

Design that Enhances Readability

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This brief is part of a series highlighting best practices for writing and designing outreach and enrollment materials that are clear, easy to read and understand, and that make it easier for people to enroll.

MAXIMUS
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There is more to ensuring an outreach flier, a public education brochure, or a health coverage application will be read and understood than simply choosing the right words. Materials also need to be visually appealing.

Like the text, a document's appearance communicates with the reader. Is the document organized, easy to follow, and presented in a reader-friendly way? Or is it full of dense, fine print and distracting graphics?

It's helpful to think of a closet. A cluttered, jam-packed closet is distressing to look at, and it's nearly impossible to find anything in it.

But, if the closet is well-organized, it looks better and is easier to use. Formatting your content is much like organizing a closet.



No one can learn to be a graphic designer just by reading an issue brief, but keeping a few principles in mind will help you evaluate the look and feel of outreach and enrollment materials to make sure they benefit from sound design fundamentals.

This issue brief highlights three tools for keeping documents clutter free:

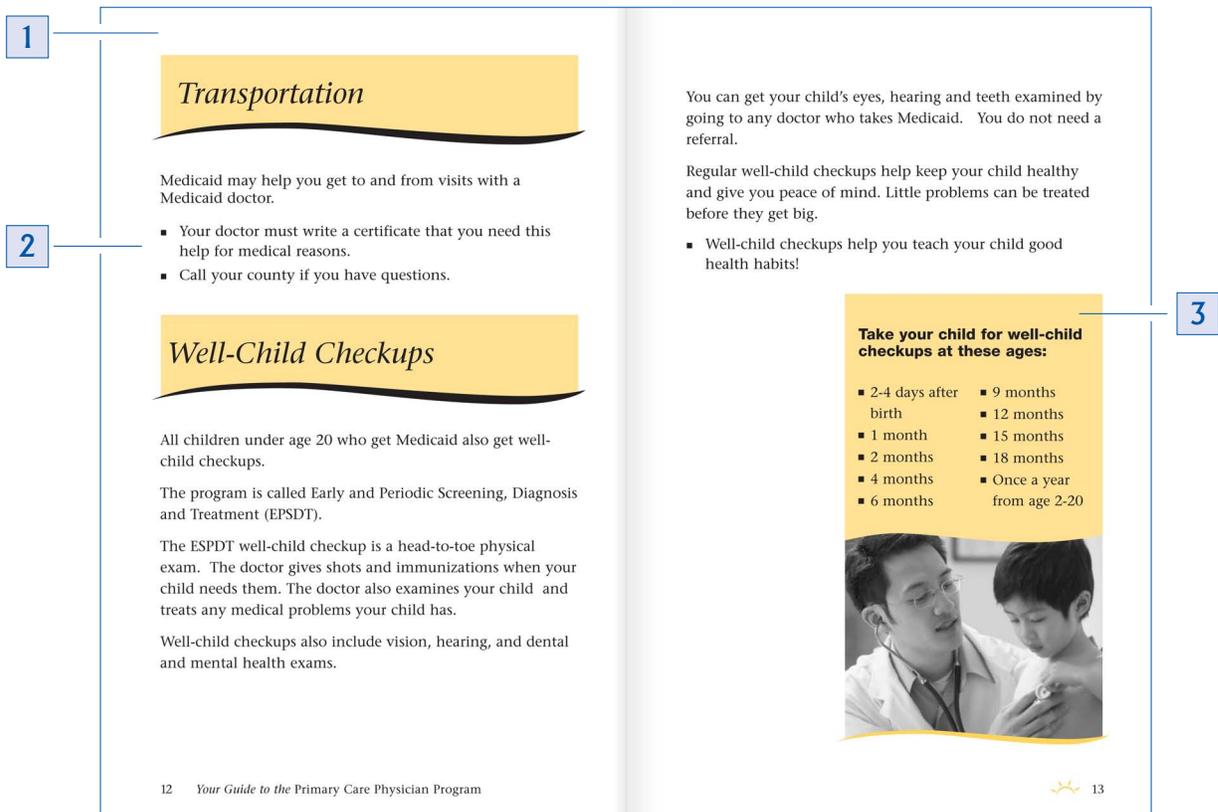
- White space
- Alignment
- Fonts

White Space

White space is absolutely critical to making written materials inviting and easy to read. White space around text or images acts as a buffer, keeping the different blocks of text from blending into each other and helping the page look more orderly.

See Figure 1 for three ways white space makes a document easier to read.

Figure 1. Using White Space



1. Generous margins help the eye rest and keep the lines of text shorter. Shorter lines increase the likelihood that your reader will actually read what you've written. In Figure 1, the booklet page size is 5½" x 8½", and the margin is 5/8".
2. Ample space creates distinct separations between bodies of text and headlines, graphic elements, or photos. Space also helps organize the content, creating corridors that guide the reader's eyes where you want them to go.
3. Even with a background or color behind text, space around the headline or chart directs the eye.

