

Building Trust

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Learn how to communicate in a way that builds trust

Think back to the last time you asked someone for advice. Chances are you turned to **someone you trusted** — like a friend, partner, family member, or favorite professor. To trust someone is to **rely on them or place confidence in them**.

If you trust someone, you believe that what they're telling you is true — so you'll be more likely to consider or follow their advice. Similarly, **people are more likely to follow health guidance that comes from trusted sources**.

To educate students about health topics and motivate them to change their behavior, you'll need to gain their trust. In this guide, you'll learn how to **build trust with your audience** — in this case, the students you want to reach.



Earn students' trust

Have you ever heard the saying that **trust must be earned**? It means that if you want someone to trust you, you'll need to **prove that you deserve their trust**. This lesson is especially important for student ambassadors. It's helpful to assume that students may not trust you at first and take steps to earn their trust.

There are many reasons why people may distrust health information and the people who share that information — including student ambassadors like you:

- **Discrimination and stigma.** People from marginalized communities — including people of color, LGBTQ+ people, and people with disabilities — may have experienced discrimination and mistreatment from health care providers. And in trying to educate people about health conditions, some experts have shared harmful messages about these groups and others.
- **Information overload.** We take in a huge amount of health information every day, and a lot of that information **isn't true!** In fact, some people deliberately spread false health information to mislead others. To learn more about misinformation and disinformation, check out our [Health and Media Literacy](#) guide.
- **Shifting health guidance.** People may feel confused or misled when scientific knowledge and health guidance evolve quickly. That tends to happen a lot in emergency situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. For more communication lessons from the pandemic, check out [page 10](#).

To sum it up, people may distrust you and your message (at first) for reasons that actually have nothing to do with you! These are big systemic issues that can't be fixed overnight. But, by using the tips in this guide, you can build trust with students so they'll be more likely to listen and follow your health guidance.

Build trust with empathy

Empathy is an important building block of trust.

Empathy means understanding and sharing other people's feelings. Put simply, it's our ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. If you're creating communication materials for students (e.g., social media posts or posters), you can show empathy for your audience through the words and images you use. Here are some ways to communicate with empathy:

- **Take time to learn about students' needs and personal experiences.** We've got some tips to help you get started on the next few pages.
- **Choose images that represent your audience.** For guidance on choosing photos, see our [Storytelling for Health Communication](#) guide.



- **Use terms your audience uses.** For example, if you're writing about a disability or health condition, ask students how they would explain their condition to a friend. You can also ask if they prefer person-first or identity-first language (see below).
- **Double check personal details.** If you refer to people in your communication materials, make sure it's okay to use their name and confirm the spelling of their name. Include students' pronouns or any other identifying information they'd like to use in your materials.

PERSON-FIRST VS. IDENTITY-FIRST LANGUAGE

Two different ways to write about people who have disabilities are:

- **Person-first language** (e.g., people with disabilities, person with epilepsy)
- **Identity-first language** (e.g., disabled people, epileptic person)

Person-first is the go-to approach that many people learn in school. But some people prefer identity-first language because they see their disability as an important part of who they are. You can show empathy and respect for your audience by using the terms they prefer.



Learn from your audience

The first step toward communicating with empathy is to **learn from your audience**. Learning from your audience means taking time to understand their needs, experiences, and perspectives. Here are a few ways to get started:

- **Set up one-on-one interviews or group discussions** to hear from individuals and small groups of people. You can write down questions ahead of time and have a formal discussion or just chat with friends and classmates who are part of the group you want to reach.
- **Create surveys** to get feedback from large groups of people — like student athletes, members of a student organization, or all students on campus. You can create online surveys using tools like [Google Forms](#) or [SurveyMonkey](#).
- **Seek out resources and organizations** created by and for the community you want to reach. For example, if you want to reach international students, connect with the international student association or staff on campus. Or if you're creating materials for Deaf students, you could check out resources from the [National Association of the Deaf](#).



LEARNING FROM YOUR AUDIENCE IS A WIN-WIN!

