Health Literacy Guide
Healthy Communities Unit

Barwon Health

About Health Literacy

What is health literacy?

Health literacy refers to how people understand information about health and health care, and how they apply that information to their lives, use it to make decisions and act on it.[1]

Why is health literacy important?

Health literacy is important because if people cannot find, understand and use health-related information and services, it is hard for them to make well-informed decisions about their health and act on those decisions. Low individual health literacy is associated with:[2]

Increased rates of hospitalisation and greater use of emergency care

Lower use of preventative health behaviours

People being less likely to adhere to medication regimens

People being less likely to have good knowledge of their own diseases or health conditions

Definition

There are many definitions of health literacy. The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care (ACSQHC) conceptualises health literacy as having individual (consumer) and environmental (system) components[3].

Individual health literacy is the skills, knowledge, motivation and capacity of a consumer to access, understand, appraise and apply information to make effective decisions about health and health care, and take appropriate action.

The health literacy environment is the infrastructure, policies, processes, materials, people and relationships that make up the health system, and affect the ways in which consumers access, understand, appraise and apply health-related information and services.

---

[1] The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care, 2014
[2] The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care, 2014
[3] The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care, 2014

Types of health literacy

Health literacy goes beyond the achievement of reading and writing skills, but more what it is that literacy enables us to do. There are three types of health literacy which can be applied in a person's everyday life[4].

	Functional Health Literacy	Interactive Health Literacy	Critical Health Literacy
Definition	Sufficient basic skills in reading and writing to be able to function effectively in everyday situations.	More advanced cognitive and literacy skills which, together with social skills, can be used to actively participate in everyday activities, extract information and derive meaning from different forms of communication, and to apply new information to changing circumstances.	More advanced cognitive skills which, together with social skills, can be applied to critically analyse information, and to use this information to exert greater control over life events and situations.
Health Services Example	Reading a prescription or filling out a form at the doctors.	Sitting in a doctor's consultation and feeling confident that you understand the information and can ask questions.	Gaining and understanding information to navigate the health care system and knowing your rights as a patient.
Health Promotion Example	Reading a health education flyer about how increasing physical activity improves health.	Applying health information to everyday life and making informed choices about ways to improve your health e.g. working out ways you can increase your physical activity.	Contacting your local government to advocate to get footpaths surrounding your house as you know this limits your ability to walk to places which impacts on your physical, social and mental health.

[4] Nutbeam 2000, 'Health literacy as a public health goal: a challenge for contemporary health education and communication strategies into the 21st century'

Health Literacy and Health Promotion

Clinical Settings

Health literacy is a set of capacities that facilitate patient compliance with medical care.

Examples:

- Understanding and following treatment regimes
- Knowing where to go and how to book appointments

Health Promotion Settings

Health literacy is an 'asset' that is an outcome of activities to increase capacity for health action.

Examples:

- Having knowledge and understanding of the social determinants of health
- Having healthy attitudes and healthy motivations in relation to health behaviour

The social determinants of health

Social determinants of health impact on our health outcomes. Social determinants of health are:

- Employment
- Housing
- Education
- Socio-economic status
- Food (access and quality)
- Gender
- Health and Social services
- Ethnicity

These determinants are responsible for health inequities, which are unfair and avoidable differences that exist in health status. Literacy, and in turn health literacy, has been strongly linked to a person's health outcomes. The literacy levels of a person is predictive of their health outcomes[5].

You are more likely to have a lower health literacy level if you…[6]

- self report a fair - poor health status
- are an older person aged over 65 years
- identify as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person
- are from a non-English speaking background
- are from a low socio-economic background
- are unemployed or not in the workforce
- are employed in an industrial workforce
- achieve a low schooling attainment

---

[5] Centre for Culture Ethnicity & Health 2015, 'Social Determinants of Health'
[6] Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Literacy and Life Skills Survey 2006

Written Communication for Community

Why is written communication important?

A lot of the health information we share in health promotion is presented in a complex way, and is often in writing. Providing simplified and more visually appealing written materials for community members helps increase engagement.

What is readability?

Readability relates to how easy or hard it is for a user to understand text. The readability of written communications depends on the content (the complexity of text) and the presentation (font and design).

Content tips

Plain language is writing in clear, concise language that is easy to read and understand. The best way to do this is by using common words, or plain English.

