



Messages with Impact: A Guide to Develop Clear and Effective Educational Materials

tecc

Tobacco Education
Clearinghouse
of California

Messages with Impact: A Guide to Develop Clear and Effective Educational Materials



When developing educational materials, **the most important thing you can do is to write clearly.** This will help readers understand your message and any action steps you're asking them to take.

This guide offers tips and resources to help you write clear and effective educational materials.

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Before You Start Writing

Before you start writing, answer these key questions. They will help guide your material in the right direction.

1. Who is your intended audience?
2. What is your main message?
3. What is your call to action?



Intended Audience

Your intended audience is the specific group of people you want to reach with your message. When you choose **one** clearly defined audience, your message will be more effective.

Your resource will be less effective if it tries to serve too many purposes. For example, if you are creating a fact sheet for multi-unit housing residents that explains the risks of secondhand smoke, you will dilute your message if you try to add information for policymakers. It would be more effective to develop two separate fact sheets for these audiences.



Main Message

Your audience may remember only one message—what do you want that to be? Write a short, clear main message and emphasize it by placing the main message at or near the beginning of the educational material. This helps your readers quickly and easily understand the most important information you want to deliver.

Call to Action

What do you want your reader to DO after reading your educational material? This is known as the “call to action.” The action should be concrete and specific. For example, a tobacco cessation material’s call to action could include information on how to contact a local clinic with cessation services or access Kick It California resources.

Example

1. **Intended audience:** Owners and property managers of multi-unit housing.
2. **Main message:** A majority of adults in California believe that apartment complexes should be vape- and smokefree. Adopting a smokefree multi-unit housing property policy can protect both your tenants and your property as well.
3. **Call to action:** Have owners and property managers of multi-unit housing adopt a voluntary smokefree multi-unit housing policy.

After you have identified your **intended audience**, the **main message**, and the **call to action** you are ready to work on the wording for your educational material.



9 Tips for Clear and Effective Educational Materials

These tips will help you create clear, effective educational materials that your readers can understand and use.



1. Write for Your Reader

Write directly to your audience.

- + Ask yourself what your intended audience needs to know.
- + Use language your audience feels comfortable with.
- + If you have multiple audiences you want to reach, consider creating multiple educational materials that are customized to each audience's needs.

2. Speak to Your Audience

Communicate as if you are talking to a friend.

- + Speak directly to your audience and use "you" and "your" where possible.
 - **Use:** You could get sick from breathing secondhand smoke.
 - **Instead of:** Secondhand smoke exposure could cause adverse health effects.
- + Use clear and friendly language, free of blame.
 - **"Learn how you can protect your family."**
- + Include examples, quotes, or personal stories from the community to engage your reader when possible.
- + Some audiences and communities use words or phrases that are unique to their area or culture, and there also may be words or phrases that should be avoided. Keep this in mind as you are writing your message.



TECC's online catalog has hundreds of educational materials with great examples of talking points you can use for inspiration.



3. Have a Clear Main Message

Put your main message near the beginning of the educational material. You may choose to bold it and highlight it. Stay focused on it.

Check out these examples of clear main messages:

- + **Tobacco companies promote cheaper products in rural communities** and fight against secondhand smoke policies.
- + **People living in apartments are more likely to be exposed to secondhand smoke.**
- + Vaping creates an aerosol made up of tiny toxic particles—**NOT harmless water vapor.**



4. Keep It Short and Simple

Keep the message short and simple. You don't need to include lots of statistics or share everything there is to know about a topic.

Remember, **the more you write, the less they'll read.**

- + Keep your message short and easy to understand.
→ **"Secondhand smoke is a real health risk."**
- + Include no more than 5 sentences in a paragraph.
- + Avoid repeating the same types of information (e.g., presenting 3 different statistics on the same topic).

5. Keep It Action Oriented

Messages that are action oriented offer clear steps your readers can take.

