Communication Plan <u>Step 6</u>: Select Communication and Engagement Tools

Tool: Guidance for Writing Analytical Results Summary Letters

Target Audience: For use by the communication team to prepare analytical result summary letters for the general public.

Purpose: Communication of analytical results is an important aspect of sampling

Given the current impetus for evaluating PFAS impacts on drinking water supplies, it is often necessary to provide residents, business owners and other stakeholders with information regarding drinking water results pertinent to their property. Because oftentimes these stakeholders will not have a technical background, or any experience with PFAS or environmental sampling, it is important to convey analytical results and necessary response actions in a simple, clear and concise manner. This document thus provides guidance for the practitioner in developing a summary letter of PFAS analytical results geared toward a nontechnical audience.

Guidance for Writing Analytical Results Summary Letters

Introduction

This risk communication tool is intended for technical practitioners in the environmental field to use when providing analytical results for the nontechnical audience.

Analytical results for environmental samples are commonly conveyed to the public through letters. For the non-technical stakeholder, environmental data can be confusing to understand, or even incomprehensible, and oftentimes can be quite alarming to them given their concern for potential adverse health effects. Questions the reader will likely ask while reading such a letter include:

● Is this a good or a bad result?

● What does this mean for me?

● Now what do I do?

● Where can I get more information/whom can I contact if I have questions or want to discuss my results?

Because the target audience is likely to be nontechnical, it is important to ensure that the letter provides the results and a clear and meaningful interpretation of the results in a sensitive manner. This document provides guidance on the overall structure and content of the results letter as well as key points on the language and format used in communicating results.

Organization

Overall, an analytical results letter should follow the basic business letter format, but as a technical document, it needs to include the main components of a typical technical document. The challenge in putting technical information into a short, accessible letter is to convey the information in a simple and concise manner that is geared toward a nontechnical audience. The letter should include the following components:

5 Key Points for Communicating Results
Keep it simple
■ provide a simple letter structure
■ use ordinary words
■ limit use of acronyms
Keep it short
■ use simple, short sentences
■ limit the number of pages
Keep it factual
■ state the facts
■ provide simple interpretation
■ avoid 'spin'
Keep it relevant
■ relate results to the stakeholder
■ provide actions that need to be taken
■ provide contact information
Keep it respectful
■ watch your tone
■ provide in alternative languages if needed

1. Key message
2. Introduction/background
3. Methods
4. Results/discussion
5. Summary/conclusion

Although these components should all be included in the letter, and are presented above in a simple and logical order, there is certainly flexibility on how the various components may be grouped and organized as needed. However, keep in mind that it is easiest to digest information when one topic or idea is presented at a time (one topic per paragraph).

Include informative section headers in the letter. Individuals typically read the material more effectively when it is clearly labeled so they know what they are getting. These headings could also be posed as questions (for example, "*Why was the testing conducted?*"), similar to what you might use in a Frequently Asked Questions format.

Key Message

A message is information you want/need to share with communities about the issue or concern, a question that you need them to answer, or both. Effective messages reflect what your target groups' needs as well as what you need to communicate. Refer to Section 4.5.1.

Introduction/Background

The introduction statement should clearly state the purpose of the letter. Why are you writing this letter, and what do you want to tell them? (For example, clearly state that the letter is in regard to sampling conducted at a person's property.) Additional language in the introductory paragraph should provide the important facts:

- What test results (for example, water, blood serum) are being presented
- Who conducted the testing
- When the testing was conducted
- Why the testing was conducted

It is also helpful to include a brief conclusory statement within the introduction (in addition to a separate section of the letter discussing results). Present one main takeaway that your message needs to convey, in case the first paragraph is the only part of the letter that the addressee reads.

Methods

Briefly describe what tests were conducted and how. Remember that your audience/stakeholders may not have any technical background. Although it is necessary to be factual, it is not always necessary to provide the minute details that may not be directly of interest to the stakeholders. For example, rather than writing in the body of the letter that a sample was "*submitted for analysis of PFAS via EPA Method 537.1,*" you can write that the sample was sent to a laboratory "*to be analyzed for 21 different PFAS chemicals.*" Details on analytical methodology could either then be footnoted if needed or included within a copy of the laboratory report, if that is provided in conjunction with the letter.

Results/Discussion

The results section should clearly provide the analytical data, and if required to do so, should reference a copy of the laboratory report provided with the letter. It is helpful to provide a benchmark or screening level with which to understand the results. Where there is more than one result (for example, multiple samples per property), consider putting results in a simple table within the body of the letter, and describe in the letter if results are over or under the benchmark. Also clearly state the units of measure used to express results. It can be difficult for general audiences to comprehend what exactly a "nanogram per liter" means, so provide a brief layman's description of units. Where multiple results are presented in different units (for example, ng/L; ng/dL), explain how the different results should be compared to their specific medium benchmarks.

