

Plain Language Basics

A Recipe for Clear Communication

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Literacy



To be able to read, write and use language in my everyday life to reach my goals and live my life to its fullest.

Health Literacy: to be able to find, read, and understand basic health information and services so that I can make the right decision for me.

Literacy Quick Facts

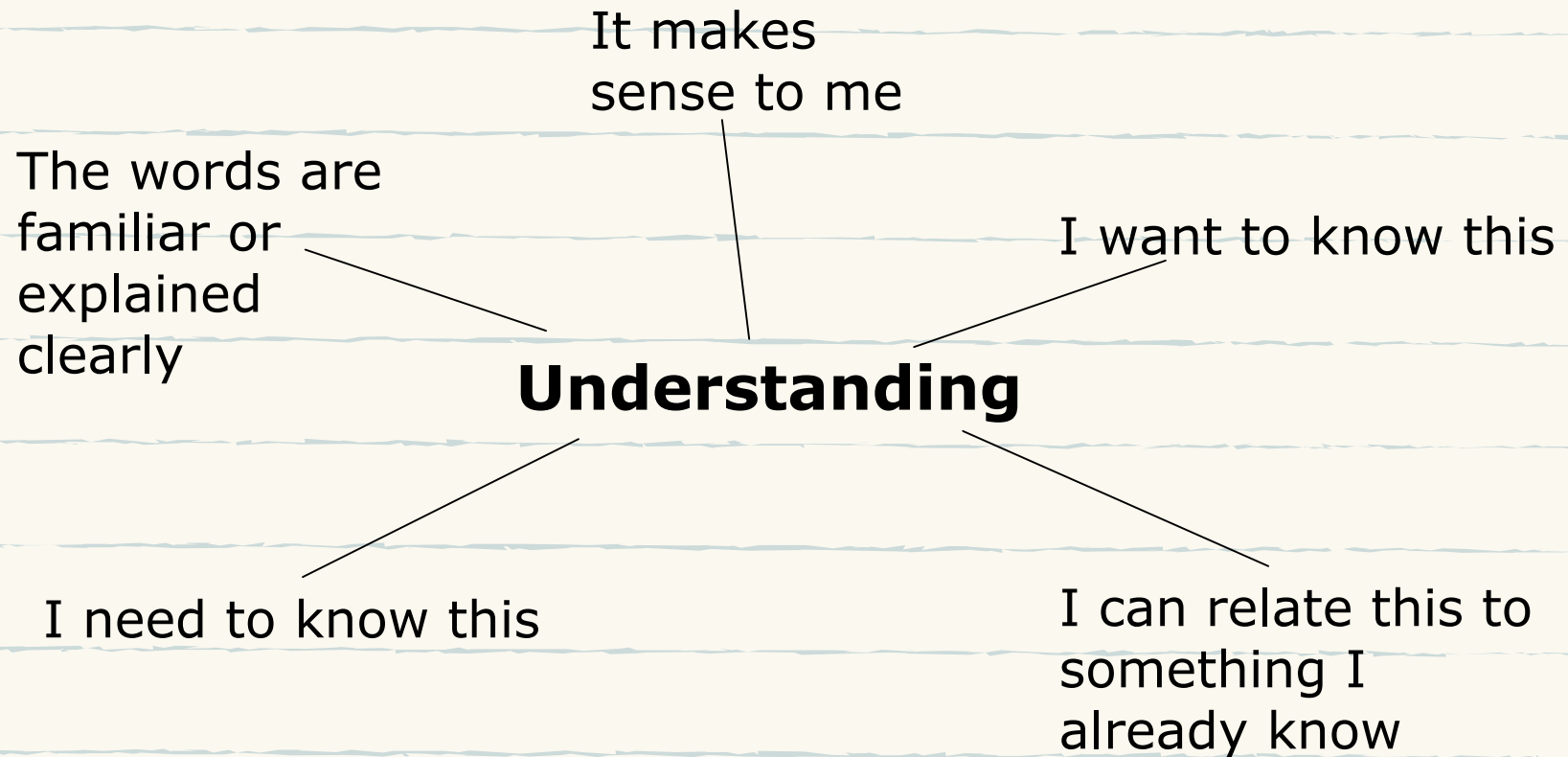


- 42% of Canadians (16-65yr) with Level 1&2 literacy levels (2003)
- 22% of this group think they are good readers
- 80% of elders have Level 1&2 literacy levels (1994)
- The sicker or more stressed the person, the lower the comprehension
- Schooling \neq literacy

Quick Check of literacy



- What do you like to read?
- How happy are you with the way you read?
Write?
- How often do you read?
- How much time do you spend reading each day?
- What makes you not want to read something?



