

Plain Language Workshop

Prepared for Interior Health Networks

by

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Table of Contents

What is Plain Language Writing?	3
Definitions of Literacy	5
Literacy Levels	6
Links between Literacy and Health	7
How to Recognize a Low Literacy Client	8
How to Overcome Literacy Barriers	9
Literacy and Seniors	10
The Plain Language Process	11
Write Your Document	13
Design Your Document	22
Plain Language Writing - Ongoing Support	26
Plain Language Checklists	27
Bibliography	29

What is Plain Language Writing?

Plain language writing is an approach to communication that begins by looking at the needs of your readers.

Writing in plain language is not only about what is written but also about how your message will be received by your reader. It involves thinking about your audience and consciously writing for them. It often includes unlearning old habits, because many of us have strong attachments to a particular style. Plain language writing is clear and effective communication for your intended readers.

“Making the simple complicated is common place; making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that’s creativity.”

Charles Mingus, Jazz musician/composer

Plain language means no one is excluded.

It is fair, open and inclusive. A plain language document is one in which people can:

- find what they need
- understand what they find
- act appropriately on that understanding

Plain language writing is not anti-intellectual, drab or “dumbing down”. It does not reduce the message. Far from being unsophisticated, it takes skill and hard work.

Plain language reduces errors and misunderstandings.

Readers understand plain language better so they make fewer mistakes, have fewer questions and complaints, feel more satisfied, and ultimately save time and money for themselves and you.

“Hard writing makes easy reading.”
An old adage

Benefits of Plain Language

Plain language writing will help readers understand your message the first time. Documents written using the principles of plain language:

- reach people who cannot read well
- help all readers understand information
- avoid misunderstandings and errors

“Words calculated to catch everyone may catch no one.”
Adlai E. Stevenson Jr. (1900 – 1965)

What does health information written in plain language look like?

It usually:

- covers only three to five points and organizes the information clearly
- uses simple graphics and techniques such as point form, bold type and underlining to highlight the most important points
- uses short words and short sentences
- uses common words rather than technical jargon
- gives your patient practical information

Definitions of Literacy

- Using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential.

International Adult Literacy Survey (I.A.L.S.) 1993

- The ability for every individual to read, understand and use printed materials in daily activities at home, at work, at school and in the community.

Vernon District Literacy Plan Task Group, June 2006

Health Literacy is defined as:

- The “degree” to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.

National Library of Medicine, 2000

Literacy Levels

Level One Individuals at this level have great trouble reading. They have very few basic skills or strategies available to understand and work with text. Usually they are aware that they have problems. A person at this level may be unable to determine the correct amount of medicine to give a child from the information on the package.

22% of Canadians fit into this level.

Level Two Individuals at this level have limited literacy skills. They can deal only with material that is simple and clearly laid out. They often don't recognize their limitations. It will be difficult for them to face new demands, such as learning new job skills.

26% of Canadians fit into this level.

Level Three Level three is the minimum skill level for coping with the demands of everyday life and work in a complex, advanced society.

32% of Canadians fit into this level.

**Levels Four
& Five**

Individuals have high levels of literacy, with a wide range of reading skills and many strategies for dealing with complex materials.

20% of Canadians fit into this level.

Links between Literacy and Health

Direct Impact

Poor literacy skills can:

- restrict access to the information people need to keep healthy
- prevent clients from properly following key instructions about medications and treatment plans
- cause clients to miss appointments, not understand consent forms or oral instructions
- stop people from obtaining vital health services and benefits

“Diabetes patients rely on a number of tools to manage their disease and prevent serious health problems. For patients with low literacy, it’s as though they have received the tool kit, but not the operation instructions.”

