

This ongoing series provides information on how to develop programs to educate Medicare beneficiaries and their families. Additional information about this and other projects is available on the Center for Medicare Education's web site: [www.MedicareEd.org](http://www.MedicareEd.org).

# Writing Easy-to-Read Materials

## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief provides the basics to help you write easy-to-read materials. Writing in an easy-to-read manner is a skill. It takes years of experience to make it part of your everyday writing habits. This brief gives you some background information and "tricks of the trade" to get you going. For more information, check the Center for Medicare Education Web site. . . . Special thanks to Sue Stableford, MPH, MSB, Director, Maine AHEC Health Literacy Center, for her input and guidance.

## Why Is It Important to Write Easy-to-Read Materials?

According to the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey, 44 percent of people age 65 and over read at about the fifth grade level or less. An additional 30 percent read between approximately the fifth and eighth grade levels (Kirsch IS, Jungeblat A, Jenkins L, Kolstad A, 1993: *Adult Literacy in America*. National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education). The National Adult Literacy Survey also showed that older adults had more limited literacy skills than younger individuals, in part due to lower levels of education and visual impairments.

What does all this mean? Many of the people you are trying to reach have difficulty understanding what they read. Three quarters of people age 60 and over have very basic or marginal reading skills. They need materials that are written in plain language and are easy to read. And, chances are, everyone else would appreciate something that is quick and accessible.

Health care materials are usually written at or above the 10th grade level. This means that most people age 65 and older cannot fully understand the health care information presented to them! If the material were written in a different way, many more people would be able to understand it.

Writing easy-to-read materials does not mean writing in a childish way. It means using an adult format, and making the information as easy to understand as possible. Most people are already uncomfortable about making health care choices. Easy-to-read materials help them understand what they need to *know* and what they need to *do* to get the care they need.

The first step in writing easy-to-read materials is to be certain you are presenting the information in a way that is culturally sensitive. Make sure you know enough about your intended audience and how they respond to health-related information.

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## What Should I Include in an Easy-to-Read Document?

Most people remember no more than three to five ideas when they read something. Jamming too much information into a document or page will confuse readers so they don't remember anything at all. So, get to the point as quickly as possible. Focus on the most important things you want readers to know and remember. If you must include technical details to satisfy legal or regulatory requirements, put them in the back. That way, most readers won't give up trying to read the most important information.

If you have a lot of material to cover, include a short list at the beginning of the document, or at the beginning of each section. This helps readers review what they need to know, and reinforces what they are learning.

Use examples, and repeat important points more than once. People remember things better if they read them a number of times. This is especially true with technical terms and ideas that are new to them. Use examples to reinforce concepts, and explain words and ideas that are difficult to understand.

### Original text:

*"Your PCP is responsible for determining that the medical procedures and treatment you receive are medically necessary and appropriate."*

### Revised text:

*"When you need medical care, you must call your PCP (Primary Care Provider). He or she will decide with you what care you need and where to get it."*

## What Should I Avoid?

Try not to use technical jargon and terms. Use the words and language your readers use in their everyday lives instead. If you must include technical information, be sure to explain what it means and use it in context. If the way to pronounce the term is not clear from its spelling, be sure to give the pronunciation as well. *Example: "When you join a new health plan, you will need to pick a PCP (Primary Care Provider)."*

Avoid glossaries; most people don't use them, especially poor readers. Include new words and their meanings in the body of the text instead. And remember, it's OK to repeat new information more than once, especially if it's in a new section or chapter.

## How Should I Organize the Information?

The cover page or title page is your first chance to "grab" your readers and let them know this document is for them. Make sure it indicates the core content in a few key words or phrases. It should also identify the intended audience. Is it for current Medicare recipients? Service providers? Family members who help older people make health care choices? Choose illustrations that are appropriate for the target audience.

Organize and present the information in the document from a user's perspective. Put it in an order that makes sense to the reader. Try to "chunk" bits of information in ways readers will remember, or in the way they will use it. If you are describing a process, such as using the emergency room, describe the steps in the order the reader will need to know or use them. If you are providing a list of information or points, give the most important information first.

If you are writing a reference document, such as how to select a managed care provider, make sure readers can easily locate important information if they need to look at it again.

Make important information easy to find. Use headers to emphasize sections. Include summaries at the end of chapters or sections to help reinforce important points. Headers and summaries also serve as a way to repeat important information for readers. Make action steps or desired behaviors stand out. Readers should know immediately what they need to do and how they should do it.

## How Should I Write?

Keep your sentences short, but not choppy. Average sentence length should be about 15 words or fewer. Keep words short, too. The fewer syllables, the better. Don't use a complicated word or sentence if a simple one will do. Use the terms your readers use. For example, they may say "shots" instead of "injections" or "immunizations."