Taking time to learn from your audience **shows that you're listening** — a very important part of building trust. And you can use what you've learned to **create communication materials and programs that reflect people's real-life needs and experiences**.

Have sensitive discussions with care

Sometimes talking with your audience is easy — if you want to learn about the health needs of student athletes, chatting with your roommate on the basketball team is a great place to start. But if you want to **discuss more sensitive and personal topics** (e.g., sexuality or disability), these conversations can get a little more complicated. Here are some tips to keep in mind:

- Some people may not feel comfortable sharing their experiences. Even if they identify as part of a group, they may not want to share their perspective based on that part of their identity. If your campus has a **diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) office or organization**, they may be able to connect you with students who are interested in this kind of work. Same goes for **campus organizations for specific communities** (e.g., the LGBTQ+ student center or Asian American student union).



- You could also talk to **people you know** who have personal or lived experience with the topic at hand. If you know someone who has shared their identity or experience openly or expressed that they want to educate others about the topic, they may be a good person to reach out to. (Again, just don't assume that everyone will be eager to share.)
- When you meet with people, emphasize that you're interested in hearing about **their personal experience**. Don't ask them to speak for an entire community or group of people.
- Before jumping into the discussion, **explain why you're interested in learning about their experience**. Let students know if your conversation will be private or if you plan to share it with others in any way. Always **ask permission** before sharing students' names, quotes, or any personal details.



Partner with trusted organizations

People are more likely to trust health information when it comes from an organization they already know and feel connected to. **Teaming up with campus organizations** is an important way to build trust with your audience. There are lots of ways you can work together — start by reaching out to discuss what collaboration could look like.

Here are a few ideas for working with campus organizations:

- Interview members of the organization to learn more about your audience.
- Reach out to the campus organization's leaders, introduce the topic you're interested in, and discuss opportunities to speak with their group.
- Ask leaders or members of the organization to help you create communication materials (e.g., social media posts or flyers).
- Ask members to review and give feedback on draft communication materials.
- Plan an educational event with members of the organization.
- Make a presentation or host a group discussion during the organization's regular meetings.



Learn from the COVID-19 pandemic

Think back to the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. As scientists learned more about COVID-19, public health officials continued to share new guidance about how to protect ourselves from the virus. That's how the scientific research process is supposed to work: when researchers learn new information, we learn better ways to protect our health.

As COVID-19 guidance evolved, public health officials sometimes struggled to explain the **why** behind the changes. At times, they didn't clearly explain what new information researchers had learned about COVID-19 and **why** we needed to take different steps to protect ourselves. As a result, many people felt confused or misled.

The moral of the story? When health guidance is confusing, people are less likely to listen and take steps to protect their health. Of course, we don't mean to vilify the public health officials who've worked hard to educate people about COVID-19. After all, it's *really* hard to communicate about scientific information that's constantly changing! And communication challenges certainly weren't the only factor at play. (For more factors that contribute to distrust, flip back to [page 3](#)).



Build trust with honesty and transparency

You can build trust with your audience by **communicating with honesty and transparency**. Whether you're talking to students on-on-one or creating communication materials for a larger audience, keep these tips in mind:

- **Be honest about what we don't know.** Acknowledge that our understanding of health conditions is bound to change as researchers learn more about the topic. If you can, name specific areas that researchers are working to learn more about.
- **Emphasize what we do know.** State the facts based on the latest science and cite trustworthy sources.
- **Focus on positive action steps.** Provide specific steps people can take to protect their health — and emphasize the benefits of taking those steps.



Repair trust

People may **lose trust** in us when our words or actions are misunderstood or hurtful. The fact is, we all make mistakes, and we've all hurt others at some point in our lives. It's part of being human! But these situations can be an opportunity to **repair trust**. If we make the most of these opportunities, people will be more likely to trust us in the future.

Repairing trust starts with **listening and taking accountability**. Easier said than done, we know! Here are some tips to help you handle those tough conversations with grace.



