

Are we effective communicators? It's easy to assume that, as public health experts, we know how to convey public health issues. Health literacy (HL) is the unsung backbone to advocate for public health causes, educate communities, and engage our professional peers. This tool offers an easy-to-use assessment of HL and communication. It provocatively asks us to assess our own knowledge of and practice with HL. The tool also shares tips for effective writing for print and web and enhancing presentations.

Health Literacy: Undervalued by Public Health?

**A tool for public health
professionals.**

Prepared for the American Public
Health Association Community Health
Planning & Policy Development Section

Tammy Pilisuk, MPH AUG 2011

The Issue: Why Should We Care About Health Literacy?

Public health training instills in us that facts, data, and evidence-based research are the pillars to our credibility as health professionals. We're involved in public health expressly to help keep communities across the globe healthier. But are we good communicators? Do we, across our broad field, know how to leverage health literacy (HL) and communication to complement our work?

A National Priority

An estimated 9 in 10 Americans have difficulty understanding basic health information.¹ It follows that the ability to convey public health issues *clearly* is pivotal to achieving successful health outcomes. Once relegated to health educators, HL improvement was highlighted as a [national priority](#) by the US Surgeon General in 2010.² Health communication is part of [Healthy People 2020](#) goals³ and there is a framework for a federal HL [national action plan](#).^{4,5} HL and communications are cited as key factors in taking action on [social determinants of health](#)^{6,7} and implementing [health care reform](#).⁸

Applies to Every Audience

One of the most common misconceptions is that health literacy only applies to those with low literacy. The National Network of Libraries of Medicine notes aptly that [health literacy varies by context](#)⁹ and may not necessarily be related to education or reading ability. For example, even a well-educated person may have trouble grasping new information when given frightening news like: “You have a brain tumor.” HL champions can tell you: simpler is not the same as “dumbed down.”

Beyond Data... What is Convincing

Contrary to what many health professionals learn in school, [data](#) or [facts](#) alone often are not convincing.^{10, 11} We can learn from research in the cognitive sciences. That is, human beings are hard-wired to react to and remember something that touches us [emotionally](#).¹² Studies indicate that just hearing something that [rhymes](#),¹³ or is repeated often can come across as more [persuasive](#), even more true.¹⁴ Grasping these concepts can make the difference between engaging and motivating the intended audience, or having your issue be ignored because it seems too abstract—even irrelevant.

Online Communication, Important Differences

The growth of online communications is also a health communication game-changer. [The average reader scans web content](#) and is not inclined to read lengthy information on a web page.¹⁵ This means that our HL and communications toolbox requires new and distinct skills. Being clear, concise, eye-catching, and provocative has now become essential to catch and hold the attention of *all* audiences—and to get your message across.

Extending to Professional Communications

Similarly, how we communicate with our peers, in writing, or at conferences and webinars can be a measure of success. Our ability to communicate our own work impacts how we collaborate with, educate, and inspire our colleagues. In other words, HL and health communication skills are not just for health educators anymore! (See page 4 for practical communication resources.)

How Can The Public Health Community Step Up?

It's said that the first step to change is [recognizing there is a problem](#).¹⁶ You may be on top of your HL game—or perhaps a few pointers could help. A suggestion is to inventory your work to identify your regular communication products. Check which below *you* or *your group* produce routinely:

- Newsletters, e-blasts, memoranda
- Reports, white papers, data summaries (self-published, not journal articles)
- Community action tools/toolkits or advocacy materials
- Health education materials, brochures
- Forms or instruction sheets
- Webinars or in-person presentations with PowerPoint
- Websites
- Social Media 2.0 communications, blogs

Assessing Your Health Literacy Strengths and Weaknesses

How many of the following are you familiar with—and actually use regularly? Pssst: You don't have to show the results to anyone, so try to give yourself an honest assessment.

