What’s your point?

What’s the purpose of your document?

The main points

1. Be specific about your target audience and the purpose of your document.
2. Make sure the document meets the needs of the audience and achieves its purpose.

Be specific about the target audience and the purpose

Stating that your audience is the ‘general public’ or that your purpose is to ‘inform the reader’ is rarely helpful. Be specific.

Who are you writing the document for? Your audience might be parents of babies, people being treated for cancer or people wanting information about flu vaccination. To write effectively, you need to know about your target audience – get inside their heads. How much do they typically know? What information do they need? What concerns do they have? What are the typical literacy levels? Might some of your audience have additional communication needs?

The best way to find out about your audience is to talk with them and ask them about the information they need. What does your audience watch, read and listen to? What words do they use in relation to the topic you are writing about?

It’s also important to pinpoint the purpose of your document. This makes it easier to limit your messages to the ones you need to provide. Often the purpose is to persuade the reader to do something, like:

- Eat five serves of vegetables every day.
- See your doctor and ask to have your blood sugar levels checked.
Make sure your document meets the needs of your target audience and achieves its purpose

• **Limit the number of messages**
  Focus on what your audience needs to know and do, and don’t overload your document with unnecessary information.

  As a general guideline, use no more than four main messages and include recommendations about where to get more information.

• **Organise your content in a logical order, from the point of view of your readers**
  Give the most important information first, and repeat it throughout your document.

  Grab your reader’s attention at the beginning – often people do not read all the text and may miss your key point if you save the best for last. Often the most important information is the action your audience needs to take.

• **Be specific about what your reader needs to do**
  Write:  *Be physically active for at least 30 minutes every day.*
  Not:  *Being physically active is important to help you prevent chronic illness.*

  Write:  *If you lift anything heavier than a full kettle it could damage your wound.*
  Not:  *Don’t lift anything heavy.*

• **Focus on the positive**
  Write:  *Wash your hands before handling food.*
  Not:  *Do not handle food without first washing your hands.*

• **Use visual descriptions (descriptions people can easily picture in their mind) or analogies that are familiar to your audience**
  Write:  *Try to keep a large step away from others.*
  Not:  *Try to keep a metre away from others.*

• **Only include one idea or issue in each sentence or paragraph.**
  Introduce each paragraph with a sentence describing the content of each paragraph.

  Follow that sentence with details and examples. For example: *Using your asthma inhaler will help you breathe better. This is because . . .*

• **Include stories**
  Storytelling is an effective way to communicate messages, especially in relation to health. When we use stories, we tell the reader about a real person and the real health challenge they faced, and what happened. People can relate to it, and it can change how people feel about the information we provide. When we use stories in our documents, we invite ‘non-expert’ voices into the conversation; it helps people feel like partners in their own health.