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 6

Should you do individual interviews or focus groups?

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

TOOLKIT Part 6, Chapter 6

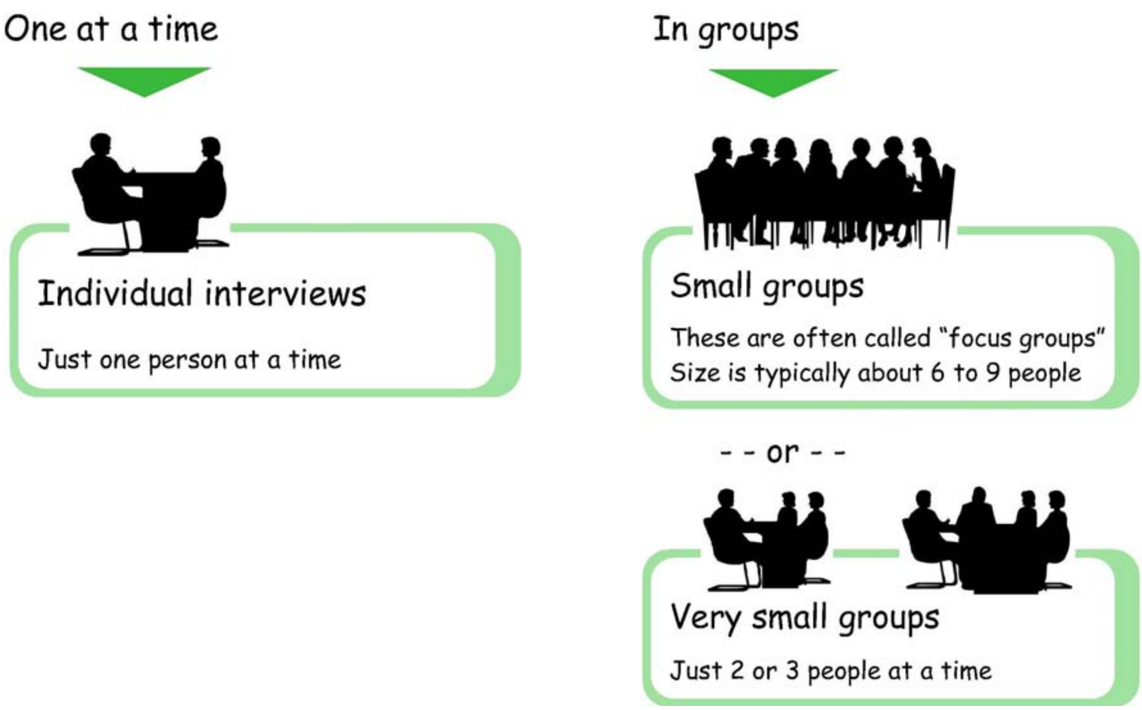
Should you do individual interviews or focus groups?

List of figures in this chapter:

This document is the sixth 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).

Two ways to get feedback

There are two main ways of working with readers to get their reactions to written materials:



This simple difference of whether you get feedback from people one at a time or in groups affects how you work with them and the types of reactions you can get. This chapter will help you decide whether to use individual interviews or group sessions for your project:

- We discuss strengths and limitations of each approach.
- We discuss practical issues to consider and offer advice about how many interviews or groups sessions you might need to do.

About focus groups

What are "focus groups"?

Focus group discussions are a popular method for getting people to share their experiences and opinions in a group setting (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan & Krueger, 1997; National Cancer Institute [NCI], 2002).

- Led by a moderator or facilitator, these guided group discussions "focus" on getting people's comments and opinions about a chosen topic. The moderator uses a written guide to ask a series of questions that encourage participants to share their views about various aspects of the topic. These are discussion groups, not decision-making groups. The goal is to bring forth the full range of viewpoints among participants, not to reach conclusions or consensus.

- A typical size is about six to nine participants, and sessions typically last about an hour and a half.

