



STANDARD TRANSLATABLE ENGLISH PRINCIPLES

for Public Health

A GUIDE TO AUTHORIZING COMMUNICABLE DISEASE POSTERS
WITH TRANSLATION IN MIND



ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

WHAT IS THIS BOOKLET?

This booklet outlines the Standard Translatable English Principles for Public Health (STEPs for Public Health), a set of research-grounded principles for creating translatable public health messaging. Following these principles creates content that is quick and easy to translate - whether translated by a professional translator or a community member. This is because the Standard Translatable English (STE) approach uses words that are cross-translatable, which means they can be found in all, or most, languages. Translators will often be able to create word-for-word translations of STE texts without complicated workarounds.

STE has been used in many fields, such as language learning, agriculture, and heatwave risk communication. In recent years, researchers have been working on applying STE to the field of public health communication. This booklet communicates the findings of that research. It presents the core principles of STE for public health messaging. Together, these have been given the name Standard Translatable English Principles for Public Health, or “STEPs for Public Health”. This booklet was authored and designed by STE researcher Ida Stevia Diget.

HOW DO I USE THIS BOOKLET?

This booklet is an entry point into using STE for public health communication. You can use the booklet when creating public health posters intended for translation. You can also use it when creating public health messages not intended for translation to make sure that any unofficial translations of the message have a lower risk of errors and misunderstandings. You can use the STE principles for any kind of English public messaging, but for illustrative purposes, this booklet provides examples of poster-based messaging focused on COVID-19 and influenza.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The principles presented in this booklet were made possible by the work of all Standard Translatable English researchers but in particular the work of Dr. Lauren Sadow. The version of Standard Translatable English as presented in this booklet owes much to her work on language teaching. Dr. Sadow additionally coined the term Standard Translatable English and related acronym, STE. This booklet was also inspired and guided by the work of Dr. Helen Bromhead, Dr. Deborah Hill, and Dr. Ulla Vanhatalo. Among researchers, the STE approach is often referred to as the minimal language approach. The approach was created by Prof. Anna Wierzbicka, and has been significantly developed by Prof. Cliff Goddard.



QUICK GUIDE TO STEPS FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

WORDS

- Choose words that are easy to translate.

For example, say “think”, “want” and “know”, instead of “consider”, “wish”, “sense”.

- Choose clear and precise words and phrases, even if it means a longer message.

For example, say “When you cough, cover your mouth and nose with your arm, not with your hand” instead of “Cover your cough”.

- Choose words and phrases that are used across languages. Avoid very Australian or English-specific phrasing.

For example, “get vaccinated against COVID-19” instead of “Arm yourself against COVID-19”.

SENTENCES

- Use complete sentences.

For example, say “Do this when you wash your hands” rather than “how to handwash”

- Use simple sentences, and avoid putting actions into nouns.

For example, say “Get a COVID-19 vaccine here” rather than “COVID-19 vaccination now available”

- Be direct and concrete.

For example, say “call an ambulance” rather than “seek emergency medical assistance”

- Tell people what it is good for them to do.

Counter this with undesirable behaviours when necessary. For example, “cough into your arm, not your hand”

PICTURES

- Choose pictures that cannot be misunderstood in a way that is detrimental to the message.
- Choose pictures that look like their real-world counterparts.
- Choose pictures that are relatable and make your audience feel represented.

LAYOUT

- Keep the total number of messages to a minimum.
- Make sure step-based procedures are numbered and separated.
- Make sure the reading direction of your poster is clear.
- Use a simple font and make text as large as space allows.
- Use contrasting colours and make sure your font colour contrasts with the background.

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1

STEPS FOR PUBLIC HEALTH



1.1 WORKING WITH THE RIGHT WORDS

Creating an STE text firstly requires an understanding of what words work well for translation. Some words have equivalents in most languages. We can call these “translatable words”. These should be used as much as possible when creating an STE text. Below is a list of some translatable words relevant for health communication.

TRANSLATABLE WORDS



Words about people

people, I, you, someone, other/else, woman, man, was born, children, mother, father, husband, wife



Words about people's bodies

body, head, face, ears, eyes, nose, mouth, teeth, fingers, hands, breast, bones, blood, skin, parts



Words about things

thing, kind, big, flat, hard, heavy, long, mine, round, sharp, smooth, soft, thin



Words about time and place

time, a long time, a short time, after, at night, before, during the day, for some time, moment, anymore, place, now, when, where, somewhere, here, near, far, above, below, inside, around, at the bottom, at the top, in front of, in the middle, on something, on one side



Words about doing and happening

do, can, say (words), happen, make, hold, move, stand, sit, lie, sleep, grow, live, breathe, die, kill, play, laugh, sing



Words about thinking and feeling

think, feel, know, is called, see, hear, want, don't want



Words about numbers and counting

one, two, much, more, few, some, little, all



Very general words

there is, good, bad, the same, like, very, true, maybe, if, as, in this way, because

Of course, some additional words are necessary. For example, the translatable word list does not have words for COVID-19, influenza, or symptoms. The important thing is to choose extra words carefully. Think about whether there is a way to communicate your message with translatable words first. For example, you could say, “feeling like it is hard to breathe”, instead of “shortness of breath”.

