Strategies for Reading Public Health Data

1. Find something striking

For any public health data, look for:

- the highest rates (incidence or prevalence) compared to the average (state or national)
- a disease needing a significant reduction in rates to be brought down to the average
- a disease whose rates are striking compared to those of another disease's rates

Changes through time - For data from one location over time, also look for:

- an alarming increase, or suspicious decrease in rates
- really varied rates (i.e., high, to low, then back to high again)
- rates not going down quickly enough following an alleged resolution of a problem

Changes across location - For data for one disease across many locations, also look for:

- much higher results in one place than another
- very high results in a location where vulnerable people might be exposed (a school, home, garden, senior center, etc.)

2. Try saying it different ways

All of the newsworthy items above involve comparing one number to another. When comparing two rates "A" and "B", you can say things like:

- *A is ___ more than B / less than B* [using units like "__ new cases per 100,000 people"]
- *A is __ %, the same as __ out of 100, __ in 10, one in __, or __ in __*
- *A is ___ times B*
- *A is ___ % of B*
- *A is ___ % lower than B / higher than B.*
- *To get from A to B would require a ___% reduction / increase*
- *A is bigger / smaller than B by ___ order(s) of magnitude*
- *A is [double, triple, a quarter of, half of, a fifth of, two-thirds of] B*
- [Draw a graph or infographic comparing A to B]

3. Choose the one you think makes most newsworthy statement