

# Guide to Materials Development

Public health assessors and health educators provide information to communities through a variety of materials and tools. These materials help to inform the community about the role of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), what occurs during a public health assessment process and what is known about the site-specific health issue, what potential or actual health risks exist, and what actions (if any) the community should take and when. In general, materials are developed and disseminated during presentations, one-on-one meetings/interviews, town hall or community meetings, and other community engagement activities; however they may also be used for other purposes as well.

## Best Practices for Developing Materials

Materials that are developed and disseminated during the community assessment process must address an audience's information needs, concerns, and their level of scientific or health knowledge. Because public health assessments are often technical in nature, materials written about them and their findings should be simplified and clearly written without sacrificing accuracy.

When developing materials:

- **Use information gleaned from the Stakeholder/Partner Outreach Tool** in this toolkit to understand the specific audience(s), their information needs, and the types of materials they would find useful. Some questions to ask yourself as you start developing communication materials include:
  - Is the audience familiar with ATSDR and what the agency is assigned to do in the community?
  - What does the audience know about the public health assessment process?
  - Does the community need additional information about potential or actual health risks?
- Have you considered special needs populations (e.g., those with visual or hearing impairments, people who are homebound, or the homeless)?
- **Consider using the Message Mapping Tool in this toolkit** before developing materials to ensure that the messages that you are conveying in meetings and written materials are consistent.
- **Tailor messages and materials to the audience to meet the needs of diverse communities.**
- **Consider translating or adapting English language materials for diverse audiences.** Depending on the community you are serving, you may need to translate or adapt materials so that your messages will be culturally and linguistically appropriate, relevant, and understood. The decision to adapt materials should be based on community demographics and discussions with key community leaders. Community partners may also be able to help facilitate or assist in the translation/adaptation process.
- **Apply plain language principles when developing materials**, including the public health assessment document (see next section, "Tips for Using Plain Language").
- **Consider developing low-literacy materials.** Writing in plain language is not

the same as writing for people with low literacy, although similar writing principles apply. Making the decision about whether to develop low-literacy materials shouldn't be based on the audience's level of education alone. People can be very well educated and still not fully understand complex medical or scientific information. Stakeholders and partners may be helpful in assessing whether low-literacy materials may be needed.

- **Provide an accurate portrayal of risk.** Even as you communicate information simply and clearly, make sure that the information, including that on health hazards and risks, is accurate and put into proper context. For example, state explicitly when a hazard does or does not exist and why or why not.

- **Acknowledge uncertainties and clearly outline what is known and not known.** Explain where and why there are uncertainties such as lack of information. For example, "ATSDR has gathered and reviewed all available information about health concerns related to breathing as told by residents near the site. At this time, ATSDR does not have enough information to make conclusions about whether breathing difficulties are related to site contaminants. ATSDR will reevaluate this concern if additional information becomes available." [Adapted from the ATSDR Public Health Assessment Guidance Manual (Update 2005).]

If there are uncertainties that can be resolved, let community members know what is being done to resolve these uncertainties.

- **Create a consistent "look and feel" for all ATSDR materials to establish a recognized agency identity.** This unified look should include ATSDR-branded templates and design elements such as color palettes, typefaces, styles, logos, and taglines. Templates and examples are provided in this document for your use. (See "Types of Communication Materials" section)

- **Ensure that the format is easy to read:**
  - Use 10 to 12 point typeface with serif, such as Times New Roman.
  - Use white space when formatting/designing materials to ensure that materials are not too text heavy and overwhelming for audiences.
  - Place relevant facts in text boxes or make them stand out some other way.

## Tips for Using Plain Language

To explain difficult concepts in a clear, understandable, but accurate manner, follow the tips below and refer to the "Resources" section at the end of this document.

- **Incorporate approved/cleared messages into materials when appropriate.**
- **Organize content to "tell the story" and make it easy to understand:**
  - Use descriptive headings.
  - Present the most important concepts first, and "chunk" text into smaller, manageable pieces.
  - Use short sentences and bulleted lists.
  - Leave out nonessential details that are not relevant or do not add to the story.
  - Use simple graphics when possible to convey information.
- **Use active voice and contractions when possible to set a personal and informal tone.** Active voice means putting the subject (the "doer") of your sentence *before* the verb rather than after. For example: "ATSDR conducted a public health assessment of the site" is active voice. "A public health assessment of the site was conducted by ATSDR" is passive voice.

- **Use simple words and terms whenever possible.** Avoid jargon or unnecessary scientific or technical words. For example, “exposure” is a term that not everyone is familiar with. When possible, try to be specific about the way residents may be exposed to a health risk (e.g., touching, eating, breathing in, etc.). The following are a few additional examples of replacing more complex words or terms with simpler ones.