Making Plain Language



- Plan your ingredients
- Use language as your base
- Present it in a way that makes it easy to digest

Apply this method to:

- Patient materials
- Web sites, Powerpoint, overheads
- Policy, guidelines, protocols
- Staff materials
- Presentations

Planning

What to put in it

- Who are you writing to?
- What do they need to know?
- What do they want to know?
- What might they know already about this?
- When and where will this be read?

Planning

Organize your content

- What is it going to say?
- What are the important messages?
- What is the most logical order for the reader and other users?
- How long should it be?

Language

- Use common words
- Use the active voice
- Write to your reader
- Use positive tone when possible
- Use short words & short sentences
- Keep verbs as verbs

Common Words



Abbreviations

- Use only when it is useful to the reader
- If need to use, write it out with abbreviation in brackets or visa versa

Jargon, slang, idioms – stay away from

Technical terms – explain them when you must use them

“Your mouth has plaque (sounds like ‘plack’). Plaque is a clear, sticky coating found on teeth.”

Active Voice



Active

"After you have missed one period, come to the clinic for a pregnancy test."

"The therapist treats your leg with hot packs."

"Healthy habits can prevent most heart disease."

Passive

"Pregnancy testing is done by the clinic after you have missed one period."

"The treatment on your leg is done by the therapist."

"Most heart disease can be prevented by following health habits."

Write to your reader



- Be personal – use second person (you, your, we, us)
- Try to connect the new information with what they already know
- Think about culture – is the topic, action, or direction culturally appropriate?

Use positive tone



- Tell them what you want them to do
- Only use a negative tone when it is very important **not** to do something

'Call us if you have any concerns.'

NOT 'Do not hesitate to call us if you have concerns.'

'Do not eat or drink anything before midnight.'

NOT 'Eat only before midnight.'

Short Words

Short Sentences



- One to two syllable words when you can ('tell' instead of 'notify')
- No more than 12 – 15 words per sentence
- One idea per sentence
- Try to keep to no more than 3 points under a heading

Verbs as Verbs

- We have turned verbs into nouns
- Does not really help us communicate

'Decide' not 'make a decision'

'Assess' not 'do an assessment'

'Treat' not 'provide a treatment'

Example

Before:

Dietary Guidelines include a recommendation of a half hour or more of moderate physical activity on most days, preferably every day. The activity can include brisk walking, aerobics, home care, gardening, moderate sports activities, and dancing.

After:

Do at least 30 minutes of exercise, like brisk walking, most days of the week.

Readability

General Rule of Thumb



If you are writing:

Aim for:

Essential information for a diverse public, including:

- People whose first language is not English
- People with <8 years of formal education

Grade 4 - 6

Information for the general public that introduces:

- New terms and concepts
- Specialized subject matter

Grade 7 - 9

Specialized information intended for an informed audience

Grade 10 - 15

Readability



SMOG (by hand) Result = grade level \pm 1.5 grades

Flesch-Kincaid (by MS WORD)

- Tools>Options>Spelling & Grammar
- Check off these boxes

- Check grammar with spelling
- Show readability statistics

Words of caution:

Computer programs are only as good as the person who programmed it

Flesch-Kincaid ONLY measures to Grade 12!!