Using White Space on Application Forms

Reducing the number of pages in an application may sound like a worthy goal, but it shouldn't be achieved by narrowing the margins and reducing line spacing. Charts and forms—whether paper or electronic—also need strategic white space.

See Figure 2 for tips on using white space to make it easier for applicants to complete a form.

Figure 2. Using White Space on Forms

Tell us about all income for each parent or stepparent living in the home.

Name of first parent or stepparent :	Is this person self-employed ? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If yes , Name of Business	
Does this person get income from a job ? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If no , when was the last day you worked? Name of employer		
If yes , answer below.		
Job 1: Name of employer:	Phone number of employer:	How much income for each pay period, before taxes and other deductions?
How often paid? <input type="checkbox"/> Every week <input type="checkbox"/> Every 2 weeks <input type="checkbox"/> 2 times a month <input type="checkbox"/> 1 time a month		
Job 2: Name of employer:	Phone number of employer:	How much income for each pay period, before taxes and other deductions?
How often paid? <input type="checkbox"/> Every week <input type="checkbox"/> Every 2 weeks <input type="checkbox"/> 2 times a month <input type="checkbox"/> 1 time a month		

1

Tell us about all other income.

Name of second parent or stepparent :	Is this person self-employed ? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If yes , Name of Business	
Does this person get income from a job ? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If no , when was the last day you worked? Name of employer		
If yes , answer below.		
Job 1: Name of employer:	Phone number of employer:	How much income for each pay period, before taxes and other deductions?
How often paid? <input type="checkbox"/> Every week <input type="checkbox"/> Every 2 weeks <input type="checkbox"/> 2 times a month <input type="checkbox"/> 1 time a month		
Job 2: Name of employer:	Phone number of employer:	How much income for each pay period, before taxes and other deductions?
How often paid? <input type="checkbox"/> Every week <input type="checkbox"/> Every 2 weeks <input type="checkbox"/> 2 times a month <input type="checkbox"/> 1 time a month		

2

Tell us about all other income.

Child support? Yes No

If **yes**, name **first child** How much?

How often? Every week Every 2 weeks 2 times a month 1 time a month

Name **second child** How much?

How often? Every week Every 2 weeks 2 times a month 1 time a month

Name **third child** How much?

How often? Every week Every 2 weeks 2 times a month 1 time a month

Name **fourth child** How much?

How often? Every week Every 2 weeks 2 times a month 1 time a month

Alimony? Yes No If **yes**, who gets it? How much?

How often? Every week Every 2 weeks 2 times a month 1 time a month

3

1. White space between sections makes it easy to tell when one section ends and the next begins.
2. Padding on all sides of the form fields prevents the fields from blending into one another. This is critical when many different kinds of questions are being asked. Without clear delineation between questions, it is easy for the reader to accidentally skip questions and submit an incomplete application.
3. Space between bulleted items and columns is also important so that it's easy to see if the bullet belongs to the text on the left or the right side.

When choosing between white space and a shorter application or form, choose white space. People are more likely to continue reading on to another page if they can easily read the first page.

Using White Space between Lines

Line spacing (also called line height or leading) is the vertical distance between one line of text and the next. White space between lines of text makes it easier for readers to navigate, just as white space between paragraphs, sections, and margins does.

Use line spacing that is at least 30 percent more than your font size. For example, if you are using a font size of 10 point, good line spacing would be 13 point. Figure 3 shows the difference that adequate spacing can make.

Figure 3. Line Spacing

This is 12 point type on 12 point line spacing. It is not as readable as when it is spaced at 30 percent or more of the font size.

This is 12 point type on 17 point line spacing. The white space between the lines makes it easier for the eye to track and decreases the tendency to jump up or down from line to line. This also means the eye will tire less quickly.

Note that too much space between lines can adversely affect readability in the same way that tightly spaced lines can. The extra space will make the paragraph “fall apart,” and the reader will get confused about where the paragraph ends.

Alignment

Remember the closet example? When closet shelves are lined up neatly, they look orderly, and it is easier to find things. Aligning the text in written materials also makes a difference in how readable the document is. Proper alignment guides the eye to make your text easy to follow. It shows the reader how to navigate the document and where to look next.

Use center alignment sparingly. It seems as if it should make the page look nice, but centered text is actually less readable because readers are used to starting each line at the left. It is distracting when that does not happen, so left-aligned text is a better choice. The left edge creates a place for the eye to return after reaching the end of each line.

Keep your text unjustified. When your text is justified—meaning that it is flush on both the left and right margins—it is more difficult for the reader to distinguish one line of text from the next. Justified text also creates inconsistent spacing between letters and words, which makes your materials harder to read.

Figure 4 demonstrates how alignment can improve readability.

Figure 4. Alignment

Before:

Payments can be made in 3 ways!