On the other hand, some words cannot be replaced and are necessary for health messaging. For example, there are no good alternatives for “cough” or “doctor”. In those cases, it makes more sense to choose the common term. Below is a list of examples of health words and phrases that can be necessary for English messages about COVID-19 and influenza, even though they may not always be fully translatable.

HEALTH WORDS



SPREAD

germs, spread



DISEASE

COVID-19, disease, influenza/flu, sick, virus



SYMPTOMS

cough, diarrhoea, fever, headache, shivering, sneeze, sore throat, symptoms, tiredness



VACCINES, TESTING and MEDICINE

(get) tested, mask, medicine, stay at home, vaccine, wash



DOCTORS and NURSES

call (a doctor), doctor, hospital, nurse

The above list is not exhaustive. You will likely find the need to add more. The important thing is to carefully consider whether there is a way to communicate your message with translatable words before adding extra ones. If it is necessary to use a certain word that is not translatable or easy to understand, maybe you can add an explanation to it. Such explanations can be created using translatable words. For example, ‘influenza vaccine’ can be explained in STE as:

“A vaccine is a kind of medicine. Vaccines do something good to people’s bodies so they do not get very sick from a disease. Influenza is one such kind of disease. A doctor or nurse can give an “influenza vaccine” to you. They will use a needle to give you the vaccine.”

1.2 DEALING WITH DIFFICULT WORDS

When writing STE texts, you might come across a concept that you are finding very difficult to explain using translatable words. You could also come across a non-translatable word that you feel it is impossible to avoid to properly communicate your message. Sometimes, a challenging word may not even be complex. It can be a common term, simple on the surface, but which has multiple meanings and can be a problem in translation (more about this in section 1.5). Whatever challenge you are facing, you should know that this is totally normal – even the most experienced STE practitioners sometimes find it challenging to explain a complex concept. It is a normal and accepted part of the process.

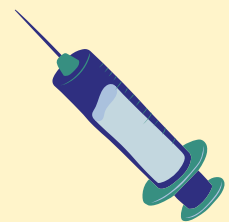
So, what can we do about it? Well, there is no simple solution to this problem. Each difficult or complex word is going to come with its own challenges. It is generally useful to get an extra pair of eyes on your work. Consulting colleagues who can provide a fresh perspective can often help solve a problem you’ve been stuck on. They may think of a different word, or entirely different phrasing, which can help you avoid the troublesome word. Of course, there may be times when you cannot find a solution, and you find you must include a certain complex, or untranslatable concept. When this is the case, the important thing to remember it does not mean your hard work in making the rest of the text translatable is lost.

Below are some concrete examples of some challenging and complex concepts used in health communication, along with some advice for how to handle this according to STE principles. There are also example STE texts in the glossary (Section 3 of this booklet) to give you an idea of how you can use STE to elaborate on some non-translatable health concepts.

1) The risks of the word "risk"

Much of public health communication is about communicating the risks of a public health threat, for example, the risk of getting COVID-19. Encouraging people to make decisions based on risk is common, but weighing the risks and benefits related to a personal health decision is a complicated task.

There may be many possible outcomes and side effects, and people can overestimate the risk of certain low-risk side effects. This could be because, for example, it is difficult to understand how a risk percentage applies to them, or because the side effect is popularised in the media or the internet, which leads to the view that it is a high-risk side effect.



Think of public health messages such as “Get vaccinated, the risk of catching COVID-19 in your area is high”. These messages, while common, are not very informative on their own. This is because such messaging relies on a lot of assumed knowledge, including the complex meaning of the word “risk”. The above message assumes that people understand that getting vaccinated changes the risk of catching COVID-19, as well as how it changes this risk.

This is a big assumption. The relationship between vaccination and an individual’s risk of catching COVID-19 is highly complex. For example, an individual’s risk of catching COVID-19, as well as their risk of getting very sick from it, depends on factors such as age, profession, current health conditions, and socioeconomic status. The public are asked to consider for themselves whether vaccination impacts their risk of simply catching COVID-19, or their risk of getting very sick from the disease when they catch it, or both.

What to do about it

Communicating about risk is an important part of public health messaging, so it isn’t something you can realistically avoid. Instead, you can be explicit about the relationship between risk and the things people should be doing to protect themselves. Highlight the possible positive outcomes and give concrete examples. In doing so, it may not even be necessary to use the word “risk”.

For example, instead of saying “Get vaccinated, the risk of catching COVID-19 in your area is high”, you could say “Many people near you are getting sick from COVID-19 now. You can get sick if you are near someone else who has COVID-19. Most people who have got their COVID-19 vaccines do not get very sick from COVID-19. Because of this, it is good for you if you can get vaccinated.”. In this way, you are making it clear how vaccination is related to the risk of getting sick. You are also saying that getting vaccinated is a good thing in this context.

This example was about communicating individual risk. For an example of how to communicate risk in the context of society or the greater good, see the glossary in Section 3.

2) Translation tension: sore throat or pain in the throat?

A common challenge when using STE for health communication is having to toss-up between a commonly used term, such as “sore throat” versus a more translatable way of saying the same thing. “Sore throat” is used as the example here, because the word “sore” often refers to muscular or external pain, for example, a sore neck. However, in the symptom “sore throat” usually means that there is some sort of pain inside the throat because of an infection or similar. This could cause trouble in translation, as there could be confusion about where the pain is meant to be located. It is most likely to cause trouble in machine translation, where the machine might choose the wrong sense of “sore” in the language you are translating into.

