

# Health+ LITERACY PROJECT

## A Guide for Choosing and Designing Health-Related Materials

### Health literacy defined

Health literacy is defined as a person's ability to read, understand and act on health-related materials.<sup>1</sup> There is often a mismatch between reading ability and the reading level of health materials.

- + One out of five American adults reads at the fifth-grade level or below.
- + The average American reads at the eighth- to ninth-grade reading level.
- + Most health care materials are written above the tenth-grade level.<sup>2</sup>
- + Many people are unable to read and comprehend the information they need to meet their health care needs.

Regardless of reading level, most people prefer health care information that is easy to read and easy to understand.

### Health literacy can be a problem for anyone

People of any age, income or race can find it hard to understand health information. Limited literacy does not mean limited intelligence or motivation. People often do not receive information in a way that is easily understood. Patients may be too embarrassed, stressed or overwhelmed to ask health care providers for further explanations. *Misunderstanding medical directions can put a person's health at risk.*

### Vulnerable populations are most at risk

While even the most literate adults may have difficulty with health literacy issues, vulnerable populations, such as elderly and low-income people, are at highest risk for health literacy issues due to lower literacy skills. People with low literacy skills tend to make more errors in their medication or treatment and are less likely to follow through with treatments.

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**Health literacy is the extent to which people are able to read, understand, and act on health information.**

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It is critical that health care information be written so it is easy for everyone to read, understand and act on. *Improved health literacy will improve the health and lives of people.*

### Making health-related materials easy to read

This publication is designed to assist educators in delivering health-related information that is easy to read, understand and act on. Enclosed is information about recognizing limited literacy clients and choosing or designing easy-to-read materials.

<sup>1</sup> Center for Health Care Strategies, Inc. What is Health Literacy? Fact Sheet. April 2003. <http://www.chcs.org>

<sup>2</sup> Doak CC, Doak LG, Root JH. Teaching Patients with Low Literacy Skills. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co; 1996: 1-9

## A checklist for choosing and designing easy-to-read print materials

Critique your materials using the following checklist. You should answer “yes” to most of these questions for a piece to be easy to read.

**YES NO 1. Content**

- Does the text tell the reader what the piece is about?
- Does the piece focus on what you want the reader to learn and do?
- Does the piece contain no more than three to five main points?
- Are the ideas presented in a logical order?
- Are concepts presented in a clear, “how to” manner?
- Are key points highlighted and summarized?
- Are the references research-based?

**YES NO 2. Writing style**

- Is it written in a friendly tone?
- Are the words used familiar to the *reader*?
- Are difficult concepts explained using common, everyday words?
- Are confusing or unknown terms clearly defined?
- Are bullets and/or numbers used to organize the text, if necessary?
- Are questions, quizzes or checklists used to get the reader involved?

**YES NO 3. Layout and design**

- Is there plenty of white space?
- Does the text look easy to read?
- Are headings and subheadings used to organize the text?
- Are headings and subheadings close to related text?  
There should not be so many headings that it is confusing.
- Do key points stand out? Are they emphasized using text boxes, bold type, color, lines and larger print size?



YES NO

- Is the type easy to see and read? The type should be no smaller than 12-point, serif typeface (the kind with little “feet” on each letter such as Times New Roman or Century). Use a sans serif type (no feet) only for headings and very small amounts of text.
- Is most of the type left justified?
- Is the text (excluding headers) written in upper and lower case letters? Use all CAPS only for headings and subheadings.
- Is the use of color appropriate and not distracting?
- Is there a sharp contrast between the ink color and the paper color (e.g., black ink on white paper, dark purple ink on light pink paper)? Is the print easy to see and read?
- Can the piece be copied on a standard office copy machine if necessary?

YES NO

#### 4. Graphics and illustrations

- Do the graphics help the reader understand the text?
- Are the graphics respectful to all people (culturally appropriate)?
- Is there a graphic of the action(s) you want readers to take?
- Do the graphics include labels that help the reader understand the text?

YES NO

#### 5. Readability check

- Does a readability check confirm the piece is at a reading level appropriate for your audience? (Materials should be written at eighth-grade level or below for the general public, lower for certain audiences). You can use the FRY, Flesh Ease, Gunning Fog, SMOG or other readability tests to determine reading level. For instructions about how to do this, conduct an Internet search.

**Note:** Computer software that tests readability often produces a readability score that is at least *two grade levels below* the actual reading level.

YES NO

#### 6. Field test

- Was the piece field tested with the target audience?

YES NO

#### 7. Copyright law

- If you are going to reproduce or reprint, have you checked to make sure you are following copyright law and have permission from the author/illustrator/photographer to reprint?



If you are going to change the piece in *any way*, have you followed institution guidelines for using copyrighted materials?

# choosing+designing

## Clues for recognizing limited-literacy clients

Clients with limited health literacy skills can be hard to identify. They can be very skilled at hiding any problems they might have with reading. Anyone can have limited health literacy skills despite race, income, age or gender. Listed below are some signs that may indicate limited health literacy skills.<sup>3</sup>

### Behaviors that may indicate low health literacy:

- + Forms that are not filled out completely, if at all
- + Missed appointments
- + Not following instructions or directions
- + Not following through with evaluations or referrals
- + Handing written materials to a relative or other person at an appointment
- + Clients say they are following directions, but no improvement occurs

### Responses that may indicate low health literacy:

- + “I forgot/lost my glasses. I’ll read this later.”
- + “I forgot/lost my glasses. Can you read this to me?”
- + “Let me discuss this with my spouse/children/family.”

### Outside factors that may limit health literacy skills:

- + Age
- + Medication
- + Language barriers
- + Education
- + Cultural differences
- + Stress
- + Poverty

<sup>3</sup> Partnership for Clear Health Communication. (n.d.). Ask Me 3. Retrieved October 28, 2004, from <http://www.askme3.org>.



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