 <p>Online - with a credit card at the ALL Kids website www.allkidsurl.org. Click on the "Enrolled Families" link.</p>	 <p>By phone - with a credit card by calling ALL Kids toll-free at 1-800-123-1234. <i>se habla español</i></p>
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Note: There is a small fee per credit card transaction. When paying with a credit card, have your Contact ID # _____ ready.

Detach and return this payment slip to pay by check or money order.

 <p>By mail - to address shown on top right of this invoice DO NOT SEND CASH. Send check or money order only. - List your Contact ID # on your check or money order. (Located at the bottom of this form.) - Use the enclosed self-addressed envelope. - Make checks and money orders out to ALL Kids.</p>
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In the “before” example, the icons tell the story. But a better solution is to organize by numbering to help your reader instantly locate the different options.

After:

Payments can be made in 3 ways!

- 1. Online** - with a credit card at the ALL Kids website www.allkidsurl.org. Click on the "Enrolled Families" link.
- 2. By phone** - with a credit card by calling ALL Kids toll-free at **1-800-123-1234**. *Se habla español.*

Note: There is a small fee per credit card transaction. When paying with a credit card, have your Contact ID # _____ ready.

Detach and return this payment slip to pay by check or money order.

- 3. By mail** – fill out this form and send it to the address shown on top right of this invoice.
DO NOT SEND CASH. Send check or money order only.
– **List your Contact ID # on your check or money order.** (Located at the bottom of this form.)
– Use the enclosed self-addressed envelope.
– Make checks and money orders out to ALL Kids.

In the “after” example, aligning the “Note” text with the left margin reinforces the layout structure and helps the eye return to a familiar starting position.

Fonts

Before starting your layout, review the document and assign fonts and font sizes according to the hierarchy of information.

Assign fonts to chapter titles, section heads, subheads, body text, captions, sidebars, and page numbers. You can also use different font weights, styles, and sizes to give the layout contrast. Contrast helps keep the content organized and easy to read, and it keeps the key messages from getting buried.

Figure 5 shows some basic tips for fonts:

1. Choose fonts that help readers see how the content is organized: what's most important, next most important, and so forth. Make sure there is enough contrast between the different types of content (e.g., headlines, body text, etc.). Sometimes, a shift in color or size is enough.

Figure 5: Using Fonts

1 Children's immunizations (shots)

2 Most doctors recommend certain shots at certain ages.

Birth	▪ Hepatitis B (Hep B)
1 – 2 months	▪ Hepatitis B (Hep B)
2 months	▪ Diphtheria, Tetanus and Acellular Pertussis (DTaP) ▪ Polio (IPV) ▪ Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib) ▪ Pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (PCV)
4 months	▪ Diphtheria, Tetanus and Acellular Pertussis (DTaP) ▪ Polio (IPV) ▪ Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib) ▪ Pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (PCV)
6 months	▪ Diphtheria, Tetanus and Acellular Pertussis (DTaP)

3

2. A standard practice is to make headlines two times larger than the body text. For example, use 24 point for your headline if your body text is 12 point. Generally, a subheadline is two point sizes larger than the body text size and bolded to emphasize the difference.
3. Unless you are an expert, it is best to use only two fonts in a single document. Limit the number of font sizes to just two or three. (This example uses two fonts at two sizes.)

A **A**

Serif Sans Serif

Serifs are defined as any of the short lines stemming from and at an angle to the upper and lower ends of the strokes of a letter.

Bonus Tips on Fonts

- For optimal readability, use a body text size of 11 or 12 point.
- The preferred combination for print formatting has traditionally been a sans serif font (without serifs) for headlines and a serif font (with serifs) for body text. The important thing is the contrast between the two fonts or font sizes. That's what helps readers see how the content is organized.
- The four fonts generally recognized as most readable for electronic formats are Arial, Georgia, Times New Roman, and Verdana. These fonts are easier to read at small sizes and lower resolution. For the web, sans serif fonts, like Arial and Verdana, are recommended for body text.
- Lines should be about 50-60 characters long. If a line gets too long, the reader's focus can wander.
- DO NOT USE ALL CAPS FOR BODY TEXT. It is hard to read and gives the appearance of shouting. All caps should be used sparingly, and only for short headlines or a couple of words within a body of text.

Conclusion

Understanding the new coverage options available in 2014 and the process of enrolling in them will be complicated. But the outreach and application materials don't have to add to the complexity. Keep these three aspects of design—white space, alignment, and fonts—in mind to ensure that documents are easy to read and understand.

Additional Resources

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Simply Put: A Guide for Creating Easy-to-Read Materials* (Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 2009), available online at http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/pdf/Simply_Put.pdf, pp. 17-23.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, *Toolkit for Making Written Material Clear and Effective* (Baltimore: Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, September 2010) available online at <http://www.cms.gov/WrittenMaterialsToolkit/>. See Parts 4 and 10.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, *Health Literacy Online: A Guide to Writing and Designing Easy-to-Use Health Web Sites* (Washington: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010), available online at http://www.health.gov/healthliteracyonline/Web_Guide_Health_Lit_Online.pdf.

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