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COMMUNICATION FOR CHANGE

C-BULLETIN 6

CommunicationBulletins

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Visual and Web Design for Audiences with Lower Literacy Skills

Good layouts and visuals enable audiences with lower literacy skills to find and understand key information in social and behavior change communication (SBCC) materials in print or on a website page. This issue of the *C-Bulletin* series conveys to the SBCC practitioner how to select and present information visually in lower literacy materials in both formats.

How Are Visuals for Lower Literacy Materials Chosen and Which Are Most Effective?

Lower literacy audiences often have difficulty understanding written content, so visual content, including the layout of material, is very important. Carefully chosen visuals and well-designed layouts help lower literacy audiences read text and understand information and messages contained within SBCC materials and formats.

Visuals include graphics, illustrations, photographs, symbols, colors, lines, and other elements that contribute to the design of printed materials or web pages.

Layouts include the way text and visuals are organized on a page. A clear, uncluttered layout is often easier for lower literacy audiences to understand.

Below are some guidelines to follow when laying out an empty space:

- Think about where the viewer should look first. This is usually a headline or a photo, but should never be both. After looking at a photo, most people look down. For this reason, placing a headline below a photo (rather than next to it) is usually preferable. Ideally, the eye will stop at some kind of response mechanism, e.g., a web address or information on where to obtain a product.

- Leave plenty of empty space or white space on the page. White space makes text easier to read and illustrations easier to follow and understand.

- Break out important information from the main text in boxes or different colors, as shown in the examples in this document.

- Choose a font (or typeface) that is clear and easy to read. **Arial** and Times New Roman are among the fonts considered to be easy to read. People with lower literacy skills will find dense, complex fonts like Papyrus and **Impact** harder to read. Font size should be at least 12 points, but 14 points is even better.

- Don't use all caps. For example, instead of "PROTECT YOURSELF" (all caps), write "Protect Yourself" (a combination of upper and lower case letters). Words in all caps are more difficult to read for audiences with lower literacy skills.

- Use **bold** for emphasis, rather than italics. Bold is easier to read.

How Do Images and Photos Enhance Understanding of Lower Literacy Materials?

Thoughtful use of images and photos help to explain and emphasize text, decode the meaning of words, and make material easier to remember. The following serve as helpful guidelines.

- If possible, use illustrations or photos, rather than clip art. Though these illustrations may be cheaper to print and their details are often clearer when printed, photos taken locally may be more easily understood by the intended audience.

- All drawings in a material should be by the same artist or in a very similar style. If they look different, the reader will notice and may see them as unpolished.

- Make photos or drawings stand out by adding a contrasting border. Shading that makes the background contrast with the central image often creates a dynamic effect.

- Present one piece of information per image. Each image should communicate a single, distinct piece of information—in some cases, a message. When images are used to show a sequence, each should show only one step, as in the hand washing example.

TIP: When making font choices, it is important to know the difference between serif and sans serif fonts. Times *and* Garamond *are among serif fonts because they have small finishing strokes on the tops and/or bottoms of some characters. Sans serif fonts (French: without serif), such as* Arial *and* Verdana*, do not have these finishing strokes.* **Printed materials that use serif font are said to be easier to read.** *There is less evidence that this is also true for online text.*

Steps are shown clearly, with one illustration per step. Numbers help readers with lower literacy skills recognize and follow the order. (USAID Hygiene Improvement Project).

HOW TO WASH YOUR HANDS

Counselling Card

1 Wet your hands and lather them with soap (or ash).

2 Rub your hands together and clean under your nails.

3 Rinse your hands with a stream of water.

4 Shake excess water off your hands and air dry them.

- Use images that are straightforward and simple, rather than abstract, detailed, or busy. Clutter will distract audiences with lower literacy skills.

- Select images of people and things that are culturally appropriate. The images should be realistic and reflect the audience's local context. Adults may not relate well to the kinds of images used in children's cartoons. And lower literacy audiences are more likely to understand an image placed within its context than one "floated" against a monochrome background.

- Use a local artist who creates images that are culturally appropriate.

- Choose strong contrasting colors to attract attention, though in a limited number. Before choosing colors, it is important to know through pretesting which colors are liked by the intended audience and whether specific meanings are attached to certain colors.

- Select a consistent design for a set of SBCC materials or a toolkit to show that each piece is related.