Key things to consider when writing in plain language are[7]:

⚠ Make the most important point first	≡ Break down complicated information into small parts	❝ Define all technical terms
Mail the letter / The letter was mailed — Use the active voice not the passive voice	??? Use simple language; avoid jargon	☰ Use formats that are easy to read

---

[7] Centre for Culture Ethnicity & Health 2015, 'Written Communication'
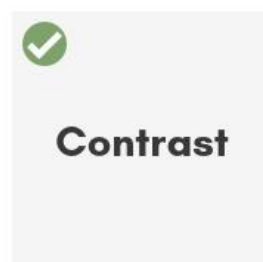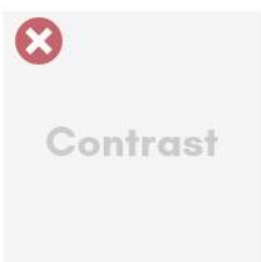
Presentation tips

Written communication is about more than just the words you use. Points to consider are[8]:
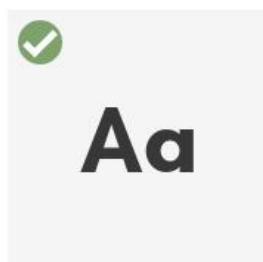
- Use a font size of 12pt +
- Select fonts that are commonly used (Helvetica, Calibri or Arial)

- Keep line spacing in mind
- Stick to one clear font and use a bold text for key points or headings
- Do not write in all capital letters

- Use colours to emphasise important information
- Ensure that there is contrast between the background color and text

- Provide context and directions alongside any tables, graphs or charts
- Use colours which are relevant to the data being presented
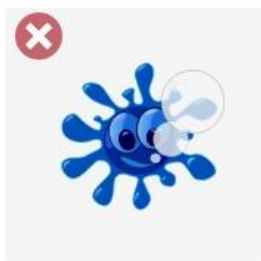
- Use simple line drawings to present key points visually
- Ensure icons are likely to be familiar to readers

---

[8] Centre for Culture Ethnicity & Health 2015, 'Written Communication'

Readability Tools

There are a number of readability assessment tools which use a formula to assess written materials. These tools assess a number of different elements within a piece of text. These elements can include: the number of syllables, length of words and length of sentences. This produces a school grade level result. The results of these tools can then tell you roughly what level of education someone will need to be able to read a piece of text easily. Readability tools can show where you can improve content in order to make it more readable. However, it is important to use these tools with care as syllables, word and sentence length are just three of more than 100 factors that affect reading ease.

It's good to aim for an appropriate reading level. Australian recommendations about reading levels range from grade 3 to 8 (ages 9-14) depending on your audience[9]. Readability tools often use US school grades. These are different to Australian grades so it is easier to talk about age instead**.**

The Readability Tools

The readability tool you apply should depend on the material you are assessing.

SMOG – Simple Measure of Gobbledygook	Good for: Written documents

The SMOG is the most appropriate readability tool in healthcare[10]. The tool calculates reading grade on two factors: the number of syllables in words and the number of words in sentences. The tool requires more than 10 sentences to produce a reliable result. The results provided are an estimate of the formal years of education that the reader requires to understand the text. This is presented in a US grade level from 5 – 18.

- Access the SMOG tool **here**

Flesch-Kincaid Reading Tools	Good for: Written documents or social media posts

Flesch-Kincaid readability tools are the most commonly cited and used of all readability scoring formula[11]. The tool measures sentence length and word length. Flesch-Kincaid has two measurement scores which are reading ease and US grade level. You can use this readability tool through Microsoft Word's readability statistics feature.

- Learn how to use the Flesch-Kincaid tool through Microsoft Word **here**

SAM – Suitability Assessment of Materials	Good for: Infographics, posters or flyers

The SAM tool is different to readability tools as it is more in depth and assesses multiple aspects, not just the text. The SAM scores materials in six categories: content, literacy demand, graphics, layout and typography, learning simulation and cultural appropriateness. The test produces a final percentage score. This score falls into one of three categories: superior, adequate or not suitable.

- Access the SAM tool **here**

---

[9] Australian Commonwealth Government 2017, 'Content Guide' and Centre for Ethnicity and Health 2015, 'Written Communication'
[10] Wang et al. 2013, 'Assessing readability formula differences with written health information materials: Application, results, and recommendations'
[11] Readable.io, 'The Flesch Reading Ease and Grade Level', www.readable.io/blog/the-flesch-reading-ease-and-flesch-kincaid-grade-level/

Testing with your audience

Readability tools are a great way of assessing materials. However, they should only be one part of the process. The best way to know if your message is clear, understandable and easy to use is to test your document with the people you have prepared it for.

The Checklist

Use this checklist to ensure that you apply the information contained in this document when producing written materials for community members.

Written Communication

- ✅ Content is written in plain language
- ✅ Presentation tips are considered

Readability Tools

- ✅ Readability tool applied
- ✅ Age 12 - 14 reading level or below achieved

Audience Testing

- ✅ Tested with relevant audience

barwonhealth.org.au