Dr. Dean Schillinger, July 23, 2002

Indirect Impact

Many studies have concluded that literacy and education are major variables affecting health. Higher levels of education can lead to higher income and social status, which are both linked to better health. Factors relevant to the low education/poor health connection include:

- poverty
- stress
- unhealthy lifestyle practices (smoking, poor nutrition, less exercise)
- dangerous work environments

Keep in mind that people of all literacy levels can have difficulty understanding information when confronted with a stressful or unfamiliar situation.

How to Recognize a Low Literacy Client

Low literacy clients often develop elaborate avoidance strategies.

- “I’ve hurt my wrist”, or “you won’t be able to read my handwriting, could you fill that in for me please?”
- “I’ve left my glasses at home. Could you read that for me please?” or “Can I take it home and bring it back to you?”

Clients or patients may also:

- have trouble signing in at the reception desk
- ask for help even when directions are written down
- misunderstand what you have said
- hesitate to answer questions
- become angry or belligerent when faced with a reading task

Myths about low literacy adults

1. *Low literacy means low intelligence.* Most people with low literacy skills have average IQs and function quite well by compensating in other ways.
2. *A person who has limited or low literacy skills is “illiterate”.* Illiteracy is rare, and means the person cannot read or write at all.
3. *People will tell you if they can’t read.* There is a strong social stigma attached to limited reading and writing skills.
4. *“Years of schooling” are a good measure of literacy level.* Years of schooling tell what people have been exposed to, not what reading skill they have acquired. Surveys show that, on average, adults read three to five grade levels lower than the years of schooling completed.

How to Overcome Literacy Barriers

Literacy is a prime determinant of health and low literacy is a barrier to the promotion of good health practices. To support all your patients or clients:

- provide a private place for people who may need help filling out forms
- use audio-visual materials that clearly explain procedures
- suggest a friend or family member also attend appointments
- review all written documents to ensure they are written in plain language and a clear format

When presenting important information orally, do not assume that your message has been understood, even if the patient says so.

- take time and be patient
- ask specific questions to *find out* if the client understands instead of asking *if* he or she understands
- keep your language simple, include only vital information
- group items together into “chunks” so that they are easier to remember

Literacy and Seniors

The older you are, the less likely you are to have the literacy skills needed for everyday life in Canada.

- 80% of seniors in Canada have low literacy skills and may not understand what health professionals tell them and give them to read (*IALS, 1995*)
- Seniors make up 23% of the population in the North Okanagan compared to the Provincial average which is 13% (*census, 2003*)

Older people may have to work harder to:

- process information quickly
- understand text that is densely packed with new ideas
- “read between the lines”
- solve new problems
- manipulate different types of information at the same time
- focus on important new information without being distracted by irrelevant details

Older adults may also:

- be less able to change their long-held opinions to accept new information
- have a hard time remembering the context, source of information or the information itself

This means that over time, false or incorrect statements may be remembered as true, simply because the information seems familiar.



The Plain Language Process

Know your readers

Organize your ideas in a way that makes sense

Write your document using plain language guidelines

Design your document

Test your document for readability and suitability

Revise your plain language document

Know Your Readers

General information about your readers.

- age
- sex
- race
- ethnicity
- language
- education
- training
- lifestyle or work style
- health
- learning style or disability

Why are you writing your document?

Is your purpose to:

- inform
- educate
- advise
- train
- inspire and mobilize
- promote

What do you want your readers to learn, understand or do?

Will they:

- use the document as a reference tool
- take action
- change habits
- remember information
- agree with your point of view
- improve performance
- feel better
- attend a meeting

Clear, organized thinking produces clear, logical writing.

Write in an order that makes sense based on your reader's needs.

- start with the familiar and then introduce new ideas, or
- start with general information and move to more specific
- organize the content from the patient's point of view
- cover only three to five important points

Give people practical information rather than the philosophy of treatment.

Write Your Document

Plain Language Tips

1. Use the active voice.
2. Use common words rather than technical or medical jargon.
3. Use a positive tone wherever possible.
4. Write directly to your reader.
5. Use short words and short sentences.
6. Write instructions in the order that you want them carried out.
7. List important points separately from the text.
8. Don't change verbs into nouns.
9. List items in parallel (the same grammatical) form.
10. Test what you write.

