

In Plain Words: Creating Easy-to-Read Handouts

Notes view for attendees

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Learning Objectives

- Discuss the importance of health literacy principles related to consumer health education materials
- Apply 5 plain language techniques for writing and creating consumer education
- Analyze existing health education materials from vendors and organizations handouts
- Integrate plain language techniques to re-write a health education handout.

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

- Thomas Jefferson

Health Literacy - be concise

- Separate the "need to know" from the "nice to know"
- KISS
- Present 1 idea at a time

Health Literacy - be organized

- Present information in a logical sequence - repeat important information as needed
- Put important information first and last - information in the middle is least remembered

Health Literacy – be specific

- Be concrete rather than abstract
- Be specific about what action to take
- Provide an example
- Instead of “Eat a balanced diet”, say
- Eat foods from each food group:
 - Breads and cereals
 - Fruits and vegetables
 - Milk and cheese
 - Meat, fish beans and nuts

Writing tips

10 steps to success

1. Be personal (use 2nd person - “you or your child”)

- Write in “conversational” style
- Use living room language
- Avoid a testing, lecturing or condescending tone
- Be sensitive to cultural differences

2. Use a question and answer format to “grab” the reader

- State why the information is important – WIIFM radio station (what’s in it for me?)
- Chunk information into manageable sections
- Format section headings in **bold** or use a different font

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

- William Butler Yeats, Irish Poet

3. Use Plain English

- Use common 1 and 2 syllable words
- Define all medical terms and abbreviations
- Avoid jargon, idioms, slang and stereotypes
- Avoid absolute words (will, never, always, must...) unless absolutely necessary to the understanding of the text
- Avoid connecting words (therefore, however...)
- Use concrete examples

4. Use consistent words

- Use exam, test or procedure – not all three
- Decide what to do with “he or she” or “he/she.” Use singular “they.”

5. Use active tense

- Reduce or eliminate passive tense
- Goal is 80-90% active
- Begin sentences or phrases with action words such as:
 - Wash your hands
 - Change the dressing
 - Take your medicine

6. Write with nouns and action verbs

- Eliminate unnecessary words
- Use adjectives and adverbs only when necessary
- ASK - Is this important to the meaning of the sentence?
If not, eliminate it.

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

- Anatole France, French novelist

7. Use simple sentences

- A simple sentence contains 1 idea.
 - Check your blood sugar before each meal.
- Avoid complex sentences - complex sentences contain two or more ideas
 - Check your blood sugar before each meal **and** give yourself the correct dose of insulin.

8. Use positive statements

- Avoid a nagging, scolding, lecturing or condescending tone
- Use positive statements to reduce reader “turn off” and improve compliance

9. Use bullets to:

- Break up paragraphs or sentences
- Add white space
- Make text easier to read
 - Call the doctor if your wound is red, swollen, warm to the touch or begins to drain OR
 - Call the doctor if your wound is:
 - Red
 - Swollen
 - Warm to the touch
 - Begins to drain

10. Limit symbols and explain abbreviations

- Parentheses
- Slash marks
- Etc. and other abbreviations

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

Readability Formulas

- Vocabulary Difficulty
 - Measured by counting the number of syllables per words in a passage
- Sentence Length
 - Measured by counting the average number of sentences in 100 running words

What Readability Tests Do Not Tell You

- Material is written clearly
- Ideas are complex
- Information is accurate
- Content is in logical order
- Material makes sense
- Vocabulary is appropriate for client
- Grammar is correct
- Gender, class or cultural issues
- Design is attractive and helps or hinders understanding

Benefits of Readability Formulas

- No cost
- Quick and easy to use
- Predicts general reading difficulty (plus or minus one grade level)
- Gives writers information about choice of words and sentence length
- Part of pre-testing materials

Readability Formulas

- SMOG: Measures 4th grade - college level. Most popular because of accuracy, speed of use, and simplicity.
- Fry Index: Measures 1st grade - college level. More accurate at the lower levels.
- Flesch Reading Ease: Correlates well with SMOG and Fry. Uses scale of 0-100 rather than grade levels. Chart needed to interpret scores.