What to do about it

For the benefit of translation, a less vague way of saying “sore throat” would be to say, “throat pain” or “pain in the throat”.

However, it is obvious that this sounds very odd to a native English speaker, and avoiding a term like “sore throat” altogether could mean that the text becomes jarring and difficult to understand in English. Of course, if writing a text for translation purposes only (not for publication in English), you could choose a solution like “pain in the throat”. However, if the text is intended to be distributed in English as well, it is probably better to stick with the common and well-known term, “sore throat”, even though it isn’t entirely translatable.

3) Encountering what seems impossible: Immune system, disease, virus

You might find that explaining or elaborating on a certain term in translatable words is complicated and taking up much more space than your poster allows. Or you might simply find that a term is difficult to explain in simple words. Some examples of this could be immune system, disease, or virus. Fully explaining complex terms like these can be very challenging even for the most experienced STE practitioners.

What to do about it

There may not always be an easy solution to this. You may have to shorten or even leave out your explanation or elaboration because of space constraints. That being said, it is better to have some context, explanation, or elaboration than none. For example, you could say “eating healthy food like vegetables helps make your immune system strong. An immune system is something inside your body that helps you not get sick” instead of “a healthy diet boosts the immune system”. You can also consider if the challenging word is even necessary for your message. For example, you can say “wash your hands so you don’t spread COVID-19 and influenza” rather than “wash your hands to avoid diseases”.

There’s an example explanation of “virus” in the glossary in Section 3.

1.3 SENTENCE SUCCESSES

STE texts need careful consideration of sentence use and structure. Below are some tips for keeping your sentences translatable and accessible in line with STE principles.

Use complete sentences

Always use complete sentences, even when creating headings or titles. For example, “how to wash your hands” may work well in English, but if directly translated, this could be grammatically unacceptable in other languages. Instead, say something like, “do this when you wash your hands”.

Use simple sentences and avoid putting actions into nouns

Use simple sentences throughout your text. When doing this, try to avoid nouns that contain an action, for example, “vaccination”. Instead, use the regular noun “vaccine”, and pair it with a verb. For example, say “Get a COVID-19 vaccine here” rather than “COVID-19 vaccination available”.

Be direct and concrete

Speak directly to your audience so it is clear who the message is intended for. Be concrete and try to avoid abstraction when doing so. For example, say “if you have the flu and feel like you can’t breathe, call an ambulance” rather than “if breathing difficulty occurs, seek emergency medical assistance”.

Using do’s and don’ts

Messaging should not exclusively inform people what not to do. If only advising people what they cannot do, it is not clear what behaviours they should be adopting. For example, if people are told they cannot cough or sneeze into their hands without suggested alternatives, one (undesirable) outcome could be uncovered coughs and sneezes. As such, it is imperative to explain and illustrate what behaviours people should be adopting.

“Do’s” can be countered by “don’ts”, or undesirable behaviours. Some people have a perception that telling people what not to do is ‘negative’ and that this should never be done. However, it can sometimes be necessary to include what not to do in order to cancel a certain expectation or behaviour that people are used to, but which is detrimental to slowing the spread of disease.

For example, if people are used to coughing and sneezing into their hands, it may be necessary to say “cough and sneeze into your arm, not your hand”.

In short, always tell people what behaviours they should be adopting. When necessary, this can be countered with what behaviours they should avoid, especially if any pre-existing behaviours need changing.



1.4 WHY 'BRIEF' ISN'T ALWAYS BETTER

English public health communication favors short words and sentences. Often, the attitude is that “less is more”. It is believed that short messages make stronger impacts. While this may be somewhat true, as a lot of text can look daunting, it isn’t always that simple. Shorter messages can be bad for accessibility, especially for non-native speakers, and create problems in translation. Below are some examples of scenarios where a slightly longer message is better for accessibility and translatability.

1) Jargon jumble

Public health communication can include medical jargon, such as Latin words. “Benign” is a familiar word to health professionals but may not be well-known to other members of the public. “Not bad for you” is longer, but more easily understood. Consider “hypertension” versus “high blood pressure”, “orthopnoea” versus “hard to breathe when lying down”. In every case, the longer version is more widely understood.

2) Snazzy slogans

Australian public messaging often includes slogans such as “If it’s flooded, forget it”, or “Arm yourself against COVID-19”. While these are short and maybe even easy to remember, they may not be very informative. Non-native English speakers may not understand what “it” is referring to in “If it’s flooded, forget it”. Does it mean they can’t drive down a flooded road? Does it mean they can’t save their child or dog from floodwaters?

“Arm yourself against COVID-19” is a wordplay on the word “arm”, both a body part and to weaponize. This sounds clever in English but falls apart in translation, as most other languages do not share this double meaning of “arm”. If messaging is meant for non-native speakers or for translation, a less vague, more informative (sometimes longer) message may be better, for example: “Do not drive down a flooded road”, “Get vaccinated against COVID-19”.

3) "Cover your cough"

“Cover your cough”, an often-used public health message, seems simple in English, but can be nonsensical if translated word-for-word, into, for example, Mandarin. This is because it’s not the cough itself that is covered, but the mouth. In the same way, “cover your mouth with your arm when you cough” can cause problems when directly translated because some languages do not distinguish between “arm” and “hand”. This means that in machine translation, such a message could get translated as “cover your mouth with your hand”.

