TOOLKIT for Making Written Material Clear and Effective

SECTION 1: Background

PART 2

Using a reader-centered approach to develop and test written material

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services

TOOLKIT Part 2

Using a reader-centered approach to develop and test written material

List of figures in this chapter:

This document is Part 2 of the *Toolkit for Making Written Material Clear and Effective*. The Toolkit has 11 Parts. It was written for the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) by Jeanne McGee, PhD, McGee & Evers Consulting, Inc. The guidelines and other parts of the Toolkit reflect the views of the writer. CMS offers this Toolkit as practical assistance to help you make your written material clear and effective (not as requirements from CMS).

Preface about the Toolkit

This document, Toolkit Part 2, is part of the *Toolkit for Making Written Material Clear and Effective.* To provide context for this document, we begin with background on the Toolkit as a whole.

What is the Toolkit?

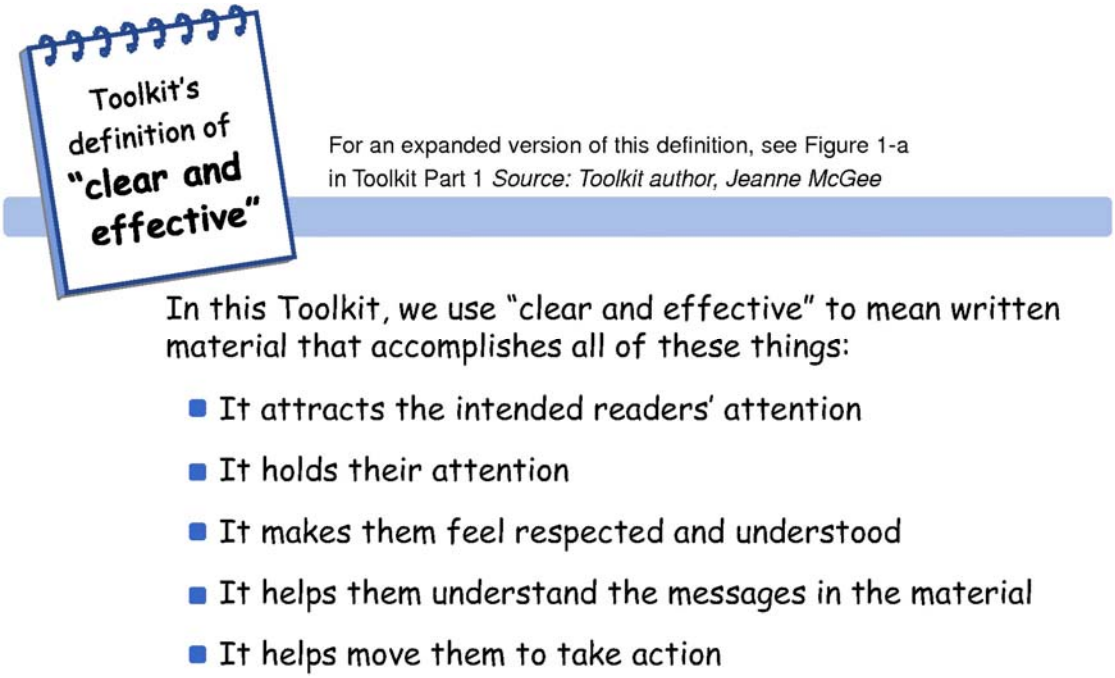
The *Toolkit for Making Written Material Clear and Effective* is an 11-part health literacy resource (see Toolkit Part 1). It's a detailed and comprehensive set of tools to help you make written material easier for people to understand and use. This Toolkit is from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and it is oriented toward the programs administered by CMS. These programs include Medicare, Medicaid, and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). In this Toolkit, we focus on material in printed formats that is written for people with Medicare or Medicaid and the parents or guardians of children with coverage through CHIP. These "CMS audiences" are culturally, linguistically, and demographically diverse, and they include significant numbers of people with low literacy skills. Much of the discussion in the Toolkit also applies to material that is written for those who work with or assist members of CMS audiences, such as material written for family members of people with Medicare, outreach workers, agency staff, community organizations, and care providers.

What topics are covered in the Toolkit?

To help you develop or revise your written material, this 11-part Toolkit includes detailed guidelines for writing, graphic design, and culturally appropriate translation from English into other languages. It includes a book-length guide to methods for testing material with readers, and covers special topics in writing and design. These special topics include cautions about using readability formulas to assess material, things to know if your material is for older adults, a comparison of written material on websites versus written material in printed formats, and an extended "before" and "after" example of using the Toolkit guidelines to revise a brochure. The table of contents for all parts of the Toolkit is available at the website where you can download the various parts. For background on the Toolkit, see Toolkit Part 1, *About the Toolkit and how it can help you.* For the full list of guidelines for writing and design and how to use them, see Toolkit Part 3, *Summary List of the "Toolkit Guidelines for Writing and Design".*

A reader-centered approach

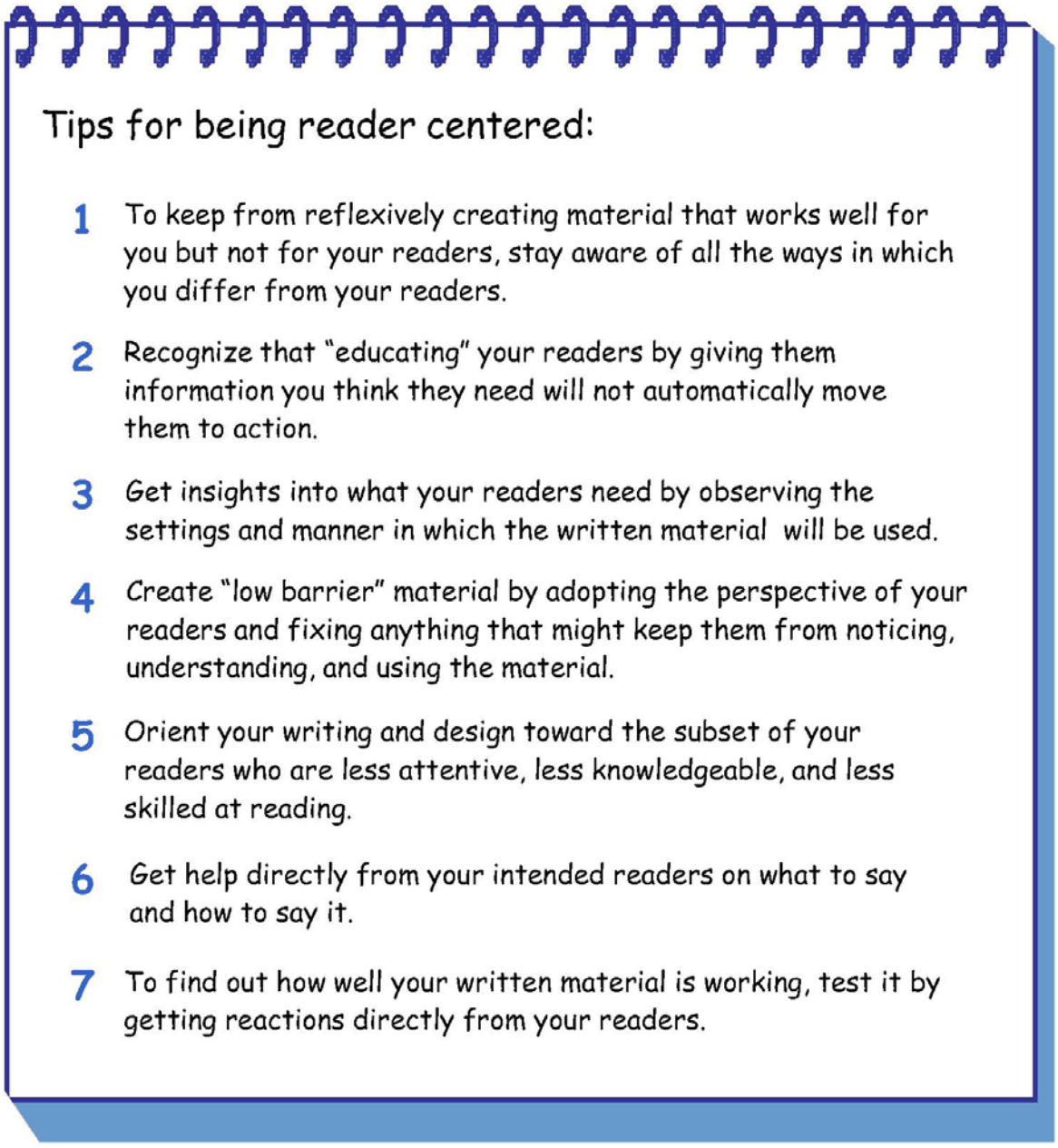
The topic of this document, Toolkit Part 2, is using a reader-centered approach to develop and test your written material. The need to be reader centered is the main theme throughout all parts of this Toolkit. If you want your written material to be clear and effective, it's essential to be reader centered.



