Understanding users and meeting their needs

Effective content considers what the audience needs to know, their background and the language they understand. It also listens to audiences – checking draft content with users means you can make sure it is engaging and effective.

Audience needs

There are a few key areas to think about in terms of audience needs:

- **Information** – what do your audiences want to know? For example, if you are developing content about immunisation programs
  - content for health professionals might include demographic information about the uptake of vaccines, and details about vaccine effectiveness and side effects
  - content for parents might be the ages at which children should be vaccinated and the diseases that vaccines protect against.

  Thinking about what users might be looking for can also help to ensure your content is AI-ready. AI platforms scan your content to determine if it answers a specific user question, so identifying those questions allows you to tailor your content to match.

- **Voice and style** – what should be the tone of your content? This can be
  - formal (abstract and impersonal)
    Voting papers must be submitted by postal voters at least 5 working days prior to the election day.
  - neutral (familiar words, impersonal but direct)
    Postal voters should send in their voting forms 1 week before the election.
  - conversational (simple language talking directly to the user)
    If you're sending in a postal vote, put it in the post at least a week before the election.

- **Pathways and products** – do you need to present the same or similar information to different audiences? You can
  - 'layer' the same information in different formats within the same piece of text (e.g. a summary box at the start of a chapter or webpage, and more detailed information further down)
  - provide visual content to help explain concepts and engage audiences
  - develop separate documents (e.g. a fact sheet for the general public and a more detailed report for researchers)
  - develop separate navigation pathways (e.g. labelling some webpages For patients and others For practitioners).

Audience vs users

Your audience is everyone your content needs to reach. Your users are everyone who is actually engaging with your content.

Think of it this way. You are giving a presentation to 100 people. This is your audience. But only 75 people are paying attention to you. These are your users.

User research and testing

Getting input and feedback from the people who will use your content helps to ensure that it meets their needs. Listening to users allows you to check your ideas and approach in terms of what information should be included, how it should be structured, and the language and tone that you should use.

You can research and talk to users before developing the content, to inform its development. You can also test developed content with users and continue to refine the content in an iterative process.

User research and testing doesn't need to be laborious or time-consuming. You can learn a lot from existing data sources and from small groups of people. A small investment in user research and testing will save time and money by avoiding having to redo content, products or websites.

Exploring existing data

Depending on the topic and publication, user data may already be available in your systems or free online. You can find:

- site analytics from existing webpages, to see what users are searching for and which pages they are bouncing off (that is, leaving very quickly)
- social media statistics, to see what users have liked and shared
- online search terms, to see the terms or phrases people are searching for – hint: type the search term into your search engine and look at the related search terms and questions for ideas
- online tools such as Google Trends and Answerthepublic
- other feedback, such as user queries, complaints and ideas.

Collecting new data

If you have specific questions about your content, you can collect new data.

Talking to or surveying audience groups provides feedback specific to their context and needs.

You can collect data through surveys (phone or online) or focus groups (usually with a facilitator), or from ongoing feedback (with questions and contact details on the product or website).

Usability testing

Usability testing, or user experience (UX) testing, is the process of testing a product, feature or prototype with real users. Most commonly, it is the process of testing a website to ensure that users can find and understand content.

For usability testing to be most effective, the users should be members of the target audiences, and testing should be repeated as the content evolves.

At the beginning of the project, users can complete card sorting or tree testing exercises to inform the development of the structure of the publication or website.

When you have a preliminary draft or prototype, you can test it directly with users.

A common testing method uses scenarios. You give the user a scenario (e.g. 'You need to find out how to sell your house. Where would you go?', 'You are worried about a rash on your child. What do you select?') and see what the user does. If users have difficulty completing the task, this tells you that your structure or wording may not work as well as expected.

Try to include draft content in user testing to gain feedback on how clear and useful the content is. Ask questions to get feedback on all content features, including text, calls to action and visuals.