TOOLKIT for Making Written Material Clear and Effective

SECTION 3: Methods for testing written material with readers

PART 6

How to collect and use feedback from readers

Chapter 3

Introducing the four methods for getting feedback from readers

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

TOOLKIT Part 6, Chapter 3

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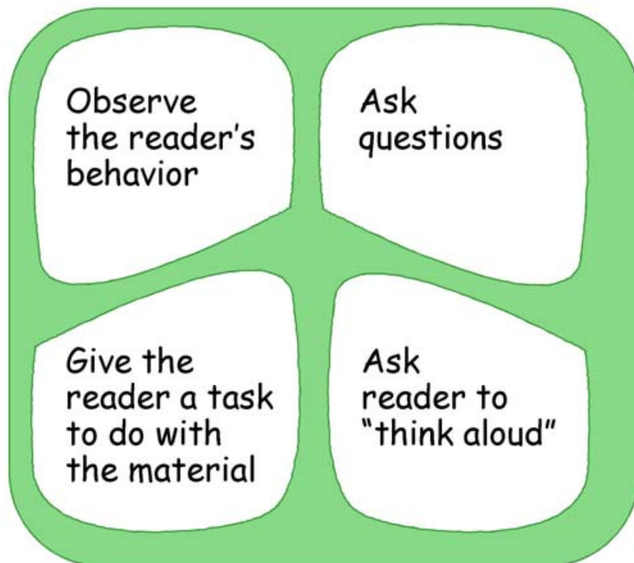
This document is the third of 19 chapters in Part 6 of the *Toolkit for Making Written Material Clear and Effective*. The Toolkit has 11 Parts. It was written for the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) by Jeanne McGee, McGee & Evers Consulting, Inc. The guidelines and other parts of the Toolkit 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).

Introducing the four methods you can use



To help you visualize the process of collecting readers' reactions to written material, this chapter gives you background on the four methods you can use. This chapter introduces the four methods by describing each one and how it is used. Then, in chapters that follow, we compare these four methods, tell which ones work best for which purposes, and give you tips on how to use them in your own feedback sessions.

We emphasize using *interviews* to get feedback

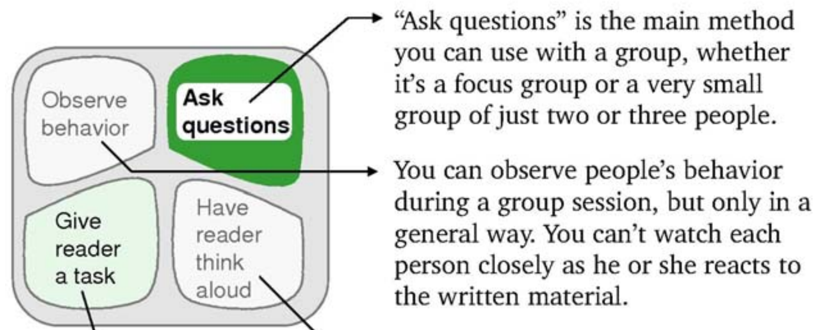
Before we start describing the four methods, there's an important point to make: if you decide to work with readers in groups, you will be limited in which methods you can use. As shown below in Figure 6-3-a, you can make *full use of all four methods* if you do individual interviews. But if you use groups to collect feedback, you will need to rely mainly on asking questions.

Figure 6-3-a. Doing group sessions limits the feedback methods you can use.

If you do individual interviews, you can use *all four* methods of getting feedback

Working with readers one at a time gives you the privacy and flexibility you need to use all four methods of getting feedback.

If you use group sessions to get feedback from readers, you are limited in the methods you can use



"Ask questions" is the main method you can use with a group, whether it's a focus group or a very small group of just two or three people.

You can observe people's behavior during a group session, but only in a general way. You can't watch each person closely as he or she reacts to the written material.

You can't ask people in a group to share their thoughts aloud.

You can use "give a task" in a very limited way during group sessions, especially if the group is very small. But you can't follow up as thoroughly on how they do the task as you can during an individual interview.

Source: Created for this Toolkit.