These things that make material clear and effective all have one thing in common: **they focus on how your intended readers react to the material.** It's the readers who decide whether the material looks interesting, whether they feel it has been written for them, whether they care about what it says, whether they find it easy to understand, and whether it influences what they think, feel, or do.

Since readers are the ultimate judges of the written material, producing material that is clear and effective for them requires that you look at the material from *their* point of view. Figure 2-a below has tips to help you do this.

Figure 2-a. Tips for being reader centered.



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Remember that you are writing for your readers, not yourself

To keep from reflexively creating material that works well for you but not your readers, stay aware of all the ways in which you differ from your readers.

For many of us, "writing for your readers" is not as simple and self-evident as it sounds. Identifying and understanding the ways in which you differ from your readers will make it easier for you to stay focused on looking at the written material from their point of view rather than your own.

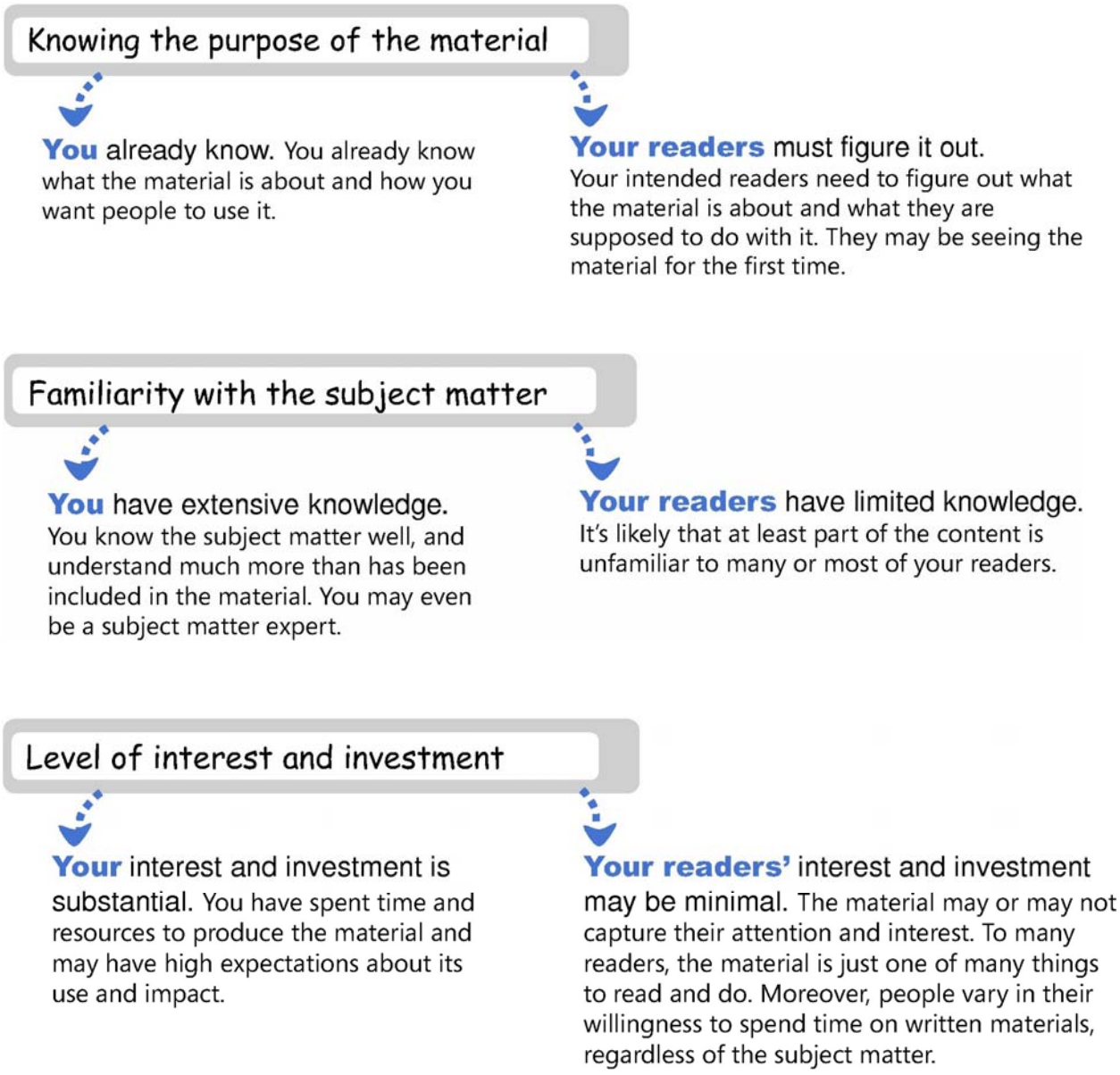
How do you differ from your intended readers?

