

SWOG Clear Communication Playbook:

Sample Sections

Use a friendly, conversational tone

It’s easy to default to a more formal tone when you’re writing. But that can come across as unfriendly or even intimidating. Making an effort to use a friendly, conversational tone helps you connect with your audience and keep them engaged with your content.

Choosing simple words that people are likely to hear and use in everyday conversation is a key part of using a friendly, conversational tone. Here are some other important tips:

Pro tip

Read your content out loud. Try pretending you’re having a conversation with a family member or friend. If it’s awkward, clunky, or overly formal, you’ll hear it!

Talk directly to your audience.

This means using “you” — also known as writing in the second person. While you may need to use terms like “people with kidney cancer” sometimes, be sure to refer to your audience members as “you” whenever you can. Your content will feel more like a conversation this way.

Use contractions.

People tend to use contractions when they’re speaking — and again, it’s a good idea to use words that people are likely to use themselves.

Use exclamation points strategically.

While you don’t want to overdo it, using exclamation points occasionally and intentionally is an easy way to help a material feel more friendly.

Avoid directives, like “should” or “must.”

These words can sound harsh and overly prescriptive — and people tend to react negatively when they’re told what they “should” or “should not” do. It’s usually easy to avoid these words entirely by saying things like “it’s important to” instead.

Formal tone	Friendly, conversational tone
<p>The study team will ask patients whether they are interested in participating in an interview about their experience in the study. This is an optional interview. It is acceptable to choose not to participate. Patients may still participate in the study regardless of whether they agree to be interviewed.</p> <p>Patients should discuss any questions about the interview with their doctor.</p>	<p>The study team will ask you if you’d like to take part in an interview about your experience in the study. It’s okay to say no! You can still take part in the study if you don’t do the interview.</p> <p>If you have any questions about the interview, talk to your doctor.</p>

DRAFT: Please do not circulate

Keep content short

Long sentences and paragraphs can be hard for people to get through — especially people with lower literacy skills. Long blocks of text can **appear** intimidating too, which may discourage some people from even trying to read a material. That’s why keeping your content short is a key plain language best practice. Here are some numbers to aim for:

Keep most sentences at 20 words or fewer.

When sentences are long, look for ways to break them into 2. For example, if you’re using a conjunction (like “and,” “because,” or “but”) to connect 2 different thoughts, you can probably break the sentence up instead.

Long sentence	Short sentences
It’s especially important that the study is for people who have a weakened immune system because they have fewer treatment options than people without a weakened immune system and they’re more likely to have aggressive disease (cancer that spreads or grows quickly).	It’s especially important that the study is for people who have a weakened immune system. That’s because they have fewer treatment options than people without a weakened immune system. And they’re more likely to have aggressive disease (cancer that spreads or grows quickly).

Try to keep paragraphs at 3 sentences or fewer.

Be sure you’re focusing on 1 topic or main idea per paragraph.

Long paragraph	Short paragraphs
If there are no signs of cancer after the surgery, it means the treatment worked very well. But there’s still a chance the cancer could come back or even spread to other parts of the body. Doctors don’t yet know whether people who have no signs of cancer after surgery will benefit from more treatment. It’s possible that since the earlier treatment worked so well in these patients, further treatment is likely to help keep the cancer from coming back. But it’s also possible that these patients don’t need more treatment since their cancer is gone — and that further treatment would just lead to side effects and hassles. This trial will help researchers figure out if immunotherapy after surgery does help keep the cancer from coming back — or if it isn’t needed at all.	<p>If there are no signs of cancer after the surgery, it means the treatment worked very well. But there’s still a chance the cancer could come back or even spread to other parts of the body.</p> <p>Doctors don’t yet know whether people who have no signs of cancer after surgery will benefit from more treatment. It’s possible that since the earlier treatment worked so well in these patients, further treatment is likely to help keep the cancer from coming back. But it’s also possible that these patients don’t need more treatment since their cancer is gone — and that further treatment would just lead to side effects and hassles.</p> <p>This trial will help researchers figure out if immunotherapy after surgery does help keep the cancer from coming back — or if it isn’t needed at all.</p>