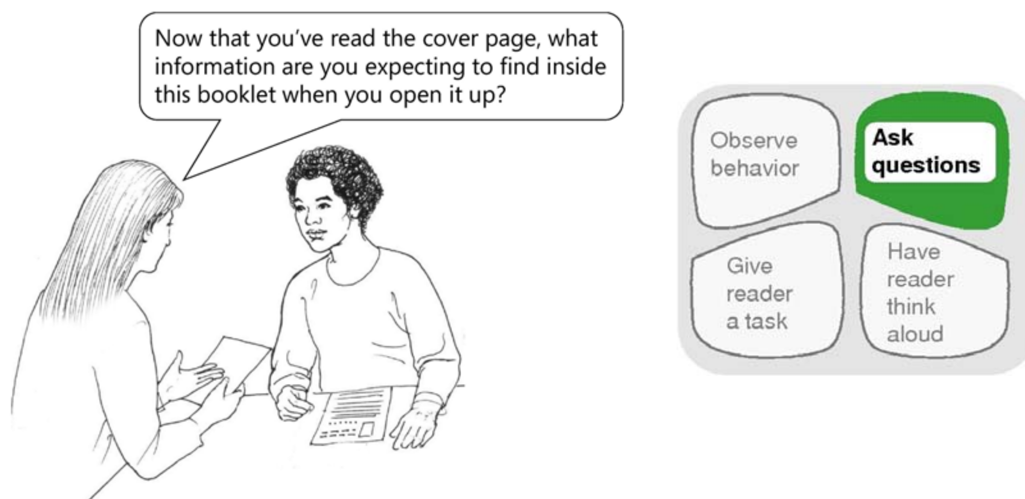
Since interviews allow you to use all four methods, the rest of this Toolkit focuses mainly on using interviews rather than group sessions to get feedback from readers. When we discuss how to ask questions of readers, what we say usually applies to group sessions as well as to interviews. But when we discuss the other three methods (*think aloud*, *give a task*, and *observe behavior*), we are focusing specifically on using these methods in individual interviews.

In addition, by focusing mainly on interviews, we hope to make this approach more familiar and provide the help that is needed to encourage its use:

- In general, interviews work better than group sessions for many feedback purposes (see Toolkit Part 6, Chapter 6, *Should you use individual interviews or focus groups?*). They are also easier to conduct, because you don't have to manage group interaction. Yet many people tend to use groups instead of interviews simply because they are accustomed to using focus groups.

- There are excellent resources available to help you plan and conduct focus groups (for suggestions, see the end of Toolkit Part 6, Chapter 6). There are also excellent resources that focus on testing the usability of websites (see, for examples, resources listed in Toolkit Part 8, *Will your written material be on a website*?). However, there are few resources that explain how to use interviews to collect feedback on written material in a printed format. Toolkit Part 6 helps fill the gap.

Method 1: **Ask questions**



In the example above, the interviewer is **asking a question** to find out if the purpose and content of the written material is immediately clear to the reader.

Asking questions is a powerful and familiar way to get feedback

Direct questioning is a flexible, powerful, and essential tool for getting readers' reactions to written material. Of the four methods we discuss, asking questions is the most obvious and familiar method, and it will be a vital part of every feedback session you do.

This chapter gives a quick overview about asking questions and a few examples. Other chapters in Toolkit Part 6 cover the topic of asking questions in detail. See especially Chapter 8, *Phrasing your questions to get the most useful feedback from readers*, Chapter 10, *Creating a written guide for conducting feedback sessions*, and Chapter 18, *Tips for effective interviewing technique*.

Some questions are prepared in advance and others are improvised

When you do sessions with readers to get their feedback, you will use a mix of "scripted" questions and "spontaneous" questions:

- **"Scripted" questions** are the ones you prepare in advance and put into the written interview guide that you use to conduct the session.
- **"Spontaneous" questions** are the ones you improvise to suit the situation when you are doing the interview.

Preparing scripted questions in advance helps you structure the feedback session and plan the most effective ways to phrase your questions. Sometimes you will ask questions exactly as they are written in the interview guide, much like using a "script." Other times you will need to use the scripted questions for reference, and adapt the wordings during the session to fit the situation.

