



TOOLKIT for Making Written Material Clear
and Effective

SECTION 3: Methods for testing written material
with readers

PART 6

How to collect and use feedback
from readers

Chapter 10

Creating a written guide for conducting
feedback sessions

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services



TOOLKIT Part 6, Chapter 10

Creating a written guide for conducting feedback sessions

What is covered in a written guide?	143
How specific does the guide need to be?	145
How long is a written guide?	147
Making the scripted parts sound natural.....	148
Building flexibility into the guide.....	150
Revising the guide	150
Tips for formatting your written guide	151

List of figures in this chapter:

<i>Figure 6-10-a.</i> What is covered in a written guide for conducting feedback sessions? ...	143
<i>Figure 6-10-b.</i> Tips for making the scripted parts of your written guide sound clear and natural	148

This document is the tenth of 19 chapters in Part 6 of the *Toolkit for Making Written Material Clear and Effective*. The Toolkit has 11 Parts. It was written for the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) by Jeanne McGee, McGee & Evers Consulting, Inc. The guidelines and other parts of the Toolkit reflect the views of the writer. CMS offers this Toolkit as practical assistance to help you make your written material clear and effective (not as requirements from CMS).

What is covered in a written guide?

When you have decided what to say and do during your feedback sessions with readers, the next step is to create a written guide. Having a written guide for reference helps interviewers do a good job of collecting the specific types of feedback you need. What we are calling a “written guide” or an “interviewer’s guide” goes by other names as well. For example, researchers sometimes call it a “protocol” or a “topic guide.” Figure 6-10-a below describes the parts of a written guide.

Figure

6-10-a. What is covered in a written guide for conducting feedback sessions?

1

Introduction - welcome the participant, give background, explain what will happen during the session

The purpose of this introduction is to set an appropriate tone for the interview and to give people information they need to have before they begin reacting to the written material. Using the written guide for reference, the interviewer welcomes the reader, makes introductions, and explains about the session. The introductory part of the written guide generally covers these tasks:

- Welcome the participant(s). Introduce yourself and the note taker (if any).
- Explain the purpose and sponsorship of the project, and how results of the session will be used.
- Give assurances of confidentiality, as applicable. Explain about observers, if there are any. Go over permissions forms, if applicable.
- Ask if there are any questions about the session.

2

Show the material and get reactions

This is the main part of the written guide and it varies considerably from one project to the next.

- It tells interviewers what, if anything, they need to say about the written material before they show it to participants.

- Often, the next step is to encourage the reader to *think aloud* and share whatever comes to mind while going through the material. Later in Chapter 18 on interviewing technique, Figure 6-18-b tells how you can give readers a demonstration to show them what you mean when you ask them to *think aloud*.
- Then the guide tells the interviewer how to show the material to participants (all at once or part by part), and how to get their reactions.
 - **This part of the written guide is tailored to the material and the type of feedback that is needed.** It covers the feedback issues you identified and prioritized when you were designing your session. For more about feedback issues, including tips on how to arrange them in a sequence that will make sense for conducting the session, see Toolkit Part 6, Chapter 5, *Creating a list of feedback issues to use in testing the material*. Once you have arranged your feedback issues into this order, you will have the outline for what to cover in this part of your written guide.
 - **It has the questions you plan to ask.** This part of your written guide includes the scripted questions that have been prepared in advance. For help in preparing your questions, see Chapter 8, *Phrasing your questions to get the most useful feedback from readers*, and Chapters 9, *Tips for collecting particular types of feedback from readers*.
 - **It describes the tasks you plan to include.** This main part of the written guide also gives the instructions for presenting and explaining tasks that will be used to see how easy it is for the reader to use the written material.

3

Thank participant and close the session

This part of the guide tells interviewers how to handle the following tasks:

- Collect any additional information from the participant, if applicable. For example, you might ask the person to fill out a brief questionnaire that collects demographic information such as age and education.
- Give the person whatever payment, or other compensation has been promised. Finish any paperwork that needs to be done. For example, this paperwork might include having the participant sign a receipt for payment, or for reimbursement of travel, or childcare expenses.
- Thank the person and escort him or her out of the interview room.

