

Developing Easy-to-Read Health and Science Materials

Many literacy experts believe that the “problem” of illiteracy has as much to do with the way things are written as it does with the ability to read well. Changing the way health and science materials are written can make information more accessible to a wider audience. Below are some simple guidelines that can help writers communicate more effectively with readers of all ability levels.

Layout and Design

- Use large print, 12 point type or larger.
- Use serif typefaces which make text easier to read across a line.
- Allow ample space between lines of type.
- Avoid hyphenation.
- Use illustrations and diagrams where appropriate.
- Avoid heavy blocks of type.
- Don't use many different type styles.
- Don't use text that is justified on both sides; using a left justified margin and a ragged right margin makes text easier to read.

Organization of Information

- Place main ideas near the beginning of text.
- Focus on what the reader needs to know.
- Avoid breaking pages in mid-paragraph.

Language and Vocabulary

- Avoid jargon.
- Use scientific terminology only where necessary.
- Where technical terms cannot be avoided, define each term well when first used.
- Avoid language that demonstrates cultural, gender, or class bias.
- Don't use complicated or long sentences.
- Use active verbs.
- Test material for readability, using a standardized readability test, but be flexible in your use of readability scales (it is okay to make allowances for scientific terms if they are well defined).
- Remember that what seems simple to you could be difficult to someone with a limited science background.

Point of View

- Maintain an adult point of view, even though you use simple language.
- Assume a lack of familiarity with science, but not necessarily a lack of interest.
- Use everyday analogies with adult connotations.
- Be sensitive to the culture of your target audience.
- Consider the context in which your reader will encounter the material.

Review Process

- Assess the need for the type of material you plan to develop.
- Provide for ample review for science accuracy and for language appropriateness.
- Build in plenty of time for revision and review.
- Pre-test materials with the target audience.

For more information about writing easy-to-read public education materials, please refer to the following:

Ontario Literacy Coalition, *Clear writing and literacy*. Toronto, Ontario: 1990. (Ordering information: Ontario Literacy Coalition, 365 Bloor Street, East, Suite 1003, Toronto, Ontario M4W 3M7.)

Push Literacy Action Now, Inc., *Just say it! How to write for readers who don't read well*. Washington, DC: 1992. (Ordering information: Push Literacy Action Now, Inc. (PLAN, Inc.), 1332 G St., SE, Washington, DC 20003.)

(Excerpted from *Science for Life: A Report of the Science + Literacy for Health Project* by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and the National Institute on Drug Abuse.)