“When you cough, cover your mouth and nose with your arm, not with your hand” is a slightly longer message, but this will be easier to translate, sidestepping the “cover your cough” expression and flagging for translators that the distinction between “arm” and “hand” is important.

4) Condensed communication = less information

Short messages can lack the necessary information and nuance of effective public health communication. For example, if the population doesn’t know why they’re doing something, they may not do it. If they don’t know how a public health measure, such as getting vaccinated, is relevant for them and their situation, they may not follow the advice.

Longer and tailored messages are important for effective public health messaging. Space constraints, especially in poster-based messaging, do limit the amount of information and detail that can be communicated. Other things must be considered, such as information overload and font size, but it is worth remembering that longer messaging is not the enemy. Longer messages can contain more details and explanations and can be easier to understand and learn from.



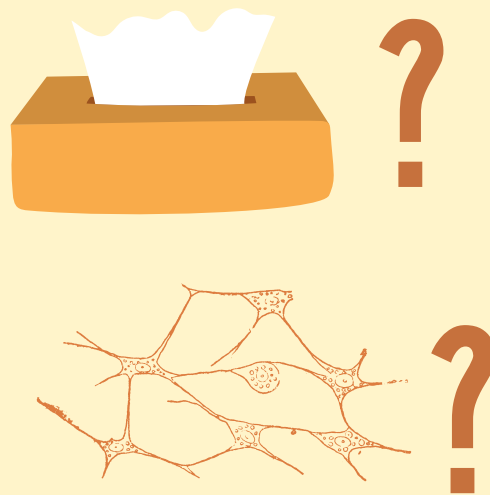
1.5 TACKLING MACHINE TRANSLATION

Members of your audience may use Google Translate or other machine translation tools to translate health messages. Machine translation can help people with limited English language skills understand English health messages, but the translations often include mistakes. Even if professionally translated versions are available, the English version is often more widely distributed, which can mean that some audience members end up using these tools.

The good news is, if you author your health messages with the principles outlined in this booklet, you can minimise the risk of mistranslations by Google Translate and similar. Here are some common machine translation pitfalls and some tips for tackling them.

1) The tissue issue

Some English words have more than one meaning. For example, 'tissue' can refer to both paper tissues and biological tissue. This can cause problems in machine translation because some languages do not use the same word for paper tissues and biological tissue. A simple phrase like "cover your cough with a tissue" can be mistranslated along the lines of "cover your cough with biological tissue". In the worst cases, such translations are nonsensical.



How to fix it

The first step in solving this problem is to figure out what words have multiple meanings. If you need help with this, you can ask a translator (you can read more about the role of translators in Section 1.6). Once you've found the words that have many meanings, see if you can avoid them.

For example, the word "tissue" may not always be necessary. You can say "cover your mouth and nose with your arm" rather than "with a tissue". If you can't avoid the word, you can try adding context to the word to steer the machine translation tool in the right direction. For example, adding the word "paper" in front of the word "tissue" may help the machine identify the intended meaning of the word.

2) The accuracy of "arm"

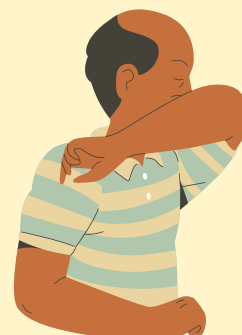
Some words have more than one meaning in other languages. For example, in Russian, Greek, or Polish, the same word is used to express arm and hand. The risk is that a message such as "cough into your arm" when translated directly, such as in machine translation, could get interpreted as "cough into your hand".

How to fix it

It is difficult to tell what words have multiple meanings in other languages when looking at an English text. The best way to figure out what words are causing this kind of trouble is to consult translators and ask them to point out potential problem words. You can also ask them to run the text through a machine translation tool and have them point out where the machine is having trouble (see Section 1.6).

In most cases, you will be able to substitute a problem word. When this is not possible, such as in the case of “arm”, adding context might help. For example, you could say “cover your mouth and nose with your arm, not with your hand”. This helps clarify that this is an important distinction, which might guide the machine translation tool to choose a suitable translation.

COVER YOUR COUGH...
WITH YOUR HAND?



1.6 TRANSLATABILITY TESTING

Once STE drafts have been completed, they should be translatability tested. That is, they should be tested for how easy they are to translate. This is done because, even when following STE principles, it can be difficult to identify what words and phrases work only in English. Translatability testing helps mitigate this.

There are several ways to translatability test. How you choose to do it depends on your available time, resources, and how you intend for your text to be used. Below are two examples of how to conduct translatability testing.



1) Texts intended for translation/available resources

It is good to test how easy a text is to translate before getting it translated. This will help make the text faster to translate, guaranteeing an efficient translation process. It will also help minimise the risk of unclear or flawed translations.

