Writing Clear Health Information

Why is it important to use these tips?

There are many reasons people may struggle to process written information. They might:

- feel distressed, sick, tired or overwhelmed

- have low literacy or limited English

- be new to Australia or the ACT and the health system here is not familiar

- have a disability that makes processing or accessing written information difficult

- not understand the cultural or medical context of the information

Good information is necessary to provide safe care – people can't consent to care or follow treatment advice if they don't understand it.

Clearly written health information makes it easy to:

- find the information we need

- understand how it applies to our situation

- put it into action.

Consider your audience

Things like **age**, **culture**, **gender** and **disability** will change how people understand information. Adapt your resource for different groups as they will:

- have different understandings of a topic

- need different formats

- respond better to different words or phrases

- need information in other languages

Remember, not everyone can use written information, so consider other ways to share information.

Before you translate!
People from different cultures may also have different attitudes or sensitivities that mean you need to consult with them to make sure your message is appropriate **before** it is translated into another language.

Make your message understandable

Put the most important information first. Your key message should be on the first page and towards the top of the page. If there is information about how to access a service or facility include this first.

Differentiate between 'need to know' and 'nice to know' information. Remember that receiving a lot of information can be overwhelming. Try to include only necessary information.

Use a conversational, everyday tone and an active voice. Identify who is doing the action and what the action is.

Give specific instructions on what you want your readers to do.

Tell your reader where they can find more information. Include links and a contact phone number and email for your service.

Try to avoid words you don't need. Avoid unnecessary words such as 'if you wish to', 'you may'

Speak directly to the reader, using words like 'you' and 'your'. Use words like 'we' or 'us' to talk about your health service or staff.

If 'we' or 'us' could refer to multiple staff, it may be better to say 'your doctor' or 'the pharmacist' so people understand which worker will be caring for them or who to ask for help.

Answer common questions. Using common questions as headings can help people find the information they need quickly. For example:

- What is [condition]?
- What can happen if you/your child has this condition?
- Who will help? (e.g., GP, nurse, Physio)
- What exercises/actions can you do?
- What improvements should you see?
- Which symptoms should you look out for?
- When should you seek help and how?

You could also include a list of questions the reader should ask their doctor to make sure they have all the information they need.

Try not to use slang. A casual tone can be more friendly, but if you are too casual, you could use more words than needed or slang that is confusing for people with low levels of English.

Don't shy away from sensitive words. Trying to replace common words with polite terms or euphemisms can make things difficult to understand.

Make your writing easy to read

✓ Use common 1-2 syllable words

✓ Be consistent with the words you use. Repeat key words and don't use synonyms.

✓ Write short sentences (15-20 words), each with only **one** idea.

✓ Use numerals (3) for numbers rather than words (three)

✓ Use dot points if writing a list of 4 or more.

✗ **Avoid acronyms, jargon, and unnecessarily complex words**. Replace medical terms with everyday language whenever you can. For example, use 'heart' instead of 'cardiac'.

  If you need to use acronyms, jargon or complex words, define them. If you are writing a long document it may be useful to include a glossary or word list.

Medical Term	Everyday Term
Cardiac	Heart
Paediatric	Children's
Otolaryngology	Ear, nose and throat

✗ **Avoid vague or subjective words** like 'severe'. Try to provide examples (what might 'severe' look or feel like?) or use more specific words.

✗ **Avoid words that could seem judgmental.** For example, 'normal' or 'healthy'. Instead say what you mean and define what 'normal' or 'healthy' means in this context. Give examples if you need.

✔	✘
We have received your referral for [your service]. You should get a booking in the next 3 months. If you do not hear from us, you can contact us or speak to your doctor.	A referral was received by the intake team. The standard waiting time for an appointment is three months. If you have not been notified after this time, you may wish to contact the triage team or speak to your referring professional.

Use clear formatting

Use a simple font (for example Arial, Calibri) in at least font size 12.

Align paragraphs to the left margin, not the right or centre.

Use headings and subheadings to identify new sections and topics. They can help signal important information to readers.

Bold important information to make sure it stands out (for example: times, dates, emergency phone numbers)

Avoid visual clutter. Make sure there is white space, so pages do not look crowded, and text is easy to read

Make sure there is a strong contrast between the text colour and the background colour. If the text colour is too similar to the background colour it is difficult to read.

This text is **easier to read**.	*This text is harder to read.*

Avoid tri-fold brochures. These are confusing because information flows across the folds in a way that may not be left-to-right. Try a booklet style with a single fold in the centre.

Use graphics or icons to highlight key ideas, actions and directions

 You could use this icon to make medication instructions stand out.

Use pictures and diagrams to explain complex or confusing instructions.

Include the Translating and Interpreting Service symbol and phone number at the top of each handout to help non-English speakers seek support

Step 4: Test your document

Use a readability checker like the SHeLL Health Literacy Editor (shell.techlabs.works) to test the reading level and complexity of your text. Aim for a reading level of Grade 8 or below for a general audience.

Use accessibility checkers in programs like Microsoft Word to help you make sure you are using headings and formatting correctly. This will help you make your document screen-reader friendly.

Ask some consumers to test your document. This is important to make sure your message is clear and actionable for consumers. Try to test with a few people of different backgrounds and different levels of knowledge.

Make sure you have enough time to make changes from the feedback!

More Resources

For detailed guidance and more resources on creating health literate materials, visit Writing Health Information for Consumers on Canberra Health Literacy Hub or **scan the QR code:**

Get advice on how to involve consumers by contacting the Health Care Consumers' Association at adminofficer@hcca.org.au or 02 6230 7800.