

Clear Writing

The following clear writing tips were compiled and adapted from the following publications.

Kripalani, S. (1995, August). The write stuff: Simple guidelines can help you write and design effective patient education materials. Texas Medicine, 91 (8), 40-45.

National Cancer Institute. (1984). Pretesting in health communications (NIH Publication No. 84-1493). Bethesda, MD: U.S. Government Printing Office.

University of Wisconsin Hospital and Clinics. (1996). Developing Health Facts for You: An author's guide. Madison, WI: Author.

Before You Start Writing:

1. **Who is your audience?** Focus on your patient's needs and concerns. Provide the information that you think your patient will need to know. Focus on what they want to know. Include information about what your patients can expect and how it will affect their daily lives.
2. **Define the purpose of the handout.**
3. **List key points you want to make.**
4. **Check to see if other materials are available.**
5. **Organize the points you've listed.** Use titles and subtitles to clearly define the organization and flow of ideas. Begin the material with an introduction to state the purpose of the document and to orient the reader. Use a summary paragraph to end a section and to recap the major points. Organize instructions in a logical order.
6. **Gather your resources to make sure the content is medically accurate.** Be prepared to thoroughly reference your sources.
7. **Choose the format.** For example, use a descriptive format, a question-and-answer format, or a format with mostly illustrations and explanatory captions.
8. **Define the technical terms you use—use common terms whenever possible.** Do not assume that your patients will understand medical terms. Avoid abbreviations and acronyms except when commonly understood. When specialized vocabulary is essential, a parenthetical definition or a glossary should be included as part of the text.
9. **Remember that the key issues are the information itself and how effectively it is communicated.** Try to keep it simple. Use shorter words.
10. **Place appropriate visual aids (charts, photos, graphics) next to the related ideas in the text.** Illustrations should enhance the document's educational content, not steal the show.

Formatting Guidelines

Proper formatting techniques can help readers understand the material more easily.

1. **Type all documents using Microsoft Word.**
2. **Use highlighting techniques, but don't overuse them.** Highlighting techniques include boldface, italics, and white space. These techniques emphasize important aspects of your document by calling attention to them visually. Be consistent throughout the text.

3. **Use at least 12-point Times New Roman font for text.** If you are writing for the elderly, use a larger type size.
4. **Avoid making lines of type too long or too short.** Use one inch side margins to get a line length of 50-70 characters.
5. **Use white space in the margins and between sections.**
6. **Use left justification to create "ragged" right margins.**
7. **Avoid using capital letters.** Capital letters are harder to read.

How to Write

1. Organizing paragraphs

- Use one idea per paragraph to emphasize each important concept.
- Start each paragraph with a strong topic sentence.
- Use examples to clarify ideas with which the reader may not have had experience.

2. Organizing sentences

- Keep sentences short (approximately 9 to 10 sentences per 100 words).
- Avoid complex sentence structure and long, fact-laden sentences.
- Use the active rather than the passive voice.
- Avoid past tense. Use present tense when defining, explaining, or instructing ("*Clean the site with warm tap water.*") Use the future tense when writing about things to be expected ("*You will be asked to change into a hospital gown.*")
- Use the second person—"you" or "your child."
- Avoid a formal academic tone. Think of talking to the reader when you write.
- Use "he or she" but not "he/she" or "s/he."
- Avoid polysyllabic words whenever possible. In the context of patient education, polysyllabic words are those that have three or more syllables.

Literacy Facts--Did You Know?

- The *average* reading level is at the eighth- to ninth-grade level (between levels 2 and 3 in functional competency measures).
- About *one in five* read at the fifth-grade level and below (in functional competency terms, at about level 1).
- For older Americans (65 and over) and for inner-city minorities almost *two out of five* read below the fifth-grade level (at level 1). (Doak, Doak, & Root, 1996, p. 3)
- According to a recent AMA study, many physicians overestimate how much their patients understand about treatment following a hospital visit. Researchers found that physicians believed 88.9 percent of patients understood potential side effects of medication at discharge, but only 54.7 percent of patients said they understood. Similarly, physicians believed 94.7 percent of patients knew when to resume normal activities, but only 57.9 percent of the patients did. Suggestions for improving communication included comprehensive discharge planning. ([American Hospital Association News](#), May 12, 1997)
- An editorial in JAMA (December 6, 1995) reports that adults with limited literacy face formidable problems using the health care system. They are less likely to use screening procedures, follow medical regimens, keep appointments, or seek help early in the course of a disease. These people struggle with essential information such as understanding emergency department discharge instructions, consent forms, oral instructions, educational materials, and labels on medication containers.

- On average, adults read at an eighth-grade level. The National Work Group on Literacy and Health recommends that health care professionals "get smart" about patient communication. All patients regardless of skill level prefer easy-to-read material. The work group says to aim for a fifth-grade level or lower. (Hospitals and Health Networks, September 5, 1997)
- Adults and children read at least one or two grade levels below their last school grade completed. (Hilts & Krilyk, 1989, p. 3)
- Only 32% of commonly used health education materials are able to be understood by the majority of patients. (Hilts & Krilyk, 1989, p. 4)
- Readability and its impact on the reader has serious implications for people who write health education materials. (Hilts & Krilyk, 1989, p. 4)

Key Point: Aim for a sixth-grade reading level!