- + Focus on realistic actions and achievable goals.
→ **"Ask family members and friends to step outside to smoke."**
- + Emphasize benefits of adopting the behavior.
→ **"When you make a smokefree rule at home, your whole family will breathe easier."**
- + Acknowledge barriers (social and financial) and provide ideas to overcome them.
→ **"Let them know it isn't about smoking, it's about keeping your family healthy."**
- + Include free or low-cost resources for help, such as a local clinic with cessation services or Kick It California.
→ **"Contact Kick It California to get free, confidential, personalized help to quit smoking, vaping, and smokeless tobacco."**



6. Choose the Right Words

Make it easy for your audience to understand your message by choosing an appropriate reading level. All audiences will appreciate accessible language.

- + Use one- or two-syllable words when possible.
- + Avoid jargon, technical, or scientific language.
- + Write in an active voice, using vivid verbs.
 - **Active:** The child ingested the e-cigarette liquid.
 - **Passive:** The e-cigarette liquid was ingested by the child.
- + Replace numerical statistics with descriptive words like “most,” “many,” and “half.”
 - **Example:** Most youth who have tried tobacco started with a flavored product.
- + Choose the appropriate reading level for your audience. For most educational materials we recommend an 8th grade or lower reading level. When writing about some topics (e.g., tobacco product waste, tobacco retail policy) for some audiences (e.g., policymakers, health professionals), you may need to use language that is more complicated or that registers at a higher reading level. You can help your readers by explaining complicated language in accessible ways.



5th Grade Reading Level:

Children who breathe secondhand smoke are more likely to get sick.

8th Grade Reading Level:

Breathing secondhand smoke increases the risk of health problems in children.

10th Grade Reading Level:

Exposure to secondhand smoke contributes to adverse health effects in children.



Check out our **TECCFlix: Checking Reading Level** tutorial to learn step-by-step how to check the reading level in Word.

7. Carefully Craft Your Title and Subtitle

The first thing your readers see is your title. It draws them in. A subtitle can serve as a primer for what comes next.

- + Title – Grab your readers' attention with as few words as possible.
- + Subtitle – Add some context with a short line



8. Organize for Impact

Organize content to meet your readers' needs.

- + Start with the most important information and end with a call to action and resource(s).
- + Lead your reader to a call to action.
- + Offer clear, logical steps from the beginning to the end. Step-by-step, chronological, question/answer, and problem/solution formats are easy to follow.
- + Break up longer content with headlines, short paragraphs, and bulleted lists.

9. Pay Attention to Design

Design elements can help readers understand and remember your main message. Use images that reinforce your message. Never use an image that demonstrates something you don't want readers to do.

- + Limit lists to 7 bullets and stay away from sub-bulleted lists.
- + Use left-aligned text instead of justifying your text.
- + Use call-out boxes or text bolding for key messages, relevant related information, or content that helps spark interest.
- + Include blank or "white space" to help focus the reader's attention on your message, which can increase its impact.



Bonus Tip: Get Help Citing Your Sources

When using facts and figures that are not common knowledge, you should cite the original source of this information. The [Rover Tobacco Control Library](#) helps CTPP-funded projects find sources for facts and statistics and helps format citations. See the Rover "Citation Help" webpage for more information.



Framing Messages to Promote Equity

Health equity is the state in which everyone has a fair and just opportunity to attain their highest level of health. When we create messages that are inclusive, we are focusing on achieving health equity.



Use Familiar Language

Some of the terminology we commonly use in public health, such as “health disparities” and “social determinants of health,” may not resonate with general audiences. It’s more effective to discuss these concepts with ordinary, emotionally compelling language.

Text Makeover

Before: “Despite efforts in tobacco control over the past two decades, tobacco-related health disparities remain for some priority population groups.”

After: “Our goal is to give everyone a fair chance to live a healthy, tobacco-free life regardless of their income, education, or ethnic background.”

