Provincial Addiction & Mental Health

Plain Language
Communication Toolkit
for AMH Research

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Alberta Health Services

Contents

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Purpose

This resource has been designed to help addiction and mental health (AMH) researchers clearly communicate the results of their research in a format that is accessible to a broad range of audiences. Plain language is an important tool in the process of translating research evidence into healthcare change and public awareness.

Part 1: **Plain language basics**

There are a variety of people who benefit from clear communication about addiction and mental health evidence: patients, healthcare providers, decision-makers, and researchers.

Writing plainly

Consider your audience

Writing with your audience in mind is **the single most important thing you can do** to make your writing useful and understandable.

Ask yourself:

- What information does my audience want?
- How familiar is my audience with the subject matter?
- How much time will they want to commit to reading this?

Use active voice

For example:

- "All staff must follow safety guidelines." NOT "Safety guidelines must be followed by all staff."
- "The doctor will answer any questions you have." NOT "Any questions you have will be answered by the doctor."

Use first and second person

For example:

- "Your doctor can help you get the care you need." NOT "Doctors can help patients get the care they need."

Write how you talk

- Use contractions where they sound natural.
- Use positive language:
    "Tell" instead of "Do not fail to tell"
    "At least" instead of "No fewer than"

Use common words and reduce syllables

Instead of	Use
At the present time	Now
In order to	To
Subsequently	Next / Later
Acquire / Attain	Get
Facilitate	Help
Individuals	People
Has knowledge of / Is aware of	Knows

There are hundreds of examples of these! Here are some great alphabetical lists to use:

- Plain English Lexicon (includes the grade level of individual words)
- Centres for Disease Control: Everyday Words for Public Health Communication
- Clear Language and Design Thesaurus
- PlainLanguage.gov: Use simple words and phrases
- Wikipedia: List of plain English words and phrases

Shorten sentences

- Aim for a maximum of 15 words per sentence.
- Long sentences often have multiple clauses. You can break these up into multiple short sentences to improve readability.

Shorten paragraphs

- Aim for a maximum of three sentences and one idea per paragraph.
- Breaking up paragraphs increases white space and makes text less daunting.

Style and formatting

Use bulleted or numbered lists

- Aim for three to five items per list.
- Use consistent capitalization, punctuation, and verb structure for all items in the list.

Use headings

- Headings signal new topics.
- They also help with scanning text and increase white space.
- Use lowercase letters (sentence case) to improve readability.
- Use question headings or statement headings rather than vague topic headings.

For example:

- "What do I need to bring to my appointment?" or "What to bring to your appointment" NOT "Appointments"

Things to avoid

Idioms

These are particularly difficult for readers whose first language is not English.

For example:

- "In a nutshell" can be "Basically"
- "Get out of hand" can be "Get out of control"
- "See eye to eye" can be "Agree"

Unnecessary acronyms and abbreviations

- If an acronym is not widely used, it's not useful. If you must use them, spell them out on the first reference within each section.
- Avoid "i.e." and "e.g." Use "that is" or "for example" instead.

Hidden verbs

These are verbs converted into nouns, and are often used in the passive voice. Look for words that end with *-ment* or *-tion*.

For example:

- "The production of" can be "Producing"
- "Make an application" can be "Apply"

Complicated noun strings

These are phrases with many nouns in a row.

For example:

- "AHS has a hospital employee relations improvement program." A plainer way to say this is "AHS has a program that improves relations among hospital employees."

Redundancy

- Don't repeat or rephrase the same information. Say it once, and say it well.
- Avoid redundant terms such as "close proximity" or "end result."

Checking readability

Readability tools use formulas to evaluate a text's readability based on:

- Sentence length
- The number of syllables in words

For most audiences, a **Grade 8 reading level** is appropriate.

- For at-risk populations or those with limited English, aim for Grade 4-6 and use visuals to add meaning where possible.
- Academic audiences can *usually* read at higher levels. However, you cannot assume a university degree indicates a high level of English proficiency or literacy.

Readability tools

You can use Microsoft Word to check readability. To do so, change your settings in your Spelling & Grammar check to "Show readability statistics." After you run your spellcheck, a Readability Statistics screen will appear.

Here are three more free tools to measure readability:

- Readability Calculator: online-utility.org/english/readability_test_and_improve.jsp
- Hemingway App (highlights areas that can be improved): hemingwayapp.com
- Readability Test Tool: webpagefx.com/tools/read-able

Limitations of readability scores

These formulas accurately gauge the readability of larger chunks of text. However, they are limited:

- A word's complexity can depend on more than its syllables. For example, "television" has four syllables but the word is quite well-known, even to young children.
- The readability of text also depends on **content organization, coherence, voice, and design**, which cannot be measured by formulas.

Therefore, it's a good idea to write based on the above principles and best practices. You can use readability measurement tools afterward to identify potential problems.

