Writing for participants

If you're carrying out research with human participants, then you'll probably have to create some participant-facing documents such as recruitment posters, advertisements, participant information sheets and consent forms. You should usually base these on CUREC template documents to make sure that key information points, such as details of data protection, are included.

We've gathered some tips and resources to help you put together these documents and communicate effectively with your participants. This is a general introduction – if you're working with vulnerable or elite/expert participants, carrying out research overseas, or conducting specific types of research you should also consult the relevant CUREC best practice guidance and CUREC Approved Procedures.

Why do I need to think about writing for participants?

- **Informed consent.** First and foremost, you need participants to understand what they're signing up for. Your participants can't give informed consent if they haven't sufficiently understood what will happen to them and any information they provide if they take part in your research.
- **Better quality responses.** Writing in a friendly and engaging way can help to break the ice with your participants before you start conducting the research, putting them at ease. If participants feel more relaxed, and are interested and engaged in the research, you're likely to have a better interaction.
- **Transferable skills.** Being able to communicate effectively with different audiences is a really useful skill as a researcher, which you can apply (for example) to public outreach, policy engagement, or interdisciplinary collaborations.

How do I write for participants?

- It's not about dumbing down – it's about presenting your research in the most appropriate and accessible way for your participants.
- First, have a think about **who your participants are**. Consider factors like their age, educational attainment, literacy level, cultural background, fluency in English (also see the section on language and translation below), and familiarity (or not) with academic research.
- Think about how these factors will affect how much **detail** (and which details) you include in participant-facing documents, and what kind of **language** you use.
- You should also consider whether your participants have any disabilities or special educational needs. Think about how you can accommodate these needs in your participant-facing documents.
- If you're working with participants from different groups of people, you should consider producing different versions of the participant-facing documents that are tailored to each group.
- If you're working with children and young people, there might be additional considerations – for example, including pictures might help children understand the meaning of the text. If you're working with children across a wide age range, you're likely to need different documents for different age groups.

Using appropriate language

Keep your language clear and straightforward. You want the participant to understand the information the first time they read it. Bear in mind that they might be skim-reading.

- Use short sentences. Avoid using semi-colons to join clauses.
- Use active sentences (e.g. "We will ask you questions" rather than "Participants will be asked questions").
- Avoid using complicated or technical language and specialist jargon. Is there a simpler word or phrase that you could use instead? If you really need to use a technical term, make sure you explain it clearly.
- Imagine explaining the information to a friend or family member, and read it over again – could what you've written be confusing, ambiguous, vague or unclear?
- You can use the 'readability statistics' function in Word, or apps (e.g. Hemingway or Grammarly) to get feedback on how easy your text is to read. You could also ask friends and family to read over your documents and offer constructive criticism.
- If you're going to

Formatting your documents

- Aim to make your documents as easy to read as possible. Use a large font, make sure your text is left-aligned (non-justified), and include plenty of white space on the page.
- Make sure the key points are easy to find. For example, you could use short headings, a question and answer format, or bullet points.
- In some cases, it might be helpful to use images or diagrams to support your text.

Keep it brief – but include all the key points

- When describing what participants will be asked to do, try to put yourself in their shoes. What information would you want to know? Are there any questions you have that are not answered on the document?
- Think about what the most important things to communicate are. Make sure these are included, and cut out any unnecessary details.
- Think about what would be a suitable length of information sheet. How many pages would you be willing to read yourself? Do your participants have difficulties reading, or might they read slowly?
- If you're using an oral consent process, then you should also think about what will be easy to read out to participants, and straightforward for participants to listen to and understand.

Be consistent

- Are you writing in the first person (e.g. "why have I been invited to participate?") the second person ("you have been invited to participate") or the third person ("participants will complete a survey")? Make sure you stick to the same voice to avoid confusion about who is doing what.
- Make sure you're consistent in the information you provide across all your participant-facing documents, and that these are the same as stated on the application documents.

Be friendly and polite

- It's important to make your documents accessible without being patronising or overly familiar. The tone you use should be respectful, even if it's informal. Remember that you are inviting participants to take part in your research.
- Make sure you use person-centred, non-discriminatory language to describe people. (For guidance, see, for example, the government's guide on inclusive language.)

Language and translation

- If your participant-facing documents are going to be translated into another language, make sure nothing important is lost in translation. If someone else is translating the documents, you could talk them through together to make sure that you're interpreting everything in the same way. If you're translating them yourself, you could ask another fluent speaker of the language to check what you've written.
- If your documents are in English, and your participants don't speak English as their first language, think about how this might affect the language you use, e.g. avoiding idioms.
- If English isn't your first language and you'd like guidance on writing in English, support is available through the University's Language Centre. Again, you might like to ask a fluent or native speaker to check your documents.

Feeding back

- After you've carried out your research, think about how you could feed back your results or findings to participants. What might they be interested in? How can you summarise and present your research in a clear, engaging and accurate way?
- You could also think about wider public engagement – see the University's Public engagement with research webpages for support.

Ask for feedback

- If you can, ask someone unconnected to the research to look at your participant-facing documents and provide feedback.
  If possible, this should include people who are from a similar social group to that of your participants. If you are recruiting children it may be helpful to ask a child within the age group to read through the information to check it makes sense to them.
- Ask them to point out anything that's unclear, confusing or missing, and edit or adapt your documents to resolve these issues. You could also informally ask participants for feedback on their experience of your research project, and take this feedback into account in future research projects.

Resources

Communication for researchers

- MRC and HRA: Consent and participant information guidance
- HRA: Informing participants and seeking consent
- Digital Curation Centre: How to write a lay summary
- Social Sciences Division: Academic writing and communication skills
- Your department may also offer specific resources and training on writing and communication.

Accessibility and inclusion

- Gov.uk: Accessible communication formats

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- [Gov.uk: Making written information easier to understand for people with learning disabilities](#)
- [RNIB: Communication and environment](#)
- [NICE: Talking about people](#)
- [Equality and Diversity Unit: Good practice in communication](#)

Language and readability

- [Readability Formulas: readability checker](#)
- [Plain English Campaign: How to write in plain English](#)