Nearly half of American adults are “basic level” readers, that is they read below an eighth grade reading level. Most health education materials are written above a 10th grade reading level. This mismatch creates a challenge for healthcare educators, who need to create materials that are appealing, easy-to-read, grab the reader’s attention, and get our message across to patients, staff, and the community. Plain language is a way of organizing and presenting information so that it makes sense and is easy to read for the intended audience. It starts with a commitment to learn as much as you can about the people for whom you are writing. The goal is to learn how your audience thinks and feels about your topic or issue – what is it that they want and need to know. Think about the purpose of the material and ask yourself, “How will the information be used? Who needs to know the information and why? When will they need to know it? What do you expect the reader to know and do?”

The *Easy Does It Training Manual*, written by the National Literacy and Health Program at the Canadian Public Health Association, states “to use plain language, you must put a L.I.D. on it! Pay attention to the Language you use, the organization and Information you present, and the Design of your text.” Apply the following tips when writing in plain language:

**Language or a writing style that creates strong visual images:**
- Use the active voice rather than passive voice
- Use common words rather than technical jargon. If technical words are necessary, explain them. Use terms consistently throughout the material.
- Use a positive tone whenever possible. Write directly to your reader by using the terms you, I, we, us, and our. Refer to your reader in first person.
- Use short words and sentences. Do not hide important information in complex sentence structure. List important points separate from the text with bullets, but include no more than 5-7 items in a list.
- Emphasize concrete examples rather than abstract principles. Use analogies and explain difficult concepts.

**Information that is organized and engages the reader:**
- Key messages are action or behavior-focused, up front, and repeated
- Major points are limited to 3-5 “need to know” rather than “nice to know” information. Give people practical information.
- Text is sequenced and presented in a way that is logical to the reader.
- Write instructions in the order that you want them carried out.
- Paragraphs and / or sections are short (3-4 sentences), limited to a single message, visually distinct, and appropriately labeled with subheadings.
Material actively engages the reader by using creative formats (testimonials, dialogue, vivid language, check list, self-quiz, stories, problem solving, short answer).

Design tips to enhance the appeal or appearance:
- Cover or masthead includes title and behavior-focused message
- Layout looks uncluttered with ample white space, generous margins, and line lengths of only 2-5 inches. A “wall of words” overwhelms people. White space, words, and illustrations are balanced and proportional to each other.
- Column width is between 2-5 inches
- Left flush justification and right ragged
- Use highly visible subheadings that are concrete, informative, and guide readers unfamiliar with the context.
- Emphasize key points with use of boxes, rule lines, bolding, increased print size, different typeface, bullets, color, other symbols.
- Use serif typeface for text and san serif for headings. Use upper and lower case letters in 12-14 point. Do not use all capital letters or italics.
- Use illustrations and graphics to help reader understand text. Make sure they are clear and uncluttered and use captions that are easy to read.

Field-Testing Plain Language Health Information Materials

When writing easy-to-read materials, it’s critical to know that your materials work. Unfortunately, field-testing materials is a crucial step that is often skipped. The best way to determine whether your materials work is to ask your intended audience. Individuals who have similar characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, skills, and accessibility as the target audience are recruited for the field-testing phase. In addition to seeking out specific individuals, you can form focus groups especially created for this purpose or seek out established groups where there are individuals who have limited literacy skills, such as adult education literacy classes in schools. Below are some examples of key questions to ask the intended audience when field-testing materials:

What are we testing?
- a. Content: Can the audience read, understand, and remember the key points?
- b. Utility: Does it get the job done? Will the audience use it?
- c. Appeal: How does the audience respond to the material? Is the piece attractive, persuasive, easy-to-read, and personally relevant?

What questions should be asked?
- a. Start with a general questions, such as: What are some words you would use to describe this pamphlet? What do you like best (least) about this brochure?
- b. Questions on content:
  - What are some of the major ideas?
  - Are any ideas confusing to you?
  - Are there any important ideas left out?
  - Are people with similar problems likely to be concerned about these ideas?
c. Questions about using the information:
   • Can a person reading this booklet do what it recommends?
   • If you were given this booklet, what would you do with it?
   • Describe how you would use this booklet in the future

d. Questions on writing style:
   • Are there words you don’t understand?
   • What do you think about how the ideas were presented?
   • What do you think about the length of the booklet?
   • Do the words sound the way people talk?

e. Questions about layout and design:
   • What do you like or dislike about the way the material looks?
   • Do the pictures help get the ideas across?
   • Are there pictures you would change or add?
   • Is the print large enough?
   • Is it organized in a way that helps you understand the key points?

Literacy is related to health. Over the past 10 years, several studies on the social determinants of health have identified literacy as having a significant impact on a person’s health and safety. Using these guidelines in writing makes sense if we expect to make a difference in the ability of a large proportion of the adult population we serve to not only read, but also to understand and act on the health care information we give them.

Reference: Canadian Public Health Association and the National Literacy and Health Program. Easy Does It! Plain Language and Clear Verbal Communication Training Manual. Canadian Health Association, 400-1565 Carling Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, K1Z 8R1, Phone: (613) 725-3769, Fax: (613) 725-9826, E-mail: comm@cpha.ca. www.cpha.ca. 1998.

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