

# AHRQ Publishing and Communications Guidelines

## Appendix 1E. How To Write a Shooting Script for Video

Video and audio can be used effectively to engage your audience in many ways, perhaps to record a panel of experts discussing a concept, provide a demo of a specific technique, or explain how a researcher made a breakthrough.

You and your contractor already should have gone through the video (or audio) considerations outlined in the [Audio/Video Concept Proposal Form](#). You should know your budget, audience, and, most importantly, your goal or purpose. You also should have figured out what you want to show and how you want to show it. The next step is to put that on paper.

As you and your contractor draft your script, AHRQ’s Office of Communications (OC) will provide a lot of feedback before you have the final version. But you should know the basics of scriptwriting for AHRQ so that your first draft can be submitted to OC. Remember that you are creating a Shooting Script. That script will enable everyone involved with making the video, especially the director, crew, actors, editors, and technical advisor, to agree on exactly how the video should look and sound before any images are recorded.

### The 2-Column Script

#### Writing Script Shots, Directions, and Instructions

AHRQ scripts are written as a simple table in Word with two columns. One side is for **visuals and directions**; the other side is for **audio**, which means dialog and anything else that is heard. This format makes it easy to read and see how the video will look and sound.

If you are creating a script for audio only, such as one to be heard on the radio, you’ll use the same 2-column format with the dialog on the left side and sound effects on the right. Refer to the samples linked from the [Appendix 1-E page](#).

If you are creating a script in which the only visuals are slides or animation, you may want to add a third column to your script. In this case, the left column is for the narration (voiceover), the middle column is for the slide or animation, and the third column is for instructions for the editor of your animation, such as “boxes in center will spin” or “main character walks out of the room.” However, depending on the type of visual used, you may be able to use the 2-column format.

#### Describing Visuals

Usually, the **visual** side of the script is on the left. Your first box should list the talent who will be seen in that scene, even if it’s just the narrator. If you are using actors, list the character names. Then describe the general set or setting for those people. This is your first shot. You need to provide enough detail so that a script reviewer (and your director) can understand the planned visuals. If you want someone to move a certain way, say how. If someone exits the frame, say so.

For instance, if your video takes place in a hospital room, you should provide details in your first visual instruction such as:

- The side of the bed with the IV pole and if your nurse will need to access it;
- Other equipment in the room and how it is set up;
- If there's a patient, where he is; and
- Whether the nurse walks into the shot or is already there.

Note: Left/right directions are written from the camera's point of view.

These instructions will help you develop your audio descriptions for compliance with Section 508 accessibility requirements.

### Scripting Audio

The **audio** side of the script is to be heard, not seen. It should include ONLY items to be spoken, which means you cannot use bullets, or parentheses, or dashes to indicate range (say "9 to 5" instead), because no one is going to say "bullet" or "dash" out loud. And don't include editing instructions such as <fade to black>. If it's not said out loud or a sound effect, it shouldn't be on the audio side of your script. However, if the words are spoken as a voiceover, you should state that is a <voiceover>.

Format your scripts so that each side can begin at the top of the box. The Video side instructions MUST be side-by-side with the Audio side and should not just be somewhere on the page. A better way to do it is to create many more boxes with one visual direction in each.

**Note:** In the sample below, there is a knock on the door. The word <knock> should appear in your script on the audio side only. Also, the knock should be included in your written captions for viewers who cannot hear it.

### Sample Script Segment

VISUALS	AUDIO
Nurse Jamie Nelson Patient Paul Jackson Fade in and come up on establishing shot of what looks like a standard hospital private patient room. Frame shot as a loose mid 2-shot so that Nurse Jamie will have room to walk into the frame.	<music low>
The bed is situated on the right side of the room. There is an IV pole to the left of the bed, but the tubing is not connected since the patient has a PICC line.	
The patient, <b>Mr. Paul Jackson</b> , is sitting on the bed with his legs hanging over the bedside. He is drying his hair with a towel. He is wearing a hospital gown and has a PICC line in his right arm.	

VISUALS	AUDIO
There is a knock and patient looks toward door to his right. <b>Nurse Jamie Nelson</b> walks into the shot from the left side of the frame to the patient. Nurse Nelson is gloved and gowned. She will stand camera left of Mr. Jackson.	<knock>  <music out>
	<b>Nurse:</b> Hello, Mr. Jackson. How was your shower? <b>Mr. Jackson:</b> It felt wonderful.

**Identifying Who Is Seen**

Every character shown in the video should have a first **and** last name and a title that we will show onscreen with a lower third ID. A patient’s title will read “patient.” For IDs of characters, the ID should only be 2 lines, the name and title. If your video has an interview with an expert, try to limit the identifying information, although you can go to 3 lines if necessary, such as name, title, and organization. If you try to use 4 lines, it’s possible the 4<sup>th</sup> line will not be seen well or at all, so stick with 1-3 lines. Abbreviate if you need to.