Taking a reader-centered approach means reminding yourself that you are writing for your readers, not yourself. For many of us, "writing for your readers" is not as simple and self-evident as it sounds. Since we are the audience we know best, it's easy to slip into writing something that works well for us but may not work as well for our intended readers. It's not that we do this deliberately. It's just that our taken-for-granted assumptions about written materials are based largely on our own knowledge, attitudes, literacy skills, and experiences. Unless we make a *deliberate and sustained effort to see the material the way our intended readers will see it*, the default is to implicitly create something with ourselves in mind.

To cultivate a reader-centered mindset, it helps to start by looking at the ways in which you differ from the people you are trying to reach with your written material. Figure 2-b below provides a list of common differences between the creators and users of written material.

Figure 2-b. Common differences between those who create written material and the readers who use it.

The chart below outlines ways in which you and the other professionals who develop written material are likely to differ from the people who will be reading and using it. The size and nature of these differences between you and your intended readers will vary from one project to the next. There may be very large gaps between you and your readers in some of the areas listed below, and smaller gaps in others.



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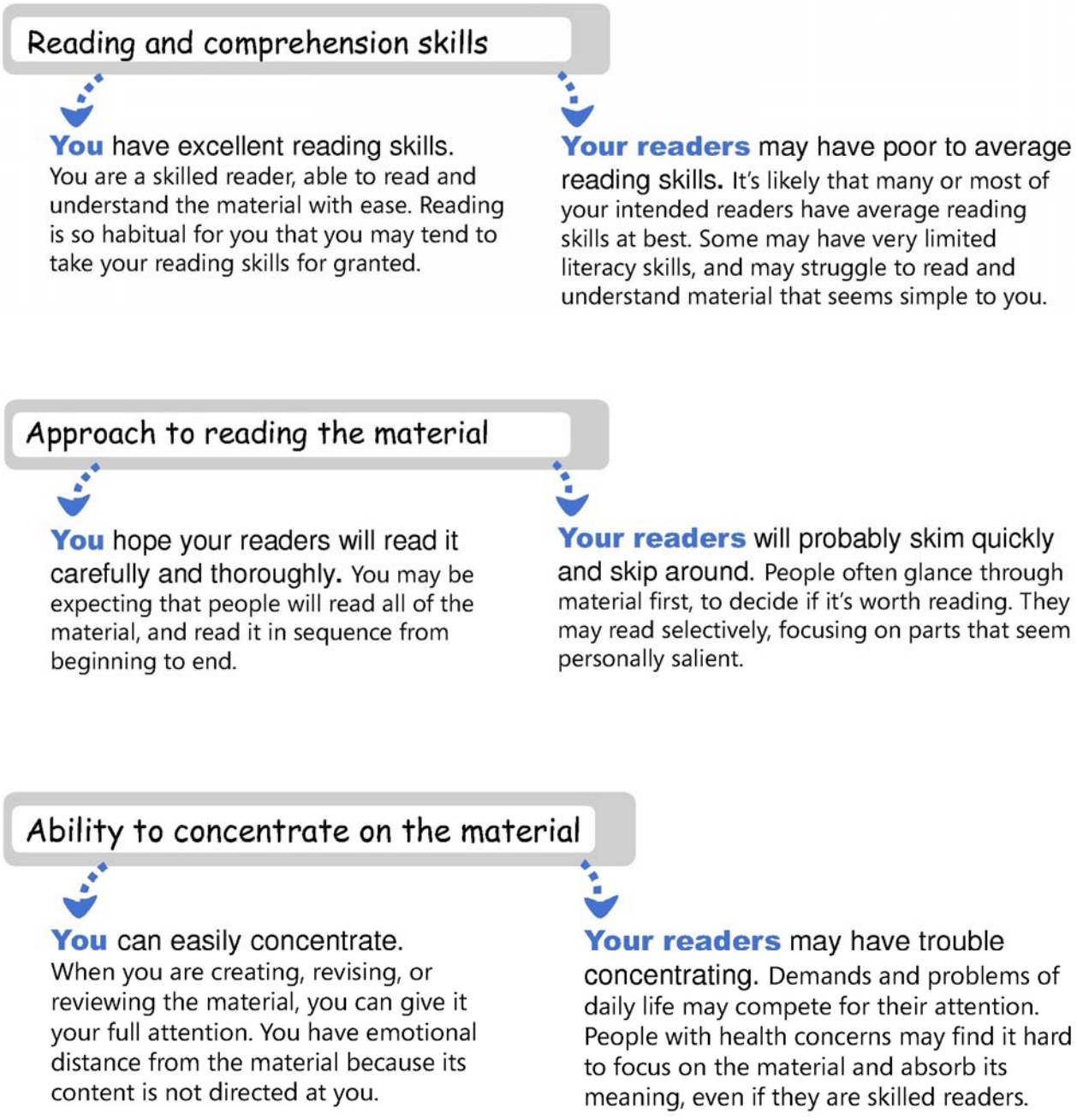

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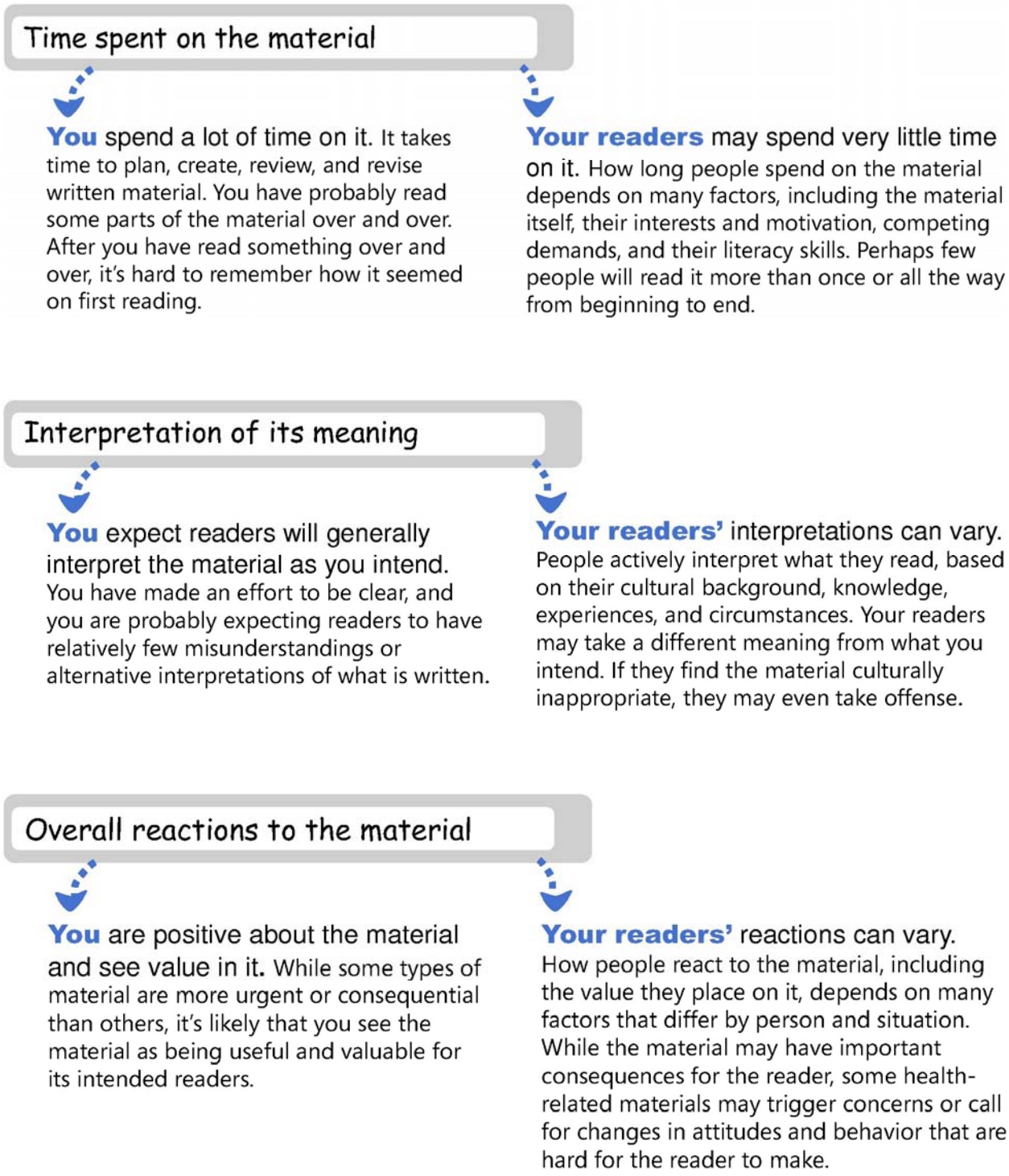