Responses that repair trust

Take these steps:

- **Listen** to feedback with an open mind
- **Think critically about your impact**, or how your actions affected other people
- **Apologize and take accountability** for mistakes or actions that harmed other people
- **Offer to repair your mistake** or make things right, if possible
- **Make a commitment to do better** in the future and then carry on with the work



Responses that break trust

Try not to:

- **Ignore or dismiss** feedback
- **Get defensive** or make excuses
- **Focus on your intent** — what you mean to do — instead of your impact
- **Center your feelings** (e.g., make comments like “I feel terrible, you must hate me!”)

De-escalate conflict

Sometimes conversations about health can bring up strong emotions. When in-person conversations get heated, showing that you hear the other person and respect their boundaries can **de-escalate the situation**.

Try these tips to turn down the temperature:

- **Respect personal space.** Give the other person a few feet of space.
- **Use calming nonverbal cues.** Keep your voice and facial expressions calm and try not to make super sudden moves. Avoid pointing or crossing your arms. (While it's important to be calm, don't tell the other person to calm down — that tends to make people feel even more frustrated!)
- **Validate what the other person is feeling.** For example, you could start by saying, "I hear that you're frustrated about topic X."
- **Ask questions and reflect back.** Show that you care about their feelings by asking open-ended questions or saying, "Tell me more about that." Then repeat what the other person said in your own words to confirm you're understanding them correctly.
- **Remember that you don't have to change their mind.** It's not your job to change the other person's beliefs. And remember that you can walk away from the conversation at any time.

Validating other people's feelings, asking open-ended questions, and reflecting back are great ways to defuse conflict on social media, too. And don't forget that you can log off or leave the chat anytime! For more tips on managing online conflicts, check out our [Health and Media Literacy](#) guide.



WHAT IF SOMEONE GETS VIOLENT OR MAKES THREATS?

Following the tips above can help to prevent conflict, but people who are feeling on edge may still respond aggressively. Call campus police or security right away if someone becomes aggressive or violent, threatens to hurt themselves or others, or does anything else that makes you feel unsafe (in person or online).

Share students' input with campus leaders

Sometimes conflict happens when **students disagree with campus policies or decisions by campus leaders**. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, some students argued that schools should take more steps to protect the well-being of students at high risk, including those with disabilities and chronic health conditions. Attendance policies have become a hot topic over the past few years, too. Some people have argued that these policies discriminate against students who miss class due to health issues.

As a student ambassador, you have an opportunity to **share students' input with campus leaders** (e.g., campus administration officials, professors, or staff who are in charge of policies). If students share feedback about a policy or other important issues, talk to a mentor, professor, or advisor you trust. They can give you advice on what to do next.

For example, your mentor might recommend that you send an email to the dean of students or make an appointment with the student affairs office to discuss the issue. That approach would probably be more effective than, say, posting negative comments on the university's social media account. Students' thoughts and opinions are more likely to gain traction if you start a thoughtful conversation with campus leaders.



If you have an opportunity to share students' input with campus leaders, try these tips to make it a productive conversation:

- **Explain why students think the current policy is harmful.** Spell out why students believe the policy will have a negative impact for a specific group or for all students on campus.
- **Propose a specific change.** Clearly explain how students think the policy should change and why this change would be an improvement.
- **Appeal to shared values.** For example, if your university often talks about challenging the status quo, mention that value when you share feedback. You can also point out areas where you feel that the policy or decision doesn't align with campus values.
- **Stay curious!** Ask questions and listen to other people's perspectives on the issue.
- **Focus on the policy, not the people behind it.** Don't make comments about anyone's political beliefs or personal characteristics.
- **Speak up as a group.** There's power in numbers! Connect with other students and share your feedback as a group.

After the conversation, be sure to **close the feedback loop by letting students know what you learned** from campus leaders. Keep students posted on any steps that leaders take to address the issue.