Use a conversational style that copies how your intended audience speaks. Try reading what you write out loud to see how it sounds. Here are the three most important things to remember while you are writing:

**1. USE THE ACTIVE VOICE.** This helps the reader imagine he is going through the experience as he is reading about it.

✦ **Original sentence in passive voice:**

*“Eye examinations and vision tests are covered in the plan.”*

✦ **Revised sentence in active voice:**

*“This plan covers eye exams and vision tests.”*

**2. BE DIRECT, SPECIFIC AND CONCRETE.** And, be as interesting and accurate as possible.

✦ **Original sentence:**

*“It is important to choose a health plan that meets the health needs of the patient.”*

✦ **Revised sentence:**

*“Decide which services and doctors you most want in a health plan. Then, pick the plan that offers them.”*

**3. USE PERSONAL PRONOUNS** to make readers know how the information applies to them.

✦ **Original sentence:**

*“When members have a problem or grievance, they can call the Member Services Department for help.”*

✦ **Revised sentence:**

*“If you have a problem or complaint, call the Member Services Department. It is their job to help you.”*

Make the material interesting for the reader. Use checklists and pose questions to make the reader stop and think. Try using a dialogue or story format, or testimonials and statements from people your target audience can relate to. People learn and remember better if they interact with the material.

## How Should the Document Look?

Each page should be interesting to look at and should draw the reader’s attention to what is important. Many people try to cram as much information onto a page as possible. This is a mistake. While it saves space, full pages of text are harder to read and to understand, and poor readers may skip the page entirely. Here are some tips on how each page should look.

Use 13 to 14 point serif type.

This is “Times New Roman” in 14 point font.

This is “Arial” in 14 point font.

The Times Roman typeface is easier to read, because it’s a “serif” font. Serif fonts have little “hats” and “feet” that make the letters stand out. Arial is a typeface without serifs, or sans-serif. Although many designers think Arial is prettier to look at, it is harder to read, because all of the letters look much more alike. Save sans-serif fonts for titles and headers.

Be sure to use clean, simple letter styles with no more than two or three diverse styles on any page. Don’t use:

- *fancy print*
- shadow print
- outline print
- *print with “curlicue-s” on the ends*
- **script** or *italics*
- **reverse print**

## What About Pictures, Graphs, Charts?

Pictures help attract attention and reinforce the text. They should be simple, realistic drawings or photos and should be appropriate for the intended audience. Don’t include pictures that simply decorate the page; they distract the reader. The quality of the picture is reduced each time you make a copy of a copy. Avoid photos and complex drawings if you are going to photocopy the material, or if others will be photocopying the material once you send it to them.

Avoid graphs and complicated charts. They are often difficult to understand, and poor readers have a lot of trouble trying to extract information from them. Use words to explain the key information in a graph. If you must use a chart, make it no more than three columns across and three rows down, and include some directions about how to read it.

Use capitals and lowercase letters when you write. DO NOT WRITE IN ALL CAPITALS, BECAUSE IT IS DIFFICULT TO READ. Do one of the following to emphasize important information instead:

- Make critical information stand out by putting it in a box;
- Put important words or short phrases in **bold print**;
- Increase the font size to introduce new sections and to make information stand out;
- Underline short phrases. *Make sure the line is not too close to the words,* or it will be hard to read. Use the “horizontal rule line” function in your word processing program to customize the underlining function;
- Use headers to introduce new sections of the text. You can make the headers stand out by underlining them and/or using bold print and
- Make lists stand out by using bullets or dingbats. A bullet is a small dot that precedes an item in a list. A dingbat is some other mark, such as an arrow or a check mark, that lists a series of items under a heading.

The pages and sections within your document should look uncluttered. Be sure to leave ample white space on each page. Use generous margins. For example, on an 8.5” by 11” page, leave a 2 inch margin on each side, with one column of text in the middle. If you need to fit more information on a page, be sure that each column is no more than 5 inches across. This helps poor readers follow the text from the end of one line to the beginning of the next. Think about how hard it would be to read a newspaper from one line to the next if the text went all the way across each page!

The AHEC HEALTH LITERACY CENTER offers consulting in plain English health communication, training in how to write easy-to-read materials, and development of easy-to-read health materials. The Center offers a national Summer Training Institute in Maine every June, *Write It Easy-to-Read*. The Year 2000 will mark the ninth such Institute.

For more information about the Institute and other Center activities and publications, check their Web site. Or, contact:

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## How Do I Make Sure I Succeed?

First, test the document with a readability formula, such as the Fry formula, which checks for word and sentence length. Beware of the Flesch-Kincaid formula that’s on word processing programs. It often reports three grade levels too low. Do a manual readability check instead. You can find the Fry formula in *Teaching Patients with Low Literacy Skills* by Doak, Doak and Root, J.B. Lippincott Company. The readability formula should be used as a screen to ensure that you are not using too many long or complicated words and sentences. It should not be used in place of editing and review by other staff and members of your target audience.