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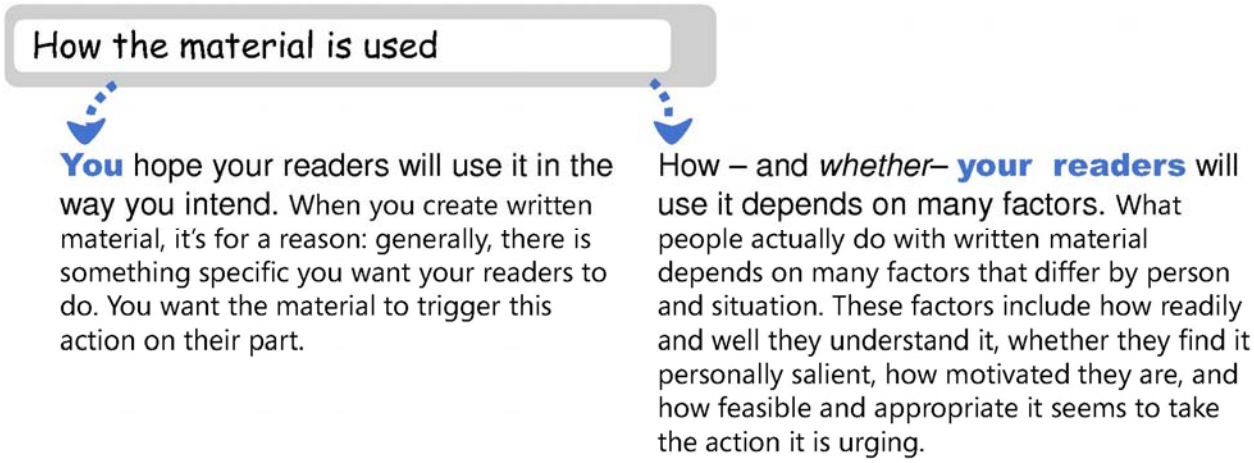


Source: Created for this Toolkit.

The chart above in Figure 2-b shows how risky it can be to use our own perspectives, rather than our readers' perspectives, to guide development of written material. Just because the material appeals and makes sense to us doesn't mean that it will to the people we are trying to reach.

Figure 2-c below suggests great resources for using a reader-centered approach to develop and test your written material. Very different from each other in topic and focus, together these resources can energize and inspire you to stay focused on your readers' point of view and use it to guide decisions you make in creating your material.

Figure 2-c. Resources for being reader centered.

Written by Janice (Ginny) Redish, this is the first chapter in *Techniques for Technical Communicators*, a book edited by Carol M. Barnum and Saul Carliner. The discussion and examples in this chapter paint a vivid picture of the active cognitive efforts involved in reading written material, showing how writing and document design can help or hinder readers. This chapter summarizes research evidence about how readers work with documents and discusses practical implications.

This book by William Smith is based on columns he wrote for Social Marketing Quarterly. It is available to download at the Academy for Educational Development website (see end of Toolkit Part 2 for details). Smith describes this publication as "low cost suggestions about how 'thinking like a marketer' can improve your program of social change." Full of stories and ideas, this book will help you think about reader motivation and other reader-centered issues in a fresh and practical way.

This report by Elizabeth Hoy, Erin Kenney, and Ana Talavera gives an in-depth description of how reader feedback was used to develop a model guide that presented health plan information for diverse populations in California. It explains the results of reader testing sessions and shows how the model guide was modified after reviewing feedback from readers. The research was sponsored by a partnership of the California Health Care Foundation and the California Department of Health Services, and focused specifically on making consumer-friendly information available to Medi-Cal beneficiaries.

http://erc.msh.org/qualityandculture

This website is designed to assist healthcare organizations throughout the US in providing high-quality, culturally competent services to multi-ethnic populations. This website offers advice and resources to help providers better understand a range of issues including diversity, nonverbal communications, and health disparities. This website is updated frequently, and it includes numerous links to other resources.

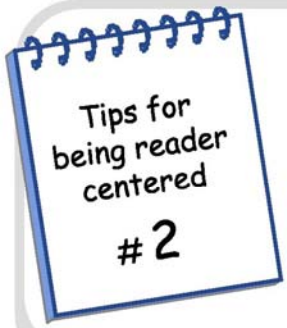
www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy

This website developed by Rima Rudd and others gives a nice overview of the various components of creating and assessing print materials. It is designed to help writers produce and test materials that are clear and easy to read. It includes an extensive list of resources available on the web and in print.

This book by Helen Osborne offers practical tips in a conversational manner. It covers a very broad range of communication situations and issues in a thoughtful and consumer-focused way. While this book does not focus on developing and testing written material, the examples and ideas it offers are a great catalyst for thinking about how you could communicate with your readers in more effective ways.

For full references, see the end of this document.

Look at motivation from your readers' point of view



Recognize that "educating" your readers by giving them information you think they need will not automatically move them to action.

Instead of asking what you want your readers *to know*, try asking what you want them *to do*. This shift in perspective will encourage you to look at things from the reader's vantage point and take account of what might motivate your readers to take the action you are seeking.

