NALA Guidelines on the design of learning materials

The following guidelines have been influenced by NALA’s Plain English work. The design of learning materials is as important as the content.

**Headings**

Headings should be a feature of every piece of text or worksheet and should guide the reader as to the content of the material. Keep the format consistent, so that readers can distinguish between headings and subheadings, and use them as guides to reading and understanding the text.

**Text**

Do not block text - don’t use all capital letters. Block text throughout makes it harder for people to read.

**Alignment**

It is best to left align text instead of centring. Do not fully justify text. When text is fully justified, the spacing between words is usually uneven. This causes the eye to stop tracking and to readjust to the spacing.

**Typeface**

Typefaces come in 2 basic varieties: serif and non serif. Serif are best for writing and the most popular is Times New Roman. Try not to use unusual serifs which might look more attractive but make the text harder to read.

**Use everyday words.**

This is very important as we can all get used to using a certain vocabulary or jargon. There is a difference between content and writing style: don’t use complicated language just because the content of your message may be complicated. Ask yourself “What would I say to the reader if they were sitting in front of me?” and write accordingly.

**Use personal pronouns.**

Use words like ‘we’, ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘our’.

**Use ‘they’.**

English does not have a genderless pronoun in the third person singular apart from ‘it’. In general, we recommend using ‘they’ instead of ‘he’ or ‘she’.

**Be sparing with abbreviations and Latin phrases.**

As far as possible, avoid ‘etc’, ‘ie’, ‘eg’.

**Use terms that are consistent.**

As a general guide we recommend no more than 20 words per sentence.

**Visuals**

Using visuals can make the text more interesting and relevant. Ensure that images tell you something about your text. Examples of visuals include:

-a picture story;

-interactive lists and images on computer;

-games format.

**The following guidelines are recommended when using visuals:**

* People relate better to images when the context is familiar. If you were writing a health worksheet on poisons in the kitchen, and were using an image of potentially dangerous poisons, it would be best to set the image in an everyday setting.
* When using images to show a procedure or set of instructions, place the image alongside the relevant text so as to best reinforce the message. It might help to number each image so that the reader can follow the correct order.
* Make illustrations very clear with no background distractions.
* Use action captions to reinforce points.
* When using graphs, make sure that they are ‘real’, relevant and clear.