Clear communication for better health

Guidance for applying the ISO Plain Language Standard to health Information

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Introduction

Effective health communication plays a vital role in promoting public health, empowering individuals to make informed decisions, and improving health outcomes.

However, the complexity of medical and scientific information creates barriers to understanding for your audience, leading to confusion, misinterpretation, and limited engagement with essential health messages. Adopting a plain language approach is crucial to bridge this gap and ensure clear and accessible communication.

This resource serves as a guide to help improve your health communication material. It offers valuable insights into the importance of writing in plain language and exploring the nuances of health communication. Writers working in a variety of professional settings and sectors, from community organizations to government agencies, will find it helpful.

By highlighting the significance of plain language in health communication and the benefits it brings to both individuals and public health initiatives, this resource aims to inspire you to embrace this approach in your writing. It provides practical advice and strategies for incorporating plain language principles into the creation of your health communication materials, empowering you to effectively engage and educate your priority audiences.

This resource supports the ISO plain language standard ISO 24495 -Plain Language — Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines, an invaluable standard for writers seeking to achieve excellence in written communication. It builds on the ISO standard by providing specific guidelines for creating clear, concise, and user-friendly content, ensuring consistent quality and accessibility across various health communication materials. We strongly advise using this resource together with the ISO Plain Language Standard for a comprehensive approach to your health communication.

What makes health communication unique?

We all need clear health information to take care of our health, understand health risks, and keep our families safe.

Health communication is unique for several reasons:

1 It often includes unfamiliar medical – and in the case of informed consent, legal – terminology and concepts.

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2 It may require readers to interpret statistics or evaluate risks and benefits that affect their health and safety. In fact, much of health communication relates to communicating risk:
- Personal risk (such as improving nutrition to prevent diabetes)
- Community risk (such as preparing for a hurricane)
- Global risk (such as responding to the recent COVID-19 pandemic)

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3 It is often deeply personal, and the context in which people seek health information is significant; readers may be experiencing stress, fear, confusion, pain, or illness.

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4 It has vast implications for health and wellbeing. For example, calculating the correct dose of medicine, following directions after surgery, or checking a nutrition label to make sure a food is safe for someone with an allergy.

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5 It is frequently communicated in times of great uncertainty or crisis.

As such, there are unique considerations to communicating health information in plain language.

What is plain language?

Plain language is communication that puts your readers first. It considers:

- what they want and need to know;

- their level of interest, expertise and literacy skills;

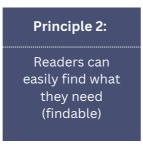- the context in which they will use the document

Plain language ensures your readers can find what they need, understand what they find, and use it to make informed decisions or take action. Thus, plain language focuses on how successfully your readers can use your document rather than on mechanical measures such as readability formulas.

ISO 24495 -Plain Language — Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines lays out a process to help writers to develop documents that communicate effectively with their intended readers. The International Plain Language Federation (IPLF) defines plain language as:

"A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily: find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information." [i]

There are four main principles of plain language based upon this definition:

Principle 1:	Principle 2:	Principle 3:	Principle 4:
Readers get what they need (relevant)	Readers can easily find what they need (findable)	Readers can easily understand what they find (understandable)	Readers can easily use the information (usable)

This resource provides you with some guidance on how to align your health documents with the provisions of ISO 24495 -Plain Language — Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines.

Plain language and health literacy

Communicating in plain language makes it easier for people to access, understand, and use health information and services to make informed health decisions (also known as "health literacy" [ii]).

It encompasses an individual's ability to navigate healthcare settings, understand medical terminology, interpret health-related instructions, critically evaluate health information, and actively engage in healthcare decision-making processes.

When writing health documents, you have a responsibility to address health literacy by presenting clear, accurate, appropriate, and accessible health information. [iii]

Using plain language health communication is an important strategic step to improve health literacy and health outcomes for your patients or clients. Other potential benefits include:
- social benefits such as empowering people to address economic and environmental determinants of health
- enabling people to play an active role in improving their own health
- mobilizing people to engage in community action for health and push governments to meet their responsibilities in addressing health and health equity.

This resource is designed to support you to improve the quality of communications you provide to all by providing guidance to:
1. enhance health literacy through the effective application of plain language principles.
2. consistently make health information, including public health and safety information, easy to understand and use and to meet the needs of the intended audience.

It is important for all information to be understandable, accessible, and relevant. Health information must also be actionable, timely, and credible. [iv]

How to use plain language in health communications

We recommend that you consider the following guidelines when creating health-related plain language communications.

Note: This guidance applies to printed and digital information that is primarily in the form of text or text accompanied by simple graphics. It is not intended to apply to verbal communication between patients or clients and their providers in a clinical setting.

Identify your readers

- consider psychographic factors like motivation, intent, and perceived susceptibility. For example, if sharing information about a health threat, consider whether your readers perceive they are at risk and then frame the information accordingly;

- identify relevant socio-demographic characteristics of your readers to help inform health information design and dissemination;

- consider social/cultural factors and complexity of identity as it relates to health – including intersectionality (the complex, cumulative way in which social categorizations like race, class, and gender combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of historically marginalized individuals or groups [1]);

- tailor as much as possible and include culturally relevant and familiar examples or terms; if tailoring is not possible, try not to exclude people in imagery and terminology.

Identify your readers' purpose

- empathize with your readers. Expressing empathy in health communication has been shown to build trust, which makes it more likely that your readers will listen to and follow a recommended course of action;[1]

- address personal impact. You can increase the sense of relevance to health issues by referring to the personal experiences of your readers or explaining how the issues can affect their family or community (or constituents).