To translatability test, conduct “pilot” translations of your text (minimum one, but ideally several) with translators and/or bilingual speakers. If possible, choose languages that are very different from English (for example, Mandarin rather than Dutch). Ask the pilot translators to do quick translations of the text and provide feedback on the process. You want to know what parts of the text were easy to translate and what parts, if any, were hard to translate. Encourage the translators to provide concrete examples. You can ask them questions like:

- *Is this text easy or hard to translate?*
- *Are there any words or phrases that are hard to find matches to in [language]?*
- *How does the translation sound? Do you find it acceptable?*

It is good if the pilot translators can also assess a machine translated version of the text. Ask them to provide feedback on the quality of the translation. You can ask them questions like:



- *How does this translation sound? Do you find it acceptable?*
- *Did the machine struggle with any words or phrases? Which?*

Adjust your text based on the advice of the pilot translators. Once finalised and sent for the “real” translation, you can also ask these translators to give feedback on the translation process, even if you do not have the time and resources to update the text again. The translators will have useful insights about what worked well and what worked less well in their language. You can use this knowledge for your next project.

The final translation should be quality checked before being released, ideally with members of the target community. In this way, you make sure that the translations are understandable, and culturally appropriate, and that the key messages are coming across as intended.

2) Texts not intended for translation/minimal resources

Even when a text is not intended for translation, some audience members may still want to translate it. As much as possible, such texts should still be authored for translatability and translatability tested to ensure translations are informative with minimal ambiguity.



Try to conduct at least one pilot translation of a text to find out what words or phrases could be problematic. If you do not have the resources to ask a translator, perhaps you (or a co-worker) speak a second language that can be used for the task. You can try translating the text yourself and consider if it’s easy to find equivalent words or phrases without altering the intended message. You can also run the text through a machine translation tool and assess the outcome. If any components sound odd or become nonsensical in translation, adjust the text, and try again. While this type of translatability testing is minimal, and may only highlight problems specific to certain languages, it is better to conduct some translatability testing than none at all.

1.7 TYING IT TOGETHER

HOW TO CREATE AN STE TEXT

Now that the key aspects of writing with STE have been outlined, you might wonder how to go about creating your first STE text. Where to start? This section takes you through a step-by-step method you can follow to get started:

First, you can choose a starting point, a model text of sorts. For example, if writing a text about how COVID-19 spreads, it may be useful to look up how the WHO defines COVID-19 transmission. Or, if writing about the use of masks, referring to current government mask requirements.

After this, you can try writing a “neutral” draft, where you write out your message in your usual writing style, just as you would any other text. Try to make sure that this draft includes everything you want to say in your message. This will give you a template to work with. Afterwards, you can adapt this template to STE, applying the principles outlined in this booklet. This includes using translatable words, keeping sentences complete and concrete and explaining and adding context to any complex concepts.

At this stage, it can be good to do some preliminary testing of your text’s translatability. If possible, you can do some small-scale testing (corresponding to method #2 for translatability testing above, section 1.6). For example, if you, or any of your colleagues, know a second language, you can use this to do some sample translations and see if there are any words or phrases that are challenging to translate. Adjust your text accordingly.

Another thing you can do is get feedback on your text from colleagues. Feedback from others may be able to highlight any aspects of your message that are unclear, or help you think of alternative, more translatable ways to formulate certain messages.

Following these steps will help you achieve a workable draft of an STE text which can be sent for translatability testing with translators, adjusted, presented to a focus group of the target community for feedback, and so on.

This method of writing STE texts is just an example. Some steps, such as feedback and translatability testing, might happen in a different order than outlined here. You also might find your own way to create STE texts, or with time, you may find that some of these steps are less useful for you. For example, you may not need to create a neutral draft, but might with practice be able to go straight the first STE draft.



1.8 PICKING THE RIGHT PICTURES

Pictures are an important part of much public health messaging, especially posters. Choosing the right ones for accessibility and cross-cultural relevance can be a difficult task, and there may not be a simple way to do so. As always, it depends on who you are communicating with, and for what reason. A good principle to remember overall is to make sure that any pictures you choose are **obviously relevant** to the message you are communicating. With that in mind, below are some tips for how to choose effective pictures for general-purpose public health posters.

1) Avoiding misunderstandings and misinformation

Make sure pictures cannot be misunderstood in a way that is detrimental to the message. Keep in mind that some people may not be able to read and understand all the words on a health poster. These people may rely on the pictures to grasp the message. Because of this, it is important that the pictures are, as far as possible, clear and precise.

You might not be able to get the full message from the pictures alone, but it is important that the audience does not get the wrong message from them. For example, if communicating that you cannot get COVID-19 through food, a picture of food with a cross or prohibition sign over it may communicate that food is dangerous in relation to COVID-19, or even the opposite of the intended message, that you can get COVID-19 from food.



YOU CAN'T GET COVID-19
FROM FOOD

Try not to use too many culturally dependent symbols to express your message. For example, using a medical cross together with other visuals (a big building, a nurse, a doctor) to say “hospital” is fine, but using the medical cross alone is less effective, as it has many possible interpretations. Depending on the context, the medical cross can mean anything from pharmacy to hospital, GP, the Red Cross, and so on.

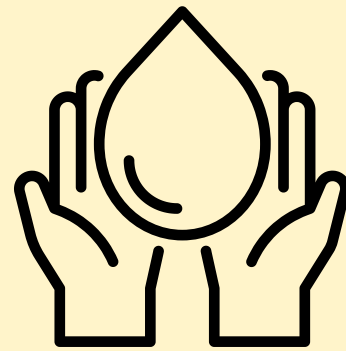
2) Similarity and seeing the message

Pictures are easiest to understand when they look like the real-world thing they are trying to depict. This simple principle is not always followed in public communication. Design is often the motivating factor, and aesthetically pleasing images are chosen over detailed images that look like their real-world counterparts.