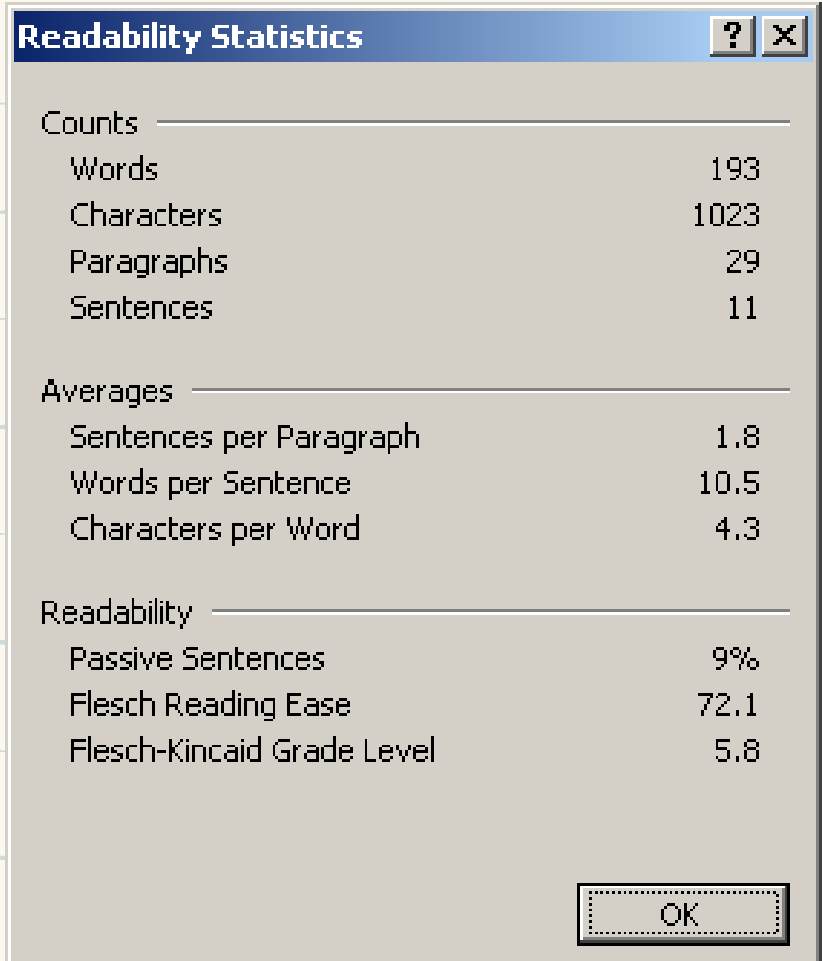
Readability

To get this image...

When it appears on your screen, press the "Alt" & "Print Screen" buttons on your keyboard at the same time.

Move your cursor to where you want the image to appear in the document.

"Paste" the image and it appears like this one.



Readability Statistics	
Counts	
Words	193
Characters	1023
Paragraphs	29
Sentences	11
Averages	
Sentences per Paragraph	1.8
Words per Sentence	10.5
Characters per Word	4.3
Readability	
Passive Sentences	9%
Flesch Reading Ease	72.1
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	5.8
OK	

Readability

Example:

'Private room or cohorting of similarly affected patients may be required.' (Grade 11)

You may need to put patients who are contagious in a private room. If there is more than one patient affected, you can put both patients in the same room. (Grade 5)

Presentation

- Grouping (chunking)
 - Short paragraphs
 - One main topic per paragraph
 - White space between
 - Bullets for:
 - lists
 - to complete a sentence
 - complete sentences (harder to read than first two)


Presentation



- Headings and subheadings
 - Help to organize text
 - Helps the reader to anticipate what is coming next
 - Helps in scanning for sections of interest

Presentation

- Layout

- Left justified
- Try for at least 50% white space
- No pictures in the middle of text
- Move from left to right to left 
- Text lines no longer than 6"

Presentation

- Font (on paper)
 - At least 12 – 14 point
 - Serif font (with a 'tail')

This is a Serif Font – Times New Roman

This is a San Serif Font - Arial

- Font (on screen)
 - No smaller than 20 point
 - San Serif font - like Verdana

Presentation

- Case:

ALL CAPS ARE NOT
EASY TO READ

*Fancy fonts (like italics and
script) are not easy to
read*

Drop caps are not easy to
read

- Highlights and
emphasis:

