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 19

Using feedback from readers to improve written material

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

TOOLKIT Part 6, Chapter 19

Using feedback from readers to improve written material

This document is the last 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).

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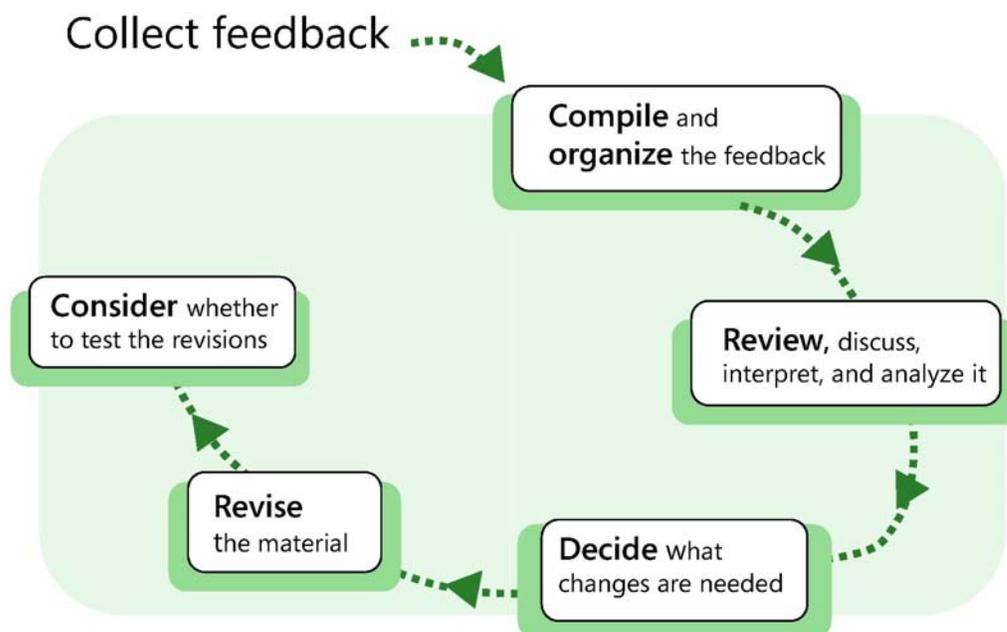
Introduction

Let's say that you have finished collecting feedback on a draft of your written material:

- **You have tested the material with readers.** You did a series of feedback interviews, and now you have a big stack of Session Summary Forms and notes taken during the sessions.

- **You have collected feedback from other sources, too.** Although this Toolkit Part 6 focuses on ways of collecting feedback directly from readers, the members of the project team and representatives from stakeholder organizations are another important source of feedback. You might get their suggestions in a variety of ways, including meetings, phone calls, and e-mails. Perhaps you have sought feedback from some other sources too, such as subject matter experts, specialists in plain language communication, and people who are familiar with the culture and information needs of your intended readers.

What next? How can you put all of this feedback to use?

The diagram below shows steps involved in organizing, interpreting, and applying the feedback you get from readers and other sources to make improvements to your written material.

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An art and an adventure

Every project is different, and so it's hard to give much specific guidance about how to interpret and use the feedback you have collected from readers and other sources. In this final chapter of Toolkit Part 6, we offer practical advice about getting organized and a few general suggestions to help you get started in analyzing, interpreting, and using the feedback you have collected.

Having feedback directly from readers lets you see the written material from their point of view. Reader feedback is fascinating and informative, and a useful tool for making your written material clear and effective. Using this feedback to improve written material is an art, and there's no right or best way to go about it. It takes trial and error, creativity, and a willingness to entertain some different points of view. Your project is unique. Sifting through the feedback you have collected, figuring out what it means, and deciding what changes to make will be your own adventure.

Tips for compiling and organizing the feedback

Before you bring people together to discuss the feedback and make decisions about revising the material, it's helpful to get the feedback organized in ways that will make it easier for people to absorb and analyze. Here are suggestions:

1. **As much as you can, try to group together all of the feedback on a given topic or section of the material.** Having it all in one place makes it easier to refer to and discuss. You don't need to spend a lot of time on this, and you don't need to start from scratch by creating a special summary document. Instead, try using "cut and paste" to group things together. You can do this electronically, or you can do it by making photocopies that you literally will cut apart and paste together in a different arrangement.

2. **If any of the feedback can be tabulated, do this in advance.** If you have used any rating scales, sorting tasks, or other methods of collecting feedback that involve numeric scoring, compile and summarize the results before you share them with reviewers.

