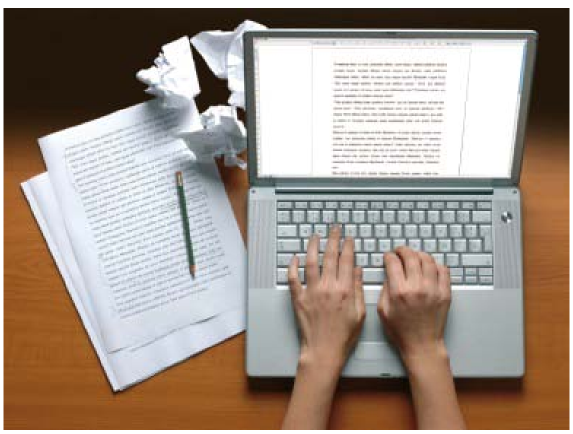
What an Evaluator Learned by Scoring Final Evaluation Reports

by Katie Moose

Hello tobacco control colleagues! In this article I would like to tell you about my personal experience scoring 2010-2013 Final Evaluation Reports (FERs). I bring a unique perspective because in addition to working at the Tobacco Control Evaluation Center (TCEC), I am also an external evaluator for three tobacco control projects. In reviewing these reports I gained many insights that will help me become a better report writer, but why keep all that wonderful knowledge to myself!? Read on to discover what an evaluator learned over the past six months during this process.

From Report Writer to Report Scorer

Conducting an evaluation within a budget is a challenge faced by every single program out there, but is especially true in tobacco control where contracts can be quite umm…shall we say limited?



Although each of my tobacco contracts is small, I think of myself as a "critical friend" who works closely with program staff to guide and advise them in the evaluation of their projects. I have been working in tobacco control for two years now and I am finally starting to feel like I understand the 'ins and outs' of working with the California Tobacco Control Program. (It's been a lot to learn!) Like most of you, this June I was busy finalizing Final Evaluation Reports for the CTCP-funded projects I work with.

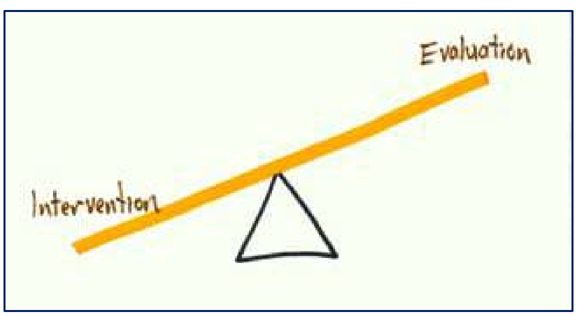
Once my own FERS were submitted, I began my short-term contract with TCEC in July as a FER reviewer. I spent the first month training with Robin to arrive at a shared understanding of what constituted a 0, 1, or a 2 in each section. Working from the rating form in *Tell Your Story*, we identified what were the absolute "Must Haves" for each measure. To make sure that every report would be judged by the same criteria no matter if the report was scored by her or me, we double-scored a number of reports. I am very happy to say that all that struggle has really paid off; on randomly selected double-scored reports, Robin and I were within 3 points of each other (on a 32-point scale) 90% of the time and within 2 points of each other 80% of the time. (Naturally, we arrived at a new score together on those few reports where our scores differed more than that.)

Time-Saving Tips

In my role as a tobacco control evaluator I am acutely aware of the time crunch and resulting pressure that evaluators are under given their limited resources. Most people can write an excellent report if they have enough time to revise and refine. The real question is, how can we write excellent reports in under eight hours (for example)? Here is how I plan to save time next time around.

- Write the background and rationale sections at the beginning of the contract period. All of the information that is needed is available at this time; there is no reason to wait. It is important to remember, though, that it must be written in the past tense to match the language in the rest of the report.
- Write up a draft of the evaluation methods in advance. This can also serve as a guide to program staff for how to collect the data. Just leave room to add in any unexpected challenges or changes that occurred.
- Draft an analysis summary of procedures in advance based on your analysis plan. Then as you actually analyze each dataset, add a description of any other steps you took – such as what variables you looked at, additional tests you ran, etc. Next time I sit down to analyze a new data set, I will pull out my analysis plan to make my life easier.
- Have program staff write the intervention section (in advance if possible). Encourage them to record along the way what they did and how well it worked. Then towards the end of the contract it will be easy to integrate all the activities together in a more narrative (story-telling) format.
- Extract results (and charts, graphs and tables) from the write-ups you did at the conclusion of each evaluation activity during the contract period. Look to see if they are still relevant based on what you know at the end of the project. You may not need to do any new analysis or data visualizations unless it would be useful. Explaining *how* the results were used can be more important than creating fancy charts and graphs if no one will use them.

Sections I Will Focus on Next Time



In general, I found that most of the FERs fell into one of two basic camps: the program-heavy camp or the evaluation-heavy camp. The program-heavy FERs often had excellent background and intervention sections, but really fell apart when it came to the evaluation methods and results. As you would guess, the evaluation-heavy FERs had nicely written evaluation methods and results, but the context necessary to interpret those findings was missing and the reader was left in the dark on the story of the program. There were a few FERs with a nice balance between these two camps, where all the parts and pieces fit together to give the reader a holistic sense of how the intervention and evaluation supported each other. I was a bit surprised to find that these more balanced reports were often written by project directors (not evaluators).

The Intervention. Unless you, as an evaluator, understand the program intervention as well as the program staff (and if you do PLEASE SHARE how you do that!), it is just not possible to write a really good Final Evaluation Report without significant contribution from program staff. It is one thing to report that program staff were able to conduct 25 educational presentations with community members on a particular topic. It is something else entirely to say that when program staff conducted these presentations, few people showed up or when they did they actually booed the presenters! I was just as guilty as everyone else of focusing on the results and leaving the intervention out in the cold. To be completely honest, I am not sure how I am going to get my program staff to write their intervention sections, but I am going to try harder to make this happen, possibly by sending them a series of questions that they can answer.

The Analysis Summary. Just like an evaluator needs input from program staff, so does program staff need input from the evaluator, particularly on the analysis summary. The summary should lay out how the data was analyzed to answer your research questions. Almost all FERs had very short analysis descriptions, as did all of my own. Next time, I am going to focus much more of my time and attention on that little section of the report.

Conclusions and Recommendations. I never knew this before, but some evaluators include a program staff interview or focus group as part of their evaluation plan. Whether I have this in the plan or not, next time I will set aside a "reflection time" for program staff and myself to sit down and reflect on what worked, what should change next time around, and what the data are really telling us. I was supremely disappointed when FERs did not have much in the way of conclusions and recommendations; I wanted to know how they were so successful (or why they weren't)! Sometimes it can be hard for program staff to take the time to reflect on their progress. What an evaluator can do, though, is provide space and an outside perspective to discover what was essential to their success.

I am so grateful for my time with TCEC scoring all of your wonderful reports. Really, most of them were very good and serve as a wonderful resource not only for your own program staff, but for others working on similar objectives. I learned so much about writing and also about what's working out there in the world of tobacco control. I highly recommend all of you spend a few hours skimming some of the FERs available on Rover. Not only will you get a sense for what makes a good report, you'll also gain valuable information about how to approach your next tobacco control project.

Photos by: Katie Moose, Shutterstock, TCEC