clearer when they're swamped in a sea of modifiers and qualifiers. Cut and cut again. Don't let yourself say "going through a development process" if you can just say "developing." Get rid of fancied-up versions of straightforward words - don't say "pre-plan" or "pro-active." Watch for wadding: you don't need to say "enhancing current and future capacity." If it's enhanced now, it stays that way until something goes wrong. "Enhance capacity" is enough. "Increase capacity" is even better.

Banish jargon

It's as natural as breathing to you, but your readers may not know the jargon you use constantly. Force yourself to look for an everyday term. Aren't "health outcomes" really results? Must you refer to someone's health status, or can you talk about their health? Technical terms often don't clarify your meaning and should be replaced; don't say a health plan has "a high rate of disenrolment;" say patients leave. If you do use a technical term, make sure you explain it right then and there. But, as a great Canadian publisher once said, "Why use a 50-cent word when a 10-cent word will do?"

Avoid acronyms

Acronyms may seem the inevitable result of wordiness - if we keep piling words on words, we're naturally going to look for ways to make things simple again. Don't do it. You may think calling

"continuity of care" COC is universal because everyone you deal with uses it, but it's not so. What about music lovers and the Canadian Opera Company? Even if someone knows, or works out, or you told them at the beginning of the paper what an acronym means, they're hard to read. Acronyms are like boulders on a path - they may not actually trip you, but climbing over them still slows you down. The rule is concepts should never be expressed as acronyms; don't say "MI" for mentally ill or LOS for length of stay. Organizations may sometimes be referred to by their acronym, but the first reference must always be spelled out, followed by the acronym in brackets: "the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation (CHSRF)." The trouble is, names are getting so complicated these days, the acronyms are getting unwieldy. It's much better to use a real word as your short form - "the Foundation."

Use active verbs

Something about setting words down instead of speaking them leads us to slip into the passive voice. We write "The speech was given by Mary Smith," rather than the more powerful "Mary Smith spoke." Try to eliminate variations on the verb "to be" and go straight to a more active choice. "Professor Smith researches waiting lists" is a lot stronger than "research is being done on waiting lists by Professor Smith." This brings up another important point: don't back into sentences. Just as the text as a whole should have what's most important at the beginning, so should a sentence. Usually it's best to put the noun, the subject of the sentence, up front with a verb close by.

Check the lead and organization

"Lead" is a newspaper term for the first paragraph of an article; for our purposes, it can also be the opening of any section within a larger piece. A lead should state briefly the most important thing you have to say in that section, the essence of your findings. Leads are usually - and usefully - followed by a paragraph or two of background or context. When you've developed a clear lead, and set the stage for your ideas with some background, organize subsequent ideas and topics in descending order of interest, so your paragraphs flow, working through the other important points you have to make. The final step in a self-edit is a backward one - after all the detailed work, stand back a little and consider the whole. Have you highlighted and led with the things your readers will care about most? Is all the information relevant to the main themes? Are the sections in a logical order? Will your readers think so?

Think of it as character-building

Remember, it's important not to take edits from an outside party personally. Changing your style isn't simple and efforts to make your work easier to read are not intended as criticism; it's just part of the process of getting your research used.

[PDF](#) - 25 KB

1565 Carling Avenue, Suite 700, Ottawa, Ontario K1Z 8R1
Tel: [613-728-2238](tel:613-728-2238) · Fax: [613-728-3527](tel:613-728-3527)