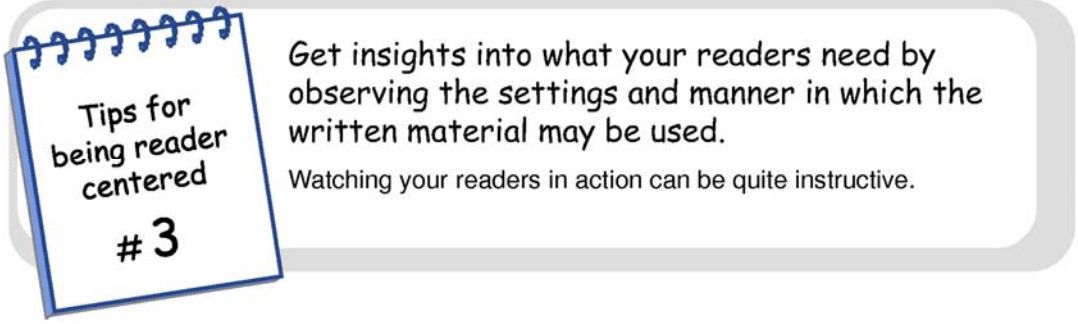
Sometimes we develop written material with the mindset that our intended readers "need to be educated" about the issues we cover in the material. But no matter how good our intentions, and how important the topic, it's possible that the people we are trying to reach will have no interest in being educated in the way that we've envisioned. And it's also possible that even if they are interested in being educated about the issues, what they learn will not lead them to change their attitudes or behavior.

Material that is created to "educate" people typically focuses on what *you* want them to know: it reflects a *producer-centered* perspective rather than a reader-centered perspective. It reflects your hope that once they *know* what you want them to know, they will *do* what you want them to do. But the simple act of giving people information—even when people understand and accept it—does not automatically move them to action.

So instead of looking at your written material from your own point of view, by seeing it as a means of educating your readers, try looking at it from the reader's point of view. Instead of focusing on what you want your readers to *know*, try focusing on what you want them *to do*. This shift in perspective will encourage you to look at things from the reader's vantage point and take account of what might motivate your readers to take the action you are seeking.

As we saw in Figure 2-b, which outlines differences between you and your readers, it's important to keep reminding yourself that you are writing for your readers, not yourself. What motivates you may not motivate your readers. Taking a reader-centered approach means recognizing and accepting that you cannot change your readers' interests and values. Taking a reader-centered approach means finding ways to make the material of interest and value to them. It means giving reasons to do what you want them to do—reasons that are compelling *to them*. For in-depth and lively discussion of looking at motivation from the reader's point of view, see *Social Marketing Lite* by William Smith (1999).

Learn by observing where and how the material will be used



Commercial marketing uses features of a setting to influence consumers and sell products. For example, it's no accident when stores put toys on low shelves within easy reach of children and put impulse items near the checkout counter. Or that shopping mall escalators are positioned in ways that force you to walk past a long row of stores.

How do commercial market researchers figure out these and other tactics that work so well for selling? Often, they use results from field observation studies. In pure observation studies, researchers unobtrusively observe, listen, and record in great detail exactly what consumers do in public places. Sometimes the researchers assume a more active role, such as mystery shoppers who spot-check quality of customer service in stores and hotels.

This powerful technique of field study is available to you, too. Observing audience behavior in settings where the written material may be used is an easy, low-cost way to learn more about your intended readers and gain insights into ways to improve your written material. Figure 2-d below shows an example.

Figure 2-d. **Example:** Using field observation to improve written instructions for physical therapy exercises.

Suppose that you are working on revising patient instruction sheets for physical therapy exercises. Think about the useful things you could learn by going to the setting and watching patients and physical therapists to see how the instruction sheets are actually presented and used. Direct observation would let you see how therapists work with a patient to explain an exercise, watch the patient perform it, and follow-up with additional help on technique. It would also let you observe how and when the written instruction sheet is presented to the patient. Ideally, you could also watch the patient use the instruction sheet without assistance from the therapist.

What you learn by observing the patterns of behavior on the part of therapist and patient can help you refine the written material to make it easier for the patient to understand and use. To give just two examples of how you might use what you learn through observation:

- Suppose that you observe that the instruction sheet omits many things the therapist said to help the patient learn to perform the exercise correctly and avoid further injury. You could expand the written instructions to include this extra coaching. The expanded instructions would anticipate and address problems and questions that are likely to come up later on at home when patients struggle to remember exactly how they did that exercise during their therapy session.

- Suppose that the written instructions include one illustration that uses an arrow to indicate the way patients are supposed to move their arms. When you watch patients using these written instructions as their only guide, you see that this illustration is too poorly drawn or incomplete for them to follow. To help patients do the exercise correctly, you could replace the single illustration with a series of several illustrations that show different stages of movement of the arms.

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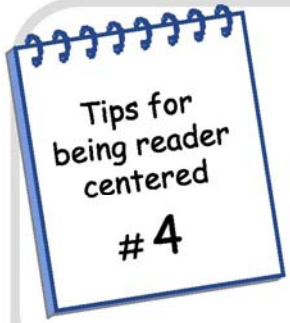
Focus on removing common barriers