3. **Try to point out areas of agreement and disagreement among those who gave feedback**. As you compile and organize the feedback, be alert to areas where feedback tends to be similar and consistent, and areas where there are differences of opinion. These patterns of response can give you insights into strengths and weaknesses of the material and the types of changes that might be needed. For example, feedback might be consistently positive about the photographs you are using, but there might be mixed reactions to the way the material is organized.

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4. **Consider whether it is important to keep track of who gave which kinds of feedback.**
   Especially if there are strong disagreements, it can be useful to see if there are any patterns to the disagreements. For example, you may find that only older readers have trouble reading certain parts of a document due to the size of the font, and find that certain illustrations are hard to understand.

5. **Try to share at least some of the feedback in advance.** Members of the team who are going to discuss the reader feedback may appreciate some lead time to become familiar with the issues that came up in the sessions. Sharing results in advance can help make your in-person meetings more productive.

Interpreting and using the feedback you collected

To help you interpret and use the feedback you collected, this last section offers some general suggestions and things to consider.

Try for a mix of people

When you are analyzing and interpreting the feedback you collected from readers and other sources, it helps to assemble a group of people with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. If possible, include interviewers and note takers who conducted the feedback sessions. They can share their impressions and answer questions that come up. You might want to include writers, editors, and graphic designers who will be implementing revisions to the material. There are many ways to get people involved in this process. You could hold big meetings, a series of small meetings, conference calls, or use e-mail. Who participates and how they participate depends on many factors, including scope of the project, timetable and resources, and who has responsibility for making the final decisions about which changes to make.

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Be prepared to interpret meaning and judge what's most important

When you collect feedback from readers and others, you can expect to get differences of opinion and conflicting advice. Once in a while, feedback is strong, consistent, and it's clear what you should do with it. For example, if readers find a photo culturally unsuitable, it will have to be replaced. If subject matter experts find a clinical error, you will have to correct it.

But usually, interpreting the feedback is a messy process. When you are analyzing the feedback you collected, it can help to act like a detective. You have collected tidbits of evidence or clues about possible problems in the material and suggestions for ways to improve it. These clues require interpretation, and you can't necessarily treat them at face value. For example, readers and reviewers might suggest that you emphasize text in ways that violate sound principles of design. They might tell you to put a box around it, make it all really big and bold, or use all capital letters. You can use their feedback as indicating that there's a problem, but reject their advice about how to fix it and find a more effective way to emphasize the block of text.

As you sift through the feedback you have collected, you will need to weigh all of the evidence to reach a conclusion about how to use it. Some feedback is clearly more consequential than other feedback. If reader feedback consistently identifies barriers in navigation or misunderstandings of key content, you will need to address these problems. But if people differ in matters of taste, such as differing in their opinions about a color scheme, this feedback is much less consequential.

Often, feedback from readers will help you spot problems but may not give you much guidance about how to fix them. To help figure out ways to address the problems you identify in testing material with readers, the other parts of this Toolkit will be helpful, especially the detailed guidelines for writing and design in Toolkit Parts 3, 4, and 5. When it's time to do triage on possible changes, be guided by what is most important to help readers understand and use the material (see Toolkit Part 2).

Recognize that a change you make to one part of the document can ripple through the rest of it

Revising material is an iterative process with a considerable component of trial and error and occasional nice surprises. Sometimes, when you fix one part of a document, the changes you make will fix other problems as well. For example, if you strengthen the introduction, people may be able to understand what follows better – even if you don't change anything but the introduction. Other times, you might make a change that improves the document in one area but inadvertently creates a new problem in a different part of the document. If you make extensive changes in your material, it's wise to test the material with readers again. Getting another round of feedback will let you know how well your revisions are working and verify that you haven't created any new problems.

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What you learn will carry over into future projects

Using feedback from readers to improve your written material will make the material more effective for the intended readers. Besides making this positive contribution to improving health literacy, working with readers to collect and use their feedback will help you become more skilled at producing written material that is easier for people to understand and use.

If you are not able to respond to all of the good suggestions you get, don't be discouraged. Whatever you have learned from readers is a benefit. The insights and the skills you develop and refine by learning directly from readers will carry over into your other projects. The more you watch, listen, and learn from readers, the more you will be able to see the written material from their point of view. This will change the way you look at information materials and sharpen your skills in writing and design. In future projects, you will be able to produce suitable materials in a more efficient and cost effective way.

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