4

After session is over – review and expand on your written notes, fill out a Session Summary Form

This last part of the guide may include reminders about what the interviewer and the note takers (if there are any) are supposed to do right after the session is over. Ideally, they will take a few minutes together after each interview to do the following tasks:

- **Review and expand on notes made during the session, clarifying and filling in anything that is missing.** The purpose is to make the notes as specific, accurate, and useful as possible, since the notes will be used to analyze results from the feedback sessions and to guide revisions in the material. For tips on taking notes, see Chapter 17, *Conducting feedback interviews and taking notes*.
- **Write down summary notes about the interview.** The purpose of these notes is to share the interviewer’s and note taker’s impressions about how the session went and any insights and ideas they got from it that show problems with the material or suggest how it might be improved. The quickest and easiest way to make these summary notes is to prepare a form ahead of time and then fill it out after each session. We call this the “Session Summary Form” and give a sample form in the next chapter.

Source: Created for this Toolkit.

How specific does the guide need to be?

Written guides vary in how much detail they give. Some guides are simply a brief outline of “talking points,” and other guides are more detailed. Since an outline of talking points does not provide much guidance for interviewers, we recommend making your guide more specific:

- **Clear instructions.** Without being overly long and detailed, it should state clearly what interviewers are supposed to say and do during the session.
- **Scripted questions for the key issues.** To make it easy for interviewers to be consistent, the guide should include scripted questions (specific wording) for the *main questions* you want them to ask. Of course, interviewers need flexibility. Even when the guide shows scripted questions,

there will be times when interviewers need to adapt the wordings of these questions in order to respond appropriately to each participant.

Benefits of making your written guide reasonably specific

It's worth the time and effort to prepare a reasonably specific guide:

- **Spelling out the details in a written guide will help you ask your questions in the most effective ways.** How you ask readers for their reactions, including the way you word your questions, has a great impact on the usefulness of the feedback you get. Preparing a written guide helps you develop a logical sequence of topics and forces you to decide how to phrase your main questions. As you work on the guide, you will be able to consider different ways of asking a question and can choose the wording you think will work best. It's much easier to figure out in advance what the most effective wordings might be. Especially when you're a beginner, it can be hard to come up with the best wordings during a session.
- **Preparing the written guide gives you a good reality check.** Writing down all of the questions and instructions will help you assess what you can reasonably accomplish in the time available. If you discover that you have too many issues and questions to include, you can identify priorities and adapt your approach.
- **Having a written guide makes it easier for interviewers to do a good job of conducting the session.** The written guide is a great tool for quality control. When interviewers have a detailed guide to follow, they can cover all of the topics in the order you have arranged and using the wordings you have prepared. If the interviewers are experienced, a detailed script helps them understand the purpose and focus of the interview, making it easier to guide the interview in the most appropriate and effective ways. If interviewers are less experienced, having a detailed script makes it easier to focus on their interaction with the reader.
- **Creating the written guide in a collaborative way taps into the creativity and expertise of your team members and stakeholders.** When you are preparing your written guide, make it a group effort. Ask others for their ideas about what to cover in the sessions with readers. Circulate a draft of the written guide to team members and other stakeholders for review and comment. Ask them to critique the tone and question wordings as well as the content. You'll find that people tend to notice different things, so the more reviewers you have, the better.
- **The written guide will be a good resource for future projects.** If you have never done a feedback session before, it can take some time to develop your first written guide. But as you gain experience doing feedback sessions, it will be quicker and easier to develop the written guide. Using your written guides from previous projects as resources will give you a head start.



How long is a written guide?

Some written guides are quite brief, and others are long. It all depends on your project and your preferences. Here are things that affect how long the guide for your sessions will need to be:

- **How much time you have during the session.** For example, a written guide for conducting a 15 minute session is likely to be much shorter than a guide for conducting a 90 minute session.
- **The length and nature of the written material you are showing.** In general, the shorter the material you are showing, the shorter the written guide. For example, if you are getting reactions to a poster or a reminder postcard, your written guide will be a lot shorter than if you are getting reactions to a 20-page booklet.
- **What you want to learn from readers.** For example, if your purpose is to get readers' preferences for photos and color scheme, your written guide will be shorter than if you are checking on how easy it is for them to understand several pages of text.
- **The methods you are using to collect feedback.** Some feedback methods require more detailed written instruction than others. For example, if interviewers will be collecting feedback by encouraging readers to think aloud and observing their behavior, the instructions in the written guide might be quite brief. But if they need to show readers different versions of the material and ask a long series of questions, the written guide would be longer.
- **Experience and preferences of those who will be conducting the interview.** A guide that provides more detailed instructions can help less-experienced interviewers feel more confident.

