



Health Literacy and Plain Language Primer

What is health literacy?

The U.S Department of Health and Human Services defines health literacy 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.”

It’s not just being able to read. It includes skills like being able to: understand brochures and medication instructions, accurately describe symptoms, operate a computer, and evaluate information for accuracy, amongst other things.

Why is health literacy important?

People with low health literacy have:

- Higher hospitalization rates
- Longer hospital stays
- Increased difficulty controlling chronic illnesses
- Increased medication errors

According to the American Medical Association, poor health literacy is a stronger predictor of a person’s health status than age, income, employment status, education level and race.

What is plain language?

Plain language is a way of writing material so that it is clear and easy to understand. Writing material in plain language does not “dumb down” the material or make it unprofessional. It presents material simply in order to be an effective teaching tool for the widest possible audience.

How do you write in plain language?

Plain language encompasses the following components:

Organization

- Only include what the patient **needs** to know
- Present information in a logical order
- Use subheadings and bullets to chunk information

Style

- Use short words and sentences
- Avoid medical jargon. If a medical term must be used, then explain its meaning.
- Explain vague terms (i.e. ‘plenty’ of water, ‘heavy’ objects).

- Use the active voice (Take the medicine at 8am).
- Use personal pronouns. For example, use you instead of patient, we instead of the nurse.

Format

- Use at least 12 point font
- Avoid using all caps or italics
- Use pictures that add to the content
- Use serif font