More resources

Examples and guidelines

- [PlainLanguage.gov: Resources](#)
- [University of Wisconsin: Writing Clear, Concise Sentences](#)

Online courses

- [Federal Aviation Administration: Plain Language Course](#)
- [WriteClearly.org: Plain Language Online Course](#)

Part 2: **Simple steps to make it plain**

Plain language allows your readers to understand your message the first time they read it.
These steps can help.

1 Know your audience	**Respect their time.** Give them the information they want, and nothing more.
	Write to them, not at them. Words like We, Our, and You are natural and inclusive ways to communicate.
	Explain the topic simply. Use words your readers will understand. No jargon.
2 Shorten everything	**Shorter words.** Words with fewer syllables and letters are easier to understand.
	Shorter sentences. Average about 15 words per sentence, and no more than 24. Avoid sentences with multiple clauses.
	Shorter paragraphs. No more than five lines per paragraph. Walls of text are scary!
3 Review format and style	**Increase white space.** Headings, lists, and short paragraphs are great for this.
	Organize visually. Short yet descriptive headings let people scan for the information they need.
	Make it easy on the eyes. Choose high-contrast colours and simple fonts. Reduce capital letters and needless punctuation.

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Part 3: **Plain language myths**

There are a lot of misunderstandings around what plain language is. As a champion of plain language, you may need to counter some of these myths with the facts about clear communication.

MYTH	FACT
Plain language is "dumbing down" the content. Many people think plain language means oversimplified content.	**Plain language is writing clearly and effectively.** Writing plainly shows respect for your readers and clarifies convoluted topics.
Plain language is not necessary if readers are highly educated. When writing for people with higher education levels, many assume that dense text and difficult words are okay.	**Highly educated does not always mean highly literate.** Many people with advanced degrees are not strong readers. Also, even strong readers shouldn't have to work to make sense of convoluted writing.
Plain language reduces credibility and authority. Experts may think they can illustrate their authority on a topic by using technical terms and insider jargon.	**Clear and precise writing engages any audience.** Explaining a topic simply shows that you understand it inside and out. This is true whether you are communicating with experts or non-experts.
Plain language is easy: just replace long words with shorter ones. People often think they can make something "plain" by skimming the text and replacing long words and jargon.	**Plain language is thoughtfully reaching your intended audience.** What is plain for one audience may not be plain for another. Plain language considers: organization, layout and design, sentence construction, and word choice.

Part 4: **Plain design checklist**

There are a few common design elements that improve readability and communication. Use the checklist below to make sure your document follows these guidelines.

☐ Use proximity to group related elements

- Visually connect ideas with common themes. Elements that are *intellectually connected* should also be *visually connected.*

- Make grouped items **one visual unit**.

- Bring elements together with borders, background shading, and white space.

☐ Organize elements with a visual hierarchy

- **What's the point?** Make the most important information the first thing people see.

- Draw attention to key messages through placement, size, typography, colour, and spacing.

- Try a "five-second test" with your audience to make sure the important points come through in the first five seconds of viewing your document.

☐ Embrace white space

- Use white space to separate groups of related elements.

- Surround a key message with white space to draw attention to it.

☐ Find a solid alignment

- Left alignment is usually best.

- Avoid mixing centre/left/right alignments.

☐ Create unity with repetition

- Use design choices consistently throughout. For example: bullet shapes, fonts for headlines and sub-headlines, headers and footers.

- Avoid adding too many different design elements.

☐ Attract readers with contrast

- **Be bold with contrast.** For example: black on white is much more obvious than dark green on light green.

- Elements that are different should look *very* different.

- Examples:

    Large type vs. small type

    Fancy typeface vs. plain typeface

    Colours: light vs. dark; cool vs. warm; complementary

    Widely spaced lines vs. closely spaced lines

☐ Choose colour wisely

- Use the colour palette in the Alberta Health Services Brand Toolkit.

- Unify the design by matching or contrasting colours with other graphics.

- Don't overwhelm readers with too many warm colours.

☐ Build interest with typography

- Create a visual hierarchy through headings and sub-headings.

- Use two contrasting typefaces to enhance interest.

- Don't use different typefaces that are too similar.

☐ Enhance communication with images

- Only use images that support and enhance the text.

- Use images sparingly to keep your document clean and simple.

☐ Remember to design for your audience

- Your audience's needs should drive all of your decisions about text size, typography, and colour.

- *Who* will be reading this?

  Seniors?

  Children?

  People under stress?

  People whose first language is not English?

  People with special needs (such as dyslexia or visual impairment)?

- *How* will they be reading this?

  On the go?

  From far away?

  Online or in print?

Part 5: **Get to know your audience**

Why is knowing my audience so important?

- The most important part of writing anything is to make sure somebody will read it. There is no other reason for writing.