Arrows 

Circling

Boxes

Bold type

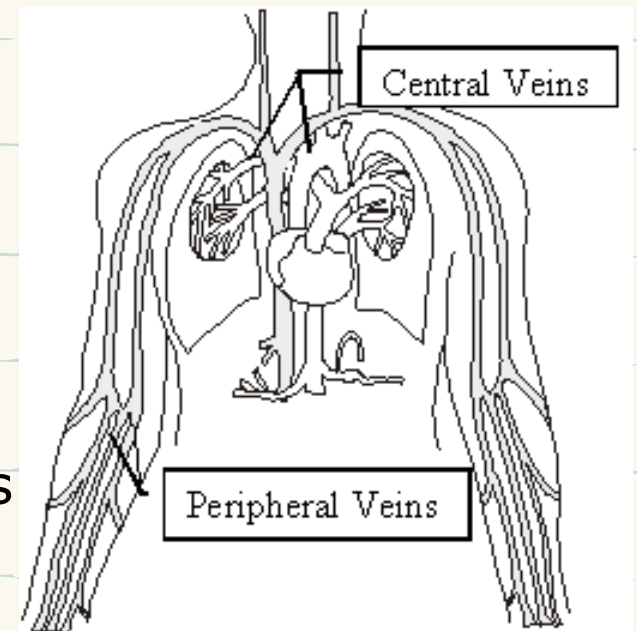
Magnifying the text

Presentation

- Graphics

A picture is worth a thousand words –
2 thousand if the person can't read

- Relevant
- Basic line drawing is best
- Familiar and easily recognized
- Provide captions
- Show desired behaviour
- Culturally appropriate
- Graphs and tables = math skills thus harder to understand



Presentation

- Colour

Careful use of photographs

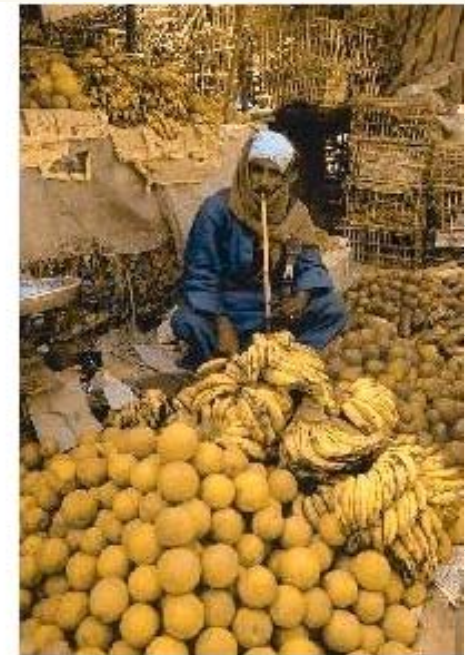
No text on top of photos or images

Use highest possible contrast text to background

Keep in mind vision
changes, aging eyes,
colour blindness



Normal vision



**Red/Green
Colour Blind View**

<http://www.vischeck.com/daltonize/>

Presentation



On Screen Notes

- Stay away from PPT bells and whistles
- Reading from a screen/projector is 25% slower than on paper
- Keep dark text on light background
 - the reverse slows reading even more
- Good colour combos:
 - Green Text on Yellow background
 - Black Text on Yellow background
 - Black Text on White background

Lorem Ipsum Dolor

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Nam erat justo, sagittis vitae, commodo ut, rhoncus lacus mit nonummy, ante.

What bothers you about this slide?

This is an example of 'how not to' and here is why this does not work::

- Poor contrast between text and background
- Embossed fonts difficult to read
- Too many colours - distracting

Duis ligula augue, aliquam sit amet, rutrum a, gravida quis, lacus. Mauris quam. Phasellus a felis quis ipsum tincidunt vehicula. Morbi elementum dapibus est.

Presentation

- Interaction

- Gets your readers involved
- Learn by doing
- More likely to keep

1. Questions

What is the name of your medication? _____

2. Problem solving

This is what I will do when I crave a cigarette:

- _____

3. Personalize it

Welcome _____

Your room number is _____

4. Checklists

either open and/or

filled in

Presentation



Before:

You must report any changes in your household composition (if anyone moves in or out of your household, if anyone gets married, becomes pregnant, or gives birth to a child), address, assets (only people age 65 or older, blind or disabled) or employment status within 10 days.

After:

You need to tell us about certain changes within 10 days.

Changes you need to tell us about:

- New people in your house, adults or children.
- People who moved out of your house.
- A change in address
- More or less income (the money you earn or get from other places)
- A change in your job.

If you are older than 65, blind or disabled, you also need to report any change in your assets (the things you own).

Presentation



Before:

Immunizing staff against influenza protects patients from death. A recent study showed that immunizing more than 60% of health care workers against influenza reduces the risk of death among residents by more than 40%.

After:

Three reasons we should be immunized each year against the flu:

- To protect the people we care for as Health Care Workers.
- To protect ourselves.
- To protect our family.

