

What makes a good information leaflet for patients?

When it's time to give your leaflets an overhaul, how do you decide which are the best and which are for the bin? And what should you bear in mind when developing your own health promotion materials?

This nine-point checklist is a good starting point. It highlights the key points that ensure a leaflet keeps the reader's attention and is easily understood. It also allows you to assess how well the leaflet has been written, designed and illustrated. And it can provide a good framework for developing new written materials for your practice.

1. Target group

Who is the leaflet aimed at?

Do the cover design and title clearly indicate for whom the information is intended?

2. Information quality

Is it accurate?

Can you spot any glaring mistakes? Ask your colleagues if you are unsure.

Is it up-to-date?

Some information, such as contact details, for example, frequently changes.

Are the important points covered in the right order?

The content of the leaflet should be non-judgemental and give the reader accurate and balanced facts.

3. Tone of voice

Is it patronising or scaremongering?

This is likely to put the reader off — and prevent the message from getting across.

Does it avoid discrimination?

Leaflets should avoid making assumptions or using clichés about issues such as

race, sex and age.

4. Motives

Is the information from a credible source?

Be aware of advertising. Are the messages given influenced by commercial interests?

Do they contradict other health promotion messages regarding, for example, when to introduce solid foods to babies' diets or the benefits of bottle feeding instead of breast feeding?

5. Clarity and comprehension

Is the language simple and direct?

Are sentences short? Is jargon — in particular, medical jargon — avoided? Does it address the reader in a friendly, 'personal' way?

Are meanings clear?

For example, abbreviations may not be obvious to all readers.

What about headings?

Most people scan a leaflet quickly by picking out the headings, so these should be used to emphasise the most important points.

What is the readability score (use the FOG Index, or the one in your word processing package)?

Most leaflets for the general public should be aimed at those with a reading age of 9 to 10 years old.

Is there a summary of the most important information?

A good leaflet should summarise the key 'take home' messages.

6. Design and layout

Is it a convenient size?

Would it easily fit in a pocket or handbag, for example?

Does it have an eye-catching cover and title?

Does the leaflet stand out from other publications.

Does it use easy to read, sensible typefaces?

12 point type is the most commonly used for adult readers, but for people with visual problems, a minimum size of 14 point is recommended by the British Royal National Institute for the Blind.

Is there enough spacing between the lines?

Densely packed text is much more difficult to read.

7. Is there too much information?

Readers may be put off by large blocks of text.

Have bullet points been used effectively?

They can be used to highlight key points.

Is colour used to help you find your way around the text?

Sometimes colour can make reading the text more difficult.

8. Illustrations and photographs

Do they support the text?

Illustrations and captions can help to 'tell the story' and reinforce key messages.

Are photographs relevant to and representative of the target audience?

If the information applies to the general public, are people from different walks of life and communities visible?

9. Bilingual versions

Is the same tone used in both languages?

If you are not fluent in both languages, it is worth asking someone who is to check through the text.

Is the design suited to different cultures?

All languages and communities should be treated equally: sensitivity to cultural differences is important.