

▶ **DIRECT FROM CDC** ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Do Not Forget to Test Your Environmental Health Messages: Three Tips to Help You Test Before Publication

Traci Augustosky, MA, MAIS
Allison Chatham, PhD
Alison Cooper
John South, PhD
*National Center for Environmental Health
Agency for Toxic Substances and
Disease Registry
Centers for Disease Control
and Prevention*

Editor's Note: The National Environmental Health Association strives to provide up-to-date and relevant information on environmental health and to build partnerships in the profession. In pursuit of these goals, we periodically feature columns on environmental health from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the *Journal*.

In these columns, authors from CDC's Water, Food, and Environmental Health Services Branch, as well as guest authors, will share tools, resources, and guidance for environmental health practitioners. The conclusions in this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of CDC.

Traci Augustosky, Dr. Allison Chatham, Alison Cooper, and Dr. John South are colleagues and writer–editors for CDC's National Center for Environmental Health and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

Introduction

Environmental health professionals play a crucial role in protecting communities by conveying timely, accurate, and actionable information. Yet even well-researched health communication efforts can fall short if they are not tested with their intended audiences. Testing public health messages and materials before publication ensures that information is not only scientifically sound but also understandable, relevant, and accessible.

This column outlines three essential considerations for testing public health materials: 1) knowing your audience, 2) using existing resources, and 3) making the testing process accessible. By integrating these practices, environmental health professionals can improve communication effectiveness and ultimately strengthen public health outcomes.

Tip 1: Know Your Audience

Identifying your audience is always the first step in developing a health communication product. It is also crucial for testing. Let us say you are working on a new project about an environmental health issue. Who is it for? Colleagues? Health professionals? Worried parents? Learning about your audience's demographics, health concerns, preferred communication channels, and motivations will help you figure out how to test your materials (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2024b). For example, testing your materials with physicians could look a lot different than testing materials with parents of toddlers.

If you are writing for a public, non-scientific audience, you should also consider health literacy issues. Approximately one half the population struggles with reading, and 9 out of 10 people will have a hard time understanding your health messages (CDC,

2024a). Here are some ways you could tailor your testing methods for different literacy levels within your audience:

- Partner with adult literacy groups to help recruit readers with weak reading skills.
- Read testing materials and directions aloud to help people with weak reading skills.
- Create tasks for people to do with the information during the sessions. Focus on how useful the information is for completing the tasks.
- Separate weak and average readers into different testing groups so that weak readers are not embarrassed or overpowered by others in the group.

Knowing your audience will streamline your testing process, give you more actionable results, and help you create clearer, more effective health messages.

Tip 2: Use Existing Resources

Sometimes, authors do not test materials because they think testing requires a lot of time, money, or expertise. Free, easy-to-use testing tools are available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Environmental Health to make testing fast and effective. Use the following tools for audience tests or self-tests.

Audience Tests

Audience tests help you gather feedback directly from readers. After all, when it comes to understanding your material, your readers are the experts. They can tell you if your messages are helpful and clear.

The *Small-Scale Testing* guide teaches you how to conduct a paraphrase test, in-depth interviews, focus groups, surveys, or comparative tests with three to nine participants. This guide provides everything—tips about

how to start with a good product, examples of interview guides, and a bank of questions you can pull from for your testing.

Self-Tests

Self-tests are checklist-style testing tools. These tests do not solicit feedback from your audience. Instead, they help you evaluate your materials based on best practices. They help you overcome assumptions you might make about your materials.

The **Clear Writing Assessment** includes 24 yes/no questions to help ensure your document is clear and effective. The questions cover audience, purpose, structure, and writing style. The tool automatically calculates your score. There is also a User Guide to explain why these questions are important and how to revise your work if you do not get a passing score.

These resources and many others related to clear writing are available at www.cdc.gov/nceh/clearwriting/index.html.

Tip 3: Make Your Testing Accessible and Comfortable

Make it easy and enjoyable for your audience to give you feedback.

- **Choose a setting that is comfortable for your testers.** For example, allow them to provide feedback online or during a community event (e.g., street festival, town hall

meeting). Consider providing a shaded tent or air-conditioned bus if you will be meeting people at an outdoor location on a hot or rainy day.

- **Determine whether your topic is sensitive.** For example, are you asking about controversial topics or private behaviors? If yes, consider offering one-on-one interviews. If in person, space the interviews out so that participants are less likely to see people they know (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023).
- **Address the needs of populations that might have special circumstances.** For example, offer trustworthy, on-site babysitting for parents coming in for a focus group, or consider providing child-friendly activities. Provide interpreters for individuals who are hard of hearing or who use English as a second language. Consider offering gift cards or other items valued by the community to anyone who participates.

Conclusion

Effective testing of public health materials depends on three foundational practices: 1) identifying and understanding your audience, 2) leveraging available tools and resources, and 3) designing testing experiences that are accessible and comfortable. These considerations help ensure that messages resonate with different participants, overcome barriers

such as limited health literacy, and foster greater community engagement. Incorporating thoughtful testing into the development process leads to clearer, more effective environmental health communications that better serve the needs of all audiences. ✨

Corresponding Author: Traci Augustosky, MA, MAIS, Team Lead, Writer Editor Services, Office of Communication, National Center for Environmental Health/Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 4770 Buford Highway NE, Chamblee, GA 30341. Email: tee1@cdc.gov

References

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024a). *Talking points about health literacy*. <https://www.cdc.gov/health-literacy/php/about/tell-others.html>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024b). *Testing*. <https://www.cdc.gov/health-literacy/php/develop-materials/testing-messages-materials.html>
- Nii Laryeafio, M., & Ogbewe, O.C. (2023). Ethical consideration dilemma: Systematic review of ethics in qualitative data collection through interviews. *Journal of Ethics in Entrepreneurship and Technology*, 3(2), 94–110. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEET-09-2022-0014>

Did You Know?

Use our Workforce Outreach Toolkit to help decision-makers, your communities, and the next generation of environmental health professionals understand the importance and value of the environmental health profession and workforce. Find the toolkit at www.neha.org/workforce-outreach-toolkit.



Stand out in the crowd.
Show the world you are the environmental health expert you know you are with a credential. You might even earn more or get promoted.

neha.org/credentials