Identify the context

- consider whether your readers are likely to be experiencing pain, stress, confusion, or fear. Each of these can affect working memory and comprehension. If this is the case, limit the amount of information and repeat key messages;

- consider whether your readers have previous experience with the health threat or similar health risks or topics that can be referenced to make information more relevant;

- identify what your readers may be hearing/reading about the health issue from other sources that may affect their understanding of information and guidance. Address misinformation directly and provide alternative correct information;

- give your readers the information they need when they need it to make appropriate health decisions. During an emergency, this means providing frequent and reliable updates.

Select the document type

- consider all channels that are available and their capacities to reach priority audiences (for example, mass media, community-based authors, social media, or interpersonal communication) and choose the most appropriate ones;

- make information available online, but also consider the digital literacy skills of the intended reader.

Select content your readers need

- avoid paternalism (acts of authority by the health care professional in directing care, instructions, or information to patients or lay people); [1]

- be explicit about the behavior or action you want your readers to take to protect themselves and others;

- build awareness of existing or emerging health threats or benefits, support understanding of the risk, promote knowledge of solutions, and instil confidence to act;

- be transparent about how you analyze data and make recommendations or policies;

- clarify what is known and not known and steps for how remaining questions will be answered;

- let your readers know where they can go for more information or support.

Information design

- make sure the words and images convey the same message and reinforce each other;
- ensure images are culturally relevant and inclusive;
- make sure images are accessible to people with disabilities (for example, by including captions and alt text for screen readers);
- use images that show positive, health-promoting actions.[1]

Choose familiar words

- be careful with abbreviations (for example, mixing up tsp and Tbs could be harmful). Introduce abbreviations if your readers need to learn them or if they are already very familiar;
- use familiar frames of reference and examples;
- limit use of numbers. If using numbers, use whole numbers. If using numbers for risk, explain what the numbers mean and put in context. Don't make readers conduct mathematical calculations.[1]

Write clear sentences

- provide context first, then describe the behavior. For example, write "If you have shortness of breath or pain in your chest, tell your doctor" rather than "Tell your doctor if you have shortness of breath or pain in your chest."

Consider including images and multimedia	• place anatomical images in context of the body;
	• use images that help to convey the message rather than tokenistic icons;
	• ensure imagery is inclusive.
Project a tone that respects your readers' needs and situation	• avoid alarmist language, particularly in a public health crisis;
	• respect personal autonomy. Provide information so that your readers can make the best decision for themselves and their loved ones.
Community test your documents	• have processes in place to community test documents with readers representative of the intended audience.
Review and evaluate your documents	• regularly review and evaluate relevant documents;
	• when choosing evaluation metrics for health information, include constructs such as behavioral intent, self-efficacy, perceived risk, and source credibility.

Glossary

For the purposes of this resource, the following terms and definitions apply.

Crisis communication
Refers to the strategic process of communicating information and managing public perception during times of emergency, crisis, or significant disruption. With regard to health, this includes a wide range of events such as public health emergencies, disease outbreaks, and natural disasters. Effective crisis communication needs to provide clear, concise and consistent messaging to address public concerns, promote safety, and provide guidance to the public.

Digital literacy
The ability to use digital technologies and navigate the digital world effectively. In a health context this relates to the ability to effectively find, understand, and use health related information from digital sources. It includes having the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate health-related websites, apps, and online resources to make informed decisions about one's own health and wellbeing.

Health communication
Health communication consists of interpersonal or mass communication activities focused on improving the health of individuals and populations. It involves translating complex medical and scientific information into accessible language and formats that are easily understood by diverse audiences including patients, caregivers, healthcare professionals, policy makers and the general public.

Intersectionality
Intersectionality acknowledges that individuals are not defined by a single aspect of their identity, such as gender, race, religion, or age. Consideration must be given to a combination of multiple social dimensions and the complex interactions between them to better understand and address social inequalities.

Paternalism

Paternalism in a health context is where health professionals or health authorities make decisions or take actions on behalf of patients or the public with the intention of protecting their wellbeing. This limits the autonomy of the individual and assumes that healthcare providers and authorities know what is best for the patient or the public without seeking their input or considering their preferences.

Risk communication

Risk communication is the process of conveying information to individuals, or communities about potential risks or hazards. Typically, the goal of risk communication is to enhance understanding of risks to enable informed decision-making and promote actions to mitigate or manage the risk.

Tailoring

Refers to the process of creating individualized communications, and typically starts with a theory-driven assessment of characteristics that are unique to an individual and are related to the outcome of interest. In contrast to generic forms of health communication (e.g., health brochures or information websites), tailored communications provide individuals with information that is relevant for them and that fits with their particular situation. As a result, this information is more likely to be considered as personally relevant and, consequently, to be read.[v]

[i] PLAIN International What is plain language? - Plain Language Association International (PLAIN) (plainlanguagenetwork.org)
[ii] CDC https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/learn/index.html
[iii] WHO https://www.who.int/teams/health-promotion/enhanced-wellbeing/ninth-global-conference/health-literacy
[iv] World Health Author Principles for Effective Communications https://www.who.int/about/communications/principles
[v] Bol N, Smit ES, Lustria MLA. Tailored health communication: Opportunities and challenges in the digital era. Digit Health. 2020 Sep 23;6:2055207620958913. doi: 10.1177/2055207620958913. PMID: 33029355; PMCID: PMC7520919.