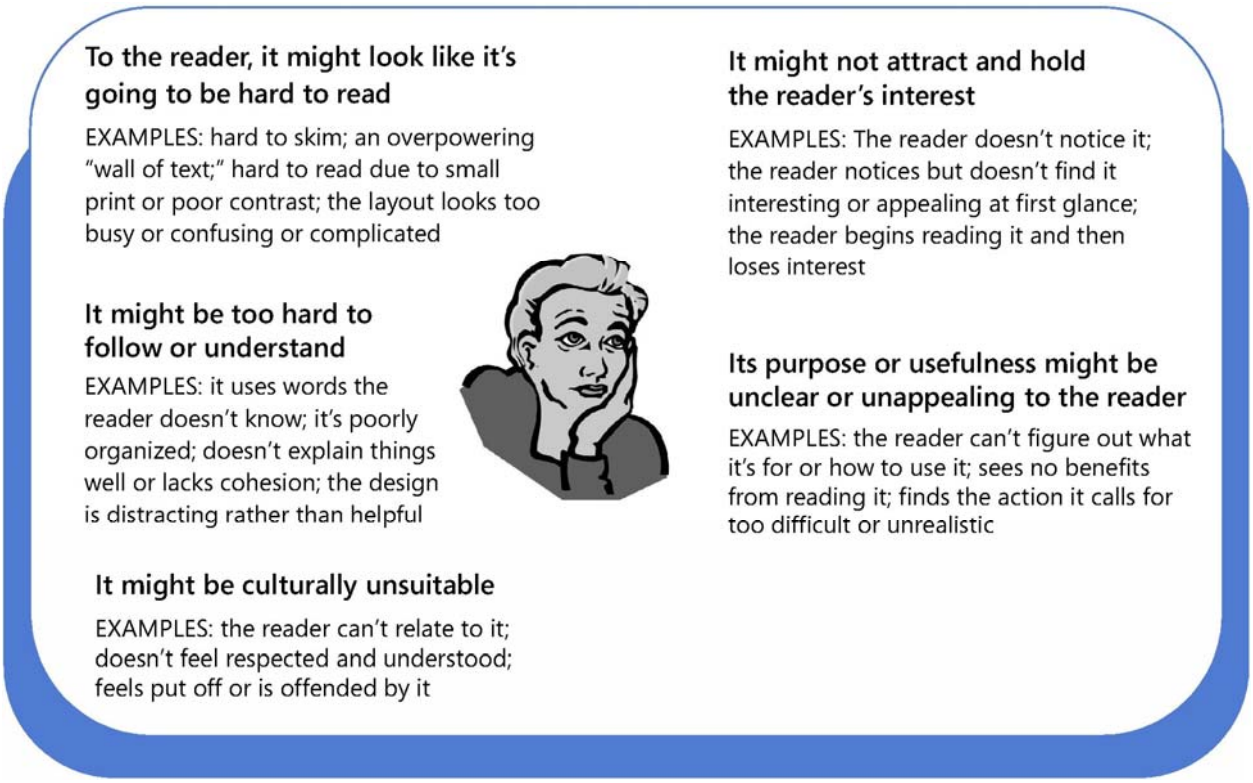


Create "low barrier" material by adopting the perspective of your readers and fixing anything that might keep them from noticing, understanding, and using the material.

Looking at the material from your intended readers' point of view rather than your own will help you identify and remove aspects of content, organization, writing, and design that might be barriers for your readers.

When you consider all the ways in which you differ from your intended readers, as outlined in Figure 2-b above, you become aware that many things about the material that are not barriers for you might be sizeable barriers for your intended readers. This realization can change your entire approach to developing written material. You will find yourself noticing details of content, writing, and design that might keep your intended readers from noticing, understanding, and using the material. The diagram in Figure 2-e below shows some common types of barriers.

Figure 2-e. Barriers that can keep people from understanding and using written material.



Source: Created for this Toolkit. This figure summarizes many of the topics that are addressed in the Toolkit Guidelines for Writing and Design. For details, see Toolkit Parts 3, 4, and 5.

Focusing on removing possible barriers is a very powerful and effective way to make written material easier for your intended readers to understand and use. To look at the material from your reader's point of view, you will need to work hard at suspending your own reading skills and habits, your subject matter knowledge, and your taken-for-granted preferences and assumptions. Figure 2-f below gives an example.

Figure 2-f. **Example:** Taking the reader's perspective to identify possible barriers in written material.

Suppose you are a clinician who is revising a fact sheet about asthma for patients who are newly diagnosed. Many of your patients have low literacy skills and you want to make the fact sheet appealing and easy for them to understand and use. The fact sheet you are using now begins with a formal definition of asthma and then shows cutaway diagrams that compare normal and inflamed airways. This approach reflects a medical model and it makes sense to you as a clinician. **But when you take a fresh look at the fact sheet from your intended *reader's* point of view—rather than your own—you begin to see some big barriers for your readers:**

- **Words and sentences**. You notice that the formal definition of asthma uses long and complicated sentences and words such as *inflammation* and *constriction* that will be unfamiliar and too difficult for your intended readers. You realize that starting with this type of definition will confuse and discourage your intended readers rather than inform them. You think about how you could rework the beginning to tell them what they need to know about asthma using words they can understand.

- **Illustrations.** You notice that the cross-sectional diagrams of airways that are so familiar and simple to you are actually very abstract and complex. You realize that for a patient who lacks your subject matter knowledge and familiarity with conventions for medical illustration, this type of static and greatly magnified cross-sectional drawing of an airway, shown completely out of context, is likely to be baffling. You think about other ways you could explain the key points about normal and inflamed airways that would make more sense to your readers.

- **Writing style and tone**. You notice that the overall tone of the fact sheet is dry and impersonal. You know that newly diagnosed patients tend to be concerned about having asthma and what it will mean in their lives; they need emotional support as well as information. To help these patients absorb new information about asthma, you realize that the information must be delivered in a friendly and supportive way. You think about how you could rework the material to improve its tone.

For more about the medical model, including cautions about using it for your written material and comparisons to other models of writing, see Doak, Doak, & Root (1996) and Toolkit Part 4, Chapter 2 *Guidelines for organizing the content* (sequencing, grouping, labeling). Figure 4-2-b, *Six ways to organize and present information,* is in this chapter. For a wealth of ideas about ways to communicate more effectively with patients, see *Health Literacy from A to Z* (Osborne, 2004).


Source: Created for this Toolkit.

How can you create low barrier material?

There are two steps to creating "low barrier" written material that works well for your intended readers:

1. **Identifying the barriers**. As shown in the example just above, the first step in creating "low barrier" written material is to look at the material from your reader's perspective and identify possible barriers. The more you know about your readers, and the better you get at seeing the material from their point of view, the easier it will be to identify possible barriers.

2. **Fixing the barriers**. Once you have identified possible barriers, the next step is to fix them:

    - **Removing barriers**. When you notice possible barriers in material you are revising, fixing these barriers means removing the barriers and making whatever changes in content, organization, writing, and design are needed to fix the problem.

    - **Being aware of and avoiding barriers at the outset**. As you become knowledgeable about your readers and more experienced in taking their perspective, you will find that you are able to create low barrier material in a more efficient way, right from the start. This skill takes time to develop, but getting practice in removing barriers will lead you to not writing them in the first place.

Other parts of this Toolkit can help you identify and remove barriers:

- The four chapters of Toolkit Part 4, *Understanding and using the Toolkit Guidelines for Writing,* will help you anticipate, identify, understand, and fix many aspects of content, organization, writing, and design that can make it hard for people to understand and use your written material.

- The eight chapters in Toolkit Part 5, *Understanding and using the Toolkit Guidelines for Graphic Design,* will help you anticipate, identify, understand, and fix many aspects of page layout, use of fonts and contrast, headings, text emphasis, color, and visual elements that can distract people from your messages or make the material hard to skim and comprehend.

