

Making It Plain: Tips on Wording for Consumer Materials

According to national surveys, nearly half of adults read at an 8th grade level or below, while most health education materials are written at a 10th grade level or above.

By following simple guidelines for “plain language” materials, health and social service professionals can help to ensure their message is understood by their target audience. These guidelines can aid in developing new materials or in evaluating the suitability of materials from other sources.



Organization and message

- Indicate the core message and target audience on the cover page (“Keeping Your Family Healthy with the Acme Clinic”, rather than “The Acme Clinic”)
- Use messages appropriate to the age, culture, and language of the target audience
- Offer key messages that are behavior-focused, up front, and repeated (“How You Can Prevent High Blood Pressure”, rather than “High Blood Pressure and You”)
- Limit major points to three to five messages, focused on “need to know” rather than “nice to know” information
- Engage the reader with a friendly, positive, and conversational tone. Brief stories and examples may help.

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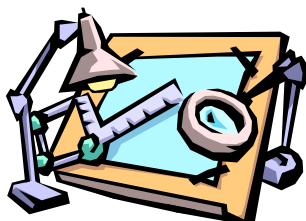
Writing style

- Use an active rather than passive voice (“take your medicine once a day”, rather than “medicine should be taken once a day”)
- Avoid technical jargon or explain it when necessary (“Your primary care provider is the doctor in your health plan who will manage all your health care”, rather than “In your managed care plan, your Primary Care Provider offers care coordination and pre-authorization of services”)
- Use concrete examples rather than abstract principles (“To stay healthy, get regular exercise and eat healthy foods”, rather than “Physical activity and good nutrition can help to maintain health”)
- Keep words and sentences short and simple, without becoming choppy. Avoid polysyllabic words if a simpler alternative is available.
- Keep lists of points bulleted and brief. Number them if appropriate.

Most of these guidelines were adapted from *Write It Easy-to-Read: A Guide to Creating Plain English Materials*, by the Maine AHEC Health Literacy Center. (207) 283-0170. (www.une.edu/hlit/)

Design Tips for Consumer Education Materials

Surveys have shown that nearly half of American adults read at a basic level, and that one in five adults reads below a fifth grade level. Simplifying the text of health education materials can help ensure that the language of the materials matches the reading abilities of a broad audience. However, the way that text and graphics are formatted on a page can be as crucial as the wording in making sure that the message is understood. The design guidelines below can aid in developing new materials or evaluating the suitability of existing materials.



Design

- Use ample white space and margins to draw attention to the text and make the material appear uncluttered.
- Use dark inks on white, light, or pastel papers. Avoid printing dark text over graphics.
- Follow a unified and consistent layout on multi-page documents.
- Emphasize key points with limited use of boxes, rule lines, indentation, bolding, different typeface, or increased print size.

Text

- Use subheads (section titles) that are concrete and informative and that guide

readers to the main points.

- Set column widths for to two to five inches. Shorter or longer columns will be more difficult to read.
- Use 12 to 14 point serif fonts for body text. A serif font is a typeface — like this one — that has small “handles” or “feet”. Reserve sans-serif fonts for titles and subheaders (see the title of this article).
- Do not use all capital letters.
- Use left justification, with the right margin “ragged” (i.e., text should be even on the left and uneven on the right, as in this article).
- Make use of reverse print (white letters on a dark background) sparingly.
 - Avoid splitting words across two lines.

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Illustrations

- Use clip art or photos that reinforce key points in the text. Facial expressions and body language in photos should be appropriate to the topic.
 - Select illustrations that are appropriate to age and culture of the audience. Readers will relate to the material better if they “see themselves” in the pictures.
- Add captions if appropriate.

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