Tips on Equitable Communication Practices in a Policy Context

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This content was initially created to inform federal staff at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. In an effort to increase collaboration and share promising practices, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation has made this tool available for both public and private partners. Potential audiences that may be interested in these materials include, but are not limited to, state and local governments, tribal governments, and other private or non-profit organizations focused on programs and policies relating to health and human services. Links and references to information from non-governmental organizations are provided for informational purposes and are not an HHS endorsement, recommendation, or preference for the non-governmental organizations.

Purpose

This tip sheet highlights the importance of using equitable communication practices in a policy context. It also includes tips and guiding questions for consideration as well as a list of additional resources.

Importance of equitable communication

Equitable communication—written (words and images), oral, and manual and expressed (American Sign Language, signs, gestures, body language)—in a policy context is vital. No one, no matter where they live or were born, how they identify, or their circumstances, should face barriers to accessing and using the information they need to achieve their goals.

Equitable communication:

- Uses language and visuals that are inclusive and culturally connected to the intended audience

- Ensures accessibility

- Makes information easy to find, understand, and use

What is equity?

The consistent and systematic, fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment, such as Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of colors; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality. *Definition adapted from Executive Order 13985.*

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Characteristics of equitable communication

To be equitable, strategies for communication should:

Be inclusive and culturally connected. To ensure they are responsive to the audience, equitable communication strategies aim to be person-first, gender-neutral, strength-based, culturally and linguistically inclusive, bias-free, respectful, and connected with the intended audience.

Ensure accessibility and linguistic responsiveness. Equitable communication strategies ensure that information is maximally accessible to everyone so that people with varied access needs and primary languages can fully understand and engage with all messages.

Make information easy to find, understand, and use.[2] Equitable communication uses language that is plain, comprehensible, and in a format that makes sense for the intended audience, often presenting information in a variety of ways.

The table below presents tips and guiding questions for developing equitable communications. These are starting points that are meant to be adapted for specific audiences and contexts as appropriate, and seeking out legal guidance may be required depending on the activity and the applicable civil rights laws. These tips may also evolve over time.

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[2] Adapted from federal plain language guidelines available at https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/.

Tips and guiding questions for developing equitable communication

Be inclusive and connected with your intended audience

Tips	Guiding questions
Identify your intended audience	
- Ensure that you identify and include all those who could benefit from the communication. Ensure that members of the community, including community-based organizations that represent the community members of interest, participate in identifying the audiences you want to reach. - Acknowledge the diversity across and within communities and think about whether and when you need to tailor communications accordingly. Note that different people within a community may prefer different terms and ways of communicating about certain matters. Recognizing that your intended audience may be quite diverse, try to tailor communications and respect variations across and within communities as much as possible. - Educate yourself about the historical, cultural, and policy context of the community and ensure that messages reflect that context.	- For whom is the message intended? What communities are recipients part of (recognizing variations in how individuals and groups self-identify)? Consider: - Racial group - Ethnic group - Country of origin - Sexual orientation - Gender/gender identity - Religion - Urban/rural status - Socio-economic status and impact of poverty - Disability status - Intersecting identities - What contextual information may inform how the audience accesses, understands, receives, and uses information?
Collaborate or consult with the intended audience to develop content and communication strategies	
- Work with community members, leaders, community-based organizations, and population-specific experts to develop the content and tailored strategies for equitably and effectively communicating to the intended audience. When possible, develop the content and communication strategies in collaboration with the community. - Draw on the community to validate the cultural and linguistic responsiveness and accessibility of materials. - Consider creating multiple materials with similar content that are appropriately tailored for specific audiences. - Establish specific opportunities and a reasonable timeline to regularly update materials with current language, changing contexts, and appropriate formats based on input from community members and leaders, recognizing changes in legal obligations, terminology, and methods for consuming information. - Seek feedback from those in the community on specific language, grammatical structures, and terminology.	- Have we engaged with the community to ensure that our communications respect and respond to the community's cultural and linguistic preferences and diversity (while noting that preferences may differ by person)? - How can we stay meaningfully engaged in recurring conversations with community members to ensure we understand how they access, understand, and use information? - How can we remain appropriately engaged with the community so that we regularly revisit and evaluate communication strategies within intended audiences? - Are we updating communications strategies at the appropriate frequency to ensure they remain current and relevant based on changing contexts, evolution in communication and language principles, legal obligations, preferences, and format?