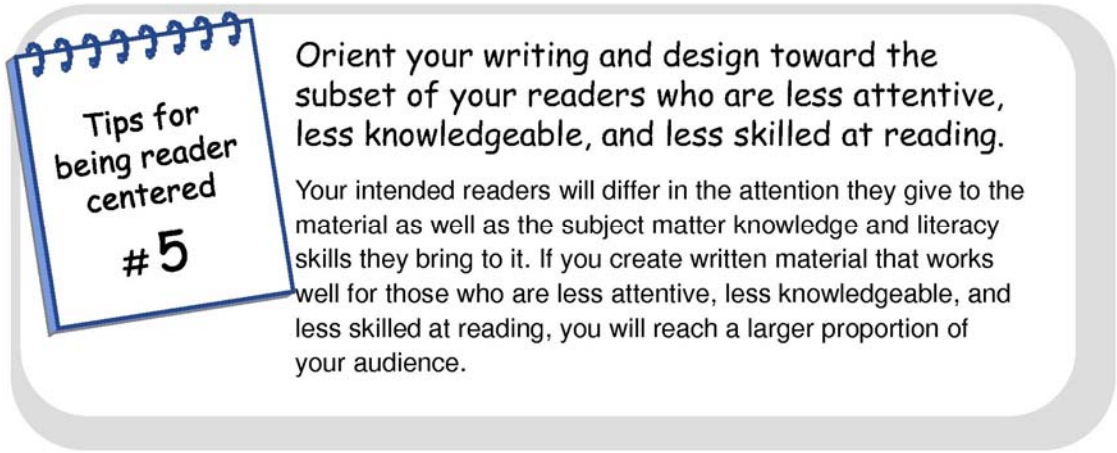
- If you are writing for a Medicare audience, you can learn about barriers that apply to this audience in Toolkit Part 9, *Things to know if your written material is for older adults.*

- If your intended readers have limited English proficiency, and you are translating the material into their language, see Toolkit Part 11, *Understanding and using the Toolkit Guidelines for*

Culturally Appropriate Translation. This part of the Toolkit discusses barriers related to the challenges of cross-cultural communication.

One of the most effective ways to identify and remove barriers is to get help from your readers as you develop the material and test it by getting reactions directly from them. We discuss these topics in later sections (tip 6 on getting help from readers and tip 7 on testing your material).

Orient toward the subset of readers who are less knowledgeable, less attentive, and less skilled at reading



The tip shown above is a pragmatic suggestion for taking a reader-centered approach to creating low barrier written material. It urges you to **orient toward the subset of your readers *for whom the potential barriers are the greatest***, that is, the readers who are less attentive, less interested, less knowledgeable, and less skilled at reading. If you can make your material work well for these readers, it will work well for the rest of your readers, too.

In terms of reading skills, the Toolkit focuses on material that is written for people with skills at only the *Basic* level of literacy. For a discussion of how literacy skills are measured and what is meant by *Basic* literacy skills, see the section on *What are "low literacy skills"?* (Toolkit Part 1, *About this Toolkit and how it can help you,* page 3). Although others who will use the written material may have literacy skills above the *Basic* level, focusing on the needs of those with only *Basic* level literacy skills will allow you to reach the broadest possible audience with your written material.

Literacy skills are important, but they are not the only factor that influences how readers work with documents. Sometimes our hopes and expectations about reader behavior are unduly optimistic: we may

assume that people will give the material their full attention, that they will read it carefully from beginning to end, that they will be able to understand it, and that they that they will immediately be interested in and care about what it says.

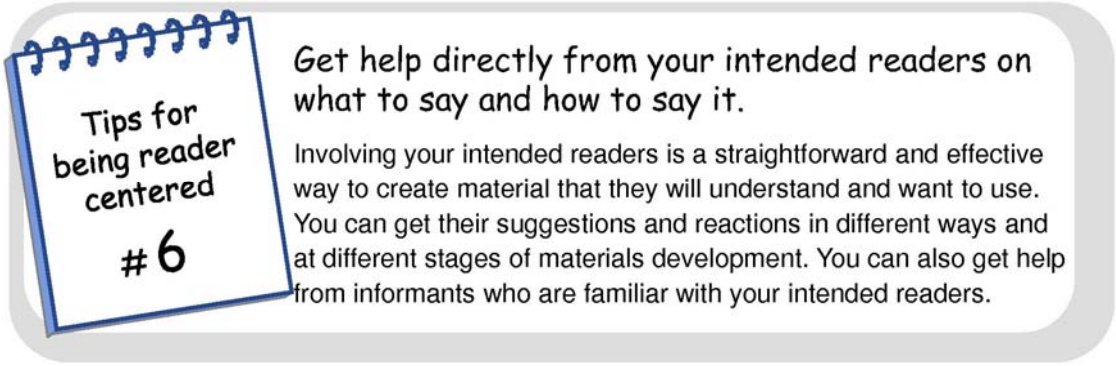
While these assumptions may hold for some people, there will surely be others who skim quickly and are easily distracted, who need some convincing about the salience and value of the material, and who find some words and concepts hard to understand. Given the range of interests, skills, knowledge, and life experience that your intended readers bring to the material, it is sensible to make fairly conservative assumptions about reader behavior (see Redish, 1993).

The detailed guidelines in this Toolkit are all oriented toward helping less-skilled readers who are less attentive and less knowledgeable about the topics covered in the material. To give just a few examples, these guidelines:

- Urge you to embed definitions of terms right where readers need them, rather than forcing them to go elsewhere for a definition (see Guideline 3.4 in Toolkit Part 4, Chapter 3, *Guidelines for writing style*).
- Stress the need to use plenty of informative headings that stand out clearly and make it easy for people to skim and find information of personal interest (see Guideline 2.4 in Toolkit Part 4, Chapter 2, *Guidelines for organizing the content*).
- Explain how certain design elements can distract your readers and show you how to avoid distractions by creating a clear and obvious path through the material (see Guideline 5.3 in Toolkit Part 5, Chapter 2, *Guidelines for overall design and page layout*).

By making special efforts to remove barriers that might be problematic for this subset of your readers who are less attentive, less knowledgeable, and have lower literacy skills, you will create material that will work well for a larger number of your intended readers.

Get help from readers on what to say and how to say it



This tip urges you to get members of your audience actively involved in helping you develop your written material. Readers can give you good advice about what to say in your written material and how to say it. Since it's your readers who decide what is culturally appropriate and easy to use, getting their input helps you stay on track to produce something they will understand and use. Getting help from readers requires some extra planning, but it is the best insurance you can get for creating material that they will find appealing, culturally appropriate, and easy to understand and use.

You may also want to get help from informants who have close contacts with members of your intended audience, and are familiar with their language, culture, and traditions. Informants might include people in your agency, as well as people from other organizations and community groups. While people in regional and national organizations can also serve as informants for certain aspects of your project, it's the people in your own community who are familiar with local cultural patterns and issues. Depending on your audience and material, your informants could include individuals and organizations such as the following: health care practitioners and health care organizations; public health agencies; social workers and social service agencies; senior centers; teen clinics; outreach workers; ABE (Adult Basic Education) programs; ESL (English as a Second Language) programs; WIC programs (Women, Infants, Children); refugee resettlement agencies; schools; advocacy groups; Legal Aid; faith-based organizations; and neighborhood groups.

What kinds of help can you get?

There are many ways that representatives from your intended audience and informants who are familiar with the audience can help you when you are developing and testing written material. For example, you can get:

- **Help with refining the content**. At an early stage in your project, input from intended readers and informants can provide helpful advice and a good reality check on your initial ideas for the material. When you are ready to begin writing the text, you probably have a notepad of ideas and topics. Perhaps you also have a list of points to be covered that was generated by subject matter experts. Before you go very far on your writing and design, take some time to share your ideas and get reactions from intended readers and informants. Find out what they already know and how they feel about what you plan to cover in the material. This discussion and advice can help you clarify your goals and identify and prioritize key messages.

