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 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 talk to 100 people. This is your audience. But only 75 people are paying attention to you. These are your users.

Meeting audience needs

Your audience will likely be diverse and have equally diverse needs. But there are a few key areas you can consider to help meet common aspects 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.

- 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 before 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, don't wait until the last minute.

- 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)
  - 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 online content as 'For patients' and 'For practitioners').

Push vs pull

Before you start to write content, your first thoughts are probably 'What do we want/need to tell the audience?' That is a major part of the development process: you must know what your topic and key messages are. This is the information you want to 'push'.

But if you only think about what you want to say, you miss a major part of the equation. The other side is 'What does the audience want/need to know?' This is the information the audience wants to 'pull'.

Putting yourself in the audience's shoes can shape what you include in the document and how it is structured. For example, you might want to say that your project involved many organisations. But the audience wants to know more about the project outcomes. That doesn't mean you delete all mention of the collaborators, but it does mean that you have 'Outcomes' as your first heading, and 'Participants' as a lower priority.

Think about what the audience is interested in, what they are driven by and what questions they really want answered.

For example, if you want to present information on healthcare regulation, the audience is probably not wondering 'How does healthcare regulation work in Australia?' What they really want to know is 'How do I know my hospital is safe?' You may cover similar material in your answer, but focusing on audience pull will enable you to talk to them directly and produce content that is more relevant to their needs.

Balancing push vs pull is critical to producing information that will be well received by – and useful to – the audience.

User research and testing

When you are developing content, getting input and feedback from people who will use it helps to ensure that it meets their needs. Listening to users allows you to check what information to include, how it should be structured, and the language and tone to use. You can even check the type of content – users may tell you they want a graph or infographic when you've given them text.

You can research and talk to users before developing the content, to inform its development. You can also test developed content with users and refine the content in an iterative process. User research and testing is commonly done for online content, but you can also use it for printed publications.

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. And 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

Use existing data to identify key topics to include and the language to use. User data may already be available in your systems or free online, such as:

- site analytics from existing webpages, to see what users are searching for or bouncing off
- social media statistics, to see what users have liked and shared
- online search terms, to see the terms or phrases people are searching for

- online forums, to see what people are talking about and they language they use
- 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. At its simplest, collecting new data can be asking your colleagues, friends or family for their opinions about your content. More usefully, talking to audience groups can provide feedback specific to their context and needs.

You can collect data through surveys (phone or online), interviews or focus groups (with a facilitator), or from ongoing feedback (with questions and contact details on the product or website). Ongoing feedback allows you to ask specific questions from users. Yes–no questions, such as 'Could you understand what to do after you read this brochure?', and open-ended questions, such as 'What else would you like to see on this page?', will contribute useful feedback.

Usability testing

Usability testing (often a part of user experience, or 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.

When you have a draft or prototype, you can test it directly with users. A common method of testing is giving 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. Where would find this information?') and watching to see what the user does. If users have difficulty with the task, this tells you that your structure may not work as well as expected.

It is a good idea to include draft content in user testing, so that you can 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.