Design Tips

1. Choose left flush justification.
2. Choose type that is clear and easy to read.
3. Pay attention to how the text looks on the page.
4. Use illustrations and graphics effectively.

1. **Use the active voice.**

Instead of:

This medicine is to be taken before every meal.

Use:

Take this medicine before every meal.

Instead of:

First aid kits should be kept in your house and car.

Use:

Keep first aid kits in your house and car.

2. **Use common words rather than technical or medical jargon.**

- jargon is specialized language used by a particular group
- people outside a group may not understand the words
- if you must use a specialized word, provide a definition or use the word in an example.

Instead of:

Your card has been *activated*.

Use:

You may now *use* your card.

You have *hypertension*.

You have *high blood pressure*.

Use acronyms carefully.

Acronyms are formed from the first letter of the words they represent.

The first time you use the proper term, put the acronym in brackets.

Then you can use the acronym in the rest of the document.

Some acronyms like R.C.M.P. and U.S.A. may be so well known that they need no explanation, but,

When in Doubt, Spell it Out!

Instead of:

What is C.O.P.D.?

Use:

What is Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (C.O.P.D.)?

3. **Use a positive tone wherever possible.**

Instead of:

Do not fail to notify your family doctor in case of illness.

Use:

Notify your family doctor when you are sick.

Sometimes a negative tone gives a clearer message.

Instead of:

This medicine is suitable for children over 12 years of age.

Use:

Do not give this medicine to children under 12 years of age.

4. **Write directly to your reader.**

Use the words *you, I, we, us, and our* to make your document more personal.

Instead of:

Patients are asked to register at the reception desk before each appointment.

Use:

Please register at the reception desk before your appointment.

Instead of:

The hospital will advise interested persons when to attend an education session.

Use:

We will tell you when to come in for training.

5. **Use short words (one or two syllables) and short sentences (no more than 15 to 25 words).**

Instead of:

Patients' responsibilities for home convalescence will be reviewed by the physician before departure from the clinic.

Use:

Before you leave, your doctor will explain how to take good care of yourself at home.

6. **Write instructions in the order that you want them carried out.**

Instead of:

Before you leave the clinic, make an appointment for a follow-up visit at the reception desk.

Use:

Make an appointment for a follow-up visit at the reception desk before you leave the clinic.

7. **List important points separately from the text.**

Instead of:

Feb.7-8, 2009, Vernon Better Breathing, Vernon Health Unit, 15th Street & Hwy 97, Vernon, BC; 9am tel (250) 555-9911. fax (250) 555-9916

Use:

Better Breathing 2009

Date: February 7th and 8th, 2009

Time: 9:00 am to 12:00 pm

Place : Vernon Health Unit,
15th Street & Hwy 97

Tel: (250) 555-9911

Fax: (250) 555-9916

8. **Don't change verbs into nouns.**

<i>Verbs</i>	<i>Nouns</i>
decide	decision
examine	examination
inspect	inspection

Instead of:

All **decisions** pertaining to the payment of medical claims which exceed \$500 are the prerogative of your insurance company.

Use:

Your insurance company will **decide** if it will pay medical claims which are more than \$500.

9. **List items in a parallel (the same grammatical) form.**

Instead of:

Three healthy habits are:

1. Getting eight hours of sleep each night.
2. You should eat three balanced meals every day.
3. It is important to exercise regularly.

