



Kansas Health Institute

Writing Guide: Policy & Research Products

May 2016

Introduction

The Kansas Health Institute is dedicated to providing quality publications to our audiences that are easy to read, have a good balance of words and images, and convey our vision of *Healthier Kansans through Informed Policy*.

In this Guide, you will find several tips and tricks for writing a great publication, as well as some specific rules to abide by. These rules will help ensure consistency in our formats and messaging, and should decrease the time needed for editing.

At KHI, the Policy and Research staff work collaboratively with Strategic Communications to produce a high-quality product that meets research standards and also provides communications value to our readers.

Questions? Check with a Strategic Communications staff member for assistance.

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KHI Approach to Writing

Every organization has a certain tone and style to its writing, and KHI is no different. KHI's style is different from many other research or academic organizations in that we are focused on delivering often complex content in a simple and digestible way. We try to avoid an overabundance of numbers and technical jargon so that our various audiences can easily understand our messages.

Voice & Tone

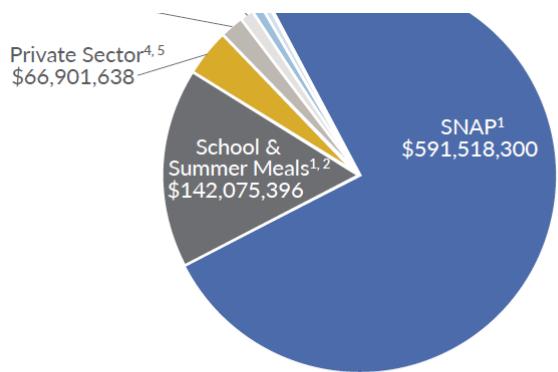
Voice. KHI's publications are written in third person voice. Third person uses a more general voice that reflects neither the writer nor reader specifically, using words like "students" and "participants" and pronouns such as "he," "they" and "it." Good writing typically begins in one point of view and retains that perspective throughout in order to avoid confusion for the reader.

Tone. Because KHI is nonpartisan, it is crucial that the tone of our publications is clear and free of directives, like ““should” or “must,” as well as opinions and advocacy. We provide expert analysis and contextualize material for the state of Kansas and its policy environment, so language might include, “analysis has shown...,” or “policymakers could consider...”

Example of policy options text in a KHI issue brief:

Policy Options for Reducing Food Insecurity in Kansas

Food assistance programs serve as a vital first line of defense in alleviating food insecurity and preventing hunger. However, many Kansas families who are eligible to receive food assistance are not getting it. For example, Kansas had one of the lowest state participation rates (69 percent) in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly called Food Stamps), in 2011, ranking 44th in the nation. That means that nearly one-third of individuals (31 percent) who are eligible do not receive SNAP benefits. Greater participation in this federally sponsored food assistance program could help to reduce food insecurity and hunger while also providing economic benefit to Kansas. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that every \$5 in SNAP benefits generates \$9 in economic activity.



Source: 1) U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Services program data. 2) FRAC, Profile of Hunger, Poverty and Federal Nutrition Programs, Kansas, 2012. 3) U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Community Living, Administration on Aging (AoA) State Program Reports. 4) Feeding America "Hunger in America 2014," Kansas report. 5) Expenses from organizational annual reports with Kansas share prorated based on number of counties in service area. All data are the most recent that were available at the time of this report.

Concise Writing

Keep it simple. KHI content can be complex and, as a research organization, we are naturally compelled to explain all of the data and findings. However, if we do that, our audiences can quickly lose interest (unless they love data or are researchers themselves). It is critical that we cut extra words and explanations and get to the point, while preserving the science from the research.

When we begin to draft, we sometimes resort to **common but wordy expressions**. These clutter your writing, so prune them as you revise.

Empty expressions like “to all intents and purposes”, “in fact” and “the fact is” and “in the process of” carry no information, so you should delete them.

“The passengers were ~~in the process of~~ boarding the plane when ~~in fact~~ the flight was canceled.”

As you revise your writing, look for words that are repeated unnecessarily, whether exactly or in a slightly different form.

DRAFT: “The author’s informative overview provides particularly revealing information about the Obama administration.”

