How to Conduct a Paraphrase Test

Paraphrase testing will tell you what readers think of your content and if they interpret your message(s) as you intended. Paraphrase testing works best for short documents, web content, survey questions, talking points, and key messages.

Steps for a Paraphrase Test

1) Draft your document using the Federal Plain Language Guidelines.

2) Recruit 3 to 9 participants (members of your target audience or proxies) and set up an individual interview with each of them. Interviews can be face-to-face or by phone.

3) Mark your document with stopping points (i.e., sentences, paragraphs, or sections of your document that you want your participants to read and then discuss). It's best to add a stopping point for every 1-3 paragraphs. You can also set a stopping point after an important sentence.

4) During the interview, at each stopping point, ask the participant to tell you in their own words what that section means. Ask them to paraphrase what they just read.

5) Write down each participant's explanation. Do not correct or interrupt the participant.

6) Compare notes from all one-on-one interviews to identify places where your content was unclear, misunderstood, or hard to remember for 2 or more participants.

7) Fix those issues and retest.

How to Gather Additional Information

You can use your one-on-one interviews to gather some additional insights about your materials. Avoid "yes/no" questions; they don't provide much usable information. Ask open-ended questions like this:

- What would you do if you got this document?

- What do you think the writer was trying to do with this document?

- What do you particularly like or dislike about this document?

Sometimes participants might be uncomfortable or embarrassed to say what they find difficult to understand in a document. It may be easier for them to discuss problems they think others may have when trying to read the document. You may want to ask questions like this:

- If I gave this document to someone who was busy, stressed, or had difficulty reading, what about the document might cause them problems?

- What about the document might work for them?