



In Plain Words: Creating Easy-to-Read Handouts

Writer's Tool Box

Sandy Cornett, RN, PhD

Wayne Neal, RN-BC, MAT

Kathy Ordelt, RN, CPN, CRRN

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Writer's Tool Box

Think like a wise man but communicate in the language of the people.

- William Butler Yeats

The purpose of this *Writer's Tool Box* is to help you write at a middle school level using Plain Language. It can help you provide your patients and families with more easily read, easily understood documents.

Why is Plain Language important?

Poor reading ability is a big problem in our country today. In addition, even good readers may not be able to read and understand health-related materials. Plain Language is necessary because oftentimes patients and families:

- Read and understand at a middle-school level.
 - 50% of adults in the U.S. read at an 8-9th grade level.
 - 20% read at or below a 5th grade level.
 - 5% don't read at all.
- Are overwhelmed and intimidated by what they need to learn.
- Do not understand medical terms and jargon.
- Are hesitant to ask questions when they don't understand.

For the Medicaid population, the average reading level is 5th grade; the average Hispanic reading level (in Spanish) is 3rd grade.

This Tool Box will explore 10 evidence-based, easy-to-use tips that can help you write in a way that is easily read and understood.

Plain Language

What is Plain Language?

Plain Language is a way to write and speak so that your target audience (patients and families) can easily understand you. It is writing and speaking clearly and concisely using everyday, common, conversational language.

Plain Language is:

- Using commonly known and understood words and terms
- Eliminating non-essential information

Plain Language is not:

- "Dumbing-down"
- Talking down to

Plain Language writing tips

You can write effective patient and family education materials using Plain Language by following the **10 basic writing principles** listed here:

Plain Language principle	Example
1. Be personal – use second person (you, your) whenever possible.	Use “you” or “your child”, rather than “the patient” or “the child.”
2. Use a question and answer format to chunk information into manageable bites.	What symptoms could I have? When should I call the doctor?
3. Use common, 1 and 2-syllable words. Eliminate as many 3+ syllable words as possible. Define all medical terms.	Use doctor, medicines and advise, rather than physician, medications and recommend.
4. Use consistent words throughout the document; eliminate variations.	Use exam, test or procedure rather than all three words within the same document.
5. Use active tense; reduce or eliminate passive tense.	“Wash your hands before you eat,” rather than “Your hands should be washed before you eat.”
6. Write with nouns and action verbs; eliminate unnecessary words like adjectives and adverbs.	“Take your medicine with each meal,” rather than “It is important for you to take your medicine with food in the morning, afternoon and evening each day.”
7. Use simple sentences with about 12-15 words.	“Wash the equipment with soap and water after each use. Air dry with all clamps open,” rather than “Wash the equipment with soap and water after each use and air dry with all clamps open.”
8. Use positive statements; reduce negative ones.	“Keep your dressing dry,” rather than “Do not get your dressing wet.”
9. Use bullet points instead of sentence and paragraph structure.	Watch your cut for signs of infection such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redness • Swelling • Foul smelling drainage • Increased warmth
10. Limit extra symbols such as parentheses, slash marks (he/she, and/or) and abbreviations such as “etc.”	Co-joined and multiple use terms and symbols can confuse people with poor reading skills.

Tip #1 **Be personal –** **Use second person (you or your) when possible**

The trouble with so many of us is that we underestimate the power of simplicity.
- Robert Stuber

Using the second person makes the materials more personal and helps to “grab” readers and put them in the situation.

- Write using a conversational, rather than a stiff, formal, clinical tone.
- Avoid a testing, lecturing or condescending tone
- Be sensitive to cultural differences

Formal, clinical tone - Patients may experience dizziness, headaches and weakness.
Personal tone – You may have dizziness, headaches and weakness.

Tip #2 **Use a question and answer format –** **Chunk information into manageable bites**

I believe more in the scissors than I do in the pencil.
- Truman Capote

This technique also helps to include the reader and pull them into the document. State why the information is important - “what’s in it for me?”

Examples include section headings such as:

- What treatment will I have?
- When can I return to work or school?
- What are the steps to changing my dressing?

