

Tips and Tricks for Effective Communications to SCSEP Participants

How to use this checklist:

Grantees and partners can use this checklist to review existing and new communications to SCSEP participants. Using the questions and tips below, consider how to revise your communications so that participants are more likely to understand and act on them. The questions are organized into five sections:

1. Ease of action
2. Clarity
3. Prominence
4. Personalization
5. Timeliness

Checklist questions:

Ease of Action - Make it as easy as possible for participants to do what they need to do.

- Have you provided actionable information so the reader knows what they need to do?
Examples: instructions, a checklist, or other when/where/how prompts.
- Is the recommended choice the easy choice?
Whenever possible, use defaults or simplified processes with as few hassles/steps as possible.

TIP: Review any information that is **not** actionable closely to determine if it is needed. Resist the urge to explain things to “educate” or “inform” the participant if that information is not required to be included by SCSEP or directly related to an action the participant needs to take. Only essential information should be included.

Clarity - Use plain language and formatting to make communications easy to read and understand.

- Have you removed/avoided all jargon and legalese?
- Is the main point of the communication clearly written?
- Have you included only information that is essential for the reader to know?
- Is the language simple and easy to understand for someone new to the topic?
- Have you used short sections with clear and informative headings?

Prominence - Make the most important information most prominent in the communication.

- Is your main message up front?
- Have you emphasized key information using color, bold and/or large font, headings, and/or call-out boxes/text boxes?

TIP: Make sure that only the **most important** information is prominent on your communication. Overuse of emphatic techniques (bold, italics, color, etc.) makes it more difficult for the reader to tell which information is most important.

Personalization – Think about the reader’s needs/situation and personalize communications to them.

- Have you tailored the message and information to the reader’s specific needs and perspective?
- Can you include a handwritten note, individualized feedback, or offer of personal assistance?
Example: “It was nice to see you at our training last month! I appreciated your questions.”
Example: “If you would like help with filling out this form, please call me at XXX-XXX-XXXX.”
- Have you used personalized pronouns (e.g., you and we)?
- Is the tone of the communication sympathetic, rather than formal or hostile?

- Are you using a communication channel that is likely to reach the recipient, and could you use multiple or additional communication channels?

Example: You could follow up on a letter with a phone call, text, or postcard reminder.

Timeliness - Consider timing and timeliness.

- Will the recipient have ample time and opportunities to respond to your request(s)?

Example: If you are sending a letter about an upcoming appointment, aim to have it delivered no less than one week before the appointment.

- Have you set and highlighted deadlines?
- Are you sending reminders/prompts to encourage the completion of the requested action? See examples above about sending reminders after a letter.

- Can you reach recipients at certain times of the day or days of the week when they are likeliest to be able to digest and act on your message?

Example: If you're sending a text message or making a phone call, consider daytime vs. evening and weekday vs. weekend based on what you know about your recipients.

***TIP:** Align the number of communications/reminders with the urgency/importance of the action. For example, the stakes are higher for an involuntarily termination notice than they are for an upcoming training notice.*

Interested in learning more?

Here is a list of resources that informed this checklist:

1. SNAP Model Notice Toolkit (USDA, 2020): <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/model-notice-toolkit>
2. Effective Communications Checklist (MDRC, 2020): https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/img/Effective_Communications_Checklist.pdf
3. How to design effective communications: What has OES learned? (GSA, 2018) <https://oes.gsa.gov/assets/abstracts/OES%20Learnings%20on%20Writing%20Better%20Communications%202018.pdf>
4. Developing SIMPLER Solutions (OPRE, 2017): <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/developing-simpler-solutions>
5. Writing Effective Letters (Plain Language Action and Information Network, n.d.): <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/resources/content-types/writing-effective-letters/>