Assessing Written Materials
Reading Ease and Actionability

Sabrina Kurtz-Rossi, M.Ed.
Director, Health Literacy Leadership Institute
Tufts University School of Medicine
Literacy, Language and Culture

Language is reflective of cultural beliefs and concepts.

In the Navajo language there is no word or concept for chemotherapy.

Enhanced Cultural and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) Standards

- **Principle Standard (Standard 1).** Provide effective, equitable, understandable and respectful quality care and services that are responsive to diverse cultural health beliefs and practices, preferred languages, health literacy and other communication needs.

CLAS Standards by Theme

- Governance, Leadership and Workforce (Standards 2-4)
- Communication and Language Assistance (Standards 5-8)
- Engagement, Continuous Improvement and Accountability (Standards 9-15)

Integrate Health Literacy and Cultural Competency

- Plain language + Translation + Cultural Relevance
- Avoid Jargon + Interpretation + Teach-back
What do you find hard to read and why?
Audience-Centered Materials Development

• Involve your AUDIENCE
• Specify OBJECTIVES
• Consider USE and FORMAT
• Develop the CONTENT
Develop the Content

• Use everyday “living room” language

• Limit information to need to know

• Provide information that is culturally relevant to audience concerns

• Break complex information and instructions into manageable chunks
Activity
Plain language practice

Write down 5 medical words or public health terms. Suggest alternative living room language familiar to your audience.
### How People Process Text


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proficient Readers</th>
<th>Below Basic Readers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpret meaning, generalize</td>
<td>Take words literally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read with fluency</td>
<td>Read slowly, or one word at a time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get help for uncommon words</td>
<td>Skip over unfamiliar words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grasp the context, make inferences</td>
<td>Miss the context, may not make inferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persists in reading</td>
<td>Tires quickly when reading</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Plain Language Writing Principles

• Write in everyday language
• Define unfamiliar words
• Use active voice
• Use shorter words and shorter sentences
• Avoid abbreviations and acronyms
• Give *pro-nun-see-AY-shun* if needed
Tips for Writing

• Q & A format ("I"/ "you")
• Bulleted lists
• Interaction
• Story telling
• Dialogues
Plain Language Design Principles

• Lots of white space and wide margins
• Use **SERIF** font for text
• **NON SERIF** for headers
• Larger type (12 point or larger)
• **UPPER AND LOWER CASE**—NOT ALL CAPS
• *Avoid italics, script, fancy fonts*
Plain Language Design Principles

• **Bold**, concise headers
• Consider use of columns
• **Ragged** right edge
• Appealing colors
• High contrast
RECOMMENDED REGARDING WRITING IN TERMS OF ITS RECEPTION

IT IS NOT INAPPROPRIATE, WHEN USING PRINT MEDIA TO IMPART MATERIAL OF A FACTUAL OR INTERPRETIVE NATURE WHICH HOLDS THE INTENTION OF CONVEYING CRITICAL INFORMATION TO AND/OR INCLUDING A CRITICAL ACTION BY ITS PROSPECTIVE RECIPIENTS, TO EMPLOY RELATIVELY NONCOMPLEX VERBIAGE SO AS TO MAXIMIZE COMPREHENSION IN THE AFOREMENTIONED POPULATION.

Credit: Lessons in Plain Language 1992, PLAN, Inc.
# How Readers Process Visuals

Adapted from Doak C, Doak L, Root J. Teaching Patients with Low Literacy Skills (2nd edition). Lippincott 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Proficient Readers</strong></th>
<th><strong>Below Basic Readers</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scan the visual to find central concept</td>
<td>Eyes wander, difficulty finding central focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quickly identify key features in a visual</td>
<td>May skip over key features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separate key points from details</td>
<td>May get lost in or too focused on details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quickly interpret visual information to derive meaning</td>
<td>Interpret visuals more literally</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tips for Visuals

- Use realistic, uncluttered drawings or photos
- Select images relevant to your audience
- Apply labels and arrows
Tips for Numbers

• Reduce effort, do the math
• Provide fewer options
• Keep denominator the same (1 in 100 / 4 in 10)
• Use appropriate visuals
• Use labels carefully (poor, fair good, excellent)
• Use frequency (1 out of 10) vs percent (10%)

www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/numeracy-course
Notes on Translation

• DO NOT USE Online Tools
• DO NOT EXPECT Word-for-word

• Emphasize need for plain language
• Work with experienced translators
• Consider back-translation
• Field-test and localize
Field-testing

A process of reviewing draft materials with your target audience

• **Questions**
  – What did you learn?
  – What will you do?
  – How would you say this?
  – What do the pictures tell you?
Materials Assessment

What are readability formulas?

– Assess the reading grade level at which a material is written

– Mathematically calculated and expressed as a school grade level

– Correlated plus or minus 1.5 grade

– Most assess two aspects of text
  • Word length
  • Sentence length

Available for English, Spanish, German Chinese, French, Hebrew, Russian, Vietnamese, others.
Readability Formulas

• **Fry**
  - Number of words per sentence, syllables per word
  - Plotted on a graph
  - 100 word sample

• **SMOG**
  - Simplified Measure of Gobbledygook
  - Extensively used in health
  - 3 samples of 10 sentences
Pros and Cons

• How are they helpful?
• What are their limitations?
Beyond Readability

Criteria for Assessment

- Language
- Design
- Cultural Appropriateness
- Numbers
- Call to Action

CDC Clear Communication Index

Patient Education Materials Assessment Tool (PEMAT)

Suitability Assessment of Materials (SAM)
http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/resources/dook-book
Check List Approach

☐ Language
  ✥ Does both the main message and call to action use active voice?  
  ☐ Yes = 1  
  ☐ No = 0  
  ☐ NA

☐ Design
  ✥ Does the material use bulleted or numbered items?  
  ☐ Yes = 1  
  ☐ No = 0  
  ☐ NA

☐ Actionability
  ✥ Does the material include one or more calls to action  
  ☐ Yes = 1  
  ☐ No = 0  
  ☐ NA

☐ Numbers
  ✥ Does the material explain what the numbers mean?  
  ☐ Yes = 1  
  ☐ No = 0  
  ☐ NA

☐ Culture
  ✥ Does the material include pictures reflective of the primary audience?  
  ☐ Yes = 1  
  ☐ No = 0  
  ☐ NA

☐ 90% or above = Excellent  
☐ 89% or below = Needs improvement

Score ___ / Total ___ x 100 = ___%
Activity
Small group discussion

Review fact sheets. Consider criteria for assessment. Which is easier to read and why?
Key Points

• Take an audience-centered approach to materials development

• Keep literacy, language and culture in mind throughout the process

• Practice plain language writing and design principles

• Field-test your materials and make suggested changes