Tip #3 – **Use plain words**

Use the smallest word that does the job.
- E.B. White

It’s important when you write or speak to use plain, common words rather than medical jargon. When possible, use 1 and 2-syllable words or phrases to replace multi-syllable (3 or more syllables) words. Use an informal, conversational style.

You wouldn’t normally say, “The physician will be in momentarily to provide you with your medication prescriptions.” You are more likely to say, “Your doctor will be in shortly to give you your prescriptions.”

Below are some words that are commonly used when writing patient and family education materials, along with suggested substitutes to help you write at a middle-school level. The substitute you choose depends on the context and intent of what you are trying to say or write.

Instead of	Use
Ability	Skill
Accomplish	Do, act, carry out
Accurate	Correct, right
Additional	More
Alternative	Choice
Annually	Each year, yearly
Anticipate	Expect
Approximate (-ly)	About
Assist (-ance)	Aid, help
Attempt	Try
Bacteria	Germs
Cardiovascular	Heart, blood vessels
Communicate	Speak with, talk
Comply with	Follow
Concerning	About
Demonstrate	Show
Detect	Find
Determine	Decide, find
Detrimental	Bad, harmful
Develop	Occur
Diagnosis	Problem, condition, illness
Difficulties	Problems, trouble
Discontinue	Stop, end
Early detection	Find early, soon
Effective (-ly)	Works well, good, useful
Elevate	Raise
Eliminate	Stop, end, get rid of
Encourage	Help, offer to, tell, urge
Etiology	Cause
Evident	Clear
Examine	Check, see, study
Excessive (-ly)	Extra, too much, more than normal, a lot
Facilitate	Help, ease
For a period of	For
Frequent (-ly)	Often
Identical	Same
Immediate (-ly)	At once
Immunization or injection	Shot, protect
Indication	Sign
Initiate	Start, begin
Interrupt	Stop, pause
Maximum	Most, greatest, more
Medication	Medicine
Minimum	Least, smallest, less
Minimize	Decrease, slow down
Modify (-ication)	Change
Observe (-ation)	Check, see, watch
Occurrence	Event
Opportunity	Chance
Option	Choice
Participate	Take part in
Perform	Do
Permission	Consent

Instead of	Use
Physician	Doctor
Principal	Main, chief
Prognosis	Usual course, outcome
Provide	Give, offer
Recognize	Know, see, accept
Recommend (-ation)	Advise (advice)
Remainder	Rest
Saturate	Soak
Sensation	Feeling
Similar (-ity)	Like
Situated	Placed
Sufficient	Enough
Terminate (-ion)	Stop, end
Uncommon	Rare
Unnecessary	Unneeded, needless
Utilize (-ation)	Use
Visualize (-ation)	Picture, see

In addition, eliminate “connecting and introductory” words that are unnecessary, such as:

- therefore
- consequently
- however
- whereas, where of
- particularly, in particular
- in addition to
- regarding
- pertaining to

Tip #4

Use consistent words throughout the document – Eliminate variations

Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.

- Leonardo da Vinci

Consistent words reduce confusion

Using consistent words throughout a document helps to reduce confusion by reducing variables. Using the examples below, which would you prefer for clarity?

Word confusion	Word consistency
Colonoscopy - When you arrive for your <i>procedure</i> , the nurse will check your temperature, blood pressure and heart rate. After this, she will help prepare you for your <i>exam</i> . You will need to have an IV started in your hand or arm before the <i>test</i> begins.	When you arrive for your <i>test</i> , the nurse will check your temperature, blood pressure and heart rate. After this, she will help prepare you for your <i>test</i> . You will need to have an IV started in your hand or arm before the <i>test</i> begins.
Strep throat - Strep throat is caused by the strep <i>germ</i> . The <i>bacteria</i> can cause fever, sore throat and stomach pain. The strep <i>organism</i> needs to be treated with antibiotics.	Strep throat is caused by the strep <i>germ</i> . The <i>germ</i> can cause fever, sore throat and stomach pain. The strep <i>germ</i> needs to be treated with antibiotics.

Tip #5

Use active tense

Reduce or eliminate passive tense

Be grateful for every word you can cut. Writing improves in direct relation to the things we can keep out of it that shouldn't be there.