Do not use more than 2 credentials (e.g., M.D., M.P.H.). It is AHRQ’s style to put periods between credential abbreviations, but if you need the room, you can remove them **as long as you are consistent** throughout the video and all credentials do or do not have periods. OC will provide guidance about this style.

**Using Appropriate Language**

The language that you use in your video will determine how it is received and understood by your audience. What your narrator says is especially important.

**Narrator**

There are two types of narration: on-camera and voiceover. Regardless of which you use, or if you use both, if you start your video with a narrator, you must tell your audience as close to the beginning as possible what the point of the video is and why they should watch. If too much time goes by before you provide this information, you will lose viewers.

**Narration (On-Camera)**

On-camera narrators will speak directly to the audience, meaning they will look straight into the camera’s lens. This view is more personal, so the narrator should use “you” and talk directly to the viewers. People prefer being spoken to rather than being spoken at.

You can use both an on-camera narrator and voiceover. But since anyone seen on camera must be properly identified on the screen, make sure the narrator is seen long enough the first time for the viewer to read the identification before switching to another shot or to voiceover. It usually takes about 6 seconds, but that time can be shortened **if necessary**. If the narrator is never seen in your video, you should not provide an ID.

## **Narration (Voiceover)**

In a voiceover narration, your viewers will be listening to the narrator while seeing something else. In general, if you are showing a visual with wording, do not have your narrator read exactly what is seen on the screen, unless it's for specific emphasis of one sentence or phrase. Make your narration conversational, especially if it's describing a demonstration, so that your audience easily can understand what they see. Remember that the purpose of a voiceover is to hear one thing while seeing another. Your audience will not be reading a research paper, so don't make them listen to one.

If your audience is primarily people with advanced degrees, you can use more medical jargon than if you are speaking to, for instance, college students or patients. But regardless of your audience's level of education, you must be conversational.

The audience for your video is **listening**, not reading. They are not going to read your script, so you should not write the script the way you write a research paper. For one, reading a paper out loud would take much longer than it takes to read silently, and listening comprehension can take longer than reading comprehension. Reading can be harder if English is not your audience's first language or not the language in which they received their degree. Therefore, your script should not be a simple cut-and-paste from your written paper.

It helps to think that you're meeting with a colleague you haven't seen in a while and explaining your research. Or that you're giving a plenary at a conference. What words would you use? Write the script based on what you would **say**, not what you would write.

After you think you are finished with all or part of the script, read it out loud as though you are making a presentation (even better, have someone listen to you). If it doesn't sound natural and conversational, you'll need to do some rewriting. After you make changes, read the script out loud again.

## **Dialog**

Know your target audience and how they speak to one another.

Conversation should be natural. Simplify when possible. But if it's natural for your audience to use jargon in a situation, then your actors can use jargon in that same situation. Just keep jargon to a minimum. If your video is teaching the jargon to the audience, one technique is to put the new word on screen with a very short definition, but don't keep it up too long or your audience will miss what happens next.

After you write dialog, read it out loud to someone who represents your target audience and see if that person understands your meaning.

## **Consistency**

Make sure you use the same terms consistently. For instance, if you refer to "midline and central venous catheters" in one place, don't suddenly refer to them as "vascular and central catheters" somewhere else. Your terms and references need to be consistent across the narration, dialog, slides, and titles. Otherwise, you will confuse your audience.

## **SEO Optimization**

Videos are a crucial part of AHRQ's Search Engine Optimization (SEO) strategy. They increase user engagement and play a key role in improving search engine rankings by using relevant keywords and content. OC knows how to ensure that every video script uses language that will yield the best search results.

By integrating SEO strategies into video scripts, AHRQ ensures that its valuable content reaches a broader audience, thereby increasing the impact of its health communication efforts. OC is committed to working with you to achieve these goals and enhance AHRQ's presence in search engine results.

## **Script Writing and SEO Optimization**

### **Incorporation of Keywords**

When you write your script, OC will work closely with you to integrate SEO-friendly keywords and phrases. This process will ensure that the script conveys the intended message, increases online visits, and aligns with AHRQ's overall marketing plan.

### **Keyword Selection and Placement**

You should select keywords based on current SEO targets and AHRQ's ranking in search results. OC will help you identify primary and secondary keywords that fit the video's content and are likely to drive traffic to AHRQ's websites.

### **Content Relevance**

To maximize search results, the script should address topics that are not only relevant to AHRQ's mission but also currently trending or frequently searched for by the target audience. This approach helps position AHRQ as a leader in health-related content on search engines.