How you phrase your questions is crucial

How you phrase your questions has huge impact on the meaningfulness and usefulness of the feedback you get. If you ask questions that readers can answer with a simple "yes" or "no," you won't learn much. If you phrase your questions in ways that get people to give feedback that is more specific and detailed, you will learn how well the material is working and where it needs to be improved.

To get the most productive results from feedback sessions, it's crucial to phrase your questions in ways that allow and encourage readers to say what they think without feeling pressured or inhibited. This means:

- **Asking questions that are worded in a neutral way**, rather than asking leading questions that seem to point toward a particular type of answer. Figure 6-3-b below gives examples.

- **Phrasing most of your questions in ways that allow and encourage readers to answer in their own words.** Questions that are phrased to have readers answer in their own words are called "open-ended" questions. (Questions that give people answer categories to choose from are called "closed-ended questions." For example, a question that asks people whether they agree or disagree with a statement are closed-ended questions.) In general, using open-ended questions rather than closed-ended questions for most of your questioning will help you get the most meaningful and useful feedback from readers. Figure 6-3-b below gives examples.

Figure 6-3-b. Comparing ways of phrasing questions (open-ended vs. closed-ended; neutrally worded vs. non-neutrally worded).

What do you think of the photo on this poster?

Neutral: This question is worded in a *neutral* way. It doesn't steer readers toward any particular type of answer.

Open-ended: By asking, "what do you think…", this wording *encourages readers to answer in their own words.*

Do you think the photo on this poster is good?

Not neutral: This question is *not* worded in a neutral way. By including the word, "good," it may subtly steer readers toward giving a favorable response.

Not open-ended: This is a "yes-no" question. Questions that can be answered with "yes" or "no" are not open-ended. They do *not* encourage readers to respond in their own words.

What problems do you see with the photo on this poster?

Not neutral: This wording is *not* worded in a neutral way. By asking "what problems do you see," it steers readers toward searching for something that is wrong with the photo.

Open-ended: This question wording is open-ended and it *does* encourage readers to respond in their own words.

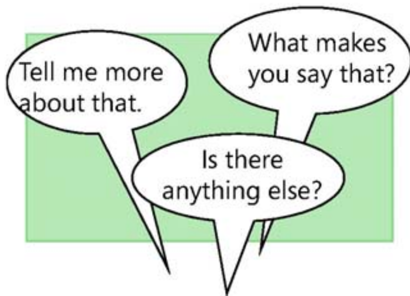
Source: Created as an example for this Toolkit.

Use follow-up questions to get the most meaningful feedback

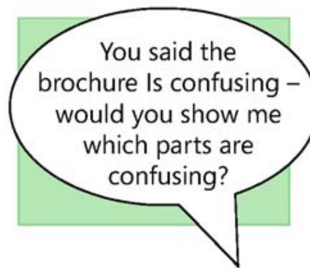
Follow-up questions are the ones you use to get a reader to say more or to make sure that you understand what a reader has said. Follow-up questions are often called "probes" because you use them to probe for a more expansive or specific answer. Probes are crucial tools for getting the most informative feedback. Figure 6-3-c below has examples of probes.

Figure 6-3-c. Using follow-up questions ("probes") to get a more informative response.

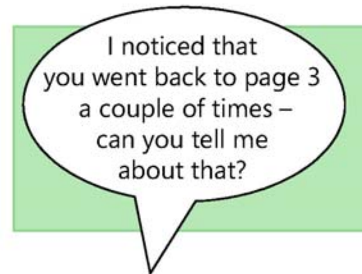
Using probes to encourage the reader to say more:



Using a probe to clarify what a reader has just said:

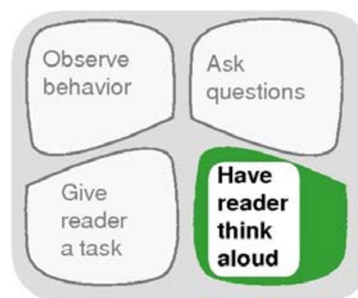


Using a probe to follow up on behavior you have observed:



Source: Created as an example for this Toolkit.