Then, ask a test group to review the material while it is still in draft form, before you have printed the final copies. Testing the material with members of your target audience will help answer a number of questions.

### Does the intended audience understand what you’ve written?

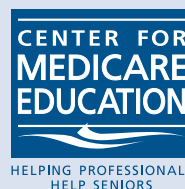
#### Is the material acceptable to them?

- **• TONE:** Is the tone pleasant and friendly?
- **• CLARITY:** Is the information clear and understandable?
- **• ATTITUDE:** Is the information presented in a way that’s respectful?
- **• AESTHETICS:** Do they like the way it looks?

#### How helpful is the information you are presenting?

- Is this information they can use?
- Does your target audience intend to use this information?
- What are some examples of when and how they will use it?

Be sure to ask people what changes they would recommend, and try to incorporate these suggestions into the final copy.



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## *Checklist for Easy-to-Read Materials*

### **WHAT TO INCLUDE AND WHAT TO AVOID**

- ✓ Include three to five main messages that stand out to the reader
- ✓ Include short lists at the beginning of the document or beginning each section
- ✓ Use examples to reinforce important points and explain difficult concepts
- ✓ Repeat important information more than once
- ✓ Avoid technical terms and jargon; if you must use them, explain them within the text
- ✓ Avoid glossaries
- ✓ Use simple pen and ink drawings to reinforce text and draw attention to key points
- ✓ Avoid drawings and photographs that do not photocopy well
- ✓ Avoid complicated charts and graphs

### **HOW TO ORGANIZE THE MATERIAL**

- ✓ “Grab” the reader on the cover page or title page
- ✓ Think and write like a reader or a “regular person,” not like a professional
- ✓ Keep the steps in order when describing a process
- ✓ Put most important information first, and least important information last
- ✓ Make sure readers can go back and easily locate important information
- ✓ Use headers and summaries to introduce new material, and reinforce and highlight key points

### **WRITING STYLE**

- ✓ Use short words and sentences
- ✓ Use words and phrases your readers use
- ✓ Use conversational style: active voice, vivid nouns and verbs, personal pronouns
- ✓ Include dialogue or story format, or testimonials
- ✓ Pose questions or use checklists to encourage interaction with the material

### **HOW THE DOCUMENT SHOULD LOOK**

- ✓ Use 13 or 14 point serif type
- ✓ Use simple letter styles; avoid fancy print that’s difficult to read
- ✓ Use capital and lowercase letters
- ✓ Emphasize important points by putting them in a box, using bold print, increasing font size and/or underlining short phrases
- ✓ Use bullets and dingbats to make lists stand out
- ✓ Leave ample white space and margins
- ✓ Make columns no more than 5 inches across

### **FIELD TESTING**

- ✓ Test document with readability formula
  - ✓ Get feedback from target audience and service providers
  - ✓ Revise if necessary and check again with target audience
-

## Fry Readability Graph

### DIRECTIONS FOR USE

1. Randomly select three passages from a book or article and count out exactly 100 words starting at the beginning of a sentence. *Note:* A word is defined as a group of symbols with a space on either side, so a hyphenated word is considered one word. Count proper nouns, initialisms, acronyms and numerals as words. For example, "Joe" "IRA" "1978" and "&" are each one word.
2. Count the number of sentences in each 100 words. First, count the number of complete sentences and write it down. Then, for the last sentence (which is probably not complete), estimate what proportion of the sentence is completed up to the 100th word. Here's the last sentence in a piece, with a slash (/) after the 100th word:  
*Talk with your / doctor about things that are still not clear to you.*  
 In this case, three words out of a total of 12, or 1/4 of the sentence, is included in the 100 words. The fraction (1/4) then gets converted to the nearest tenth (.3). So the total number of sentences will be a whole number plus .3.

3. Count the total number of syllables in each 100-word passage. For initialisms (IRS), acronyms and numerals (1978), count one syllable for each symbol. So, IRA = three syllables and 1978 = four syllables.
4. Find the average number of sentences and average number of syllables. Add the numbers from each of the three passages and divide by three.

### EXAMPLE

	Number of Sentences	Number of Syllables
First 100 words	5.9	124
Second 100 words	4.8	141
Third 100 words	6.1	158
Totals	16.8	423
Totals divided by 3 =	5.6	141
	average # sentences	average # syllables

5. Look at the Fry graph. Find the average number of syllables on the horizontal axis and the average number of sentences on the vertical axis. The intersection of these two points will fall in a "band" indicating the grade level of the material (eighth grade for the example given).