REVISION: “The author’s informative overview provides particularly revealing information about the Obama administration.”

-Adapted from “Writing Matters”, Rebecca Moore Howard.

Words vs. Numbers. We use a LOT of numbers in our publications. We cannot get around that fact. However, we can get creative in the way we write about them. We have some rules about percentages, decimals and such (see the KHI Style Guide), but a good rule of thumb is to make the numbers easy to understand. For example, it is easier to read “...more than half of all Kansans age 19-26 have insurance” than “...in Kansas, 51.7 percent of all Kansans age 19-16 have insurance.”

Key tip: After you draft the sentence including numbers, read it aloud and see how it flows.

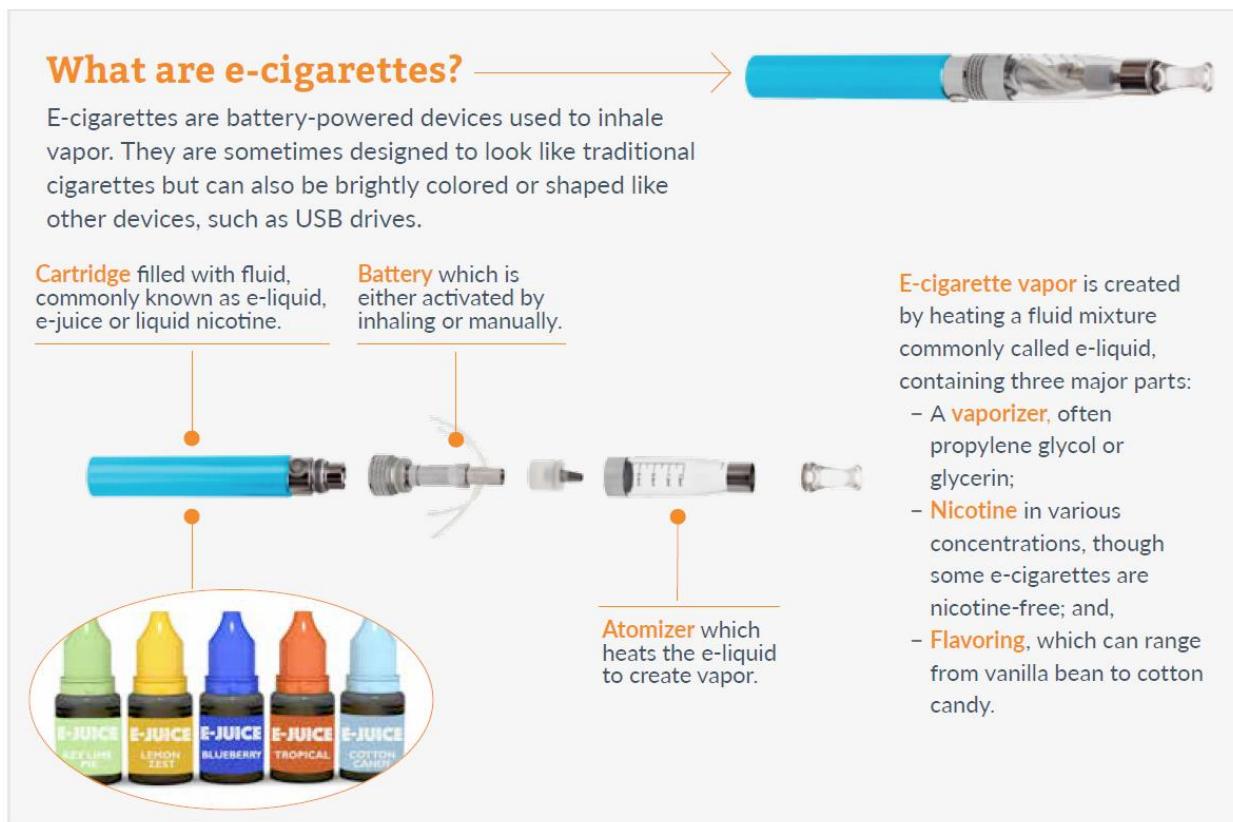
Audience

KHI’s audiences vary, and include policymakers (state and local level), government agencies, health departments, advocacy groups, media, private foundations, academia and more. The majority of our published products are aimed at the groups listed here, although there might be a group/groups that are more targeted for certain publications (e.g. health impact assessment on corporate farming would also attract an agricultural audience). The Strategic Communications team can help you assess the audience(s) for your publication to ensure the writing is planned accordingly.