For example, to make a poster look simple and elegant, we could choose a simple line drawing of a drop falling into open palms to express the meaning “handwashing”.

Yet for those who have trouble reading the text, a picture like that does not necessarily mean much. It has many possible meanings, such as using hand sanitiser or someone holding a drop-shaped item. If you can't read the text or guess the correct meaning, the "handwashing" message might get lost.

The message would be clearer if the picture looked like the action of handwashing - perhaps including a tap, running water, and soap. In this way, the intended message can be inferred from an unambiguous image. If tossing up between design and clarity, try to make sure your chosen design is not compromising your pictures to the point where they no longer look like the message you are trying to communicate.



VS



3) Representation and relatability

Make sure your audience feel represented and can relate to the people in your pictures. Some public health communication is targeted at a particular group of people. And in turn, some groups of people are more vulnerable to certain public health threats. Other public health threats are equally relevant to everyone in the population (even if to varying degrees). COVID-19 and influenza are, at present, universal public health threats. Because of this, some public health communication about these diseases is intended for everyone.

Thus, it is important that any pictures used are as relatable as possible to as many people as possible. For example, a poster for the influenza vaccine with pictures of only white-skinned people may give a false impression that the poster only concerns white people. In short, if your audience is diverse, make sure they feel represented by the people and pictures on your posters.



1.9 LAYOUT LEGIBILITY

There are many things to consider when choosing the overall layout of your poster. Many accessibility considerations are related to layout, such as the volume of messages, font size, colour contrasts, and clarity of step-based procedures. Below are some tips for creating clear poster layouts suitable for translation.

1) Minimal messages

Keep the total number of messages to a minimum. The fewer the messages, the more space to provide important details and make the messages really clear. If you want more than you have space for, consider including a link or a QR-code for more information. In this way, interested people have a quick way of learning more about your message.

If you do put a link or a QR-code on your poster, it is good if the link offers alternative communication products, such as video and sound. Different people have different communication needs so it is good to offer different ways of learning about your message. A link or QR-code can also offer translated versions of your message.

2) Up, down, left to right - reading direction decisions

Consider whether the reading direction of your poster is clear. This is important when using text and pictures together, as this can easily be confusing to navigate. Is your poster meant to be read top-to-bottom, left-to-right? Does it change or muddle your message if read in the wrong order? If yes, is there a way to make the reading direction clearer, with numbers, arrows, or a different layout?

You should also consider how your poster would look if it needs to be mirrored for translation into a right-to-left reading direction language such as Japanese.

3) Spelling out the steps

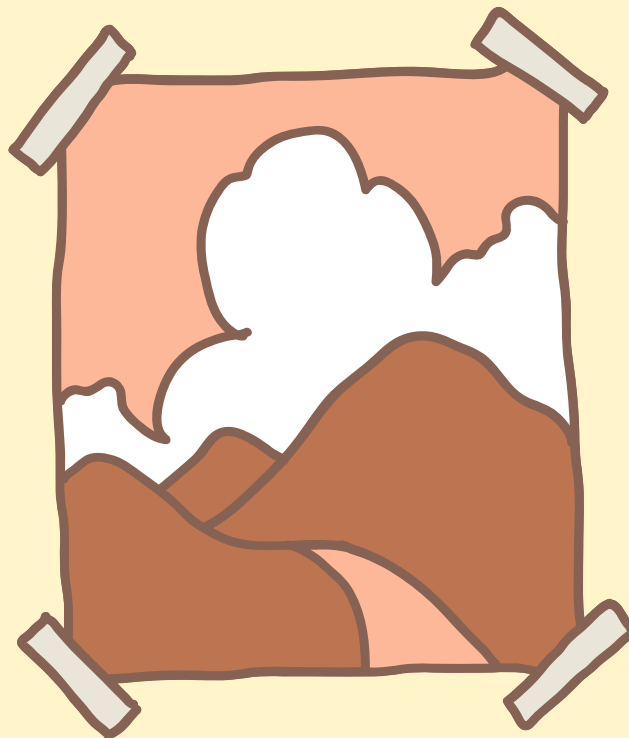
If you have steps on your poster, such as steps for handwashing, make sure these are clearly separated and numbered. It is important to keep steps separate from each other, so it is clear which instruction goes with which step. Numbering helps clarify in what order the steps should be followed and will help preserve this order in translation. If steps are not separated and numbered, the order of the procedure could be unclear. Adding arrows between steps can also help guide the reader through the steps.

4) Finding your font and using contrasting colours

Use a simple font that is easy to read. Make any text as large as space allows and ensure it contrasts with the background. Large and contrasting text is easier to read, especially for people with visual impairments. This will also make the poster easier to read from further away. Choosing a contrasting colour scheme can also make your poster “pop”, which will make it more attention-grabbing.

2

EXAMPLE STEPS FOR PUBLIC HEALTH POSTERS



2.1 EXAMPLE COVID-19 POSTER

Don't spread COVID-19
When you cough and sneeze, do this:

Cover your mouth and nose with your arm, not with your hand.



If you have to wipe your nose, do it with a paper tissue.



Throw the paper tissue in the bin.



Then wash your hands with soap and water.