- William Zinsser

Studies have found that writing in active tense reduces ambiguity and adds clarity. It is better understood and remembered than writing in passive tense. When you write, write using an action verb in active tense as much as possible.

Your goal – as close to 80-90% passive sentences as possible.

What is active tense?

Active tense is when the subject (of the sentence) does something to the object (of the sentence).

Example: Ed watched TV.

Subject – verb – object

Sometimes, the subject is not stated, but is “assumed”.

Example: Wash your hands. (“You” is assumed to be the subject of the sentence)

What is passive tense?

Passive tense is when the object (of the sentence) has something done to it by the subject (of the sentence).

Example: The TV was watched by Ed.

Object – passive verb – subject

Passive verbs are often “to be” verbs such as is, are, was, were, am, be and been. These verbs are often joined by a second verb that ends in -ed or -en.

Below are some examples of active and passive tense sentences:

Active tense – no changes needed:

- The doctor changed the dressing.
- Give your child his medicine each day at bedtime.
- Most of us don't take the time to exercise each day.

Passive tense:

- The treatment was done by the therapist.
- Most heart disease can be prevented by following healthy habits.
- Your child should be immunized before starting to school.

Change to active tense:

- The therapist did the treatment.
- Healthy habits can prevent most heart disease.
- Immunize your child before he starts to school.

When should I use passive sentences?

You can use passive sentences:

- To keep from placing blame or to decrease hostility
 - Your bill has not been paid vs. You have not paid your bill
 - A mistake was made vs. You made a mistake
- If you don't know who the subject is
 - The medicine has already been started.
- If it just sounds better

When providing instructions, start the sentence or phrase with an action verb when possible. This lets the reader know exactly what they need to do.

Examples include:

- Wash your hands well.
- Know the side effects of your medicines.
- Keep good records of all your bills.
- Ask your doctor about the treatment.

Tip # 6 Write with nouns and verbs – Eliminate extra words

The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do.

- Thomas Jefferson

Use nouns and verbs when you write; eliminate unnecessary, descriptive words, such as adjectives and adverbs. Some good examples are:

Too many words	No extra words
The patient population at large does not generally understand the complex diagnostic procedures that need to be completed.	Patients often do not understand their medical tests.
The Food and Drug Administration, other regulatory agencies and local boards set strict rule for the protection of consumers.	Our government sets strict rules to protect consumers.
Complex hormonal changes during pregnancy may cause a variety of women to experience mood swings.	Many women have mood swings during pregnancy due to changes in hormones.
Cancer is treated using aggressive medications known as chemotherapeutic agents.	Cancer is treated with chemotherapy medicines.

Ask yourself – does the reader really need to know this? Is this important to the meaning of the sentence? If not, eliminate it.

Tip #7

Use simple sentences - Avoid complex sentences

***The finest words in the world are only vain sounds if you can't understand them.
The best sentence? The shortest.***
- Anatole France

People who have trouble reading and understanding may only comprehend one idea at a time. It's important to use simple sentences rather than complex sentences for this reason. Sentence length should be approximately 12-15 words, with about 3-4 sentences in a paragraph. Paragraphs should contain one main idea or topic per paragraph.

What is a simple sentence?

A simple sentence contains one idea.

Example: Asthma is a disease that affects many children. (1 idea)

What is a complex sentence?

A complex sentence contains two or more ideas.

Example: Asthma is a disease that affects many children and can cause missed days of school when it is not well managed. (2 ideas)

Complex sentences are often joined by "connecting" words or phrases such as:

- And
- Or
- But
- Nor
- However

Tip #8

Use positive statements – Reduce negative ones

The finest language is mostly made up of simple unimposing words.
- George Eliot

To help reduce reader "turn-off", avoid a nagging, scolding lecturing or condescending tone. Use positive statements whenever possible to improve reader compliance and buy-in.

Negative tone	Positive tone
Never ride in a car without using your seatbelt.	Always use a seatbelt when you ride in a car.
Do not eat foods with a high sugar and fat content.	Eat a diet high in lean meats, fruits and vegetables.
Never send your child to school with a fever.	Your child may return to school when his fever is gone.