Digestible Content

Balance of words and images. Readers need “breaks” from words to comprehend their content in parts. Some people skim, some read every word, but a balance of words and images can help both kinds of readers. KHI uses graphs, charts, infographics, call-out boxes or other images to help communicate the message of the publication. The Strategic Communications staff can help you select the right images for your publication. See “Publication Types” in this Guide for some best practices for deciding how many and what types of images to include in your draft.

Example of infographic to help depict a lot of information concisely:



Titles

Compelling titles set the tone for the reader. They are one of the most important elements of a publication because they serve the following roles:

Attention grabber. This is what the reader sees first and helps them decide whether to keep reading.



Sound bite. Reporters will often grab the headline for their story.

Social media snippet. There is limited space on social posts, so an effective title can be reused in social media.

Search engine keyword. Search engines, like Google, rely on keywords to optimize search. Headlines are great for this purpose.

Example title of a brief + subtitle:



KHI.ORG
Informing Policy. Improving Health.

An Alternative Path to State-Specific Health Reform

Exploring the ACA's Section 1332 Waiver

Paragraph Structure

More paragraphs are better than long paragraphs. Readers need information broken up into digestible parts, and paragraph breaks can help with this. Also, pay close attention to the flow of your text to find natural places for subheadings. Headings shouldn't be placed too frequently, but they give the reader a preview of the information they are about to read, then transition to new information at the next subheading.

In most KHI publications, we don't include citations within the flow of the text. Most of our short publications have limited space and we don't want the reader to lose momentum by being forced to read a technical citation or reference in a sentence. Instead, we may refer to data sources like this: "According to the 2015 U.S. Census Bureau, 90 percent of Kansans had health coverage through their employer." Long, technical reports will use end notes and/or foot notes for citation purposes.

Verb Tense

Tense is the grammatical word to describe the ending of a verb (usually -ed for past and -s for present). English usually marks the sense of time with an adverb (for example: "it is happening today" or "it happened yesterday.") In most KHI publications, we are referring to data or research that has already happened, but are contextualizing it to the present (e.g. current legislation, hot topic, etc.). This may cause a "tense shift" where we refer to data in the past, but the current status of something in Kansas.

Change Tense. Sometimes it is necessary to change tense. For example, if the timeframe of the action changes from past to present, the tense should change to indicate this:

*"Although it **was** only a four-hour ride from my home in Pennsylvania to my boyfriend's home in Virginia, I **was** terrified. Looking back, I **think** my feelings may have been influenced by stereotypes of the Old South."*

Although this paragraph starts in the past tense, the phrase "Looking back" clearly shows the time frame of the action "think."

Don't Change Tense. There are other times, though, when a tense shift is not correct. For example, if the action all happened in the same time—past, present, or future—then the verbs should be consistent in tense. This "mistake" is often heard in speech, and it is even used in very informal writing. However, from a grammatical viewpoint, this type of unnecessary shift in tense should be avoided in more formal (such as academic) writing.

*"I **climbed** out of the car, **walked** through the door, and **prepared** to meet "the parents," but instead a large, honey-colored dog **runs** to meet me at the door."*

Here is a better way of writing this sentence:

*"I **climbed** out of the car, **walked** through the door, and **prepared** to meet "the parents," but instead a large, honey-colored dog **ran** to meet me at the door."*

-Adapted from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Kathleen Jones White Writing Center

Parallelism

Many KHI publications use lists or bullets to describe something. The items in a list or outline are coordinate and should be parallel.

Not Parallel.

- Changes in Renaissance England
- Extension of trade routes
- **Merchant class** became more powerful
- **The death** of feudalism
- **Upsurging** of the arts

Parallel.

- Changes in Renaissance England
- Extension of trade routes
- **Increased** power of the merchant class
- **Death** of feudalism
- **Upsurge** of the arts

-Adapted from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Kathleen Jones White Writing Center