- Sessions can take place in a wide variety of settings. Focus groups held at a market research facility may use a special type of room with built-in video and audio recording equipment. It also has a one-way mirror with a small observation room on the other side that allows people to observe the discussion in a relatively unobtrusive way.

Using focus groups to get feedback on written material

Focus groups are often used to guide the development of educational materials, information campaigns, questionnaires, and other materials (NCI, 2002). At an early stage, focus groups can be very helpful for learning about the intended audience for your written material and their information needs and interests. You can use focus groups with members of your intended audience to explore their knowledge, experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and views about the topics you are covering in your material. Researchers call this doing "formative research" to guide the development of the material. This is an important application of focus groups, but we don't address it in Toolkit Part 6 because it doesn't involve the testing of written material.

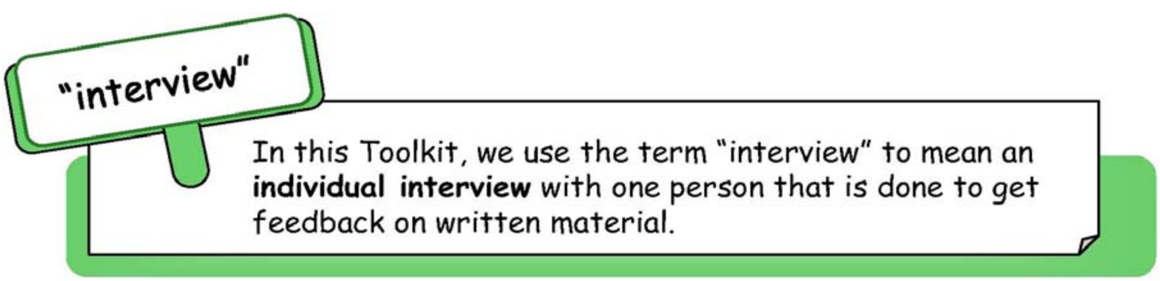
Focus groups can also be used when you are ready to get readers' reactions to a partial or complete draft of the written material. Working with readers in a group session to get their feedback on written material has some unique advantages:

- **Interaction can trigger a broad range of responses within the group.** With the guidance of a skilled moderator, the interchange of group discussion can bring forth a broad range of ideas, experiences, insights, and reactions. Group discussions can work well when you want to check on first impressions, get readers' reactions to different versions of the material, and explore issues of personal relevance and cultural acceptability.

- **Being part of a group can be comfortable**. A group situation can feel more relaxing to some people because there is less pressure to answer every question or speak to every issue. In addition, hearing others speak can help encourage some people to share their own views, especially if the moderator keeps the most outspoken and opinionated people from dominating the discussion.

About individual interviews

"Interview" is a general term for a broad range of situations that involve asking and answering questions, such as job interviews, news interviews, or interviews done to collect data for a research project. In the simplest case of a "one on one" interview, only two people are involved – the interviewer and the interviewee. But there can be a team of interviewers, or a group of people being interviewed. Interviews can be formal or informal, highly structured or unstructured, scheduled or impromptu, public or private, long or short.



When we say, "interview" in this Toolkit, we mean **an *individual interview* done for the purpose of getting a reader's reactions to written material**. Typically, the interviewer shows written material to the person who is being interviewed, then uses various methods to solicit his or her reactions. Besides asking questions, these methods typically include observing the reader's behavior and asking the reader to share thoughts by thinking aloud. An interviewer might also use another method, which is to give the reader a task to perform that involves using the material in some way.

Working with readers one at a time to get their feedback on written material has some unique advantages:

- **What people say is not influenced by others**. Individual interviews are a private encounter, which can make it easier to put people at ease and get them to share their candid reactions without feeling inhibited or influenced by what other people say. The privacy of an interview can be helpful, too, if the written material covers sensitive topics.

- **People can talk at length.** Since the entire interview is devoted to just one person, there is plenty of time to give in-depth responses.