Instead of This Word	Use This Word/Phrase
Inhale	Breathe
Ingest	Eat
Imbibe	Drink
Receptor	Adult or child
Demonstrate	Prove or show
Biodegradation	Decomposition or breakdown of a material
Carcinogenic	Causing cancer
Acute	Taking place over a short time
Chronic	Taking place over a long time
Morbidity	Sickness

- **When technical words are necessary, explain them and consider providing a glossary.** For example, “Groundwater on the island is found in several different aquifers (an aquifer is a layer underground that contains water). One of these aquifers is contaminated or tainted. A separate aquifer is used to supply drinking water. The contaminated aquifer is not connected to the aquifer used for drinking water, so residents are not coming in contact with contaminated groundwater.” [Adapted from ATSDR Public Health Assessment Guidance Manual (2005 Update)]
- **Use phonetic spelling for the name of a chemical, disease, or pathogen for easier readability. For example, Asbestosis (As-**

bes-TOE-sis); Mesothelioma (MEZ-o-thee-lee-O-ma).

- **Use graphics to visually explain a difficult concept.**
- **Make sure the reading level is appropriate for the intended audience.** In general, aim for an 8th grade reading level when writing for the general public. Use the Microsoft Word reading level check or [www.readability-score.com](http://www.readability-score.com).

## Writing for the Web

Many people turn to the Web as a source when they want to find information quickly. Developing Web content may be more advantageous in communicating risk or time-sensitive information due to its immediacy as a medium, and this method may reach more people faster than printed materials.

When Web users come to a Web site, they will be seeking specific information. If you are developing communication materials or content for a Web site, you must keep your users’ information needs in mind and develop content to ensure you are helping address those needs. If your Web site doesn’t address their informational needs, they’ll leave.

In addition to the tips for using plain language, here are additional points to keep in mind if you are writing content for the Web:

- **Write your content in chunks.** Separating your content into chunks of information makes the content more skimmable. Web pages need to be concise and to the point. People don't read Web pages, they skim them, so having short, meaty paragraphs is better than long, rambling paragraphs.
- **Use clear headlines and subheadings.** Subheadings will make the information you are trying to communicate easier for readers to skim. .

- Front-load important information first. Start with the content that is most important to your audience, and then provide additional details.
- Use lists instead of paragraphs. Lists are easier for readers to skim.
- If you use paragraphs, they should be short. Your content should be as concise as you can make it. Use no more than 5 sentences per paragraph, and use no more than 20 words per sentence.
- Use white space. Including space between headings and paragraphs makes your online content easier to read.

## Web Site Content and Accessibility

If you are writing information that will be posted on your Web site or a Web site that is partially funded or hosted by the Federal Government, the content and materials posted must be Section 508-compliant. “Section 508” refers to Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act (29 U.S.C. 794d), a Federal law that requires agencies to provide individuals with disabilities equal access to electronic information and data comparable to those who do not have disabilities, unless an undue burden would be imposed on the agency. The Section 508 standards are the technical requirements and criteria that are used to measure conformance within this law. See the “Resources” section for links to more information about how to write 508-compliant materials and Section 508.

## Types of Communication Materials

The table on the following page outlines a variety of materials or tools that health assessors and health educators can use to inform community audiences about ATSDR, the public health assessment process, what is currently known about the site, health risks, plans to meet with the community, summaries of the public health assessment results, and frequently asked questions.

Descriptions of these materials, examples of their uses, and available resources from ATSDR and other sources are also provided. These materials can be adapted by health assessors to provide site-specific information.

We recommend that you use precleared materials when possible to save time and ensure consistent messaging across ATSDR activities. If you need to develop new materials, approved templates are available in the following links

- Fact Sheets (on CDC’s intranet):  
[http://brandidentitystandards.cdc.gov/Center\\_and\\_Program\\_Brand\\_Identity\\_Standards/ATSDR/ATSDR\\_Fact\\_Sheet\\_Templates](http://brandidentitystandards.cdc.gov/Center_and_Program_Brand_Identity_Standards/ATSDR/ATSDR_Fact_Sheet_Templates)
- PowerPoint Presentations (on CDC’s intranet):  
[http://brandidentitystandards.cdc.gov/Center\\_and\\_Program\\_Brand\\_Identity\\_Standards/ATSDR/ATSDR\\_PowerPoint\\_Templates](http://brandidentitystandards.cdc.gov/Center_and_Program_Brand_Identity_Standards/ATSDR/ATSDR_PowerPoint_Templates)

