



Health Literacy Standards

The following guidelines are provided to guide you as you create and write materials for patients. These guidelines utilize the principles of easy-to-read and easy-to-use written material.

Define Target Audience

Before you can begin to write, you need to have a clear understanding of the audience to whom the piece is directed. Is this primarily a senior audience? Healthcare professional? Healthcare consumer? Having an understanding ahead of time will help you determine appropriate messages, grade level, cultural aspects and content.

Determine Message

- Decide what message you want to communicate in the piece. Stick to writing about that message.
- Limit key concepts to no more than 3 in any communication.
- Focus on “Need to do,” not “Nice to know.” Your copy should address what action(s) you want the recipient to do. Other information that you might want to convey that does not help the reader do the action you want them to do is only a distraction. For example, if you list 3 steps on how someone can effectively use a mail-in drug program, this is a “need to do.” If you write a paragraph about why this program was developed and how long it has been available, that’s a “nice to know.”
- Be sure your message content is accurate and up-to-date. Review other materials you are sending to the reader and be sure your message is consistent and clear, i.e., you are not sending out “mixed signals.”

Organize your Document

- Make sure your most important message is stated at the beginning. Be clear. “This letter will tell you how to sign up for this program.”
- Sequence your material in the same order that the reader needs to read and do the actions.
- Watch for concepts and actions that need to be discussed and defined before the reader can go on to the next step. For example, if they need to register on a website and select a password before they can use the website, be sure you discuss and define those steps first. Or if you are reviewing how one tests their blood sugar levels, be sure they understand the concept of sugar in the blood first.
- Use “chunking,” i.e., put like messages together. Using bulleted lists to organize these like concepts helps with comprehension. Be sure you do not exceed 7 items in any bulleted list, as this is maximum number of concepts the mind can effectively hold in short-term memory.

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- Be careful when using tables. These can be hard to navigate. Do not use more than 3 columns and 3 rows.
- Use short, descriptive headings. This will help in navigation, and will also alert the reader to what kind of information is coming up. This aids in comprehension.

Write Message in Clear and Simple Terms

- Be sure your written material is at no higher than a 6th grade level. The lower grade reading level you achieve, the more people will be able to understand your message. Conversely, the higher your grade reading level, the fewer number of people will be able to understand and use your message.
- Use active voice, not passive voice. In active voice, the subject of the sentence (You) performs the action of the verb (take one pill). For example, “You should take one pill each morning.” In passive voice, the subject is being acted upon by the verb: “One pill should be taken each morning by you.”
- Use short sentences. In general, no sentence should be any longer than 10 - 15 words.
- Use short, simple, easy to understand words. Choose one- or two-syllable words over longer, more complex ones. For example, “use” rather than “utilize”; “pay” rather than “remunerate”; “without” rather than “in the absence of.”
- Use examples when you are trying to convey a concept. Here’s an example: When discussing an enlarged prostate and the difficulty in urinating, you could say, “It’s like pinching a straw or bending a garden hose.” This gives a visual to someone that conveys the sense of what you are trying to explain.
- Eliminate any jargon. For example, say “high blood pressure” rather than “hypertension.”
- Define technical terms that must be used. For example, if you must use terms such as “coinsurance,” give the reader a definition of that term in simple, easy to read language (“amount you pay first”). Do not use the word itself when giving a definition.

Use Interactive Tools

Engaging readers and making them feel that the document is directed toward them will help with reader engagement and comprehension. There are a few tools you can use to accomplish this:

- Use second-person terms such as you, your, or yours.
- Ask questions. “Do you have any of these problems?” This will help your reader move from the non-personalized realm of your document to pause and ask themselves the question, thus helping personalize the message.
- Include quizzes. If you need to help someone arrive at a conclusion—for example, if they are at risk for a chronic disease—quizzes can help. They can also convey information and model healthy behavior at the same time. For example, the quiz could list healthy behaviors and ask the reader how many of these they practice on a daily basis.

