Writing for Public Health

When writing about public health issues, your job will often be to convey clearly and precisely research-based findings to those less familiar with the science. This is a challenging task but a vital one since your writing could directly impact and improve people's lives. To help you develop more effective texts, consider the following information.

Supporting Evidence

Much of the information you convey needs to be rooted in empirical evidence as well as in your interpretation of data. Rather than arguing a case based solely on your personal opinions or anecdotes, help your audience to understand how research supports a position or potential intervention and how you have evaluated findings in order to make your case. For examples of problematic versus effective ways to discuss information, see the following:

> **Problematic:** A different treatment system would be good.
> **Effective:** By combining the many different databases that track patients enrolled in the city's drug treatment programs, we could create a more efficient system.

> **Problematic:** Bullying is a public health crisis that happens in many different ways.
> **Effective:** Schneider, et al. (2011) found that the majority of students who were cyberbullied (59.7%) were also victims of school bullying.

> **Problematic:** Lead paint is very unhealthy for children, so the problem needs to be fixed.
> **Effective:** In order to evaluate the importance of lead-paint abatement, the cost of not-abating must be compared to the cost of abating (Schwartz 1994).

When discussing research findings, it is also important to avoid sweeping claims or generalizations. In short, base your discussions off of the information available. Hence, when you make a claim, ask *What evidence do I have for this?* or *Why is this important?* and make that evidence very clear to your readers.

Additionally, try to avoid quoting source material. Paraphrase key findings and theories while making certain to cite information you take from sources so your audience knows what research is your evidence.

And, lastly, you may feel passionately about an issue, yet make certain to use your sources carefully and do not read ideas into or manipulate your findings.

Overarching Focus and Cohesion

Even the best evidence will require you to plan out and build an argument in a careful way. To accomplish this, begin with a focused topic and goal. Know what your purpose is and what you want to argue.

Once you know your purpose, show your readers what evidence you are using and how you have analyzed that evidence in order to support your main argument. You won't need to rely on a 5-paragraph format, but think carefully about the logic of your argument and help your readers to see very exactly
        1) what your argument is
        2) what various key evidence supports that argument
        3) how you have analyzed the evidence to show support for your argument.

Audience

Your intended audience dictates not just what type of information you convey but also how you structure the discussion, so think about the audience carefully. Put yourself in your readers' shoes and consider what those people know already, what they value, and what they need to know to understand the issue or make informed decisions. Some audiences might need you to include more background information sooner, some might be less familiar with the science related to an issue, etc.

Language

Direct language: In order to write sentences that are clear and informative, avoid sentences that include a lot of adjectives and adverbs. Stick to writing that conveys facts and information in a direct, unbiased way.

You can take some additional steps to make certain your language is direct. For example, you can check to make certain most of your sentences are written in the active voice—when that is the best option:

> **Passive voice:** It is concluded that the intervention would be helpful…
> **Active voice:** Researchers conclude that the intervention would help…

Finally, look for sentences that contain a lot of prepositions (e.g., of, by, in, for, at, to, etc.). If a sentence has a lot of these, rephrase so the language is more direct:

> **With many prepositions:** A focus <u>on</u> how childhood memories can be full <u>of</u> false information is a common point <u>of</u> emphasis <u>in</u> the research <u>of</u> Elizabeth Loftus.
> **With fewer prepositions:** Loftus emphasizes that childhood memories can be full of false information.

Verb tense: Tenses will likely need to vary based on information you are conveying. For example, use the *past tense* when writing about what others have done or found (e.g., Simon and Adams (2011) found…). In contrast, use the *present tense* when writing about stable conditions or information (e.g., Hepatitis A is primarily contracted…).

Person-first language: This could help you to avoid potential connotation problems. For example, stating "people with autism" rather than "autistic people" places emphasis on the person rather than a condition.

Precise grammar: Grammatically precise prose will help you to convey information effectively, so proofread carefully. You can work on this by reading the writing aloud to yourself or by having someone read the writing out loud to you. In general, it's a good idea to have someone else read your writing before your intended audience does. An outside reader can help you to proofread and to check for clarity.