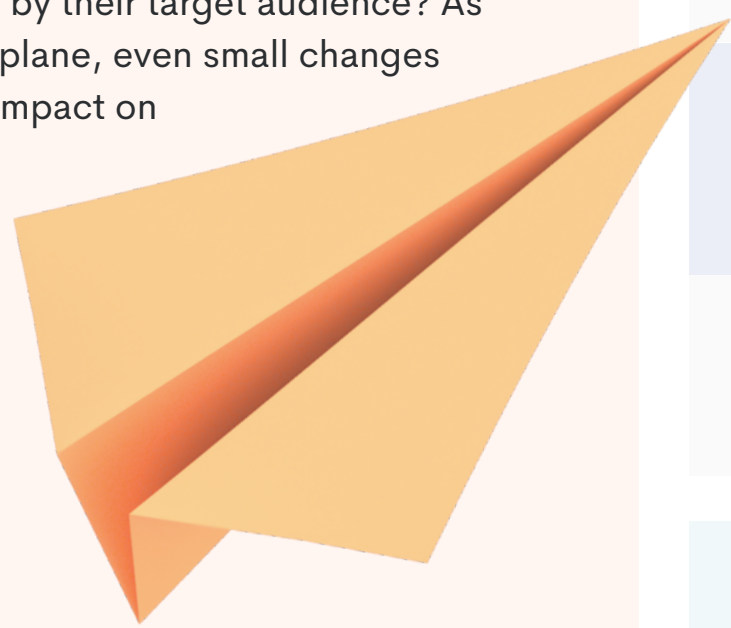


Plain Language Survey Development: Small Changes, Big Impact

Surveys are an integral part of many research projects. Much time is spent building verified and well-written instruments that capture ideal data, but it can be easy to overlook the most important stakeholder – survey users. How can we use plain language principles to make surveys approachable and understandable by their target audience? As with a paper airplane, even small changes can have a big impact on performance.



Purpose

As a research fellow with the Medical Library Association's Research Training Institute, I underwent a one-year intensive course on research methods. Fellows are called to carry out a research project which falls within their area of interest in the field of librarianship. The purpose of the study is to examine whether a tabletop game developed by FEMA is an effective disaster information literacy tool for children, specifically Girl Scouts aged 8-13 in the U.S. This is a protected target population with specific communication needs; well-designed surveys are essential to good data collection.

Objectives

- A Using skills gleaned from University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) Center for Health Literacy training entitled Applied Plain Language Writing, build surveys that are specifically tailored for target audiences.
- B Submit surveys to UAMS plain language expert for feedback to ensure appropriateness for target audience – Girl Scouts aged 8-13 in the U.S.

Before Feedback	Feedback	After Feedback
Please take this survey before playing Ready 2 Help .	→ "Only use 1 highlighting technique to draw attention to key points. We prefer bolding. [Using more than 1] makes it a bit hard to know where to look."	→ Please take this survey before playing Ready 2 Help .
How many people are in your troop? • Less than 5 • 5-10 • 11-15	→ "Avoid dashes and slashes. Some readers may not know how to interpret these and a grade schooler may think this is a math problem."	→ How many people are in your troop? • Less than 5 • 5 to 10 • 11 to 15
Do you think learning about disasters and emergencies is important?	→ "...'learning' is a nominalization (forming a noun from a verb). People really struggle with nominalizations if they struggle to read or [if] English is their second language."	→ Do you think it is important to learn about disasters and emergencies?

Methodology

- 1 Undergo plain language literacy training: Applied Plain Language Writing.
- 2 Build surveys using principles learned in training while keeping target population in mind.
- 3 Submit surveys for assessment by plain language experts – this is key!
- 4 Modify surveys based on feedback and build final version of survey instruments.



Next Steps

Now that the surveys have been adapted to best suit the target audience, the next step is conducting a pilot test and revise the surveys as needed. The instruments will be used for a project examining tabletop games as disaster information literacy tools.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Dr. Ana Cleveland (UNT), Dr. Emily Vardell (Emporia State), Susan Lessick (UC Irvine), Katie Leath (UAMS), and everyone at MLA RTI and UAMS Center for Health Literacy for their time, guidance, and editorial insight on this project. Additional thanks to Brian Leaf for his support.

Author



E. Bailey Sterling, MSIS
LIS & Technology Coordinator
NNLM Region 3
MLA RTI Student Fellow

Affiliations

- Network of the National Library of Medicine, Region 3
- University of North Texas Health Science Center
- University of North Texas
- Medical Library Association Research Training Institute