

Tips for Creating Materials for a Low-Literacy Families¹

Information

- Only include what the family NEEDS to know. Leave out things that you would like them to know but that are not necessary for getting your point across.
- The message should be short, direct and specific.
- Apply the material to the families' typical situation to make it more meaningful.
- Try to provide direct, how-to information.
- Avoid statistics.

Organization

- Be consistent in the way the material is organized and formatted throughout the document.
- Sequence information logically. This can be done using numbers or categories of information.
- When possible, organize the material using simple, clear headers.
 - Break complex ideas down into sub ideas and sub headings.
 - Short explanatory headings are better than single word headings, which may be confusing.
 - Single Word Heading: Breakfast
 - Explanatory Heading: Breakfast Meal Plans
 - Put the first bullet or point on the line directly below the header.
 - If desired, underline or bold the header. Do not use italics.
 - Use a mix of lower and upper case letters. DON'T USE ALL CAPS!
- Present only one idea at a time.
- Try to keep each idea to one page.
- Put important information either first or last.
- Summarize and repeat important information.

Visuals

- Whenever possible, use visuals to explain headings and important information.
- Use visuals that directly relate to the information. Visuals should be direct and informative, not just attractive.
- Place the illustration next to the text it is describing.
- Use simple illustrations. Line drawings that do not contain extra detail work well.
- Illustrations should be realistic so that the provider, center staff or parents can identify with them.
- Use captions or text to tell readers what to look for in the illustrations. Different people may interpret the same picture differently.
- Circles and arrows are very useful in pointing out key information.

Format and Layout

- Use capital and lower-case lettering; using all capital letters is difficult to read.
- Do not use right justification (where all words on the right side are aligned).

¹ Adapted from "Creating CACFP Materials in a Low Literacy Format," http://frac.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/tool_kit.pdf

- Avoid putting the first word of a sentence as the last word on a line. Also, (that was an example), avoid putting the last word in a sentence as the first word on a line.
- To highlight a word or passage, bold or underline it. Italics are hard to read.
- Use at least 12 point font.
- Use a light background with darker text.
- Use thin lettering without curls.
- Avoid lengthy lists.
- Start each paragraph on a new line and skip lines between paragraphs. Do not indent paragraphs.
- Paragraphs should not be more than 60 words.

Wording

- Use everyday language, including phrases and words that the family would use, whenever appropriate.
- Clearly define any new words.
- Repeating new words at short intervals can help make them familiar.
- Use short, non-technical words of two syllables or less.
- Use words with single meaning. For example, “poor” could mean having little money or it could mean unskilled.
- Avoid abbreviations, contractions, acronyms, unfamiliar spellings of words, and quotation marks.

Sentence Structure

- Use the active voice instead of the passive voice. For example,
 - Active – I ran.
 - Passive – I went running.
 - Active – Mary found the penny.
 - Passive – The penny was found by Mary.
- Sentences of 8-10 words are best. Never use sentences longer than 25 words.
- Use positive statements. For example,
 - Positive: Always eat breakfast.
 - Negative: Do not skip breakfast.