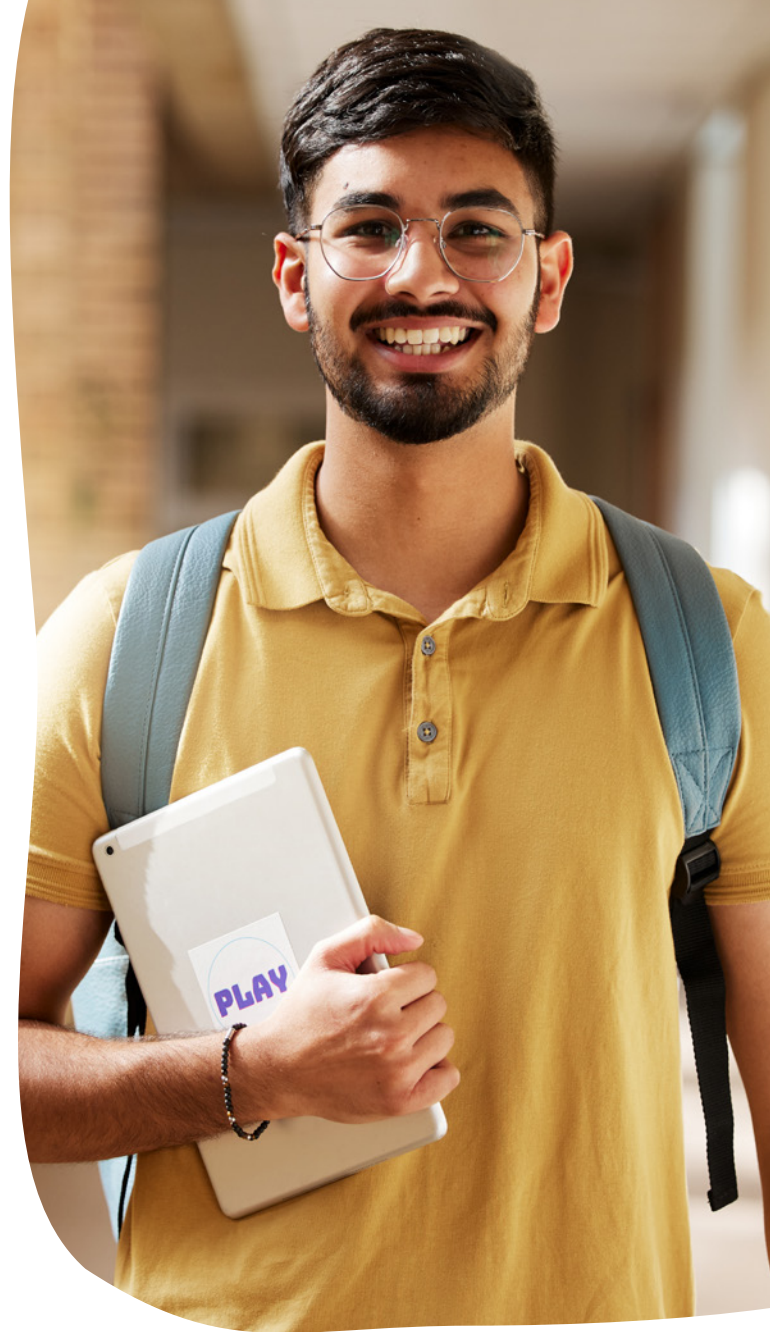


Bringing it all together

If people trust you, they'll be more likely to listen and follow your guidance. That's why trust is so important to your work as a student ambassador! In this guide, you've learned how to:

- **Learn from your audience** (the students you want to reach)
- **Build trust** by communicating with empathy, honesty, and transparency
- **Repair trust** when your words or actions hurt someone
- **De-escalate conflicts** or heated conversations
- **Share students' input with campus leaders** in a constructive way

You can use the strategies you've learned to build trust within your campus community — and empower students to take care of their health.



Resources on building trust

Check out these resources for more information and guidance to help you build trust with your audience:

- [AAMC Center for Health Justice: Trustworthiness Toolkit](#)
- [Edelman Trust Barometer: The Trust 10](#)
- [Building Trust: Focusing on Trust to Improve Health Care](#)
- [CDC: Preferred Terms for Select Population Groups and Communities](#)

Note: *This webpage is a helpful starting point, but it's always a good idea to check with your audience and use the terms they prefer.*

