

Team: Stacy Robison, MPH, MCHES; Xanthi Scrimgeour, MEd, MCHES; Sandy Williams Hilfiker, MA; Amy Behrens, MS; Blythe Miller; Adam Moorman; Kat Good-Schiff, MFA; Jaya Mathur, MA; Morgan Griffin, MA; Kelsey Jordan; Rebecca Wright

What is We Health Literacy?

We  Health Literacy is an ongoing series of fun, weekly emails intended to promote health literacy and provide tips on implementing best practices. The emails cover diverse health literacy issues — everything from longstanding questions like how to avoid common health-related jargon to timely issues like how to communicate about Ebola or the Affordable Care Act (ACA).

Goal

By sending these emails, CommunicateHealth aims to connect with the broad health literacy community and provide guidance to professionals working to promote health literacy in their organizations. Simply put, our mission is to help professionals communicate more effectively with people about their health.

Inspiration

After years of conferences, presentations, emails, and chance encounters, we came to realize that health communicators are hungry for information on health literacy, plain language, and user-centered design. We  Health Literacy helps fill this information gap.

Audience

The emails are written in plain, conversational language — content is appropriate for novices, experts, and everyone in between. Among our subscribers are:

- Health communicators, including public health professionals
- Clinicians
- Hospital administrators
- Non-profit administrators
- Private sector professionals
- Educators

The doctor is in!

GUESS WHO??



Let's kick off this post with a fill-in-the-blank exercise:

- "I'm feeling sick. I think I'll go see a _____."
- "An apple a day keeps the _____ away."
- "Just what the _____ ordered."

Now, remember your answers and keep them to yourself. No cheating.

This week we'll address a question we get a lot: When writing about health professionals, should you use "doctor" or "nurse" or "provider" or something else altogether?

Technically speaking, titles depend on degrees. But unless you're staring at a framed diploma, knowing the best way to refer to a health care professional can be tough. Our advice is to keep it simple and go with what people use in conversation: "doctor." For all of them.

Yes, there's a difference between doctor, physician, clinician, nurse practitioner, midwife, psychologist, physician assistant, and so on. But when people are feeling sick, they just go to "see a doctor." This is not the time to pull rank.

Using plain language should come naturally — you know, write how you speak. Think about your answers to the fill-in-the-blank questions above. We're pretty sure that you answered "doctor" for all of them. Right?

The bottom line: Don't be afraid to refer to doctors, physicians, and clinicians as "doctor." Plain language is on your side.

Plain language is not "dumbing down."



Want to know the quickest way to upset a writer at CommunicateHealth? Tell us that writing health content in plain language is "dumbing down" the information. And it not only upsets us, but it insults the 9 out of 10 Americans who struggle with understanding and using health information.

A big part of the "dumbing down" myth stems from the need to limit information. Deciding between need-to-know and nice-to-know information is an important step in developing clear health information. We often hear medical experts say that we need to give people all the information, otherwise we're doing them a disservice. But we argue that the disservice is in overwhelming people with so much information that they miss the key message.

If my mechanic gave me a detailed explanation of how my car engine worked every time I went for an oil change, I would:

- Have no idea what she was talking about
- Zone out
- Probably find a new mechanic

I just want to know whether my car is okay, and if not, how much it will cost me to fix it. If I want to know more, I'll ask.

Being clear, straightforward, and easy to understand isn't dumb. In fact, it's really quite smart — and a challenge to do well. If it were easy, everyone would be doing it!

The bottom line: Plain language is smart. And when you use it to write health information, there are big payoffs for readers.

So, are there any results?

Since launching in July of 2013, We  Health Literacy readership has grown from 0 to nearly 1,100 readers, almost entirely by word of mouth.

According to MailChimp, the email marketing service used to send out We  Health Literacy, the weekly emails have an open rate of 34.4% — almost twice that of emails sent by other similar creative service agencies.

Seeing both the growth in numbers and direct email feedback from our readers affirms that we're connecting with and providing support to the health literacy and plain language communities.

Sign up for the weekly email (and check out past tips!) at communicatehealth.com/healthlit

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