Method 2: **Ask the reader to "think aloud"**



In the example above, the woman is sharing her reactions to the written material by "thinking aloud."

Having readers tell what they are noticing about the material

To gather the most useful feedback, you want readers to feel comfortable about talking freely and openly about their reactions to the written material. The method called *think aloud* encourages this behavior:

- **You simply ask readers to say aloud whatever comes to mind** as they are looking through the written material. Readers who are thinking aloud make comments about what is drawing their attention and give you insights into the opinions they are forming as they look at the material. The illustration above gives an example. The woman who is thinking aloud is telling the interviewer *what* has caught her attention ("Now I am looking at the baby at the bottom of this page") and *why* (it's such a cute picture").

- **You can ask questions, too**. In actual practice*, think aloud* is seldom a long, uninterrupted "stream of consciousness" monologue from the reader. Instead, it is usually a series of spontaneous comments by the reader, interspersed with occasional follow-up questions from the interviewer who is probing to get elaboration on something the reader has said.

Benefits of getting people to think aloud

As a method for collecting feedback from readers, "*think aloud*" is not well known or widely used. It's a powerful method, and we urge you to try it. When people are able and willing to think aloud, what they say can be very informative. Hearing their spontaneous comments enhances and extends the feedback you get from asking them questions, giving them tasks, and observing what they do with the material:

- *Think aloud* helps you capture people's **immediate impressions that are not influenced by a particular line of questioning** from the interviewer.

- *Think aloud* can give you **insights about things that you never thought to ask about** in your scripted questions. Listening to people's spontaneous remarks can reveal many things that you didn't anticipate or expect.

- *Think aloud* **lends accuracy to your observations of behavior** because people who are thinking aloud often tell you exactly what they are looking at and why.

Readers need some coaching

Some readers feel self conscious or inhibited when you ask them to share whatever comes to mind:

- **People need guidance and encouragement**. Since the *think aloud* process is so different from everyday life, you will need to explain, encourage, and remind people to speak up and

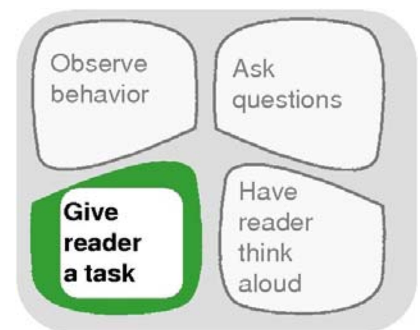
share their thought aloud. When you ask readers to *think aloud*, it helps to give a brief demonstration that models what you want them to do. We explain how to do this in a later chapter (see Figure 6-18-b in Chapter 18, *Tips for effective interviewing technique*).

- **Sometimes it works well and sometimes it doesn't**. With coaching and encouragement, many people will get into the spirit of a *think-aloud* interview. But some may not, and others, especially those who are poor readers, may find it too hard to read and talk at the same time.

Method 3: Give the reader a task

This is a new form. People in member services are still working on this form, and they want to know how hard or easy it is for people to fill it out.

You can help by giving it a try. Take the time you need to answer the questions on this page, and feel free to make comments while you're filling it out.



In the example above, the interviewer is explaining a task she would like the participant to do.

"Give a task" is a method for assessing usability

This method that we call "give reader a task" is a type of "usability testing." By giving the reader a task to perform, you are testing how hard or easy it is for readers to use the written material for its intended purpose.

"give a task" (usability testing)

- Giving tasks is a very direct and powerful way to assess the usability of the material and spot places where it needs improvement.
- You give the reader something to accomplish that involves using the material. For example, the task might be to find a particular type of information or make a decision based on reading the material.
- By watching and waiting without asking any scripted questions, you will discover if people are able to do the task, how long it takes, and whether they encounter any problems.

What kinds of tasks?

When you use this method, **the "task" is something specific that you ask a reader to do that involves using the material**. The type of task you give depends on the material. Here are some examples of tasks:

- If the written material is an enrollment form, the task might be to fill it out.
- If the written material is a medicine label for a children's pain reliever, the task might be to figure out the right dose for a child who is two years old and weighs 30 pounds.
- If the written material is a chart that compares patient survey results for a group of hospitals, the task might be to figure out which hospital is doing the best on patient satisfaction and which is doing the worst.
- If the material is a detailed handbook that describes medical insurance benefits and coverage, the task might be to pretend that you have that insurance, and find out what you need to do to file a complaint about not being given care you thought was covered.