- **You can follow the lead of each individual**. Interviews give you the time and flexibility to follow-up on whatever the person says**.**

- **You can ask people to share their spontaneous reactions to written materials by "thinking aloud."** An individual interview provides the privacy you need to have people feel comfortable about thinking aloud.

- **You can observe individual behavior.** You can and should observe people's behavior in a focus group, but the group setting imposes practical limits on how much you can observe and on your ability to follow up directly with people on what you note about their behavior. In contrast, when you work with readers one at a time, you can monitor their body language and watch for such things as what they look at first, the order in which they read the material, when they look puzzled, and how long they spend on each part. You can also ask an occasional question that follows up on behavior you observe.

- **You can give people tasks to see how well they can use the material.** Interviews work better than groups for "usability testing" that addresses how well people can actually use the written material. Examples of tasks you might use for this purpose are asking people to look up a topic in the material, to actually fill out a form, or to find the answer to a specific question.

Picking the best approach for a particular purpose

Comparing what you can do in groups with what you can do in interviews

The chart in Figure 6-6-a below shows what you are able to do in a feedback session when you work with readers in groups compared to working with them one at a time.

Figure 6-6-a. Comparing what you can do in group sessions to what you can do in interviews.

	Group sessions	Individual interviews
Can you ask questions?	yes	yes
Can you have a group discussion that includes having participants comment on or build on what others say?	yes	no
Can you observe what readers do with the material?	limited	yes
Can you give readers tasks to see how well they can use the material? ("usability testing")	limited	yes
Can you adapt the feedback session and your line of questioning based on how each reader reacts?	limited	yes
Can each reader speak at length on many topics?	no	yes
Can you give readers privacy (avoiding the influence of what others say, and making it easier to discuss sensitive topics)?	no	yes
Can you ask readers to "think aloud?"	no	yes
Can you concentrate on a single person without needing to manage group interaction?	no	yes

Source: Created for this Toolkit; see acknowledgments.

Matching your approach to the types of feedback you want to get

Group sessions are **definitely better** for some purposes

- ***When group interaction will enhance the usefulness of the feedback you get***. Group discussion works well to bring out a range of reactions among participants. Comments made by one person may trigger reactions from others. The group interaction itself can be of interest, by revealing the diversity of people's reactions to the materials, including what engages their interest or emotions.

Individual interviews are **definitely better** for some purposes

- ***To assess navigation.*** Interviews allow you to observe how readers "navigate" through the material. You can observe which parts they actually read, how long they spend on each part, and the sequence they follow in working their way through the material.

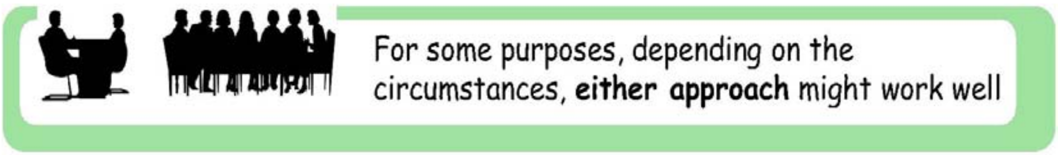
- ***To assess comprehension***. Interviews give you the privacy and flexibility to use a variety of techniques to find out how well people can understand what they are reading.

- ***For usability testing***. In an interview, you can ask people to think aloud and give them tasks to see how well they can use the material.

- ***When* you *need in-depth feedback.*** In individual interviews, the entire interview is devoted to getting reactions from just one person. Compare a typical focus group of seven or eight people, where each person gets to speak for less than ten minutes, on average.

- ***When you want readers' reactions to lengthy or complex written materials***. Interviews offer the flexibility and time you need to follow the lead of the participant and get into the details of longer or more complicated text.