When discussing the results, avoid use of descriptors relative to the magnitude of the benchmark (for example, their result is "just below" the benchmark or is "slightly higher" than the benchmark), because this imparts a judgment about the significance of the result that may not be shared or understood by the recipient. However, it may be helpful to describe the basis of the benchmark, with respect to the need for action and with respect to potential health risk. Where no benchmark exists, it is important to point this out as well.

If there are background or reference data available with which to compare results, it may be useful for the reader to understand how the results compare to other results in the region. Therefore, include such data or links to data resources where available.

Summary/Conclusion

The conclusion of the letter should clearly state what the end result is and what happens next. Where the concentrations are above a benchmark, for example, indicate what follow up steps will be necessary, how they will be contacted, and whom they can contact if they'd like to discuss their results. Keep questions like the following in mind when writing the conclusions. Readers are likely to ask them:

- *Is it safe to keep using my water?*
- *Where will we get an alternate water source?*
- *Should I see my doctor?*
- *Will there be additional testing?*
- *Whom can I contact to talk about my results?*

Even if results are nondetect or are not above the benchmarks, it is important to mention if there will (or will not) be any follow-up testing or information seeking, and to provide contact information if the recipient wishes to discuss the results. It is also helpful to include a separate fact sheet (or provide a link to a website) on the chemicals for the recipient so they can review other sources of information on their own if they wish.

Guiding Principles for Letter Writing

The above sections provided overall guidance on the structure and content of the analytical results letter. This section focuses on key communication concepts for the language used within the letter. These concepts fall into the following five key principles:

Keep it simple

Analytical results letters contain technical information to be provided to an audience of varied reading levels, ages, backgrounds and cultures. It is important that the subject matter is conveyed in simple and concise language that is easy to understand. General rules of thumb when writing simply are as follows:

- use short, simple and ordinary words
- use short, simple sentences
- keep technical jargon to a minimum
- limit the use of acronyms
- use easy-to-read fonts and adequate character spacing (margins, kerning, lines)

As discussed above, individuals read material more effectively when it is clearly labeled and they know what they are getting, so include section headers and limit topics to one per paragraph to the extent practical. Additional writing guidance may be found at the website Plainlanguage.gov (https://www.plainlanguage.gov/resources/content-types/writing-effective-letters/).

Although several readability assessment tools are available to evaluate text, it is often most helpful to have the draft letter reviewed by a few nontechnical staff or friends to ensure the letter's clarity.

Keep it short

To best communicate results, keep the letter short, with the goal of *briefing* the reader on their results. Remember that this is a letter, not a technical report, and that the recipient wants to know the basic information – what the results are, what needs to happen, and whom they can contact for follow-up. Try to keep the letter to no more than two pages if possible.

Keep it factual

State the basic facts (*the results are X*), along with a simple interpretation of the results (*and this concentration is above/below this benchmark or screening level*). Avoid "spin" – downplaying or amplifying the magnitude of a concentration. Also avoid any unnecessary risk comparisons to other chemicals or issues (for example, cigarette smoking risks) unrelated to the contaminant release. Remember that environmental issues are *involuntary* risks for stakeholders, and their perception (or reality) is that they have little to no control over these risks, unlike voluntary risks that the reader can choose to take.

Keep it relevant

Once the reader has their results, they will want to know how the results will impact them. Inform the reader of any actions that they need to take, and what additional actions, if any, are expected to be undertaken by the consultant or agency. Provide contact information (including a name, phone number, and email address) for the reader if they have follow-up questions or need to communicate with the project contact about any required actions.

Keep it respectful

Although the wording in the letter should be simple, ensure that it is not written in a condescending tone. Remember that although the letter author has experience and education in the subject matter, it is possible that the letter recipient may not,

but that does not mean they can't or shouldn't understand difficult concepts. Also remember that environmental information (for example, their drinking water is impacted by a contaminant) is often frightening to the public, so a high level of compassion is required when crafting language. Where possible, use pronouns (you/your, we/our) and active voice to better engage the reader.

Also, always consider your audience's demographics, and whether the letters should be provided in languages besides English.

The Second Draft

Once the letter is drafted, *proof it to ensure there are no typographical or numerical errors*, that it includes all relevant information, and that it is easy to understand. It can be very helpful to have a non-technical person review the letter and provide feedback on its clarity before the letter is sent out to the recipients. Simple typos can cause the reader to assume that the writer is careless and that the reader or the issue is not important. Larger errors such as use of incorrect units or providing erroneous values can obviously have a major impact on the reader, and a later correction/retraction of results can result in loss of trust between the writer and reader. Trust is a crucial component of risk communication as well as the project's ultimate success.

Additional Resources

Additional resources for successful letter writing are provided at Plainlanguage.gov (https://www.plainlanguage.gov/resources/content-types/writing-effective-letters/) and Dunagan et al. (2013).