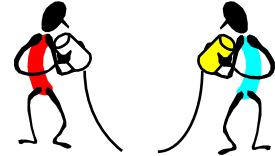## Health Literacy Tips for Patient Education Materials

What it is

Health literacy is "The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions".

Why it matters

Low health literacy may lead to:
- longer hospitalizations
- chronic disease
- earlier death

Fast facts

- Almost 15 million people in Canada have low health literacy
- Almost 90% of older adults have low health literacy
- Reading levels of health education materials do not match the reading skills of the audience

Why use scripts and other written patient education materials?

- To maintain consistency in communication between staff and patients
- To provide consistent vocabulary in communications with patients
- To support understanding of changes (such as Advanced Access)
- To reinforce expectations the practice team has of patients regarding their appointments
- To facilitate training of new staff to office policy and procedures

To ensure understanding in written communication

- Use plain, everyday words and pictures that are clear and culturally relevant
- Talk directly to the reader. Words like you, I, we, us and our make the material more personal.
- Use gender free language
- Eliminate all unnecessary words
- Use 1 or 2 syllable words as much as possible
- Maintain average sentence length of 10 words
- Limit paragraphs to 4 or 5 sentences
- List information whenever possible
- Avoid medical jargon

Keep the style simple

- Do not use all UPPER CASE letters
- Do not use different type faces on the same page. Use 14 point or larger
- Leave lots of white space (areas without print)
- Skip at least one line between paragraphs and sections

Readability and reading level

- Have your scripts use the same language as your brochures or other patient information. This provides consistency in communication.
- When developing your materials, use Microsoft readability assessment tool.

How to use the readability tool

1. On the Tools menu, click "Options", and then click the "Spelling & Grammar" tab
2. Select the "Check grammar with spelling" check box
3. Select the "Show readability statistics" check box, and then click OK
4. Run the spell check feature. When Microsoft Word finishes checking spelling and grammar, it displays information about the reading level of your document

The readability statistics box

There are two main results you want to check:

(1) Flesch Reading Ease
   The higher the score, the easier it is to understand the document. The following table is also helpful to assess the ease of readability in a document.

   90-100 : Very Easy
   80-89 : Easy
   70-79 : Fairly Easy
   60-69 : Standard
   50-59 : Fairly Difficult
   30-49 : Difficult
   0-29 : Very Confusing

Readability Statistics

Counts	
Words	91
Characters	406
Paragraphs	1
Sentences	6

Averages	
Sentences per Paragraph	6.0
Words per Sentence	15.1
Characters per Word	4.3

Readability	
Passive Sentences	0%
Flesch Reading Ease	73.3
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	6.7

(2) Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level
   Unless it is necessary for the reader to learn medical words, there is no reason why simple language should not be used. In fact, experts today recommend writing legal, safety and health information at the **7th-grade level**.

Health Literacy Tips
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