I. Plain language guidelines for print materials

A. Formatting

- Leave extra white space in paragraph breaks and margins
- Make judicious use of images or illustrations, as appropriate (sometimes a picture really is worth a thousand words). Are images relatable to intended audience?
- Choose reader-friendly font style and size (bolder, larger fonts are easier to read)

B. Writing for Print

- Use active voice rather than passive voice
- Replace or define complex terms and unfamiliar acronyms
- Minimize jargon and multi-syllabic words, when possible
- Create an executive summary and chapters (if a long report)
- If intended to provoke action, can reader easily identify/understand what to do?
- Pay attention to tone (Are you scaring the reader with frightening statistics? Are you boring the reader with dull, un-relatable facts?)
- Draw on real-life stories and anecdotes to bring emotional impact to your content. Supplement abstract facts and figures (make your content “come alive”)

C. A Few Additional Tips for Web Writing

- Be catchy with email subject line, headline, & article titles. Use images/photos
- Use subheadings to “chunk out” text; use bullets whenever possible
- Create article “teasers” with 2-3 sentences that allow viewer to click for more.
- Shorten sentences and paragraphs (e.g., minimize clauses; break long sentences into 2 shorter ones). Text requiring scrolling “below the fold” may go unnoticed!
- Avoid displaying long URLs. Rely on hyperlinked text (e.g., definitions, sources, for more information) to reduce word length. Eliminate underlines for non-linked text.
- Go 2.0! Engage readers; ask for comments. Pose a question for readers to answer. Email periodic updates; don’t count on readers to seek new items on your website.

D. Evaluation of Reader Comprehension

- Using Grade level checks (e.g., [SMOG test](#) or the [Readability Calculator](#))
- Evaluating drafts with focus groups of target audience
- [Usability testing](#) with 5 individuals

II. Making PPT slides enhance your communication

A. Slide Formatting

- Is text minimal and *not* written in complete sentences?
- Is color contrast easy to read?
- Are bullets limited to 3-4 per slide?
- Are animations, slide transitions, and clip art used judiciously so they do not distract?
- Do slides contain interesting visuals to capture the audiences’ attention?
- Do you select images, video or audio to evoke an emotional connection with the audience? Visuals and multi-media should help tell the story of your presentation.
- Are graphs and charts easy for the audience to see and grasp? Simplify chart to highlight the main point. (Strategies include zoom-ins, animated overlays to add more data 1 click at a time, and bold circles or arrows to show a key figure or trend.

B. Presentation Effectiveness

- Do you make an effort to *not* read your slides during a presentation?
- Do you limit the number of slides to approximately 1 per minute?
- Do you practice your presentation to ensure you make key points and stay within your allotted time?

III. Resources to Enhance Public Health Written Communication Competency

HL champions have produced many guidelines on how to make materials and information easier to read for a variety of audiences. Here are a few selected resources.

a. Plain Language Writing

- [Simply Put](#) (CDC)
- [Plain Language Initiative](#) (NIH)
- [Health Communication Tips](#) (Health Research for Action, UC Berkeley)
- [A Case for Clarity in Writing Health Statements](#) (Wilson & Park, 2008—why “myth vs. fact” may defeat your case!)
- [Plain Language Tools](#) (Federal Register, includes regulations and legal documents)

b. Writing for the Web

- [Writing for the Web](#) and [Be Succinct! Writing for the Web](#) (Useit.com)
- [Health Literacy Online](#) (DHHS)
- [The Digital Divide in Public E-Health](#) (West & Miller, 2006)
- [Accessibility of State and Local Govt Websites for People with Disabilities](#) (US Dept of Justice)

c. Grade Level Calculators

- SMOG Test ([manual calculation](#)) or [automated calculation](#)
- [Words Count](#)

d. Focus Group Testing

- [In Other Words, Can They Understand? Testing Patient Education Materials with Intended Readers](#) (Health Literacy Consulting)
- [Sample Focus Test Guide](#) (CDC)

IV. Resources to Enhance Public Health Presentations Competency

- [Why Bad Presentations Happen to Good Causes](#) (Andy Goodman’s astute guide on reinventing presentations to emphasize the power of storytelling)
- [12 Tips for Creating Better PowerPoint Presentations](#) (Tips for creating slides from Microsoft)
- [Top 10 Slide Tips](#) (more tips for creating effective, aesthetic slides)
- [Really Bad PowerPoint \(and how to avoid it\)](#) (A sardonic, yet insightful brief on how to hold your audience’s attention and avoid common pitfalls)

V. References

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