



Health literacy strategies for clear communication

Ashley Ring, MPH and Melanie Schwarz, MA

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CommunicateHealth's mission

Advance health equity by designing health information that's easy to access, understand, and use



Learning objectives

After this training, you'll be able to:

- Define personal and organizational health literacy and understand how it relates to your work
- Apply health literacy best practices to help promote equity and inclusion
- Use plain language and clear design strategies to create user-friendly materials



Health literacy overview

What is health literacy?

Personal health literacy

The degree to which **people have the ability** to find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others

Organizational health literacy

The degree to which **organizations equitably enable people** to find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others



Factors that affect health literacy

Groups that are underserved and at risk for poor health outcomes are the most likely to have limited health literacy skills, often because of:

- The conditions in their environments
- Discrimination and systemic racism

Effects of limited health literacy skills

People with limited health literacy skills may struggle to:



Understand a
vaccination chart



Calculate the right
dose of medicine



Follow directions for
fasting before surgery



Health literacy is situational

Anyone can have limited health literacy skills sometimes because:

- Health information can be complex and overwhelming
- People may be stressed, scared, and sick when they get health information

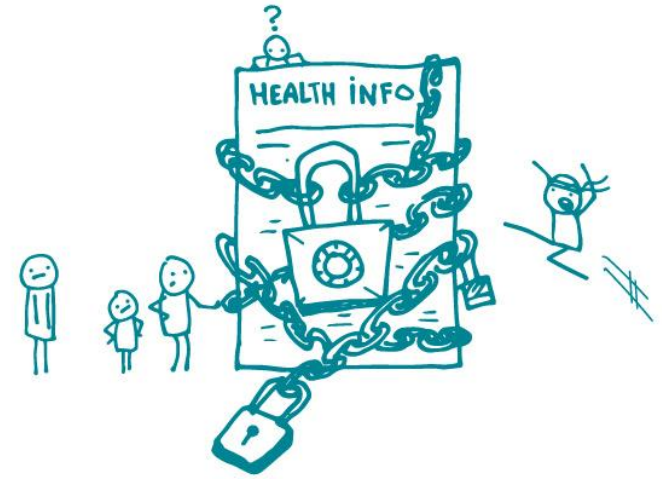
Quick question

How does health literacy play into your work?



How we can help

As health professionals, we can **help people understand health information** by communicating clearly and creating user-friendly materials





Health literacy strategies to use in your work

Set the stage: define your audience and purpose

Define your audience

Who is your material for?

- **Broad audience:** People in Texas
- **Specific audience:** Black or African American adults who haven't had a flu shot in 1 year or more



Define your material's purpose

Think of the purpose statement as your main communication objective: What do you want people to **think, feel, or do** after they read the material?

- **Vague purpose statement:** Educate about flu shots
- **Specific, actionable purpose statement:** Encourage Black or African American adults to get this year's flu shot

Create a clear structure and information hierarchy



Key point

A clear structure and information hierarchy helps readers quickly scan your material — and take in important information

Draft a clear main message and put it first

The main message is the **most important thing you want readers to know**

- **Vague main message:** Heart disease is a serious health risk
- **Clear, actionable main message:** Heart disease can cause serious health problems and even death — but you can take steps to lower your risk for heart disease



Only include “need-to-know” information

Need-to-know

You can take steps to lower your risk for heart disease — like eating healthy, getting active, and using strategies to lower stress.

Nice-to-know

For more than 100 years, heart disease has been the leading cause of death in the United States — and this trend continues today. Heart disease includes different types of heart conditions, like coronary artery disease. The good news is that **you can take steps to lower your risk for heart disease, like eating healthy, getting active, and using strategies to lower stress.**

Break up text

- Divide text into short sections with clear, actionable headers
- Limit each paragraph to 1 thought or idea
- Use bullets for lists of 3 items or more

What is astigmatism?

Astigmatism is a common eye problem that can make your vision blurry or distorted. It happens when your cornea (the clear front layer of your eye) or lens (an inner part of your eye that helps the eye focus) has a different shape than normal.

The only way to find out if you have astigmatism is to get an eye exam. Eyeglasses or contact lenses can help you see better – and some people can get surgery to fix their astigmatism.

What are the symptoms of astigmatism?

The most common symptoms of astigmatism are:

- Blurry vision
- Needing to squint to see clearly
- Headaches
- Eye strain
- Trouble seeing at night

If you have mild astigmatism, you might not notice any symptoms. That's why it's important to get regular eye exams – your eye doctor can help you make sure you're seeing as clearly as possible. This is especially true for children, who may be less likely to realize that their vision isn't normal.



Activity: Choose actionable headers

Which header is most actionable?

1. “About asthma”
2. “Asthma symptoms”
3. “Prevent asthma attacks”
4. “How can I prevent asthma attacks at home?”

Write in plain language



What is plain language?

Plain language is communication your audience can **understand the first time they read or hear it** — and it's one of the most important tools you have to create accessible materials that resonate with your readers



Choose simple words

Choose **everyday words** that people use in conversation.