Type of Material or Tool	Purpose	When To Use	Example
<b>Fact Sheets</b> (general and site specific)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Provide information to communities about ATSDR.</li> <li>▪ Provide information to affected communities about what the public health assessment process entails.</li> <li>▪ Deliver results of the public health assessment process to affected communities.</li> <li>▪ Provide information about specific health risks in affected communities to the public and health professionals.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Distribute handout during presentations, one-on-one meetings/interviews, town halls or community meetings, other community engagement activities.</li> <li>▪ Distribute via community and faith-based settings, local public health departments, post offices, libraries, grocery stores, etc.</li> <li>▪ Direct mail to community members and/or email to community listservs.</li> </ul>	<a href="http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/com/allabout.html">http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/com/allabout.html</a> <a href="http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/COM/whatyou.html">http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/COM/whatyou.html</a> <a href="http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaqs/index.asp">http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaqs/index.asp</a> <a href="http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/az/a.html">http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/az/a.html</a> <a href="http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/emes/">http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/emes/</a>
<b>Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Provide anticipated FAQs and answers to affected communities in a quick format.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Distribute handout during presentations, one-on-one meetings/interviews, town halls, or community meetings.</li> <li>▪ Distribute via community and faith-based settings, local public health departments, post offices, libraries, grocery stores, etc.</li> </ul>	<a href="http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/com/pha.html">http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/com/pha.html</a> <a href="http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaqs/index.asp">http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaqs/index.asp</a> <a href="http://www.epa.gov/superfund/community/pdfs/toolkit/18faq.pdf">http://www.epa.gov/superfund/community/pdfs/toolkit/18faq.pdf</a>
<b>Infographics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Present complex information, data, and statistics quickly and clearly through a visual representation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Use as part of a fact sheet or as a standalone item to distribute at meetings and other community engagement activities.</li> </ul>	<a href="http://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/resources/infographics.html">http://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/resources/infographics.html</a>

Type of Material or Tool	Purpose	When To Use	Example
<b>Flyers or Posters</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Announce upcoming meetings and provide details (date and time) and why (purpose of meeting).</li> <li>Provide next action steps in the public health assessment process or actions that the community should take.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Distribute prior to presentations, town halls, or community meetings. See fact sheets above.</li> <li>Distribute in between meetings to remind the community of next steps.</li> <li>Direct mail to community members and/or email to community listservs.</li> </ul>	<a href="http://www.epa.gov/superfund/community/pdfs/toolkit/supmaterials/publicnotices/pub_notice_ads-1.pdf">http://www.epa.gov/superfund/community/pdfs/toolkit/supmaterials/publicnotices/pub_notice_ads-1.pdf</a>
<b>PowerPoint Presentation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use a widely accepted presentation format for town halls or community meetings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>During town halls or community meetings.</li> </ul>	<a href="http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/ems/health_professionals/grem.html">http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/ems/health_professionals/grem.html</a>

## Resources

### General

- ATSDR Public Health Assessment Guidance Manual (Update 2005):  
<http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/hac/PHAManual/ch4.html#4.4.4>
- EPA Superfund Community Involvement Toolkit:  
<http://www.epa.gov/superfund/community/toolkit.htm>
- National Conversation on Public Health and Chemical Exposures:  
<http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/nationalconversation/>

### Plain Language

- Federal Plain Language Guidelines:  
<http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/guidelines/FederalPLGuidelines/index.cfm>:

- Simple Words and Phrases:  
<http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/word suggestions/simplewords.cfm>
- CDC Clear Communication Index User Guide:  
<http://www.cdc.gov/ccindex/tool/index.html>
- CDC Plain Language Guide, *Simply Put*:  
<http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/pdf/SimplyPut.pdf>
- NCEH/ATSDR Clear Writing Resources:  
[http://intranet.cdc.gov/nceh-atsdr/ClearWriting/cw\\_resources.html](http://intranet.cdc.gov/nceh-atsdr/ClearWriting/cw_resources.html)

### Web Writing

- Writing for the Web:  
<http://www.usability.gov/how-to-and-tools/methods/writing-for-the-web.html>
- HHS Web Style Guide:  
<http://www.hhs.gov/web/policies/webstyle.html>

- Health Literacy Online:  
<http://www.health.gov/healthliteracyonline>

## Section 508

- “How To” Topics, including creating 508-compliant files:  
[http://www.section508.gov/how#Create\\_Accessible](http://www.section508.gov/how#Create_Accessible)
- HHS Section 508 Accessibility Checklists:  
<http://www.hhs.gov/web/508/accessiblefiles/checklists.html>
- Summary of Section 508 Standards:  
<http://www.section508.gov/summary-section508-standards>
- U.S. General Services Administration’s Section 508 Web site:  
<http://www.section508.gov/>
- HHS.gov Section 508 Web site:  
<http://www.hhs.gov/web/508/>

## Glossary

- ATSDR Glossary of Terms:  
<http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/hac/PHAManual/appb.html>
- EPA’s Useful Terms and Definitions for Explaining Risk:  
[http://www.epa.gov/superfund/community/pdfs/toolkit/risk\\_communication-attachment6.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/superfund/community/pdfs/toolkit/risk_communication-attachment6.pdf)