- ***When you want reactions from people who are diverse in ways that might inhibit group discussion***. Focus groups generally tend to work better when the participants are relatively homogeneous in their characteristics and experiences. For example, if your group includes people who have only a grade school education as well as people who have college degrees, it can be inhibiting for those with less education. Of course, whether diversity within a group becomes inhibiting depends on many factors (see Krueger & Casey, 2000). But if you are doing interviews, there's no need to be concerned about it, since you will be getting feedback from people one at a time.



- ***To get people's initial impressions***, including the appeal and cultural acceptability of the photographs, illustrations, color schemes, or examples included in the written materials.

- ***To have people compare several versions and give their preferences***. When you are showing people several variations of written material, you should use interviews if you want to avoid the influence of what others say. If you think that a group discussion of people's preferences and the reasons behind them may be helpful, then focus groups are a better choice. If the variations are lengthy or complex, interviews may be a better choice than focus groups.

- ***To get feedback from key informants or information intermediaries***.

The chart in Figure 6-6-b below summarizes these comparisons between group sessions and interviews.

Figure 6-6-b. Whether to use group sessions or interviews depends on the type of feedback you are seeking.

Summary chart Whether an approach will work well depends on the purpose of your feedback sessions	Group sessions 	Individual interviews 
To get people's first impressions of the material and assess its appeal	✓	✓
To have people compare several versions and give their preferences	✓	✓
To explore needs and preferences for content and level of detail	✓	✓
To find out how well the organization and layout is working for readers	☐	✓
To find out how well people understand the material . . .	☐	✓
To find out how well people can use the material for its intended purpose ("usability testing")	☐	✓
When you need in-depth feedback	☐	✓
When you want readers' reactions to lengthy or complex written material	☐	✓
When you think some participants might feel inhibited about sharing their reactions in a group setting	☐	✓
When group discussion will enhance the usefulness of the feedback you get	✓	☐

Source: Created for this Toolkit; see acknowledgments.

What about using very small groups?

In using the summary chart above, keep in mind that using very small groups of just two or three people can also be an effective way to get feedback on written material. It often works well as an alternative to a larger group discussion, especially if you are new at leading focus groups or if you are doing a conference call to get feedback from expert reviewers. When there are only two or three people giving their feedback, each can speak at greater length. If the people in the very small group have differences of opinion, there's greater opportunity to explore these differences and the reasons behind them.

If people will be using the written material together in real life, it can be helpful to interview them together to get their feedback. For example, we know that people with Medicare often rely on family members and caregivers to help them understand information about Medicare and make decisions that affect their health. To collect feedback on material about Medicare, you could consider interviewing the person with Medicare together with the person he or she relies upon for help. Using this approach reflects real-life situations in which Medicare information is used. It can give you insights into how people with Medicare work jointly with their spouses, adult children, or other helpers to interpret the information about Medicare and use it to make decisions.

Should you use a combination of focus groups and interviews?

As we've seen in this chapter, since focus groups and interviews both have unique advantages, one or the other may be your best choice for a particular purpose. Other times either approach might work just as well. In many projects, there may be a place for both focus groups and interviews. For example, if you are getting feedback at different stages of your project, or you are getting feedback from informants or information intermediaries as well as from the intended readers of the material, a combination of focus groups and interviews might work well. Figure 6-6-c below gives an example.

Figure 6-6-c. Example of a project that combines focus groups and interviews.

A managed care plan that serves Medicare enrollees expanded its coverage for eyeglasses, and the communications department prepared a flyer to inform plan members. Here is how they did it:

FIRST – two focus groups with informants

PURPOSE: to get their ideas and advice to help guide development of the material

First, to get ideas and advice, the project started with two focus groups:

- One group with customer service staff who answer help line calls from members, to get their suggestions about how to explain the new coverage as clearly as possible.

- One group with marketing representatives who work at health fairs to recruit new plan members, to get their suggestions about which features to emphasize.