Complex language

The medication should be taken once a day. You should not consume food for 30 minutes after taking the medication. Any side effects you experience should immediately be reported to a health care provider.

Simple language

Take your medicine once a day. After you take the medicine, don't eat anything for 30 minutes. Tell your doctor or nurse right away if you have any side effects.

Define unfamiliar terms

If you have to use a complex term because your audience needs to know it: Define it!

- High blood pressure (**also called hypertension**) can raise your risk of heart disease.
- Eating foods with too much **sodium (salt)** can cause high blood pressure.
- **Coronary arteries are blood vessels that bring blood and oxygen to your heart.** When you have coronary artery disease (CAD), those blood vessels become narrow.

Activity: Replace jargon terms

Jargon	Plain language
Administer	Give
Utilize	Use
Malignant tumor	Cancer
Medication adherence	Taking your medicine exactly the way your doctor tells you to

Use active voice

Passive voice: The subject of the sentence is receiving the action

Getting a flu shot is recommended.

Active voice: The subject of the sentence is doing the action

Experts recommend that you get a flu shot.



Use a friendly, conversational tone

- Refer to readers as “you”
- Use contractions
- Aim for conversational, not formal

Instead of: Patients may be overwhelmed with information about treatment options. They should contact the health care team with any questions.

Try: Learning about your treatment options can feel overwhelming. Remember that you’re not alone — if you have questions, ask your health care team for help.

Include clear action steps



Tell your audience *what* to do — and *how*

- Give clear, specific instructions
- Provide enough information for people to understand — but not so much that they might get overwhelmed or confused
- Use bulleted or numbered lists



Tell your audience *why* to take action

If people understand how they can benefit from taking an action, they're more likely to do it.

Less motivating

It's important to follow your hospital discharge instructions.

More motivating

Following your hospital discharge instructions helps you stay healthy — and makes it less likely you'll have to come back to the hospital for more treatment.



Make action steps doable and realistic

- Consider barriers that might make it hard for people to carry out a behavior
- Try to give small, manageable action steps
- Offer alternatives to account for different preferences and situations



Doable and realistic action steps

Instead of this

Work out for at least 150 minutes each week.

Try this

Get as much physical activity as you can. Experts recommend 150 minutes a week, but any amount of activity has health benefits. You can try:

- Taking a walk after dinner
- Doing squats while you're watching TV
- Taking the stairs instead of the elevator
- Lots of things count!



Activity: Write a clear, motivating, doable action step

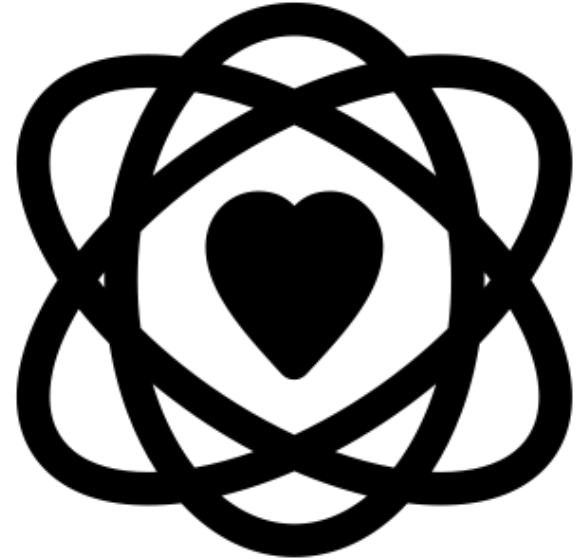
How could you improve this action step?

Get a checkup.

Use culturally familiar, inclusive language and examples

What is inclusive language?



- Reflects your audience's diverse identities and experiences
- Helps people feel seen, heard, and respected



How to use inclusive language

- Write content that your audience can relate to
- Use gender-neutral terms
- Avoid making assumptions about your audience's life situations
- Avoid terms that can promote stigma and stereotypes

Avoid stigmatizing language

-  Get tested for HIV regularly so you know if you're clean.
-  Get tested regularly so you know your HIV status — and you can get the care you need if you find out you do have HIV.

Inclusive language = familiar language

- Make sure examples of activities, foods, and experiences are culturally familiar
- Choose names and images that represent your audience in terms of race/ethnicity, age, and gender
- When you're writing for a broad audience, choose examples and images that don't exclude anyone

Activity: Make this content more inclusive

Check out these tips for talking with your husband about your breast cancer diagnosis.

Check out these tips for talking with your **spouse or partner** about your breast cancer diagnosis.



**Design materials so they're
easy to read**

Include plenty of white space

White space is one of the most important design tools you have. It helps the eyes rest and gives your content room to breathe.



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Use a font that's easy to read

- Use at least 12-point font for most written materials — and 16-point for web content
- Avoid decorative fonts, ALL CAPS, *italics*, or underlining



Visually emphasize key points

Try using:

- **Bolding**
- Larger size
- **Color**
- Icons
- Call-out boxes



Questions?

Thank you!



ashley@communicatehealth.com

melanie@communicatehealth.com



communicatehealth.com