Tips	Guiding questions
Focus on people and their strengths in communication	
▪ Use person-first language (e.g., "children in foster care" instead of "foster children" and "people experiencing homelessness" instead of "homeless people") unless the intended audience states their preference for alternative language. ▪ Use strengths-based language that focuses on the assets and successes of individuals or communities rather than their perceived needs or problems.	▪ Are we ensuring that our communications do not define people by their current condition or situation? ▪ What assets, strengths, or successes of the community can we include in this communication? – How can we best highlight these assets, strengths, or successes in the language we use and in the information we are communicating? ▪ Are we creating any harm or perpetuating any stereotypes through the language we use?
Choose words carefully to avoid causing harm or offense[3]	
▪ Use language that is culturally and linguistically inclusive and bias-free whenever possible. ▪ Use gender-neutral language whenever possible. ▪ Avoid generalizations; try to be as specific as possible when referring to groups. ▪ Avoid, when possible, language that may blame, harm, or stigmatize the community (examples may include, "vulnerable," "high-risk," "at-risk," "marginal," or "minority"). If using these terms is unavoidable for legal purposes or there are other reasons to use them, explain the rationale. ▪ Avoid language that includes violent connotations and replace it with more neutral, inclusive, and precise descriptors ("collaborator" instead of "stakeholder" and "eliminate disease" instead of "combat disease").	▪ Have we considered how individuals with differing age, disability, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, immigration, and racial and ethnic identities (among others) might respond to the language we use? ▪ Does our choice of language unintentionally reinforce stereotypes or the stigma commonly associated with a specific group, community, or condition? ▪ Can we replace terms such as "vulnerable," "high-risk," "at-risk," "marginal," or "minority" with less stigmatizing or bias-free alternatives such as "people from (*X* racial group)" or "groups that have been economically or socially marginalized"? *Note: Some laws or formal program names may include these terms, but it is important to use alternatives when possible and appropriate. Regardless of the chosen term, be thoughtful and intentional in word choice.*
Ensure that images reflect and resonate with the audience	
▪ Ensure that the identities (for example, gender, disability, race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation) presented in communications appropriately reflect the intended audience and showcase the audience's diversity. ▪ Ensure images highlight the strengths of the community and do not reinforce stereotypes.	▪ Are the images used reflective and inclusive of the intended audience? ▪ Do the images used portray unhelpful power dynamics or reinforce any stereotypes?

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[3] The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's list of preferred terms for select populations, groups, and communities is available at
https://www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/Preferred_Terms.html.

Ensure accessibility and linguistic responsiveness for all

Tips	Guiding questions
Ensure that individuals with disabilities can receive and use the information	
▪ Identify the specific accessibility needs of the audience in advance, including through querying and collaborating directly with intended audience. Consult assistive technology users with disabilities when possible. ▪ Develop a tailored accessibility plan for reaching people with disabilities across all outreach and materials. ▪ Follow civil rights laws and other accessibility requirements for people with disabilities.	▪ How can we make this resource accessible to the audience? Will the audience benefit from closed captioning, alt-text, large print, or some combination? ▪ Are the text and images accessible for audience members who use assistive technology, such as screen readers? ▪ Which audiences have accessibility needs? What is the nature of these needs? How can we quantify these needs and embed accessibility into our communication goals? ▪ What resources are needed and available to support implementation of the accessibility plan? ▪ What metrics will be used to measure progress toward accessibility goals?
Share information thoughtfully in a variety of languages	
▪ Identify and assess the language needs of your audience. ▪ Develop and then disseminate resources simultaneously in several languages. ▪ Be cognizant of different dialects, variations, and other nuances within the same language. Consider ways to incorporate multiple variations of words in the same language, such as by listing alternate terms in parentheses. ▪ Consider using the standardized variety of the languages in question, which is generally understood by speakers of all dialects of the language if the intended audience considers it appropriate. Some communities view standardized language varieties (for example, "Peninsular Spanish," that is, the Spanish of Spain) as inappropriate and inequitable because of their connections with colonial histories and instead prefer their regional language (for example, Central and South American Spanish). ▪ Ensure that information and meanings are retained throughout the process of translation. Research and assess the most appropriate (for example, backtranslation or committee approaches) and accurate method for translation available to support consistency in meaning for the audience. ▪ Consider cultural, linguistic, and access standards such as the National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) in Health and Health Care,[4] and follow other applicable language access requirements in law. ▪ Avoid using automated translation tools, including web-based tools.	▪ Are communications available in the languages primarily spoken by the intended audience? ▪ How many languages are spoken in the communities we are trying to reach? What variations in language varieties (for example, dialects) exist? ▪ What language variety do members of the communities we are trying to reach consider appropriate and equitable to use? ▪ Can people who speak different dialects of the language understand the translated materials? ▪ Is there clarity and cultural relevance in translated concepts, phrases, metaphors, and analogies? Are there unnecessary idioms?