What can you learn by giving readers a task?

When you use this method, the feedback you get is *behavioral*: you watch what the reader does in performing the task. Behavioral feedback is different from the spoken feedback you get when readers answer the questions you ask or they share their reactions by thinking aloud, and it can give you unique insights into how well the material is working.

Usability is the ultimate test

If you find that readers can't perform the task you give them, or can't perform it correctly, or have a lot of problems or frustration, then it's a matter of serious concern.

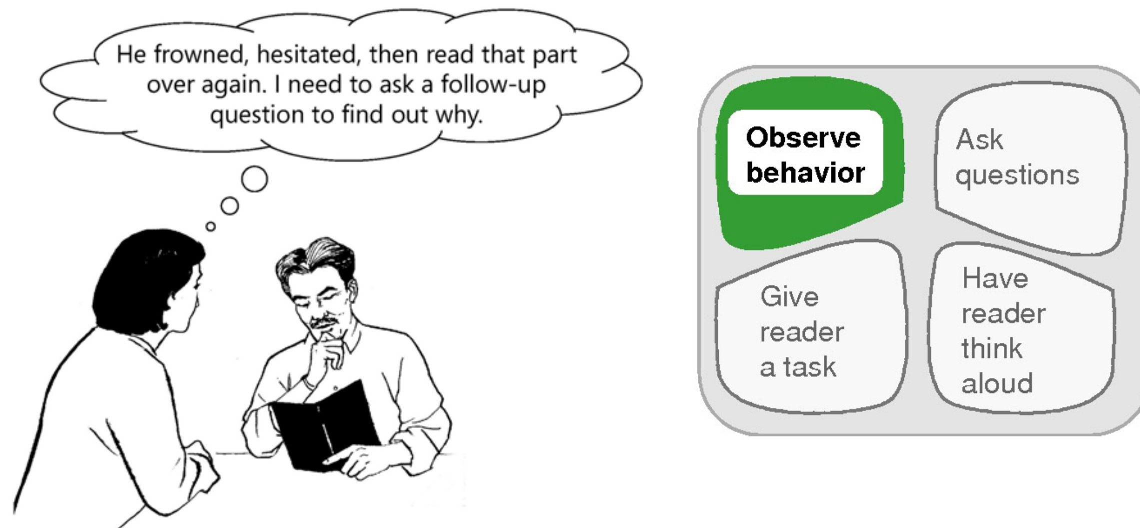
Even if written material is fine in all other respects—such as appeal, cultural appropriateness, and ease of understanding—it is *not suitable if readers can't use it for its intended purpose.*

The ultimate practical test of written material is whether or not people can use it for its intended purpose, and giving them a task to perform is the best way to find out. When you give a reader a task to perform with the material – unassisted and uninterrupted by the interviewer – **you are collecting evidence about how well the material is likely to work in a real life situation**. This behavioral feedback you get from giving readers a task to perform is compelling. It can give you a unique perspective on the material that you cannot get from asking questions or having readers think aloud.

Material that appears to be clear and effective can flunk the usability test. For example, suppose that you are using feedback sessions to test a chart that compares hospitals on quality of clinical care and the ratings given by patients. You start by showing the chart to readers and getting them to share their reactions by *thinking aloud*. The comments they make about the chart are very positive. They say that they like the colors and design; they think the information in it is interesting and useful; and they say the chart looks easy to use. Then, to check on usability, you give them a task that involves using the chart to compare hospitals and identify which ones are doing the best in certain areas of performance. To your surprise, you find that some of them make mistakes in using the chart, and draw the wrong conclusions. If you had not given them the task, you would have relied solely on their positive feedback during *think aloud*, and would not have discovered that there were problems with usability of the chart.

This method of "give a task" is powerful and compelling, but it is not well known or widely used as a method of getting feedback on written material. We urge you to look for ways to incorporate tasks in your feedback sessions.