Plain Language Basics



No matter what you are writing, keep in mind:

- Who you are writing this for
- What your 'need to know' information is
- Where this will be used
- When they will be reading this
- How will this be used (stand alone or as part of face-to-face)

Plain Language Basics



Access to health care is easier with clear communication

Clear communication is the cornerstone of patient safety

Challenging Word Groups

Concept Words – words used to describe an idea, metaphor, or notion

Active role	Taking part in
Avoid	Stay away from, do not use or eat
Collaborate	Work together
Factor	Reason, cause, another thing that...
Gauge	Measure, get a better idea of, test how you...
Intake	What you eat or drink, what goes in your body
Landmark	Very important, turning point, important event
Option	Choice
Referral	Ask you to see another doctor, get a second opinion
Wellness	Good health, feeling well

Category Words – words that describe a group or subset, or that may be unfamiliar to patients

Activity	Something you do, something you do often/do every day
Adverse (reaction)	Bad
Cognitive	Learning, thinking
Hazardous	Risky, not safe, dangerous
High-intensity exercise	Use an example, such as running
Generic	Product sold without a brand name, like ibuprofen (Advil is a brand name)
Noncancerous	Not cancer
Poultry	Chicken, turkey, etc.
Prosthesis	Man-made arm/leg, to replace a body part
Support	Help with your needs (care, money, friendship)

Value Judgement Words – words that may need an example or visual to help get the meaning across clearly

Adequate	Enough <i>6-8 glasses of water a day</i>
Adjust	Fine-tune, change
Cautious -ly	With care, go slow <i>Make sure to hold onto the hand rails</i>
Excessive (-ly)	Too much, More than expected, a lot, more than normal <i>If blood soaks through your bandage</i>
Increase gradually	Add to – <i>add 5 minutes a week</i>
Moderate	Not too much <i>So you don't get out of breath</i>

Other points to keep in mind:

- Pay attention to local customs and phrasing.
- Watch cultural variations in word choices

Alpha List

Instead of...	Use...
Abdominal	Stomach area
Absence of	No
Accommodations	Places to stay
Accompany	Go with
Accomplish	Carry out
Accurate	Correct
Acquire	Get, buy, pick up
Additional	More
Administer	Give
Advise	Tell, recommend
Ailment	Sickness, illness, problem with your health
Alternative	Choice
Ambulate	Walk
Analgesic	Pain reliever, pain medicine
Annually	Each year, yearly
Anticipate	Expect
Apply	Put on, use
Appointment	Visit
Appropriate	Correct, right for you, right
Approximate (-ly)	About
Area	Spot, place, section
Assist	Aid, Help
Attempt	Try
Available	Ready
Bacteria/virus	Germ
Beneficiary	The person who will get your belongings after you die
Benefit	Help
Benign	Not cancer, will not cause harm, is not cancer
Buttock	Bottom
Capable	Can
Carcinogenic	Will cause cancer
Cardiovascular	Heart, blood vessels
Catheter	Tube
Cell Culture	Tissue study
Cerebral hemorrhage	Stroke
Cessation	Stop, pause
Chronic Disease/Illness	An illness you have for life, long-term illness, an illness of that lasts a long time and possibly progresses slowly
Circulation	Blood flow, way it moves through
Cognizant	Aware
Communicate	Speak with, talk

Instead of...	Use...
Compassion	Pity
Competent	Able
Complete (-tion)	End, finish, fill out
Comply with	Follow, meet the program rules
Complications	Problems
Component	Part, piece
Concerning	About
Conclude	End, decide
Conclusive	Final
Condition	Problem, health problem, how you feel
Congestion	Stuffed up (nose)
Congestive heart failure (CHF)	A condition where your heart can no longer pump enough blood to the rest of your body
Consent	Accept, permit, allow
Consult	Ask, talk to, check with
Contact	Call
Contagious or highly contagious	Easily caught
Contains	Has
Contraceptive	Birth control
Contusion	Bruise
Convert (-sion)	Change to
Cooperate	Help
Coronary Thrombosis	Heart attack
Decrease	Make less, reduce, lower
Defect	Problem
Deficit, Deficiency	Lack, shortage
Delete	Strike out
Demonstrate	Show, prove
Desire	Want, wish
Detect	Find
Determine	Decide, find out
Detrimental	Bad, harmful
Develop	Arise, occur
Diabetes	A disease where your body does not produce or use the right amount of insulin. Insulin helps move sugar from your blood to your body cells. You need the sugar for your body cells to work properly.
Diagnosis	Problem, condition, illness
Diagnosing	To find out
Diet	Food
Difficulties	Problems, trouble
Dilate	Open, stretch
Diminish	Get less, slow down