[4] Information on the National CLAS Standards is available at https://thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/clas.

Tips	Guiding questions
Use translators with appropriate qualifications and consider best practices for translation	
▪ All translators and proofreaders should have appropriate translation training (regardless of personal knowledge from lived experience). ▪ Translators should ideally be sought from within the intended audience, so the community's linguistic, political, and cultural contexts are incorporated into their translation work. Proofreaders or reviewers should also be community members. ▪ Translators should be asked to go beyond just words and sentences to comment on social and cultural aspects of the materials.	▪ Do hired translators bring relevant context- and community-specific expertise? ▪ Have all aspects of the resource been translated, including alt-text and captions?

Make information easy to find, understand, and use

Tips	Guiding questions
Ensure that all individuals can find information	
▪ Consider how the audience will consume the resource (for example, digitally on a computer or mobile device or on paper). ▪ Consider the length, design, and layout of the resource, including the use of empty space, margins, font size, and colors.	▪ What is the nature of the audience's digital access, including the speed and quality of Internet service? ▪ If the resource is likely to be viewed by phone, is the resource mobile friendly?
Make key information easy to understand	
▪ Ensure that key takeaways and action items are easy to locate and understand. ▪ Use graphics, images, and data visualizations (with alt text) if it will be helpful to the intended audience. ▪ Consider balance by using straightforward, easy-to-read charts and clear messages to help the audience understand the message quickly. Understand that some people prefer hearing rather than seeing key messages, others prefer images or videos, and still others prefer reading.	▪ Can the intended audience easily locate resources? ▪ Can the intended audience easily navigate materials and skim through them to identify key points? ▪ Have we conveyed our message in a variety of ways?
Use plain language	
▪ Use active voice and action verbs. ▪ Avoid jargon, technical language, and excessive abbreviations or acronyms.	▪ Is the language similar to that in other communications that the audience typically consumes? ▪ To what extent is the intended audience versed in the technical language we use in communicating to them? ▪ Do any words have a different meaning for the audience?

For more information

CDC's Health Equity Communication Resources:

▶ https://www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/Health_Equity.html

▶ https://www.cdc.gov/globalhealth/equity/guide/index.html

Plain language guidelines, examples, and resources:

▶ https://www.plainlanguage.gov/

▶ https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/developmaterials/plainlanguage.html

▶ https://www.opm.gov/information-management/plain-language

Resources for reaching individuals with primary languages other than English:

▶ https://www.hhs.gov/civil-rights/for-individuals/special-topics/limited-english-proficiency/index.html

▶ https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/open/pres-actions/2013-hhs-language-access-plan.pdf

Resources on using language to promote health equity and reduce bias:

▶ https://thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/clas/blueprint

▶ https://www.ama-assn.org/about/ama-center-health-equity/advancing-health-equity-guide-language-narrative-and-concepts-0

▶ https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/

Resources on accessibility:

▶ https://www.hhs.gov/web/section-508/index.html

▶ https://www.hhs.gov/web/section-508/os-technical-resources/index.html

▶ https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc-disability-related-resources