Method 4: **Observe the reader's behavior**



In the example above, the interviewer is observing the reader's behavior, and planning how she might follow up on what she has observed.

Observation is used in every interview

Observation is the last of the four methods for collecting feedback, and it's one you will use in all of your feedback sessions. As we explain in the next chapter, you won't be using it as a *main* method to get feedback. Instead, whatever the main methods you use, you will be using observation as a *secondary method* throughout the interview. Whether you are asking questions, asking the reader to think aloud, or giving the reader a task to perform, you will want to keep an eye on the reader's expressions and other body language and watch what the reader actually does with the material:

- **You can observe specific behaviors**, such as which parts readers look at, in which order, and how long they spend on each part. This helps you identify which parts of the material readers tend to skip over and which parts naturally draw their attention.

- **You can watch for differences in how readers approach the material and navigate through it.** For example, some readers may work their way slowly and methodically from beginning to end, and others will skim quickly through it or skip around from one part to another. Observing what different readers do will help you identify the typical paths that readers take through the material and see how well the material is working for each of the

typical paths. Watching readers work their way through material that is long shows you the extent to which they use navigational devices such as table of contents, headings, page numbers, headers and footers.

- **You can watch for facial expressions, gestures, and other body language**. Frowns, grimaces, smiles, restless shifting, and other behaviors can be clues about how the reader is reacting to the material.

What can you learn from observing a reader's behavior?

- **Observation gives you clues and insights that can help you spot possible problems**. Observing what readers do with the material can give you insights that you might not get by using the other methods. For example, if you are watching closely, you may notice that most readers skip over the top part of a particular page. This behavior by readers is a clue that maybe there's a problem with the top of this page. For example, is there something about the layout or design that is causing people to overlook that part of the page? Are they skipping it deliberately due to lack of interest in the topic? Or are they skipping it because it uses words they don't know and it looks hard to read?

- **It helps you use the other methods more effectively**. When you are watching what readers do as they think aloud or work on a task, you will notice things to follow up on when they are finished. The illustration above gives an example. In this illustration, the interviewer has observed the reader's facial expression and behavior ("he frowned, hesitated, then read that part again") and is planning how she will follow up on this observation to find out what it means ("I need to ask a follow-up question to find out why"). If the interviewer had not been watching, she would have missed this clue about a possible problem with the material.

- **It shows you how much readers differ in their approaches to written material, which reminds you to be realistic in what you assume**. When you work on developing written material, it's tempting to assume that your intended readers will start at the beginning, notice everything, and read it from beginning to end. But after you have done feedback sessions where you watch what readers actually do with the material, you'll find that this assumption doesn't hold. Some skip around, some start in the middle or even at the end. Some skim through the whole thing, pausing only when something catches their interest. Observing a reader's behavior can help you find out whether the layout and organization are working well for the whole range of readers who have different ways of approaching and using the material.

Be cautious about drawing conclusions based on observing behavior

Observation is an important part of any interview and it can be quite revealing. Quietly watching how people react as they read the written material shows what naturally draws their attention and can give you clues about possible problems in the material:

- **It's up to you to pursue these clues to find out what they really mean and whether they can help you make improvements in the material**. The clues themselves don't tell you much about what the problem is or how you can fix it.

- **In addition, it's easy to over-interpret or misinterpret the facial expressions, gestures, and other reader behavior you observe**. For example, does spending a long time on one part of the material indicate special interest in the topic or might it mean confusion? Does a frown indicate confusion, or might it mean frustration or boredom?

When you are observing behavior during a feedback session, it can be helpful to ask a follow-up question to check directly with the reader on the meaning of the behavior you observe. The illustration at the beginning of this section shows an example, where the interviewer is thinking to herself about how she needs to ask a follow up question. Of course, you have to be selective: if you ask too many questions about behavior, you will make readers too self-conscious.

End notes

Suggested resources

Dumas, Joseph S. and Janice C. Redish
1999 *A practical guide to usability testing*. Revised edition. Portland, OR: Intellect Books.

Willis, Gordon B.
2005 *Cognitive interviewing: A tool for improving questionnaire design*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

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