2.2 EXAMPLE INFLUENZA POSTER

Do this to not spread the flu:



Go to a doctor and get a flu vaccination.



Wash your hands often.
Use soap and water.



Stay at home all the time
if you are sick.



When you cough
or sneeze, cover
your mouth and
nose with your
arm, not with
your hand.



If you think “maybe
I have the flu”, call
a doctor.

2.3 EXAMPLE HANDWASH POSTER

Wash your hands like this:

1 Use soap and water.



2 Wash your hands all over.



3 Wash both sides of your hands.



4 Wash every finger.



5 Dry your hands.



See a video of someone washing their hands well:



Every day people get sick because there are germs on their hands.
That's why you should wash your hands often.

3

GLOSSARY OF EXAMPLE TEXTS



C

Coughing and sneezing safely

When you cough, cover your mouth and nose with your arm, not with your hand. When you sneeze, cover your mouth and nose with your arm, not with your hand. If you have to wipe your nose, do it with a paper tissue. Then throw the paper tissue in the bin. Then wash your hands with soap and water.

D

Distancing

Don't be so near other people that you can touch them. Don't be so near other people that they can touch you. Don't be so near other people that you can breathe the same air.

I

Infection

When things like viruses or bacteria get into a person's body, doctors say this person has an "infection".

L

Long COVID

Some people still have bad symptoms many months after they first were sick from COVID-19. These people can have symptoms like being very tired all the time (this is sometimes called "fatigue"), problems with remembering things, not being able to concentrate or think well like before

R

Risk, COVID-19 sickness, individual

Many people near you become sick with COVID-19 now. You can get sick if you are near someone else who has COVID-19. Most people do not get very sick from COVID-19 after they are vaccinated. That's why it is good for you if you can be vaccinated.



Risk, COVID-19 sickness, societal

Every day people get sick from COVID-19. We know that there will always be COVID-19 in our country. Because of this, it is good for all of us if many people are vaccinated. It is good if you can get vaccinated. After you are vaccinated, you can still get sick with COVID-19, but most people who have got their COVID-19 vaccines do not get very sick from COVID-19.

We know that people who are old or sick can get very sick from COVID-19. They can die because of it. Some of these people can't get vaccinated against COVID-19. If many of us are vaccinated, it can stop COVID-19 from making these people sick. They can do things when they want, like they could before COVID-19.

S

Spread, COVID-19

When a person is sick with COVID-19, tiny little drops of water with COVID-19 virus can be in the air near that person. The tiny drops of water come from the person's mouth or nose. The drops are very, very small, people cannot see them. The drops can be in the air for some time. People can become sick with COVID-19 when they breathe the air where these drops are. The drops can also be on something flat and smooth, like a table. People can become sick with COVID-19 when they touch something with these drops on it and touch their face a short time after.

People can be protected from this by wearing masks, washing their hands with soap and water, and by being vaccinated.

Stay at home

If you are sick, it is good if you can be at home all the time. If you can't be at home, it is good if you don't go so near other people that you can touch them. Don't go so near other people that you can breathe the same air. If you have to go near other people, it is good if you can wear a mask.

Symptoms, COVID-19

COVID-19 can make people feel sick. When someone is sick from COVID-19, they can cough and sneeze. They can feel tired. They can feel very hot or very cold. When someone feels like this, it is called "COVID-19 symptoms". When someone is very sick from COVID-19, it can be hard to breathe. Some people do not feel very sick from COVID-19 and do not have COVID-19 symptoms.

V

Vaccine

A vaccine is a kind of medicine. Vaccines do something good to people's bodies so they do not get very sick from a disease of one kind. A doctor or nurse can give a vaccine to you. Often, a doctor or nurse will use a needle to give you the vaccine.



Vaccine, influenza

A vaccine is a kind of medicine. Vaccines do something good to people's bodies so they do not get very sick from a disease. Influenza is one such kind of disease. A doctor or nurse can give an "influenza vaccine" to you. A doctor or nurse will use a needle to give you the vaccine.

Ventilation of rooms, COVID-19

You can become sick from COVID-19 if you breathe the same air as someone who has COVID-19. Because of this, it is good if you can breathe new air all the time. When you are close to other people, for example, inside a building, it is good if you can open all the windows. Lots of new air can come into the building when many windows are open. Sometimes, windows cannot be open all the time because it is too hot or too cold outside. When it is like this, it is good to open the windows often, even for a short time. It is important that you open the windows often if you are using a fan or an air-conditioner. This is because fans and air-conditioners move the same old air around again and again inside the building.

Virus

Viruses are small things that can be in people's bodies. They can make people sick. Viruses are very, very small, so small that people can't see them. People can get diseases like flu or COVID-19 when viruses get into their bodies. When someone has a virus in their body, after a short time it can be in the bodies of other people in the same place.

For example, when that someone breathes the same air as other people, when they touch the same thing as other people.

W

Washing hands

Every day people get sick because there are germs on their hands. That's why you have to wash your hands often. Do this when you wash your hands: Use soap and water. Wash your hands all over. Wash both sides of your hands. Wash every finger. Dry your hands.

Wear a mask, COVID-19

It is good if you can wear a mask when you have to be near other people. A mask is something that covers your mouth and nose well. You can get sick from COVID-19 if you breathe air where there are little drops of water with COVID-19 virus. These little drops come from people who are sick with COVID-19. The drops come from people's mouths or noses and can be in the air for some time. When we wear masks, we don't breathe the little drops of water in the air. When many of us wear masks, it stops the COVID-19 virus from making many more people sick.