- Your message is competing with thousands of other distractions, all vying for the attention of your reader. You need to know what matters to your readers, because being relevant and accessible is the only way to keep their attention.

- It is not the reader's job to make sense of your work. As the writer, it is your job to write in a way your readers will understand and care about. You need to address any potential communication challenges *before* they happen. To do that, you need to know your audience.

Getting to know your audience

Plain language is plain to your reader. There is no single "plain language" way to write, because it's always tailored for its intended audience.

To connect with your readers, you need to understand how they see the world, and how they will interact with your materials.

For example, it's helpful to know (or at least think about):

- Basic demographic information about your audience, such their age, income, gender, education, and location
- What perspectives, attitudes, and concerns they have about the topic
- What formats they prefer
- What situations or settings they will be in when reading the materials
- What background knowledge they have about the topic

Take the time to consider these things. Acknowledge what you don't know. And try to figure out a way to get the answers (within time and budget constraints, of course!). See the steps below for some good starting points.

A "general audience" doesn't exist

There's really no such thing as a "general audience." If you need to engage the general population, then you'll be working with a huge range of abilities and backgrounds. This can make it difficult to satisfy anyone. The best you can do is write in a way that will appeal to most readers. Luckily, plain language principles can help.[1]

What we know about literacy levels in Canada

Literacy data shows:

- Nearly half (49%) of all Canadians have low literacy skills. This means they can only read material that is simple and clearly laid out. They may be able to read enough to manage daily tasks, but struggle to understand new concepts or skills.
- More than a quarter (27%) of Canadians with university degrees have low literacy skills. In other words, highly educated does not mean highly literate.
- Only 14% of Canadians have strong literacy skills.[2,3]

Writing clearly and simply will help you reach the largest number of people.

Plain language reaches the broadest possible audience

Plain language makes your work accessible to a broad range of people.

You don't need to worry about plain language alienating your strong readers. Even if people *can* read at higher levels, that doesn't mean they *want* to. We all tend to read things below our actual abilities.[4] A look at the reading levels of bestselling books indicate that people prefer their reading to be effortless.[5]

Remember: **"No one will ever complain because you have made something too easy to understand."**[6]

See Step 4 below for some quick wins to make your writing more accessible.

Steps for audience analysis

Step 1: Identify your audience

Begin by thinking about who you hope to reach, and who else you might reach in the process.

For example, you might be writing a patient handout about a medical procedure. Your primary audience will be the patients. But others will likely read the handout too, such as caregivers, family members, friends, healthcare professionals, or patient advocates.

Focus on your primary audience. As you write, consider if anything might alienate your secondary audiences, or if they need very different information. Perhaps you need to create separate materials for them.

Step 2: Research your audience

Learn everything you can about your readers and how they will use your materials. For example:

- What is the typical reader's age, sexual identity, race, ethnicity, language, education, training, lifestyle, or employment status? (NOTE: There may be more than one "typical reader" – keep all these readers in mind for the next step!)
- What limitations might affect the reader as they use your materials? For example: their physical location, stress levels, physical or mental disabilities, or distractions.
- What formats are familiar to your readers?
- What formats are common for similar topics? In other words, how would the reader expect to learn this information? Is a standard already in place?
- When will the reader use the information? For example: to learn a new program, or right after booking an appointment for a procedure.
- Where will the materials be used? For example: at a nurses' station or in a waiting room.
- How will the materials be used? For example: as a training tool or a reference sheet.

To learn these things, you can:

- Interview a sample of your audience about their information needs. Just four or five people can give you some great insights and help you see patterns.
- Survey or interview staff or people who work with your target audience. Ask about your audience's information needs, common misconceptions, and demographics.
- Look into public information sources, such as statistical data and reports from organizations that work with your target audience.
- Observe your audience. This can help you see how they might interact with new information, and what challenges they have currently.

Step 3: Make a persona for each audience group

For large-scale projects, you may find it helpful to create some personas. Personas are fictional people who encompass the main traits you discovered in your research. A persona keeps you focused on who you're communicating with.

You will likely need more than one persona, to capture variations in your target audience.

For each persona, include:

- Name
- Photo (a stock image can help you visualize your reader)
- Relevant demographic information (such as age, gender, location, family status, employment status)
- Goals (health, professional, or personal, depending on your audience)
- Information needs
- Challenges and frustrations

You can format your persona however you like. Below are a couple of examples.