Better

Three healthy habits are:

1. Getting eight hours of sleep each night.
2. Eating three balanced meals every day.
3. Exercising regularly.

Best

Three healthy habits:

1. Get eight hours of sleep each night.
2. Eat three balanced meals every day.
3. Exercise regularly.

10. **Test what you write.**

Have someone else read and comment on what you write. Test the materials with patients and their families. Consult with people who know your audience better than you do. This process will tell you if:

- your audience **wants** to read your work
- they **can** read it
- they can **make use** of it

While preparing your document, here are some quick and easy checks you can make:

- read the draft of your document out loud
- check the spelling, grammar and readability level of the document on your computer

Look in “tools” and the spelling and grammar menu.

Reading Grade Levels (readability)

The appropriate reading level for printed material depends on the audience you are writing for. A technical article written for people with specialized training could be written at a higher level than an information pamphlet for the general public. Know your audience!

Some General Guidelines	Grade Levels
Specialized information for informed audience	9 – college
Material written for the general public	6 – 8
Material written for general public including people whose first language is not English	5 – 6

Most newspapers are written at grade 6 – 8 readability levels.

This manual is written at a 7.8 Flesch-Kincaid readability level.

More Helpful Tips

Avoid the use of double negatives.

Instead of:

He was not absent.

The procedure will not be ineffective.

Use:

He was present

The procedure will be effective.

Avoid unnecessary preambles. They can weaken or hide the point they introduce.

Avoid:

- It is important to add that...
- It may be recalled that...
- In this regard it is of significance that...
- It is interesting to note that...

“I understand the fury in your words, but not the words.”

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) “Othello” Act 2 scene 2

Cut out unnecessary words. Use one word instead a group of words.

Instead of:

a large number of

at regular intervals of time

at the present time

with regard to

in the event that

Use:

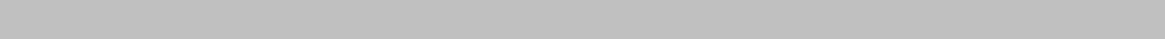
more

regularly

now

about

if



Use plain, everyday words.

Instead of:

accompany

administer

analgesic

ascertain

assist

augment

cognizant

comply

components

consequently

contusion

deficiency

demonstrate

endeavour

entails

epidermis

inconsequential

ingest

initiate

intersects

occur

optimum

option

prior to

regarding

Use:

go with

give, manage

pain reliever

find out

help

add, increase

aware

do, follow

parts

so

bruise

not enough

show

try

involves

skin

un-important

eat

start

crosses

happen

best, most

choice

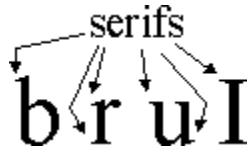
before

about

Design Your Document

Use a clear type style.

- there are two broad categories of type styles: *serif* and *non serif*.
- *serif* type has “hooks” or “feet” on the letters



The hook, or serif, helps the reader’s eyes move along the line of type. This makes the letter easier to read.

- *sans serif* type has no hooks

b r u l

Sans serif type styles draw the eye down into the text that follows. They are helpful for headings, tables and charts that you want to highlight from the main text. They are also useful when you have to use small type, such as in photo captions.

Times New Roman is the easiest type to read. However, there is some evidence that **Verdana** is the easiest to read on a computer screen because there is more space between the letters. This manual uses Times New Roman. Here are some type styles to compare:

The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog. (Times New Roman)

The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog. (Courier)

The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog.
(**Snap**)

The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog. (Verdana)

Use a type size 12 point or larger.

- letter size is measured in a unit called "points", the bigger the point size, the bigger the letter

This is 12 point. This is 14 point. This is 16 point. This is 18 point.

Be aware of line length and page margins.

Text that has a ragged or uneven right margin is easier to read than text that has a justified or full margin. A justified right margin creates unequal spaces between words and hyphenates many words at the ends of lines. Hyphenated words are hard to read.

(This paragraph was typed with a full margin and hyphenation)

Text that is centred or ragged on both sides doesn't show the reader where sentences begin and end. It looks like each line is a sentence in itself.

(This paragraph is centred.)

Leave lots of white (blank) space.

A page covered in closely packed small type is hard to read.

