How to write plain English

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Academics and clinicians sometimes find it hard to write in plain English, as technical language and a wide vocabulary is so useful that it becomes second nature. As the old adage has it – *easy to read is not easy to write.* Poor writing can mislead staff and harm care[1]. Health and social care organisations have a legal duty to communicate in an accessible manner[2]. Here is some guidance on writing for a non-academic audience.

1. Consider who should be writing the text. In one study[3], researchers noted that the average reading age in England was 9 years, so explained their message to children aged 9 and then asked them to create the patient information leaflet. Elsewhere, people test out their draft with teenagers or a schoolteacher[4].

2. Picture your audience as you write. Avoid the following words if at all possible: baseline, protocol, recruitment (unless it is to do with getting a paid job), remuneration, and almost everything to do with statistics. While some of your readers will have a doctorate, others may not.

3. Wherever possible, choose terms that reinforce strengths and inclusion rather than disability and segregation. For example, 'path without steps' is better than 'disabled access', and you may be addressing 'people who prefer to work with easy words and pictures' rather than 'learning disabled people'.

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[1] http://www.theguardian.com/healthcare-network/2014/jul/01/impact-medical-jargon-patient-centred-care

[2] Health and social care organisations have a legal duty to for the accessible information standard, as set out in Section 250 of the Health and Social Care Act 2012. See details at www.england.nhs.uk/accessibleinfo and https://www.scie.org.uk/publications/misc/accessguidelinespublications.asp

[3] See http://www.bmj.com/content/359/bmj.j5565.

[4] In a splendid reversal of the usual direction of translation, an early computer programme invited patients to enter their own data and then translated some 'Patient English' into medical terminology for the benefit of the doctor. See Slack WV, et al. A computer-based medical-history system. *N Engl J Med*, 1966. 274(4): p. 194-8. DOI:10.1056/nejm196601272740406.

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4. If you are using pictures, check that they are sending the intended message regarding equalities (age, gender, disability, ethnicity) and tone (respect and ability rather than disability).

5. Set up your computer to help you by analysing your document and reporting Readability Statistics. See the footnote for how[5]. Your Flesch Reading ease score should be at least 60 and your Flesch Kincaid Grade Level should be no more than 8. A more rigorous way to check readability is to use the Readable software (although the software costs money to purchase) or Drivel Defence (which is free), as it can provide an independent evaluation of whether efforts to write in plain language have been successful and highlight the skill of plain language specialists.

6. If you are writing for people who may have difficulties seeing or be unfamiliar with reading large blocks of text, choose at least 14-point font with big margins and short paragraphs. Always use sentence case rather than capitals. Material for general audiences should be in 12 point Arial[6] or larger.

7. People with vision problems or dyslexia will almost always prefer black text on white paper.

8. Think about the things that will be important to the person reading your document. Always date your document and answer fundamental questions:

    - why you are doing this?

    - what difference it will make?

    - how will this help you do that?

    - What will I get paid or have to pay?

    - How much time will it take?

    - Will it hurt?

    - How do I find out more?

9. More advice on writing well is available – see *The Importance of Accessible Information* from the Office of Disability Issues, or SCIE's *How to Produce Information in an Accessible Way*, while IDeA have produced this webpage of resources and NIACE offer guidance and a gobbledegook checker here. Tips from people with dementia on writing well are here and advice from the

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[5] In Word, click on the File tab in the top left-hand corner of your screen, then click the Word Options button right at the foot of the sidebar in this box. Choose proofing in the left-hand column, and then check Show Readability Statistics under the Grammar section. When you are ready to review your document, click on Spelling and Grammar in the Review strip.

[6] See http://www.sensorytrust.org.uk/resources/connect/infosheet_clearlargeprint.pdf

Department of Health on creating Easy Read materials is [here]. The [Plain English Campaign] have produced a free guide for writing medical information.

10. Advice on communicating scientific ideas to a lay audience and giving press and radio interviews is available [here]. There's a section on giving presentations to schools in the [PPA Good Practice Guide]. Specific advice on how to write a plain English summary in a research bid is available from [Make it Clear] and [Iva Cheung]. For general inspiration, see Randal Munroe's *Thing Explainer.*

11. The Information Standard quality mark can be attached to good quality information about health and social care. Click [here] for more information.