If you must use a “do not” list, combine items into one list to reduce the number of negative words the reader needs to read. This example groups the negative words into one sentence followed by a list of items:

After your back surgery, your doctor will tell you when it is safe to begin doing things again. Until then, **do not**:

- Lift more than five pounds
- Drive a car or truck
- Return to work

Tip #9 **Use bullets -** **Break up sentences and paragraphs**

Anybody can have ideas – the difficulty is to express them without squandering a quire of paper on an idea that ought to be reduced to one glittering paragraph.

– Mark Twain

Bullets help to make information easier to read and understand. They break up sentences and paragraphs and allow the reader to get through the information more quickly. They also help create “white space” on the page to rest the eyes and brain. Avoid having more than 6-8 bullets in a section.

Lists

Bullets can be simple lists, such as side effects and need no punctuation after the bullet.

Example:

- Headache
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea

Complete a sentence

Bullets can complete a sentence and require punctuation.

Example:

Before going home, be sure to:

- Review all of your medicines with your nurse.
- Ask about where to buy your supplies.
- Find out when your next doctor’s visit is planned.

Complete sentences

Bullets can be a set of complete sentences and also require punctuation. This makes bullets harder to read than the above two methods.

Example adapted from www.MayoClinic.com:

- Your doctor may first suspect pneumonia based on your medical history and a physical exam.
- During the exam, your doctor will listen to your lungs with a stethoscope to check for abnormal bubbling or crackling sounds (rales) and for rumblings (rhonchi) that signal the presence of thick liquid.
- Both these sounds may indicate inflammation caused by infection.

Tip #10

Limit extra symbols such as parentheses and slash marks - Explain all abbreviations

The chief virtue that language can have is clearness, and nothing detracts from it so much as the use of unfamiliar words.

- Hippocrates

People who do not read well are often confused by symbols such as parentheses, slash marks and quotation marks. They also do not know what to do with commonly used abbreviations such as i.e., aka, etc.

Reduce or eliminate symbols and abbreviations when possible. Consider these examples:

- Make sure the doctor explains the test to you. He/she should also tell you what to do before and/or after the test is done.
- Eat plenty of whole grain foods such as whole wheat bread, etc.
- You may have a fever (i.e. temperature over 101⁰F)

Alternatives include these examples:

- Make sure the doctor explains the test to you. The doctor should also tell you what to do before and after the test.
- Eat plenty of whole grain foods such as bran cereal, oatmeal, brown rice, and whole wheat bread, crackers and rolls.
- You may have a temperature over 101⁰F.

Next step? Check the reading level of your document

Choosing a readability formula

Readability formulas measure the **approximate** grade-level of your document. None of the formulas are totally accurate, but they can provide a general guideline for ease of reading. There are over 40 different readability formulas.

- The formulas can only be used with prose text, not tables, charts or lists.
- Most consider only word length and sentence length.
- Most are accurate to within one grade level.
- Some specialized formulas can be used with a foreign language.

Some commonly used ones include:

Formula	Pros	Cons	Accuracy
Fry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fairly easy to use for hard copy documents • Includes grades 1-17 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must be done manually • Only checks for multisyllable words 	Fairly accurate
SMOG (Simple Measure of Gobbledegook)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fairly easy to use for hard copy documents • Includes grades 1-18 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must be done manually • Only checks for multisyllable words 	Not comprehensive as the Flesh, Flesh-Kincade or SAM
Flesch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fairly easy to use • Included in the Flesch-Kincade computer program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confuses some punctuation marks and sentence structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fairly accurate
Flesch-Kincade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Computerized - included in Microsoft Office • Fast and easy to use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not as accurate as the other tools • Only includes grades 1-12 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not as accurate as the Fry, Flesch or SAM • Add a grade level to the results given

The SAM (Suitability Assessment of Materials) is not a readability formula, but may be very useful in analyzing your document.

SAM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measures more than word length • Considers multiple factors for easy reading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must be done manually • Takes longer to do than any of the others 	Fairly accurate
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If your document is not at the desired grade level or reading-ease score, go back through the document and:

- Reduce the number of syllables in words.
- Change passive-tense sentences to active-tense.
- Eliminate unnecessary words.
- Reduce compound sentences.
- Use bullets to break up sentences and paragraphs.

Repeat this process until your document is at the desired level.