Persona example #1[7]

Personas			
ARCHETYPE:	THE MEDICAL PATIENT	THE BEHAVIORAL PATIENT	THE HEALTH SYSTEM
Name:	**MARIA** GUERRERO	**HAYDEN** COOPER	**EDWARD** JUSTICE
Need:	*"I'm always busy and need to the ability to get the care I need as quickly as possible."*	*"I need the assistance of multiple providers and I need the process of that collaboration to be easy."*	*"We need our software to talk to each other so our providers don't have to learn multiple systems and disrupt their workflow."*
Basic Profile	• 36 year old elementary school teacher • Busy at work and needs to speak to a provider about a UTI • No data service at work and has to use the phone to have an appointment • Convenience is her biggest need and telehealth meets this need • Important to save time and stay out of a waiting room	• 29 year old stay-at-home mom suffering from postpartum depression • Wants easy visibility into the provider's schedule and availability • Needs the assistance of a therapist and a psychiatrist (for medication), but having trouble with their ability to collaborate through the platform • Doesn't want to pay multiple times to gain the care she needs	• Director of Digital Health • Needs all technology solutions to integrate with the EMR • Wants telehealth to aid in keeping patients healthy and out of the hospital • Wants to improve physician-to-physician consults • Needs to drive overall costs down

Persona example #2[8]

NESSA WILSON

HEALTH COACH

AGE 45
OCCUPATION Wellness coordinator
STATUS

EDUCATION

Registered dietetician
College degree, lifestyle coach
inpatient and case manager experience
Furthering her career online

"
Did you know smoking is a
leading cause of cancer?

RESPONSIBILITIES

Coach members to achieve healthy lifestyle behaviors
and align them with individual wellness goals

GOALS

To be an advocate for a healthy lifestyle
To provide on-site wellness classes
To gather biometrics data
To manage member wellness incentives

FRUSTRATIONS/IMPEDIMENTS

Not enough hours in the day

My day

Today I went onsite to a Company and provided
them a demonstartion on the impacts of stress
management and smoking. Did you know smoking
is a leading cause of cancer?

ENVIRONMENT

Telphonic/
Employer onsite/
Wellness clinics

Topics to be delivered can
focus on weight
management, stress
management, tobacco
cessation, nutrition,
physical activity and other
healthy lifestyle topics.

TECHNOLOGY

Step 4: Draft the materials

With knowledge of your audience to guide you, you can start writing.

Ask yourself:

- What are their motivations for reading?
- What information do they need?
- How familiar are they with this subject? What common ground can you find to introduce new concepts?
- How much time can they commit to reading?
- What format do they prefer?

If you are trying to persuade your audience to do something, follow three steps to motivate your readers to take the action you want[9]:

1. Put your audience's hopes and values at the forefront of the message.
2. Present the problem you are addressing as an obstacle that is personally relevant to your reader.
3. Show how the solutions you offer can help people achieve their goals.

Once you have the information your audience needs (and no more!), you can review the materials for plain language. Some quick wins to improve readability include:

- Use active voice.
- Use shorter, simpler words whenever possible.
- Use shorter sentences (average about 15 words per sentence). Avoid sentences with multiple clauses.
- Use shorter paragraphs, with no more than five lines. Each paragraph should have just one idea.
- Add descriptive headings to allow the reader to skim for the information they want.
- Increase white space. Short paragraphs and vertical lists help with this.

Step 5: Test with your audience and revise as needed

"The greatest problem in communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished."
—George Bernard Shaw

A quick way to test your draft is to run a readability test. Readability is covered in Part 1.

Readability scores are useful, but they can't measure:

- How engaging the content is
- How well the content is organized
- How effective the voice and design are

The only way to know if your message is truly being communicated is to test it with your audience. You can then make changes based on what you learn from testing and feedback.

User testing: Two approaches

Surveys or interviews

You can simply have members of your target audience read the materials, and answer some questions afterward. You can ask questions to test comprehension, and also ask for feedback about what's missing or what the reader found challenging. This can be done as a written survey, or a brief interview.

Cloze test

To do this, prepare a version of your document with every fifth word deleted. (Try this online tool.) Ask test readers to fill in the blanks. If the reader finds it easy to identify the missing word, then the structure, context, and vocabulary are a good match.

A good amount to test is 250 words, with 50 blanks. Count the exact matches and divide by the number of missing words.

- **60% or more:** The reader understood 90% of the material
- **40-60%:** The reader understood 75% of the material
- **Under 40%:** The material is too difficult for this reader

Addressing specific audience needs

The following best practices will make your writing more accessible to audiences with specific needs.

Readers whose first language is not English

Nearly one in six Canadians speaks a language other than English or French at home.[10] When writing for this audience:

- Avoid idioms and metaphors. For example, "Hang in there" or "Under the weather."
- Use positive language. For example, say "At least" instead of "No fewer than."
- Add visuals whenever possible to enhance the meaning of the text.

Readers with dyslexia

It is estimated that 5-10% of Canadians have dyslexia.[11] To make reading easier for this audience:

- Use a plain, sans-serif font, in at least size 13.
- Print on cream-coloured paper.

Make the content available electronically so font size can be adjusted.

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