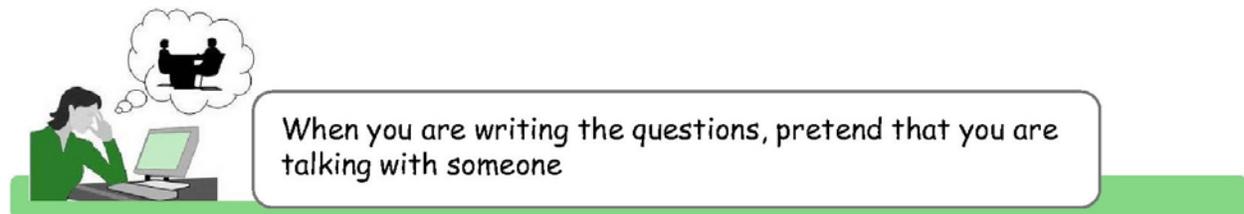
Making the scripted parts sound natural

When you prepare your written guide for conducting the interview, use everyday language that sounds clear and natural. The scripted questions should sound conversational, and so should everything else in the guide that will be spoken aloud by the interviewer, including explanations and background information. It will help to review Chapter 8, *Phrasing your questions to get the most useful feedback from readers*.

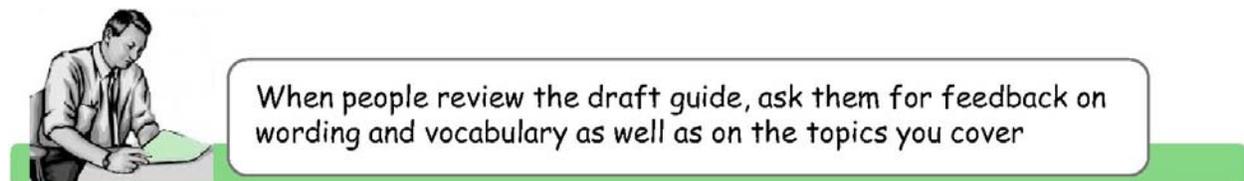
When the scripted parts of your written guide sound conversational, it is easier for interviewers to conduct the session and it sets a tone that helps put participants at ease. Interviewers may not use the exact wording in every circumstance, but when they do, it will sound natural. And, when the language is clear and simple, it's easier for them to adapt the wording when they need to. Figure 6-10-b below gives tips for making the scripted parts of your guide sound conversational.

Figure

6-10-b. Tips for making the scripted parts of your written guide sound clear and natural.



The words we use when we're speaking tend to be simpler and more informal than the ones we use when we are writing. Pretending that you are talking with someone will help you create scripted questions and other text that sounds conversational.



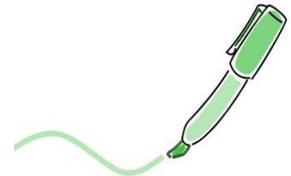
Often, reviewers tend to pay more attention to the *content* of the questions than to the *wordings*. So when you circulate a draft version of the written guide, ask reviewers specifically for their suggestions on how to make the vocabulary and phrasing sound more natural.



Record your draft questions and then play them back and listen for how natural they sound

Since the questions and other parts of the scripting will be spoken aloud, **hearing how they sound is a better test than reading them:**

- Make a recording of the scripted questions and other text you have prepared for the written guide. As you make the recording, use a highlighter to mark any question or other part of the guide that makes you pause or feel awkward when you say it. Here are examples of the types of things you might mark:
 - Places where you run out of breath trying to make it through a whole sentence.
 - Places where you stumble over a phrase.
 - Places where the vocabulary or wordings could be simplified.
- When you are finished recording, play it back. Listen critically, and mark places that you think need fixing or fine tuning.
- If a team is working together on the guide, listen to the recording together. Listen straight through without any discussion, so that each person can concentrate on listening and taking notes. Then discuss your reactions as a group.



Try using "role play" to practice doing interviews

Practicing together will help you fine tune the language as well as the content of the written guide. It will also help you prepare for conducting the actual feedback sessions.