### **SEO Best Practices in Script Layout**

While writing the script, ensure that keywords are naturally integrated into major speaking points, headings, and descriptions within the video. This practice helps enhance the script's relevance to both viewers and search engines.

### **Collaboration With OC**

OC will provide ongoing support throughout the scripting process. They will review the script to ensure it reads well and aligns with SEO best practices, AHRQ's content guidelines, and AHRQ's overall strategic objectives.

### **Metadata Optimization**

In addition to SEO optimization in the script, metadata such as video titles, descriptions, and tags should be optimized with keywords to improve visibility and indexing by search engines.

## **Word Choice and Punctuation**

While you want to be accurate in what you say, you should use language your audience can easily understand. AHRQ's [Plain Language](#) page has information about simplifying text.

## Word Choice

- **Use active voice when possible.** In a sentence written in active voice, the subject of a sentence performs the action. It is clearer, more direct, and more concise than passive voice in which the action is performed on the subject. Passive voice might be appropriate, however, if you want to emphasize the object more than subject (e.g., development of a vaccine vs. the developers).
- Say **use**, not utilize.
- Say **people** when you are referring to more than one person, not persons. “Person-centered” is allowed.
- Say **preventive**, not preventative.
- Say **compared with**, not **compared to**.
- Use the plural verb with the word **data**.
- **Distinguish between sex and gender.** “Sex” refers to male or female physical characteristics. “Gender” distinguishes masculine and feminine social roles.
- **Use humane language** to describe someone, rather than as their disease or disability. For instance, say “patients with diabetes,” rather than “diabetics.” Say “person who uses a wheelchair,” not “wheelchair-bound” or “confined to a wheelchair.”

## Punctuation

- **Do not use bullets or parentheses** in your script because no one will say “bullet one” or speak sotto voce for something in parentheses. Rewrite your information so it flows conversationally.
- **Do not use dashes to indicate a missing word.** Use the missing word instead. For instance, say “9 to 5” or “2005 through 2013.”

## Script Header

Every shooting script should include a Header that clearly identifies the video and the project for which it’s being created. It should include the Title (or working title) of the video, the name of the Project or Toolkit, the AHRQ Center and Task Order Officer or other AHRQ contact name, and the date of the draft script version. For version control, you also can include the version’s time of day if multiple iterations of the script are being sent for review on the same day (if you use and reference the time when you send it, reviewers will know instantly if they have the correct version).

In addition, number the pages in your script, although the numbers can be in a Header or Footer. Finally, if it’s important to your Center to differentiate products, you can include the Funding or Contract Number, the name of the Contractor, and/or name of the principal investigator.

## Sample Header

**Working Title of Video:** Patients with Indwelling Devices – Based on the ABATE Infection Trial Protocol

**Project Name:** Toolkit for Decolonization of Hospital Non-ICU

**Center and TOO:** CQuIPS Task Order Officer(s): Darryl Gray, Melissa Miller

**Funding/Contract #:** ACTION III 75P00119R00285

**Draft Date:** January 10, 2020, 10:15 a.m.

## **Slides**

The guiding principle for slides is: Keep them simple so you can keep the video moving.

The managing editor for your project or Center will assist in developing an appropriate slide template for your video. The template will include the AHRQ/HHS Branded Logo and may include project category branding, if it exists. For instance, Patient Safety products are identified by a blue background with white grid lines. If the video is part of the Patient Safety portfolio, it is required to use the blue and white background.

Each slide you use in a video must include a title at the top that identifies its information, except the title slide.

If you want a slide to quote from a notable person, it does not need a title, but it will need the design elements of your template. In that case, the title part of the template header will remain blank, and the quote **with** attribution will be centered on the slide, with the attribution in a slightly smaller font than the quote itself.

The slide will only be seen for a short time in the video, which means the information should be as simple as possible so your viewers can comprehend it in that time.

Occasionally, you can put a lot on a slide knowing your audience won't be able to read all or any of it. In that case, your narrator must explain the purpose and importance of including the slide in the video, but as a summary. Do not have the narrator read a complicated slide.

Do not use hyperlinks in a slide since it's likely your viewers will have no way to access them. You can include a URL on a slide, but make sure the typeface is big enough and the URL visible long enough for someone to write it down. Try to keep it short. Note that the complete URL also must be written into the transcript and captioning and must be included in the audio description if your narrator does not read it out loud. If it doesn't make sense to include the URL in your video, you should include it on the main web page that includes a link to the video and other information on your topic.

## **Additional Information**

Many books have been written about scriptwriting. One quick and easy resource is Video Script Writing 101: Basics, Examples, and Templates (<https://biteable.com/blog/video-script/>). Just remember that most resources have not been written with government regulations in mind.