Putting it all together

By following these guidelines, you should be able to write at a middle school level so that most of your patients and families can read and understand.

Here are some examples of writing at different grade levels using the guidelines in this *Writer's Tool Box*.

What is a spica cast?

Over 12th grade -

A type of hard splint made of plaster or fiberglass that completely encloses an injured or repaired body part and the surrounding area. The purpose of the spica cast is to prevent all movement and protect the broken bone or repaired hip or torn ligaments while maintaining the corrected position until it heals.

11th grade –

A spica cast is a type of hard splint made of plaster or fiberglass that surrounds an injured or repaired body part. The purpose of the spica cast is to prevent movement and protect the body part while keeping the correct position until it heals.

8th grade –

A spica cast is a type of hard splint made of plaster or fiberglass. It surrounds an injured or repaired body part. The purpose of the spica cast is to prevent movement, protect the body part and keep it in the correct position until it heals.

6th grade -

A spica cast is a type of hard splint made of plaster or fiberglass. It surrounds an injured or repaired body part to help:

- prevent movement
- protect it
- keep it in a correct position until it heals

3rd grade (when writing for children)

A spica cast can help you get better. It is a kind of hard bandage. A spica fits around your body and legs. It helps your legs and hips stay still until they can heal.

Formatting considerations

Formatting is an important component for easy reading. Consider these attributes for your document.

Choice of font and paper

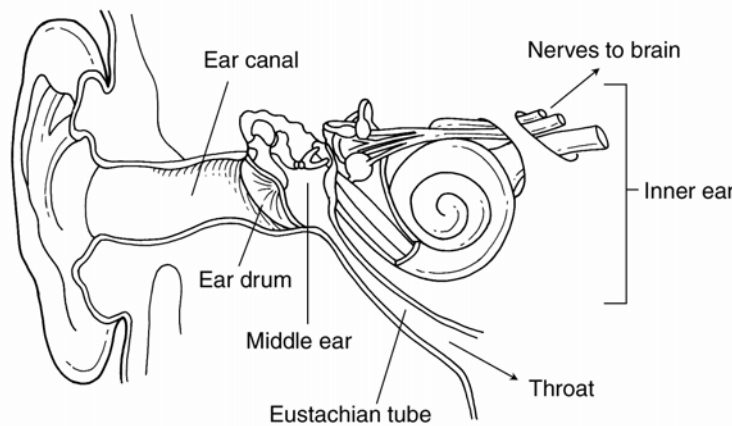
- Use at least 12 pt font, larger for senior citizens or people with visual impairments.
- Line length should be about 50 characters.
- Maintain a high color contrast between ink and paper.
- Limit fonts to two or three per page.
- Use non-gloss or low-gloss paper.

Chunk information

- Chunk information into relevant sections using a logical sequence. Each section should contain no more than 6-8 bullets or items.
- Use **bold font** to emphasize key points and for section headings and titles. Reduce or eliminate *italics*, ALL CAPS and underlining (cuts off the tails of some letters).
- Leave white space on the page to rest the eye and brain.

Illustrations

- For adults, use simple line drawings that promote realism without being too detailed.
- Provide uncluttered, easy-to-read captions.
- Place illustrations so that they do not interrupt text.



Additional resources

- **American Medical Association** – health literacy resources
<http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/8115.html>
- Doak, Doak and Root. *Teaching patients with low literacy skills*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company. 2nd Ed. 1996.
- **Harvard School of Public Health** – Health Literacy Studies
<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/>
- Lorig, K. *Patient education – a practical approach*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc. 3rd Ed. 2001.
- **Merriam Webster Language Center** - online dictionary and thesaurus –
www.m-w.com
- **MedlinePlus medical dictionary** – online medical dictionary from the National Library of Medicine
www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/mplusdictionary.html
- **National Institutes of Health** – Clear Communications: a NIH Health Literacy Initiative
<http://www.nih.gov/icd/od/ocpl/resources/improvinghealthliteracy.htm>
- **The Ohio State University AHEC Clear Health Communication Program** –
<http://medicine.osu.edu/ahec.4977.cfm>
- **Pfizer pharmaceuticals health literacy information** –
www.pfizerhealthliteracy.com
- **Plain language information** –
www.plainlanguage.gov

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