Words Matter

How to Get Your Message Across: Six Tips to Improve Your Writing

By Allyson Latta, BA, HBJ, and Sue Rosenthal, BA, MA

he bedrock of effective team care is good communication among team members. In wound prevention and management, care and education can often be complex and involve team members with different levels and areas of expertise, backgrounds and perspectives. The patient, family members, frontline clinicians and administrators are all part of the team, and everyone's goal is the best outcome for the patient.

For that to happen, communication must be clear. Miscommunication, as we all know, can have serious negative consequences.

While much team communication is verbal, written communication is vital as well, especially in the short and long term and even with the larger community. Written communication may take the form of clinical documentation, educational materials, papers and articles written for publications, policy documents and more.

Here are six tips to help you communicate in writing more effectively in the workplace and beyond.

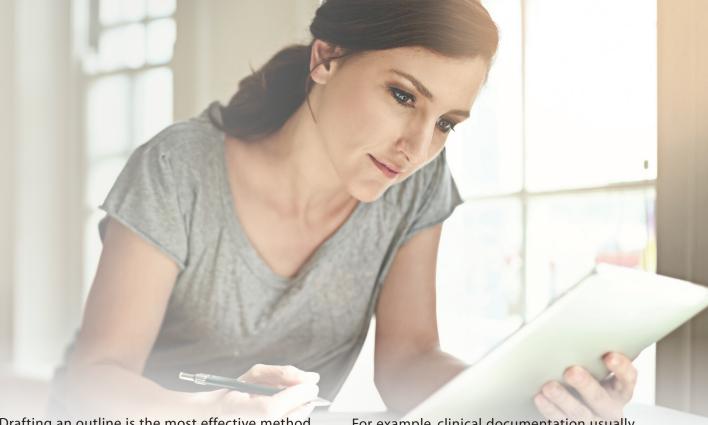
1. Create objectives for your communication

Before you write a word, determine your purpose. To keep your message focused, make sure all content in your document supports your objectives. Eliminate anything that does not.

If you have only one objective, your document will likely be short. More than three objectives is generally too many, regardless of the document's length.

2. Make a plan

Remember back in school when your teacher insisted you create an outline for your essay? There was a reason for that. Create an outline, making sure it aligns with your objectives.



Drafting an outline is the most effective method for organizing your thinking, writing the first draft and rewriting subsequent drafts. Without an outline, you risk wandering off the topic, including irrelevant or confusing information and rendering your message unclear.

3. Write for your audience

Know who will be reading your document, and write for them. The words you choose, and the amount of background and depth of information you provide all depend on your anticipated readers. Consider the following questions:

- Does your readership speak English as a first language? The answer to this will guide your word choice, the complexity of your arguments and the degree to which you define terms.
- How technical can you get without losing readers? Precise language is a powerful shortcut to getting a message across. If your audience consists of health-care colleagues who all have university degrees in science, feel free to use technical words, but even then, consider adding short definitions to ensure no one is left behind. When writing for a more general audience, steer clear of occupational jargon; use the essential technical words (in part as an educational tool), but definitely provide definitions.
- Do you need to observe particular conventions?

For example, clinical documentation usually requires specific terminology; some publications insist on standardized formats; spellings might have to be Canadian, British or U.S., depending on the publication and audience.

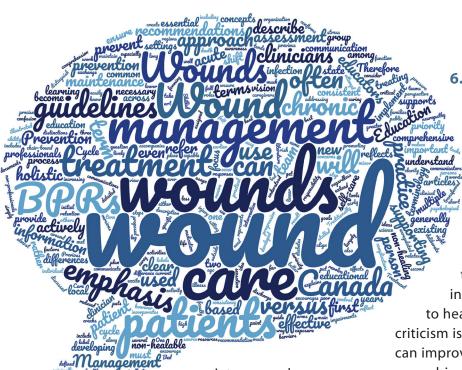
4. Don't make assumptions

While there is often significant overlap of common knowledge, within a group or generally within

The Goldilocks Ouestion:

How much information is too much, too little, or just right?

Many writers struggle to find the right amount of information and level of detail to convey their message. Too many facts and references to support an argument can be confusing. Too little information can leave gaps and lead to misunderstanding. Get it "just right," and your reader will learn and benefit from your written communication.



society, remember: no one knows exactly what you know.

Depending on your professional perspective and the particular topic, you may need to provide background information to ensure that by the time your audience has finished read-

ing, they all have the same baseline knowledge.

During Wounds Canada's advocacy efforts with legislators in the Ontario government, for example, we discovered that many MPPs didn't know what the term offloading meant in a health context, despite having had many health-care advocates speak to them about it. Once we were aware of this, and because offloading was the key issue we were addressing, we needed to account for this knowledge gap, which meant creating documentation and changing how we verbally represented the issue.

5. Be prepared to write and rewrite

Reread and rewrite with an eye to ensuring you've followed all the steps above. If you have time, put the document aside for a day or more, and come back to it with a more discerning eye. Reading your work aloud can often turn up problems you'll miss when rereading it silently. And consider printing out your document to assess it; most writers find they read more carefully and catch more issues on a paper copy than on-screen.

6. Get a second (third, fourth) opinion

At any stage in the writing process,
you might want to seek out other
perspectives on your document.
To respect your reviewers' time, it's
important to tell them where you are
in the writing/rewriting process and
to be clear what you want from them
(substantial content feedback, answers
to specific questions, proofreading) and
in what form. It can sometimes be difficult

to hear and accept feedback, but constructive criticism is an important part of the process and can improve your written work and help ensure your objectives will be met.

After receiving and considering feedback, repeat tips 5 and 6 as many times as required to polish your writing. Lack of clarity, incorrect information, or even spelling, grammar or punctuation errors can affect a reader's perception of your authority and credibility.

Ultimately, effectively written communication can save you time, conveying vital information broadly and efficiently. But as a busy professional, only you know how much time you can reasonably spend polishing a particular document. Give yourself plenty of lead time, especially to solicit reviewer opinions (tip 5) and do any necessary rewriting (tip 6)—but use your judgement. The tips above can be expanded or compressed, depending on the time available.

Just don't skip any. Your writing will be the stronger for it.

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