4 FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT STEPS FOR HEALTH

Why tailor health messaging to non-native speakers? What about the communication preferences of native English speakers?

Best practice is to make many versions of any public health message. For example, you could create one version written with STE principles, which could then be translated, tested and adjusted to the communication preferences of different groups of people. You could then make another for adult English speakers. You could make one for children, and so on, and so on.

It is also best to make sure the messages are seen by the groups they are meant for. For example, there is no use in having a poster for the Vietnamese community if they only see the English versions at their local shops.

All that being said, there is not always time or resources for best practice. Public health emergencies, such as the 2020 pandemic outbreak of COVID-19, can force a quick turnover without much time for translations and community feedback. In those cases, messaging should be as clear as possible to the largest number of people. Writing with STE principles helps make sure that messages are understandable for people who speak little English. The texts are also easier and faster to translate for professional translators. For the people who rely on machine translation, the texts come out clearer and with fewer flaws than conventionally written texts.

I feel that the style and “tone” of Standard Translatable English is strange. Why is that?

It is true that STE has an unusual writing style. This is because words that are specific to the English language have been removed for ease of translation. This can result in formulations that are different from what we'd usually see in public messaging. Conventional public messaging can have clever slogans like “Good hygiene is in your hands” (a handwashing campaign). The double meaning of the phrase “in your hands” works well for a native speaker, but it does not work well for someone with limited English skills. In translation, a slogan like this becomes nonsensical if the target language does not share the double meaning. You can read more about this in Section 1.3 of this booklet. Despite the unusual style of STE, research findings show that the Australian public like STE-based posters just as much as they like conventional ones.

If I write health messages in Standard Translatable English, can I use machine translation to quickly translate the text into many languages?

Unfortunately, no. While it is true that authoring a text with STE principles can result in fewer mix-ups in machine translation, there are other factors to consider. Ideally, an English text should be adapted before translation to be culturally appropriate for the intended audience. Using professional, human translators also helps ensure that a translation is appropriate for the community it is intended for. This is because professional translators have real knowledge about the communities they are serving, which a machine translator does not have. Machine translation can be used as an assisting tool for translators, but not by itself.

Is it very time-consuming to write Standard Translatable English texts?

It doesn't have to be! Once you get the hang of it, you will remember what words are most translatable and you'll also begin to form some go-to formulations that you can use across different messages. The method of getting a workable draft (presented in Section 1.7) can seem lengthy but does not have to take more than a day. You'll also be able to do it faster with time. It is also worth remembering that writing with STE can save significant time in the translation phase, which can justify spending a little extra time on the English text.

I've heard about "Plain English" and "Easy English". How is Standard Translatable English any different?

The Plain English and Easy English approaches suggest using "short words", but "short" does not always mean "easier to understand". For example, "oedema" is shorter than "swelling", and "benign" is shorter than "not bad for you". Yet in these cases, the longer version is easier to understand. You can read more about this in Section 1.3 of this booklet.

It is also worth noting that words and phrases that seem "plain" to native speakers are not necessarily so for non-native speakers. Standard Translatable English takes a research-grounded approach that takes this into account, and gives concrete tools and examples for how to use words and phrases that are easier to understand and translate.

Can I use Standard Translatable English for messages about public health threats other than communicable diseases, such as lifestyle health risks?

Definitely! You can use the principles of STE for any kind of public messaging. To do so, follow the directions from this booklet but swap out communicable disease health words (such as "influenza") with necessary lifestyle risk words, such as "smoking". Try to keep these to a minimum and think about whether they are necessary, or if they can be explained with translatable words. For example, instead of saying "When you smoke, harmful chemicals enter your lungs and cause emphysema", you could say "Smoking can make bad things happen to your lungs".

Where can I learn more about Standard Translatable English Principles for Public Health?

If you'd like to know more about the principles outlined in this booklet, here are some free, online resources:

For more on the STE approach, visit translatableenglish.com.

For more on the research that underpins the STE approach, visit nsm-approach.net.

Finally, for more specific queries, you can email the author at idastevia.diget@griffithuni.edu.au.



PRINTABLE RESOURCES

TRANSLATABLE WORDS



Words about people

people, I, you, someone, other/else, woman, man, was born, children, mother, father, husband, wife



Words about people's bodies

body, head, face, ears, eyes, nose, mouth, teeth, fingers, hands, breast, bones, blood, skin, parts



Words about things

thing, kind, big, flat, hard, heavy, long, mine, round, sharp, smooth, soft, thin



Words about time and place

time, a long time, a short time, after, at night, before, during the day, for some time, moment, anymore, place, now, when, where, somewhere, here, near, far, above, below, inside, around, at the bottom, at the top, in front of, in the middle, on something, on one side



Words about doing and happening

do, can, say (words), happen, make, hold, move, stand, sit, lie, sleep, grow, live, breathe, die, kill, play, laugh, sing



Words about thinking and feeling

think, feel, know, is called, see, hear, want, don't want



Words about numbers and counting

one, two, much, more, few, some, little, all,



Very general words

there is, good, bad, the same, like very, true, maybe, if, as, in this way, because