- Use symbols and images familiar to the audience, rather than visuals of things that are unfamiliar to your audience and may be confusing to them. It is important to be aware of the local meaning of any symbol used. For example, a "V" made with two fingers can mean peace in one setting and a political party in another.

In addition to the guidance above on using images to enhance the understanding of lower literacy materials, it is crucial that testing is conducted with intended audiences. Testing will tell SBCC programmers if intended audiences think the visuals are understandable, attractive, acceptable, relevant, and whether the visual induces action. Remember that visuals should be tested together with the text accompanying it. For more information about testing methods see *C-Bulletin 8.*

EXAMPLE OF GOOD LAYOUT AND VISUALS IN A POSTER

Only one image per message is used.

Image is realistic and shows local context of a clinical setting.

Lots of white space highlights text, and few details distract the reader.

Message is easy to understand and action-oriented.

It's a Question of Health

Help reduce HIV by getting circumcised today

Text is in a simple font and large enough to read from a distance. The use of bold and upper and lower case letters make the text easy to read.

Voluntary Medical Male Circumcision Poster, Government of Kenya, 2010

Why Is It Important To Modify Website Designs for Audiences with Lower Literacy Skills?

Throughout the developing world, people increasingly seek health and other information online. SBCC programs that want to reach audiences with lower literacy skills need to design web pages that are easily read and navigated. The table that follows explains and contrasts how the experience of reading and navigating web pages differs for low literacy audiences and skilled readers.

Skill	Skilled Readers	Less Skilled Readers
Reading web pages	Can quickly scan text and visuals to find essential ideas.	Re-read each word carefully or skip over most information and visuals, especially if the website offers lengthy navigation options.
Scrolling	Can scan and scroll through text and go below the "fold" to the next page or computer screen.	Have difficulty scanning text. Can lose visual concentration when scrolling down.
Searching	Can type in search words accurately and make sense of search results, including those that present shortened or chopped text.	Have difficulty spelling search words and interpreting search results.
Attention span	Attention span is long enough to scan, scroll, and search text	Shorter attention span, leading to quick decisions to stop reading and close the page.

Taking into consideration this information and the guidance presented in the first part of this *C-Bulletin*, the SBCC practitioner should incorporate the following design tips into website design to help the lower literacy reader find and understand online content and encourage them to stay on a website.

- Avoid using too many words on a page.

- Put the most important information first so readers do not have to scroll down to find it.

- Keep text static. Animated or moving text is distracting.

- Use a simple layout:

  - Put text in one column and do not divide into many sections

  - Use short titles and subtitles

  - Put only a few choices on the navigation pane and use clear, simple menu labels

- Design the search function to accommodate common spelling mistakes—for example, "klinik" instead of clinic.

- Minimize the number of links provided on each page.

- Consider the advice in the first three pages of this bulletin when laying out text and visuals.

What is the Value Added?

- Printed SBCC materials that grab the attention of audiences with lower literacy skills and are interpreted correctly.

- Well-designed websites or newsletters that allow audiences with lower literacy skills to easily find information, understand what they see, and move around the page and the website.

- Useful ways to distribute SBCC materials. Users can click on a website or newsletter link to download a material. Web dissemination can be a convenient way for users to access materials, if they have basic computer skills and access to a printer.

Does the layout of the print material, e-newsletter, or website meet the following standards?

☐ Content is organized in a clear and logical manner and is not cluttered

☐ The most important information is presented first

☐ The page has enough white space; the text and pictures have "room to breathe"

☐ The order in which sequences are shown seems logical to readers, and steps are numbered so progression is easily followed

☐ The font is easy to read, at least 12 points in size, and does not use all caps (all upper case letters)

☐ Text is not animated

☐ Images and text were pretested and considered to be appropriate

☐ Visuals are simple, realistic, and reflect the audience's local context

☐ Each visual conveys only one message

☐ Symbols and images are familiar to the reader and easily understood

☐ Colors are culturally appropriate and grab attention

☐ Visuals complement text and help to convey meanings

☐ Only a few choices are provided in the navigation pane and few links are offered on a page

☐ Web pages and online newsletters use simple layouts and small amounts of text

☐ The search engine accommodates common spelling mistakes

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Feel free to make copies. We welcome the sharing of resources.

Resources for More Information

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Acknowledgments