Comments on the method they used: In this situation, focus groups are a good choice. They are an efficient way to get input from informants, and they allow a lively exchange of insights and recommendations among staff whose experiences may differ. Front-line staff who interact directly with plan members are great resources to call on as informants. Asking them to participate in a focus group acknowledges the value of their extensive first-hand experience with members and gives them an opportunity to be helpful and influential.

NEXT – focus groups with the intended readers

PURPOSE: to get their reactions to a **first draft**

Next, the project created mockups and did another round of focus groups:

- Using what they learned from the focus groups with customer service staff and marketing representatives, they created three versions of the flyer that differed in content and design.

- They did two focus groups with people with Medicare to get their reactions to these three versions – one with plan members and the other with non-members.

Comments on the method they used: When you want to show people several versions of materials and get their preferences, focus groups can work well as long as the materials are not long and you don't need in-depth reactions. Focus groups are a good choice in this situation: the flyer is short; and people can discuss the reasons for their preferences. If you are changing coverage in a health plan, it makes sense to get reactions from both your current members and from prospective members. It also makes sense to hold these discussions separately with each group.

FINALLY – interviews with the intended readers

PURPOSE: to get their reactions to the **final draft** of the material

Finally, they made revisions and used interviews to get people's reactions:

- To get reactions to a final draft of the flyer, the communications department held a series of individual interviews: Some of the interviews were with plan members, some were with prospective plan members, and few were with relatives who help plan members with health-related matters.

- Interviewers observed what people actually did with the flyer and gave them some tasks to find out whether they understood how the increased coverage applies to their own personal situation.

Comments on the method they used: Interviews were a good choice of method for this final check on how well the flyer was working: they allowed for behavioral observation and use of tasks to assess comprehension and ability to use the information. Doing interviews with a mix of respondents gave them an opportunity to find out how well the flyer works for people whose circumstances differ.

Source: Created as a fictional example for this Toolkit.

How many feedback sessions will you need?

There is no simple answer to the question of how many interviews or focus groups you should do. Ideally, you would keep doing interviews or focus groups until you were no longer getting new information. If there were any important subgroups within the audience of readers you are trying to reach, you would want to do sessions with representatives of each subgroup or people who can serve as key informants about the subgroups.

Realistically, there are always limits on time and resources, and besides, it is hard to know in advance how many interviews or groups it might take before reaching the point where you were learning nothing new. If you are developing new materials or doing substantial revisions of existing materials, there are three main points to keep in mind:

1 **You can learn a lot by doing a relatively small number of feedback sessions**

Even if you can only do a few interviews, it will be worth while to collect feedback from readers.

2 **There are some fairly fast and cost-effective ways to collect feedback from readers**

For help in considering the time and resources involved in doing feedback sessions, see Toolkit Part 6, Chapter 2, Figure 6-2-d, *Cost implications of key decisions you make in planning your feedback sessions*. As shown in this figure, it's not the approach you choose that determines cost and timing, it's how you implement that approach. Groups can be done quickly at relatively little expense, and so can interviews. Groups can be time consuming and costly, and so can interviews.

3 **It is helpful to get feedback from readers more than once, at different stages in your project**

In general, it's more cost-effective and efficient to start getting feedback from readers at an early draft stage, while there's still plenty of time to make changes to the material. For example, you could use feedback sessions at an early stage to guide your choice of a layout and visuals, then do more feedback sessions later on to check on how well people can understand and use the material. Sometimes when you make changes to fix one part of the material, you inadvertently create new problems with the material.

Things to consider

When you are deciding how many feedback sessions you will need, here are suggestions and points to consider:

- **Take into account the extent of diversity among your feedback participants**. In general, if your intended readers or informants are similar in their characteristics and circumstances, you will need fewer sessions overall. When they differ a lot in ways that are relevant to the written materials, you should plan to do more sessions.

- **If possible, think in terms of doing more than one round of feedback sessions**. Each time you alter the material and do a new set of feedback sessions, we call this doing another "round" of sessions. So the first set of interview or group sessions would be the first round of feedback sessions. And then if you revise the material and show it to readers again, we call this doing a second round of feedback sessions.