- **Help in deciding how to word the messages, what sequence to use, and which points to emphasize.** Getting feedback from members of your audience will help you understand which words and concepts you need to explain. As you get their feedback, be attuned to the language and logic they use and the concerns they express. The way they talk about the topic may suggest ways of sequencing the material so that it will make sense from their point of view. Listen closely and you will hear phrases and examples you can use in the material. You can also ask directly for their suggestions about a title, headings, and words and phrases to use.

- **Help and advice with identifying and addressing culturally sensitive areas and potential misunderstandings**. Members of the audience can help you understand the nuances of their culture, and recommend ways to anticipate and address potential problems and misunderstandings. To avoid offending or confusing people, it's important to check with members of the audience about the visual elements as well as the words you use. Members of your audience can give you helpful feedback on colors, images, and other aspects of design.

- **Help in understanding what will motivate them.** Readers themselves are the best resource you have for understanding what they will find appealing, what behaviors will seem feasible to them, and what will motivate them to action.

- **Help in identifying possible barriers**. An earlier tip urges you to take the reader's point of view and remove barriers that might keep your readers from noticing, understanding, and using the material. Getting feedback from your intended readers is the most efficient and effective way to identify potential barriers.

- **Help in judging the adequacy of a translation.** Feedback from the intended users provides a crucial check on the adequacy of a translation See Toolkit Part 11, *Understanding and using the Toolkit Guidelines for Culturally Appropriate Translation*.

What methods can you use?

When you are seeking help from readers and informants, try for a good mix of people and use whatever method or combination of methods suits your project and is most practical. This might be consulting one-on-one with members of the audience and informants, holding two or more focus groups, or meeting periodically with the same people. For help with methods, see CDCynergy; *Making Health Communications Programs Work* (National Cancer Institute [NCI], "Pink Book", 2002); *The Focus Group Kit* (Morgan & Krueger, 1997); *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (Krueger & Casey, 2000); *Interviewing for Social Scientists: An Introductory Resource with Examples* (Arksey & Knight, 1999). See also Toolkit Part 6, *How to collect and use feedback from readers*.

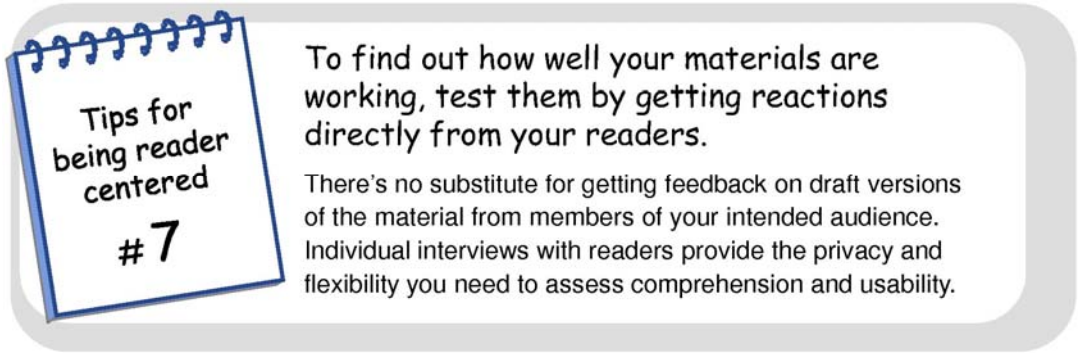
If circumstances permit, it can be very helpful to get audience members actively involved in developing and refining the written material. Various terms have been used to describe this approach, including *participatory materials development*, *learned-developed materials* (Rudd & Comings, 1994), and *cooperative composing* (Zarcadoolas, Timm, & Bibeault, 2001). You can recruit panel members at the beginning of your project and meet with them periodically to get informal input and feedback throughout the project. This type of panel is quite different from an advisory group. By definition, advisory groups just give advice about what should be done—they don't actually do it. In contrast, an audience panel both gives advice and gets involved in actually implementing it. For an example of material that was created using a participatory approach, *Hair Care Tips for Sisters on the Move: Feeling Fit and Looking Fine* (Sisters Together Coalition). It's available at the Harvard School of Public Health's health literacy website at http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/files/sisters.pdf.

While this approach requires a lot of coordination, cultural knowledge and sensitivity, and skill in working with a group, the benefits can be substantial. Getting audience members involved in the actual writing and design of your materials is an effective way to end up with culturally-appropriate materials at an appropriate reading level. It is empowering to the members of the audience, and you will be amazed at how much you will learn.

Besides talking with people, you can use other approaches to get them actively involved. For example, it can be very helpful to show people a group of photos or design choices and ask for their opinions and preferences. You can also use tasks such as card sorting as a tool for getting feedback. For example, you can put key messages on cards and ask people who represent your intended readers to sort the cards into the order that makes sense to them. This technique will help trigger a discussion of how your readers are interpreting the messages and why they think one topic needs to come before another. The technique may also reveal gaps in your sequence, that is, topics that your audience thinks should be added.

Whatever your approach, it takes careful planning and skillful implementation to get the most meaningful and useful information. Many factors have great impact on the depth, breadth, and validity of the feedback you collect, including whom you recruit to participate, the tone you establish during recruitment and during the discussion itself, the questions you ask, and the ways in which you ask them. For help with this, see Toolkit Part 6, *How to collect and use feedback from readers.* Chapter 6, *Should you do interviews or focus groups*? discusses which approaches work best for which purposes.

Rely on feedback from readers as the ultimate test



The ultimate test of your written material is, of course, the response of your readers. For the details about how to get feedback from readers, see Toolkit Part 6, *How to collect and use feedback from readers*. It focuses on how to use individual interviews to test your material with readers. Interviews offer privacy and flexibility, allowing you to get readers to engage with the material and give their candid reactions without being influenced by others in a group. You can use a variety of techniques in an interview. For example:

- Interviews allow you to watch how people read through the material, noting their "navigational" approach: where do they begin reading the document? Where do they go next? How long do they spend on each topic?

- In an interview, you can also ask people to "think aloud" as they read, sharing their thoughts and opinions as they go.

- Interviews work especially well for checking on comprehension, because you can ask people to explain in their own words what the material is about. This experience can be humbling as well as enlightening for those who developed the material, because it sometimes reveals a big gap between what they intended the material to say and what the reader interpreted it to mean.

- Interviews also work especially well for "usability testing," which checks on how well people can actually put the written material to use. For example, if the material is a decision guide for choosing a health plan, you can ask the person you are interviewing to use it to make a decision. You can watch as they read the material and make their decision, then talk with them afterwards to get their feedback on the process of applying what they have read. If the material is an application form for a program, you can ask the person to fill it out and see if any questions or problems come up as they do it.

End notes

Thanks to the following people for sharing their insights about what it takes to be reader centered and offering suggestions for topics covered in this Toolkit Part 2: Elizabeth Hoy; Ginny Redish; William Smith; Julie Carson; Helen Osborne, and Mark Evers.

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