Use Good Design Elements

Good design elements help readers use your document and understand its message. Poor design elements work against the reader, and make it more likely that the reader will abandon the document before they finish reading it. Good design helps with navigation, i.e., the reader’s ability to get from one place to another (start to finish, 1st page to 2nd page) in your document.

- Use type no smaller than 12 point. With a senior (age 65+) audience, consider using even larger type size, for example, 14 or even 16 point.
- Use generous line spacing. Double-space if possible, or 1.5 if not. Single-spaced documents tend to look crowded and hamper navigation.
- Limit the number of typefaces you use. In general, two typefaces should meet the needs of most standard documents. For headings, use a sans serif type, like Arial or Verdana. For body copy, use a serif type, such as Times New Roman or Garamond. Don't use fancy typefaces, especially ones that try to look like script. These are very hard to read.
- Be generous with white space. White space is that part of the page that does not have any text or graphics on it. This includes line spacing, margins, and space between graphics and text. White space gives the eyes a rest, and allows the other elements on the page to stand out and be recognized by the eye. Poor readers can be intimidated by a page that is dense with text and graphics, and may decide not to attempt reading the page.

Use Simple, Appropriate Graphics

Graphics can help explain text. They are very useful when describing a step-by-step process. They can help take concepts out of the abstract and provide meaning through recognition. For some poor readers, the graphics may be one of the few elements on the page they can understand. Here are a few guidelines for using graphics appropriately:

- Be sure the graphic supports the reader's need for "what to do."
- Graphics can be examples. For example, if the "what to do" has to do with eating healthy, show a simple graphic of a portion plate divided into proportions: half the plate with fruits and vegetables, one quarter of the plate with lean protein, and one quarter of the plate with whole grains. The graphic would show specifics: green salad and sliced apples for one half the plate, a serving lean chicken breast in one quarter, and a scoop of brown rice in the final quarter.
- Graphics are a good tool to show contrast, e.g., right way vs. wrong way, too big/small vs. just right.
- Graphics can help relate an unknown thing to a known thing. For example, if discussing portion sizes, show a chicken breast next to a deck of cards to show it should be that size, or one cup of brown rice can be shown next to a tennis ball.
- Graphics can be used very effectively to illustrate a step-by-step procedure. You can reduce the number of words and rely more on the graphics to "tell the story." Be sure the reader is able to follow the order of graphics if using more than one or two together. Use numbering or other navigational tools, such as arrows, so that sequence is not a barrier.
- The best graphics are very simple line drawings, or clear photographs with only the most necessary elements. Graphics and photos that appear "busy" are harder to comprehend.
- Make sure the graphic appears very close to the text it is explaining. Don't make readers search for the graphic.
- If necessary, use a short, descriptive caption for the graphic.
- Don't use abstract concepts in graphics. For instance, if you're discussing how blood carries nutrients through the body, it is not appropriate to show a truck "delivering" nutrients through the arterial "highway."
- Art for art's sake is not considered a good use of graphics. Graphics should have a specific purpose, and not be there just to make something look "pretty."

Use of Color

Color can be an effective tool to aid in comprehension and navigation, but when overused it defeats this purpose. Here are some basic guidelines for using color:

- Color can be used to aid navigation. For instance, in a longer document, color bars at the top, side or bottom of each page can be used in each chapter.
- Color can draw attention to an element on the page. This is good if you want the main emphasis to be there, but can be distracting if the color distracts the reader from the main message.
- Do not use reverse type. This is when a bright color not generally used for type is used to provide contrast to a dark background. Examples would be white letters on a black background. Reverse type is very hard to read and can cause eyestrain.
- Color in type should be used sparingly, if at all. The best type to use is black type on a white background. Other color in text is not as readable as black on white.
- If you are using color in graphics, consider whether the page will be photocopied. Some colors, when copied, lose their contrast and turn into a muddy mess.