  - If you do more than one round, you will be able to get different types of feedback at different stages of your project. You will also be able to test how well your revisions are working, and make sure that by fixing one problem you haven't created new ones.

  - If your budget and timeline permit, doing three rounds can be ideal, especially if you devote the final round to usability testing (see Toolkit Part 6, Chapter 9, *Tips for collecting particular types of feedback from readers*).

- **If you are doing interviews, think in terms of doing about 5 to 15 interviews *per round* of sessions** as a rough guide. Five is probably the smallest number of interviews per round that you would want to consider. For many purposes, 8 to 12 interviews per round can be adequate.

- **When money is an issue, it is generally much better to cut the number of sessions *per round* than to cut the number of rounds**. For example, suppose that your budget will cover 18 interviews. Instead of doing one round of 18 interviews, it would be better to do two rounds of 9 interviews each, or three rounds of 6 interviews each.

- **If you are doing focus groups, it's helpful to do more than one group per round of feedback sessions**. What you learn in a group can be heavily influenced by who participates, the questions you ask, the skill of the moderator, and the group dynamic that emerges. To reduce possible bias and increase your confidence in the results, it's wise to do more than just one group (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

  - *Focus groups with intended readers*. Since focus groups tend to work best when the participants are relatively similar, consider whether there are any subgroups with important differences among the readers you are trying to reach. Then try to schedule a separate focus group discussion with people who represent each subgroup. For example, if you are doing focus groups to get readers' reactions to a chart that summarizes Medicare coverage for preventive care, you might want to do separate groups with men and women, since some of the screening tests apply to men only and some apply to women only.

  - *Focus groups with informants*. Informants are people who are familiar with your intended readers. If your informants have similar types of knowledge about your intended readers, then it may be very productive to have a single group discussion. If your key informants have different types of knowledge about your intended readers, it would be best to schedule separate groups. For example, suppose you are working on a booklet that explains the Medicaid program to recent immigrants from Southeast Asia, and you want to get reactions from informants. You might want to hold separate focus groups with language interpreters, clinic staff, and leaders from the local community-based organizations.

- **If you are getting feedback on materials that are long and complex, consider doing a larger number of sessions.** In general, it takes more time to get readers' reactions to long, complex materials than to materials that are short and simple. When you have a lengthy document or a website with many pages, the reading time alone can be substantial and you want to allow plenty of time for readers to share their reactions. When you have more sessions, it's possible to split them in ways that allow you to cover more issues, such as asking different people to react to different parts of the materials.

End notes

CMS joins Toolkit writer Jeanne McGee, PhD in thanking colleagues who shared their experiences, reviewed early drafts of this and other chapters of the Toolkit, and offered many helpful ideas, examples, and suggestions for improvement. See acknowledgments at the end of Toolkit Part 1 and Toolkit Part 6, Chapter 1.

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1997 *The focus group kit*. Boxed edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. This kit contains six volumes, each of which is also available separately: *The focus group guidebook* (Morgan); *Planning focus groups* (Morgan); *Developing questions for focus groups* (Krueger); *Moderating focus groups* (Krueger); *Involving community members in focus groups* (Krueger & King); and *Analyzing and reporting focus group results* (Krueger).

NCI (National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health)

2002 *Making health communications programs work: A planner's guide*. National Cancer Institute, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, National Institutes of Health (NIH), Bethesda, MD. NIH publication No. 02-5145, revised December 2001, printed September 2002. For a copy, visit the NCI website at http://www.cancer.gov/pinkbook or call NCI's Cancer Information Service at 1-800-422-6237. This 251 page paperback is an updated and greatly expanded version of the classic 1992 NCI "pink book."

Suggested resources

All of the resources cited above are excellent for learning more about topics covered in this chapter.

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