Start with the “Why”

Messages that describe disparities and focus on one ethnic group can reinforce negative racial stereotypes. To avoid this, try to be explicit about the reasons why health disparities exist.

Text Makeover

Before: “American Indians have the highest smoking rates compared to all other racial/ethnic groups in the US.”

After: “The tobacco industry has aggressively marketed their products to American Indian communities, which has contributed to high smoking rates.”

People First Language

Language that acknowledges that readers are people first, and not defined by their demographics, social identities, or any other labels, conveys respect. Language that defines people by their situation or life experiences can be off-putting and offensive.

Text Makeover

Before: “Smokers have a higher chance of developing lung cancer.”

After: “People who smoke have a higher chance of developing lung cancer.”



TECC Example

Now that we have covered how to create clear and effective messaging for your educational materials, let's see these tips in action. Here is an example of one of our TECC materials, **Hooked on Hookah**. This fact card urges people to understand that hookah is a tobacco product that is just as addictive and harmful as cigarettes.



Front

Organize for Impact

Carefully Craft Your Title and Subtitle

Have a Clear Main Message

Speak to Your Audience

Pay Attention to Design



HOOKED ON HOOKAH

Hookah is NOT a safe alternative to cigarettes.

Hookah is still tobacco. The tobacco in hookah is just as addictive and harmful as the tobacco in cigarettes.

One typical session delivers:

- 2x** the nicotine of a cigarette¹
- 10x** the carbon monoxide of a cigarette.¹
- 200x** the smoke of a cigarette.¹
- 69** toxins and chemicals that can cause cancer.²

Hookah puts you at risk for:

- Nicotine addiction.²
- Oral, lung, stomach, and bladder cancer.²
- Lung and heart disease.²
- Decreased fertility.²
- Mood disorders.¹

Keep It Short and Simple

The Truth about Hookah

Hookah bars and cafes market themselves as fun and relaxing social environments.

This helps explain why most people who use hookah don't realize how harmful it is. They mistakenly believe hookah is less risky than cigarettes.³



The water cools the smoke but does not remove the toxins. In fact, the cooled smoke feels better so hookah users smoke longer and inhale deeper.³

Choose the Right Words



Hookah is available in a variety of flavors that mask the harsh taste of tobacco, such as fruit, candy, and mint. Most people who use hookah use flavors.⁴

Keep It Action Oriented

Free Help to Quit Tobacco:



Contact **Kick It California** to get free, confidential, personalized help to quit tobacco and nicotine.

Text **“Quit smoking”** or **“Quit vaping”** to **66819**

Call **1-800-300-8086** or visit **kickitca.org**

Cite Your Sources

REFERENCES

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4. Odani, S, et al. Flavored Tobacco Product Use and Its Association With Indicators of Tobacco Dependence Among US Adults, 2014-2015. *Nicotine & Tobacco Research*, 22.6 (2019): 1004-1015. <https://academic.oup.com/ntr/article/22/6/1004/5513285>

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TECC offers free support to CTPP-funded projects to help develop culturally appropriate and relevant tobacco education materials. At any stage of material development, TECC can provide different types of technical assistance (TA), including editing, graphic design, and much more. Visit MatTrack to submit your TA Request.

The TECC Materials TA Business Rules document highlights all the approved TA types TECC can provide, as well as estimated timeframes for each type of work. The document also details what projects are accountable for when submitting a TA request, and information about translations and consumer testing. This document can be found on our website in the **Technical Assistance** section.

If you need help creating a MatTrack account or have a question, please contact us at help@tecc.org.



Resources

Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018). Your Guide to Clear Writing. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/clearwriting/docs/clear-writing-guide-508.pdf>

National Institutes of Health. (2023). Plain Language: Before You Start Writing. Retrieved from <https://www.nih.gov/institutes-nih/nih-office-director/office-communications-public-liaison/clear-communication/plain-language/before-you-start-writing>

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