SMOG Testing

(Simple Measure of Gobbledygook)

- Count 10 sentences in a row at beginning, middle and end = 30 sentences
- Count every word with 3 or more syllables, even if there are repetitions
- Add the total number of words counted
- Use SMOG conversion Table I to find the grade level for long material
- Use Table II for material less than 30 sentences

Fry Readability Graph

- Select 3 passages of 100 words each
- Count the number of sentences and syllables in each 100 word passage
- Average the number of sentences and syllables from the 3 passages
- Plot the averages on the graph's horizontal axis and vertical axis.
- Intersection of these 2 points will fall within a band grade level

Computers & Readability

- Use 30 sentences (500 words)
- Cut & paste text into new document
- Use only complete sentences
- Clean up the text and DELETE
 - Headings
 - Lists with bullets
 - Sentence fragments
 - Extraneous periods

Computer Recommendations

Riffenburgh & Associates:

- Microsoft Word's readability functions are not consistent or reliable
- Flesch-Kincaid readability formulas, on any software package, are not accurate
- For Plain English
 - Average # of words / sentence = 10 to 15
 - Average # of syllables / word = less than 1.5

Appearance & Design

- Design elements - size, shape, color, pictures, text layout - to attract attention
- Design is integral to easy-to-read materials, not an "add on"
- Cover or masthead includes title and behavior-focused core message framed from patient perspective

Cardinal Rules of Text Layout

- Limit amount of text. A "wall of words" will overwhelm. It's OK not to fill the page
- Leave about 50 % white space
 - Generous margins
 - Short line lengths of 2-5 inches
 - Adequate gutters between columns
 - Spaces between titles, headers, sections and text

Typeface

- Serif Typeface (Times New Roman, Courier, Garamond) is easier to read for text
- San-serif (Arial, Tahoma, Geneva) works best for titles, headers, and on the screen
- *Italic type* and ALL CAPITAL LETTERS are hard to read - use upper and lower case letters

Type Size

- Use at least a 12-13 point type size for younger readers and 14 point for older persons - print and on-line materials
- Titles and headers need to be proportionally larger than text body, depending on size of the piece

Lists

- Break up long lists into categories with headings
- Use bullets to set off items
- Leave about 1/2 inch between bullet and first word
- List only 6-8 items in a category

Justification for Reading Ease

- Left Justify
 - Left margin even with the first letters on each line directly under each other
- Right Ragged
 - Right margin is uneven - lets the computer "wrap around" the Lines

Creating Emphasis

- Larger print size
- Bold lettering
- Horizontal line rule
- → & ☐ ○ ⊕ ☐ ⊖
- Place words under or next to pictures
- Different font
- Color
- Box around words
- Indentation
- Bullets
- Highlighter
- Dividers / tabs between sections for long documents

Reverse Print and Print-to-Paper Contrast

- Don't use reverse print often - hard on the eyes, especially for elderly.
- Dark print on light background (white / yellow) is easiest to read
- Any color ink is OK - as long as it's black
- Non-glossy paper is easier to read

Reasons for Using Visuals

- Show anatomical relationships
- Describe something difficult
- Differentiate sizes, shapes, sequence
- Give emphasis to key points

Visuals: The best illustrations:

- Attract attention
- Support and reinforce the text
- Placed close to text with captions

Visuals: General Rule

- Use life-like pictures, not abstractions.
- Logos, schemas, abstract drawings are culture-dependent and require complex inference skills

Visuals: Specific Rules

- Relevant to text, simple, life-like, appropriate for audience
- Free from distraction & clutter
- Related to one message

Pictures: Show the Right Way

- Pictures are remembered more vividly than words
- Show the correct or right thing to do, NOT the incorrect way.
- If necessary to show the wrong way, place a big X through the picture.
- Symbol of circle with line through it is not easily understood ☹

Illustrations: Using Humor and Consistent Style

- Humor is culture dependent
- Don't use a cartoon for body parts
- Choose and use a consistent style of illustrations throughout the material to enhance appeal

Planning is important:

Steps in developing easy to read materials

- Decide the purpose for the material
- Identify your audience
- Decide on essential content
- Decide how to present the message
- Write a mock-up
- Support your material with evidence-based practices
- Plan design and layout
- Share material with peers and other professionals for feedback
- Test, revise, and print

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, New York Herald Tribune journalist
Author of 17 books including On Writing Well*

NOTE: for references, please see the last page of the *In Plain Words: Creating Easy-to-Read Handouts - Writer's Tool Box*

Happy Writing!