Instead of...	Use...
Discharge	Go home or pus-like substance
Discolouration	Change in colour
Discomfort	Pain
Disconnect	Undo
Discontinue	Stop, end
Discover	Found
Discussion	Talk with you
Distend	Stretch
Dressing	Bandage
Dysfunction	Problem
Early detection	Find early, soon
Edema	Swelling, holding fluid
Effect	Make
Effective (-ly)	Works well, good, useful, As in effective date: the date you can start getting service
Elect	Choose
Elevate	Raise, lift
Eligible	Can get, can apply for, able to get, qualify
Eliminate	Stop, end, get rid of
Equivalent	Equal
Embolism	Lump of blood, Clot
Encourage	Urge, help, offer to, tell
Endeavour	Try
Ensure	Make sure
Enrol	Join
Essential	Important
Etiology	Cause
Evaluate	Check
Evident	Clear
Examine (-ation)	Exam, check, see, study, test
Exceeds	Extra, Too much, More than expected, a lot, more than normal
Exhibit	Show
Experience	To have, to feel
Facilitate	Help, assist, make it easier, ease
Feasible	Can be done
Flatulence	Gas, passing gas
Flexible	Able to bend
Fluids	Liquids
Forward	Send
Fractured	Broken
Frequent (-ly)	Often
Function	Work

Instead of...	Use...
Fundamental	Basic
Furthermore	Also
Generate	Produce
Geriatric	Senior, elder, old, elderly
Glucose level	The amount of sugar in your blood
Guarantee	Promise, backing
Health care professional	Doctor, nurse, dietitian or therapist
However	But
Humid	Damp
Hypertension	High blood pressure
Identical	Same
Illness	Sickness
Illustrations	Pictures, drawings
Immediate (-ly)	At once
Immunize	Protect from
Impair	Harm
Implement	Do, follow, carry out
In the event that	If
Inability	Not able
Inadvisable	Unwise
Inception	From the start
Incision	Cut
Incorrect	Wrong
Independent	Free, on your own, without help
Indicate (-ion)	Show, Sign
Ineffective	Useless
Ineligible	Not qualified, no longer able to get
Inflammation	Swelling (and redness)
Influenza	Flu
Inform	Tell
Ingest	Eat
Inhibit	Hinder, slow down, stop
Inhibitor	Drugs that stop something that is bad for you
Initial	First
Initiate	Start, begin
Injection	Shot
Innovate (-ion)	Create, new, change
Insert	Put into
Instructions	What to do
Instrument	Tool
Institute	Set up
Insufficient	Not enough
Intention	Aim

Instead of...	Use...
Intermittent	Now and then, off and on
Interrupt	Stop, pause
Interventions	Things you can do
Intravenous	Give you a liquid into your vein through a small thin tube
Laceration	Cut, tear
Legislation	Law
Lesion	Wound, sore, infected patch of skin
Let you know, let us know	Tell you, tell us
Limited number	Few
Locate	Find
Lower extremity	Leg
Maintain	Keep, support
Majority	Most
Malformation	Not formed in the correct/right way
Maximum	Most, greatest, more
Medication	Medicine
Method	Way
Micro-organisms	Germ
Minimum	Least, smallest, less
Modify (-ification)	Change
Monitor	Check, watch
Multidisciplinary Health Care Team	We
Necessary	Needed
Negative	No
Notify	Call, tell
Notice	Sign, take note
Notification	Notice, let know
Nutrition	Diet, food and fluids, how you eat
Numerous	Many, most
Objective	Goal, aim
Obligation	Duty
Observe (-ation)	Check, see, watch, note, remark
Obtain	Get
Obvious	Plain
Occurrence	Event
Offer	Give
Opportunity	Chance
Optimal (-mum)	Best, most, greatest
Oral /oral cavity	By mouth, Mouth
Palatable	Pleasing
Participate	Take part in
Particular	Certain

