Writing for health literacy

The health system is stressful and complex. Writing about it in a simpler way can make it a little bit more manageable for people.

These are the guidelines that the North East and North Cumbria Health Literacy team use to write and edit documents. This guide will tell you what we do and why. You can use it to help you write documents that are clear and easy to understand.

Readability

Readability means how easy your writing is to understand.

We measure readability using the Flesch-Kincaid reading grade. Aim for a score of 6.0 and under. This means the text has a reading age of up to 11 years old. We use this number because 9­ to 11 is the average reading age of adults in the UK.

Microsoft Word can measure the reading grade for you. Click on Review > Editor> Document Stats.

You can also use this tool: <https://readability.ncldata.dev/>

Readability measures are not perfect. There is more to writing for health literacy than the reading grade. Below are lots of things you can do to make your writing clearer and simpler.

**To make documents easy to understand, think about these things:**

Formatting

Make sure the text is physically easy to read. This means making your text:

* a sans serif font like Arial
* at least size 12 point
* left aligned rather than justified

Use headings and subheadings. They help lead the reader through the document in a logical way. Make sure they are formatted neatly and consistently. We recommend making them bold.

Don't use too many capital letters, italics or bold type. This avoids overemphasis. (If everything's ***IMPORTANT*,** it's harder to see what's really important.)

Do not use underlining, except for hyperlinks.

Layout

Keep your layout as simple and clean-looking as possible. Make sure the reader can easily see where each bit of information belongs.

Make sure there's plenty of white space in the document. This stops the reader being overwhelmed by walls of text.

Pictures

Pictures can help to explain information or make your documents more attractive to read. But be careful when adding them.

Make sure pictures are relevant and useful to the reader.

Give pictures a label or title.

Think about the end format of your document. Check that your pictures will still look good when they are printed or online, for example.

Pictures should be clear and not blurry. Be careful when resizing.

Make sure you have permission to use pictures. Pictures taken from the internet may have copyright restrictions.

Organisation

The purpose of the document should be clear to the reader. You may want to write a couple of lines at the beginning to say what the document is for.

Make sure the most important information is easy to find. Usually this means putting it early on in the document.

Group information into sections that make sense, and then make sure those sections follow on from each other in a logical order.

Think about things from your reader's point of view. What will their experience of whatever you're writing about be like? Can you make your text reflect the steps or thought processes they will go through? For example, in a leaflet about a procedure, describe the things that the patient will experience in chronological order.

Language

Swap long words for shorter words. Use everyday words that will be familiar to most people.

Take out medical jargon where you can. Where it needs to stay, explain it as simply and clearly as possible. Don't be afraid to use more words to do this.

Sometimes it's useful to include both a hard word and a simpler one. If this happens, put the simpler one first.

Change passive voice into active voice where possible ("we do this" instead of "this is done by us"). Active voice is usually clearer, less impersonal, and less wordy.

Use the first and second person (we, you) rather than the third (staff, patients, the NHS) where you can.

Avoid acronyms. Where you need to use acronyms (for example, if it's one that is commonly used and the patient is likely to see or hear it a lot) write the words out in full the first time you use it and put the acronym in brackets.

Headings

Word your headings in a way that makes sense to the reader. Keep the wording of headings as consistent as you can through the document.

See if you can write your heading as a question. This helps the reader understand what each section is for. It shows you are thinking about the information from their point of view.

Then make sure the text in that section answers the question.

Paragraphs

Break paragraphs up into shorter ones. Each paragraph should contain only 1 idea. If your paragraph is only 1 sentence, that's fine.

If your paragraph is more than 4 sentences, it could probably be broken up more.

Sentences

Write in short sentences that are easy to read. This makes the information easier to follow. Avoid complex sentence structures.

Look for commas, dashes and conjunctions like "so", "and", "but". These may show you places where you could break a sentence up.

You can start a sentence with "And" or "But".

Lists

Write lists using bullet points rather than in sentences. This makes each item easier to see.

Bullet points should be short and simple. They should contain only 1 idea each.

The list style that the NHS content guide prefers has:

* a lead-in line
* a colon after the lead-in line
* bullet points that follow on grammatically from the lead-in line

Use lowercase letters at the start of the bullet points. Do not put punctuation on the end of the bullet points.

Use numbered lists when you are listing steps that must be carried out in order.

Numbers

Use figures instead of writing numbers out. For example, "9" instead of "nine".

Format all dates, times and measurements in line with the NHS content guide.

If you use statistics, they need to be as easy as possible for the reader to understand. Express risk in terms of "1 in 100" rather than 1%.

Inclusive language

Make sure the words you use apply to everyone they are supposed to. Do not make assumptions about the ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity of the reader.

Resources

All NHS writing should follow the NHS content guide: <https://service-manual.nhs.uk/content>

These guidelines cover things like:

* how to write numbers, dates and times
* formatting and punctuation
* which words to use or avoid
* tone
* inclusive writing

There are more resources on the NENC Health Literacy Team's web page. There is also information about our training sessions.

<https://northeastnorthcumbria.nhs.uk/our-work/regional-health-literacy/>