Building flexibility into the guide

To get the most meaningful feedback, interviewers need to be free to follow the lead of each reader during the interview, making adaptations as needed to suit the immediate situation. Here are some ways to incorporate flexibility:

- **Build flexibility into the questions and the written instructions.** When it is really crucial to use the exact wording for a question, the guide can say so in the instructions. But often, you will want interviewers to adapt the topics or line of questioning in response to what participants say. For some topics, you may want to give some alternate wordings in the written guide.
- **Rely on interviewers to adapt the guide as needed.** Just because the written guide gives exact wordings for questions does not mean that interviewers must or will ask every single question exactly as it is written. Although the wordings are to be followed in general, interviewers need the leeway to make some adaptations, depending on the unique interaction of a given interview. It is impossible to anticipate everything that can arise during an interview. While the interview guide needs to provide structure and direction, interviewers must be trusted and empowered to adapt it when necessary.
- **Interviewer training and guidelines can address which types of departures that interviewers may need to make from scripted questions.** For example, suppose that the topic that is covered in a given question has already come up in the interview. It would be annoying to ask it again, just because it appears in the written guide. So interviewers need to feel free to skip over questions that have already been covered.



Revising the guide

Without good questions, you won't get good data from your feedback sessions. Since it takes some time and fine tuning to produce a good interview guide, you should plan to do several rounds of revision on the draft of your guide. Pretest it if you can. For example, you can use "role play" to practice doing interviews (as suggested above in Figure 6-10-b). If you are just beginning to do feedback sessions, this investment in fine tuning your scripted questions will help you collect the most meaningful and useful feedback from readers. Once you have some basic questions that work well, you will be able to adapt them quickly for use in future feedback projects.

It also makes sense to treat your written interview guide as a dynamic document, subject to further revision after the sessions are underway. If the “final” version of the written guide doesn’t work well in the field, you can make some changes.

The *Session Summary Form* we describe in the next chapter will help you identify parts of the guide that may need changing. This form is a tool to make it easier for you to review and use the results from your feedback sessions. Interviewers and note takers fill out this form immediately after each session, noting highlights from the session and any problems they encountered. The last section of the sample Session Summary Form has a place for you to fill in notes about any problems you encountered with interview questions or procedures, and suggest any changes you think should be made to the guide.



Tips for formatting your written guide

Making the guide easy to use

Here are some suggestions about ways to make your written guide easy to use:

- **Make the print large enough for easy reference.** If you make the typeface (font) a little larger than you would typically use for a document, it will be easier for the interviewer to refer to the guide in an unobtrusive way. When the print is quick and easy to read at a glance, the interviewer can stay focused on the person he or she is interviewing, using the guide briefly for reference from time to time.
- **Include section headings and prominent page numbers.** Headings and page numbers are important guideposts that help orient the interviewer.
- **Use formatting to distinguish clearly between the scripted parts the interviewer will be saying aloud, and the instructions that tell the interviewer what to do.** Usually, people use different fonts (typefaces) and other features of formatting such as indentation, parentheses, or brackets, to make a clear distinction between what the interviewer is supposed to say and the instructions to the interviewer.
- **Follow interviewer’s preferences about how you fasten the pages.** Some interviewers like to have the pages stapled together, and others prefer to use paper clips.
- **Include reminders and other notes to help the interviewer do a good job.** For example, if you are recording the session, add a reminder to tell the interviewer when to turn on the recording

device, because it's easy to forget. It's helpful to add notes that say roughly how long the interviewer should spend on each topic.

Adapting the guide to allow for taking notes

When your written guide is complete, there are a couple of ways you can adapt the guide to make it suitable for taking notes during the session:

- You can insert some blank space after each question, to be used for taking notes.
- You can enlarge one of the margins to create some space for taking notes. Make either the left or the right margin a few inches wider, depending on which will be easier for the person who is taking notes.

Using other special formats to simplify note taking

While you will write most of your notes on a copy of the written guide, there are some other formats you can prepare in advance to simplify certain types of note taking. For example, you can create a “Mini-Pages Note Sheet” that has small-size replicas of each page. This format works well for notes about behavior observation and about visual elements. There's an example of this format in a later chapter (Chapter 17, *Conducting feedback interviews and taking notes*). It explains how the mini-pages note sheet can streamline your note taking, especially if you are using “*think aloud*” or you have a lot of photographs or other images in the material.

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