LifeWays

TIPS FOR WRITING FOR LIFEWAYS

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Whenever you write for LifeWays, your first step should be to figure out who your audience is.

Ask yourself: Who are they? Why are they reading? What are their goals in reading this? What do they want to do with the information? How familiar might they already be with this topic? Do they need you to explain the basics, or can you start from a higher level of knowledge?

For example, if you're writing for a flyer that anyone in the world might see, assume they know nothing about LifeWays and the topic of mental health. If you're writing an employee procedure, you can assume your reader has basic familiarity with mental health concepts because they work in this field.

Even if someone's an employee, long-time supporter, or has lived experience, busy readers always prefer a clearly written document that uses plain language.

Keep the following in mind when developing content:

• 1 in 5 Americans speaks a language at home other than English.

• 36 million Americans have a third-grade or lower reading level.

• Adults read 5 grades lower than their last degree achieved.

• Unless you are targeting a specific population that you know more about, on average, aim for 4th-grade reading level.

• Stress can affect literacy.

• Common words are more effective than jargon.

• Numeracy is part of literacy and percentages are hard for people to understand. "1 in 3" is much easier to understand than "33.3%."

BE CASUAL, BUT SMART

You aren't writing a term paper, so there's no need to use lingo and jargon. It is good to present some knowledge but be sure to engage your readers in conversation.

BE BRIEF

Don't make your busy reader work. Limit content to what readers **need to know** and anticipate their questions and concerns. Sentences should deliver essential information quickly. Use short sentences, paragraphs, and sections. Don't be afraid to include "white space" to make the material easy on readers' eyes.

Watch for double writing. Eliminate words that simply say the same thing again. It cuts length and can make the writing clearer.

Example: You may have also experienced pressure to drink, use drugs or abuse medication to fit in ~~because it seems like everyone is doing it.~~

The strike through part is not necessary. "Fit in" already implies that everyone is doing it.

BE SPECIFIC

Give pointed advice. Give readers something to act on. Saying "Be there for your loved one" may sound nice, but it's not particularly helpful. Give them specific things to do --also known as "action items".

BE ACCURATE

As a reputable voice in the field, our statistics, facts, and figures need to add up. Generally, LifeWays uses statistics from NAMI, NIMH, SAMHSA, MHA, AFSP, and a multitude of other reputable sources.

If you are unsure of the reputation of the organization from which you are receiving statistics, running the site past you're a C level staff person for review. Always be sure to double check your facts and figures and cite your sources when publishing statistics.

MAKE THE CONTENT SCANNABLE

Use headings and subheadings. They can cut the length and take the place of transitional sentences. Most important, they help divide up your content so people can find what they need when scanning.

In addition, use bulleted lists. They break up content so it's easier to follow.

AVOID IDIOMS, CLICHES, AND JARGON

Idiomatic phrases are only understood by a certain region, or by native English speakers. The exception is for personal stories.

We wouldn't say: ***"If you are feeling under the weather, consult your doctor."***

We would say: ***"If you are feeling sick, consult your doctor."***

AVOID PHRASAL VERBS

Phrasal verbs are not well understood by people who speak English as a second language. For example, replace "work out" with "exercise" and "figure out" with "understand."

AVOID COMPLICATED CONTRACTIONS

"Don't" and "can't" are easy, so it's okay to use them. However, try to avoid "could've" "shouldn't" "isn't" and "aren't."