Instead of...	Use...
Patient/Client/Resident	You
Penetrate	Pierce
Perforation	Hole
Perform	Do
Permission	Consent
Permit	Let
Perspective	View
Pharmacy	Drugstore
Physician or surgeon	Doctor
Possibility	Chance
Prescribed	Ordered
Presently	Now
Principal	Main, chief
Prior to	Before
Procedure	Test, operation, surgery, something done to treat your problem
Prognosis	Usual course, outcome
Project	Plan
Promote	Help
Provide	Give, supply, offer
Provided that	If
Purchase	Buy
Qualified	Suited, Specially trained or educated
Radiology	X-ray
Recognize	Know, see, accept
Recommend (-ation)	Advice, suggested, a good idea, What your (doctor) told you to do, things to try
Recuperate	Get well
Registration/Register	Sign in, sign up
Regulate	Control
Rehabilitate	Restore
Reimburse	Pay or pay back
Relating to	About
Remainder	Rest
Remove	Take out
Request	Ask
Require/Requirement	Need
Residence	Home
Resume	Start again
Retain	Keep
Review	Check, go over
Routinely	Usually
Ruptured	Burst

Instead of...	Use...
Saturate	Soak
Secretions	Mucous
Securely	So it doesn't come off, so it is safe, tight
Segment	Part
Sensation	Feeling (state type)
Several	Many
Severity	How bad
Select (-ion)	Choose, Choice
Similar to	Like, same as
Situated	Placed
Specialist	Had special training
Status	State
Stimulate	Excite, make aware
Stool	Bowel movement
Submit	Send
Subsequent	Next, future, later
Substituted	Used in place of, instead of
Sufficient	Enough
Suture	Stitch
Tear a ligament	Sprain
Temporary	Short term use, for awhile
Terminate (-ion)	Stop, end, finish
The baby, the child	Your baby, your child
Therapy	Treatment
Transitional	For a short time
Transmit	Send
Transports	Carries, takes
Ultimate	Last, final
Uncommon	Rare, does not happen very often
Understand	Know, can you tell me about...
Urgent	Cannot wait long
Unnecessary	Unneeded, needless, not needed
Upper extremity	Arm
Urination	Passing urine, passing water, going to the bathroom, pee
Utilize (-ation)	Use
Varicella	Chicken pox
Vertigo	Dizzy, dizziness
Viable	Workable
Visualize (-ation)	Picture, see
Voluminous	Bulky

For more plain words: <http://www.eastendliteracy.on.ca/clearlanguageanddesign/thesaurus/>

S.M.O.G. (Simple Measure of Gobbledegook)

Text with 30 or more sentences:

1. Take a sample of 30 sentences within the document: 10 at the beginning, in the middle, and near the end of the text. (These need to be consecutive. Do not include titles and headings.)
2. Mark all the hard words (3 or more syllables) in the samples.
3. Count the total number of hard words.

Beginning	21
Middle	28
End	<u>23</u>
	72
4. Find the nearest square root of this total. (e.g. nearest square root of 72 is [64=8])
5. Add a constant of three to the square root. This gives you the reading level a person must have to understand the text. (8+3=Grade 11)

Text with less than 30 sentences:

1. Mark and count all the hard words (3 or more syllables) in the text.
2. Count the number of sentences in the text.
3. Find the average number of hard words per sentence:
Average = Step 1 ÷ Step 2
4. Subtract the total number of sentences from 30. Multiply the remainder by the average number of hard words per sentence.
(30 – Step 2) X Step 3
5. Add this figure to the total number of hard words.
Step 4 + Step 1
6. Find the nearest square root and add the constant of 3. This gives you the reading level a person must have to understand the text.

Additional Guidelines

- Consider hyphenated words as one word
- Pronounces numbers that are in numeric form to determine if they are hard words (e.g. 337 = 8 syllables)
- Proper nouns, if hard words, should be counted too (Vancouver = 3 syllables)
- Read abbreviations as unabbreviated to determine if they are hard words (ON, for Ontario = 4 syllables)
- Include the repetitions of the same word, no matter how often it is used
- The grade level is relatively accurate to +/- 1.5 grades

Samples of Different Reading Levels:

- College:** With the onset of nausea, diarrhea, or other gastrointestinal disturbances consult your physician immediately.
- 12th Grade:** If you experience nausea, diarrhea, or other stomach or bowel problems, call your physician immediately.
- 8th Grade:** If you start having nausea, loose bowel movements, or other stomach or bowel problems, call your doctor immediately.
- 4th Grade:** If you start having an upset stomach, loose bowel movements, or other problems, call your doctor right away.

Plain Language Resources

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PLAIN, the Plain Language Action and Information Network @ <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/>

The Plain Language Association International @ <http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/>

Vischeck (simulates colour blind vision) @ <http://www.vischeck.com/>