To add white space:

- change line spacing (use 1½ or more)
- change top, bottom, left and right margins
- add spaces between paragraphs

Use upper (capital) case and lower case normally.

- lower case letters are easier to read than all capital, or upper case letters
- mixed-case words keep their distinctive shapes, while the all capital words look more or less rectangular



The image shows two versions of the word 'shapes'. The first is in lowercase 'shapes' with a red outline that follows the irregular, natural shape of the letters. The second is in uppercase 'SHAPES' with a red rectangular outline that forces the word into a uniform shape, making it look like a block.

- WORDS MADE UP OF CAPITAL LETTERS ARE SEEN AS BLOCKS AND ARE HARD TO READ, ESPECIALLY IN A PASSAGE OF TEXT.

Headings

Use a clear and consistent style for headings and subheadings.

To emphasize particular content you can use:

- **bold** or *italic* type
- underlining
- a different but complementary type style
- subheadings
- illustrations
- text in boxes

Colour can be used to highlight information.

- use colours that provide good contrast
- black type on light coloured paper is the easiest to read
- soft blue or grey paper or background with black type is easier on the eyes

This is easier to read.

This is harder to read.

Graphics

Use graphics (illustrations, photographs, diagrams, lines and symbols) with caution. Make sure they mean the same thing to the readers as they do to you. Test them out. Don't use too many graphics.

Page Breaks

- start a new topic at the top of a page
- keep sentences and paragraphs on the same page
- break your writing up at a place that makes sense

Keep overall design elements (typestyle, type size, headings) to a minimum. This will make it easier for your reader to scan and pick out the important information.

Plain Language Writing – Ongoing Support

We are available to review and edit your documents.

Contact information:

Debbie Schiller or Kathy Wylie

Phone: 250 - 275 - 3117

Fax: 250 - 275 - 3118

Email: dschiller@junctionliteracy.ca

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For more information and links to many plain language websites,
visit the Junction Literacy Centre website at:

www.junctionliteracy.ca

Plain Language Check List (1)

1. Reading Audience
 - Who will be reading the document?
 - What is the best format to get the message to them?
2. Purpose
 - Why are you writing it?
 - What do you want to say?
 - Have you included the most important information?
3. Organization
 - Have you based the order of your material on the reader's needs?
 - Does the important information come first?
 - Have you said what you have to say, and no more?
4. Tone
 - Have you considered your reader's needs and written to the reader directly?
 - Do you sound helpful and appropriately personal?
 - Does your text read like informal conversation?
5. Style
 - Have you limited the length of your paragraphs?
 - Are your sentences short and clear?
 - Have you used familiar words, consistent terms and concrete examples?
6. Design
 - Is your design attractive and easy to read, with lots of white space and breaks in the text?
 - Have you helped people find the information they need? Are the contents of your document listed in your introduction? Have you included a table of contents?
 - Can the reader understand your graphics and illustrations?
 - Do the graphics and illustrations help your text?
7. Checking with Your Reading Audience
 - Have you asked a sample group of readers to check your draft document?

Plain Language Checklist (2)

Tone and Style

- Simple words (1 or 2 syllables)
- Short sentences (15 to 25 words)
- Each sentence contains only one idea
- Active voice
- Personal tone
- Clear message and organization

Organizing Information

- Logical sequence
- No more than 3 to 5 main points
- Headings and summary words used
- Bullets or numbers used

The Reader Knows

- Why this information is important to him
- What he has to do with the information
- How he has to do it
- What will happen if he doesn't follow the instructions

Fonts and Margins

- Font size of 12 or more
- Sentences or paragraphs using all capital letters are avoided
- Flush left margins and ragged right margins

Graphics

- Simple and easy to understand
- Relate visually to the desired behaviours
- Are life-like if cartoons or sketches are used

Visual Appeal

- Lots of white space
- A contrast between the colour of the print and the paper
- An inviting layout that draws the reader's attention

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