

Readability and Health Information

Effective health information is easily read and understood by the intended audience.

Readability refers to written language that is readily intelligible and can be easily read. It is also sometimes referred to as *legibility* and *ease of reading*.

When writing health information for consumers keep the following principles in mind:

- Use simple words, short sentences and short paragraphs.
- Use the active voice and be direct and clear.
- Take a personal approach. 'You might' not the 'patient might'.
- Use familiar words and avoid jargon wherever possible.
- Avoid abbreviations wherever possible.
- Use lower case letters for most of the text as they are easier to read.

Simple words and short, direct sentences are more likely to be read and understood by people with low literacy skills. Short paragraphs can help increase understanding of the main messages, by focussing the reader's attention on one key idea at a time.

Readability tools

Readability formulas are used to determine the reading difficulty of health information. Many formulas have been developed to assist writers in preparing health information materials such as pamphlets, booklets, instructions and self-care information.

These formulas vary in content. However, all indicate that high readability scores can be reduced by the use of short words and sentences. The lower the number of polysyllabic words, the lower the reading level, and therefore, the easier it is to read and understand.

One common readability tool is the SMOG (Simple Measure of Gobbledygook) test, which is effective in measuring the reading level of health material.

SMOG – Simple Measure of Gobbledygook

The SMOG test is simple and quick to apply and generates an approximate reading grade, for the material. The step-by-step guide is easy to follow;

- *Mark off the material in three ten-sentence sections, one at the beginning, one towards the middle and one at the end of the text.*
- *Count every polysyllabic words (word with three or more syllables), even if the same word appears more than once from the sentences in the material.*
- *Add the total number of words counted.*
- *Use the SMOG conversion table to determine the grade level of the material.*

It is also important to consider;

- Acronyms and abbreviations need to be counted as the whole word that they represent.
- Numbers that are written out in the text or in numeric form need to be pronounced to determine the number of syllables. If numbers are polysyllabic they need to be included in the word count.
- Words with hyphens should be counted as one word.

SMOG conversion table

Word Count	Grade/School Year Level
0-2	4
3-6	5
7-12	6
13-20	7
21-30	8
31-42	9
43-56	10
57-72	11
73-90	12
91-110	13 (university)
111-132	14
133-156	15
157-182	16
183-210	17
211-240	18

For more information on the SMOG formula go to <http://www.med.utah.edu/pated/authors/>

An example: an excerpt from a Menopause fact sheet for women.

Before

Menopause is a natural phase in a woman's life, which occurs when the ovaries cease producing hormones, normally between the ages of 45 and 55 years. Menopause usually signifies the end of menstruation and childbearing years. This transition is not always smooth. Menopause may cause some women to experience tiredness, hot flushes, mood swings, feelings of being unloved, loss of sex drive, dry vagina and frequent urination. These symptoms can vary from woman to woman and may actually begin some years before the end of menstruation.

After

Menopause is a normal phase in a woman's life. It occurs when the ovaries stop making hormones, often between the ages of 45 and 55 years. Menopause signals the end of having periods and the end of the child-bearing years.

This change is not always smooth. Menopause may cause some women to feel tired, have hot flushes, mood swings and feelings of being unloved. It may also cause loss of sex drive, dry vagina and needing to urinate more often. These symptoms can vary from woman to woman and may begin some years before a woman's periods end.

For more information see:

- **Hi Quality**, developed by the Centre for Health Information Quality (CHIQ), is a site designed to increase awareness about quality assurance in relation to health information - <http://www.hiquality.org.uk>
- **Centre for Health Care Strategies Inc**, provides a number of fact sheets covering important aspects of health literacy – <http://www.chcs.org/resource/hl.html>
- **University of Utah - Health Sciences Centre**, provides fact sheets for writing effective health information – <http://www.med.utah.edu/pated/authors/>