

# Workplace Health Literacy Toolkit

What health literacy is, why it is important and how  
to embed and consider it within your workplace



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## Introduction and background

### What is health literacy?

Health literacy is about a person's ability to understand and use information to make decisions about their health.

A user with low health literacy will generally struggle to:

- read and understand health information
- know how to act on this information
- know which health services to use and when to use them

Research shows that:

- more than 4 in 10 adults struggle with health content for the public
- more than 6 in 10 adults struggle with health content that includes numbers and statistics

This is because a lot of health content is written, often unintentionally, for people with higher health literacy skills.

**Functional literacy** means having good enough skills in reading and understanding to manage daily life. To be 'functionally literate', people must have a literacy level at or above the equivalent of GCSE grade 1, 2 or 3 (was D-G). About 15 in 100 adults (15% or around 1 in 6 adults) in England and Northern Ireland have a literacy level at or below that.

**Functional numeracy** means being good enough at basic maths to manage daily life. That means numeracy at key stage 2-3 or above (or as good as the average 11 year old). Around 24 out of 100 people (24% or nearly 1 in 4 people) in England are below this level.

## **Why health literacy is important**

Low health literacy has been linked to a range of important problems.

These include:

- unhealthy lifestyles and poor general health
- low use of preventative services, like vaccinations and screening
- difficulty taking medicines correctly
- increased A&E attendances and hospital admissions
- reduced life expectancy

Health literacy is also a health inequality issue. There is a close link between socio-economic deprivation and low health literacy.

**The University of Southampton mapped where people in England are likely to struggle with health literacy. They based this on local literacy and numeracy levels. People in the NE & Cumbria are more likely to struggle with health literacy.**

**You can find it on this link: <http://healthliteracy.geodata.uk>**

## **What is digital health literacy?**

Health and workplace information and services are increasingly provided online. To access these, people need to have computer and online skills as well as health literacy. These computer and online skills are referred to as digital skills.

So, digital health literacy covers both digital skills and the ability to apply these to health information.

Those without the required digital skills may be left out. Barriers include:

- Lack of interest in technology
- Lack of confidence and fear of technology (“I don’t want to break it”)

- Language difficulties (including English as a second language)
- Money (cost of equipment, broadband and smartphone contracts)
- Traditional reliance on family or other helpers
- Disability.

### **Where do we go from here?**

When individuals improve their health literacy skills and organisations improve the ways that they communicate, this has two key benefits:

Firstly, people take steps to stay healthier; and secondly, people's health improves. Wherever you work, it should help you to support people with low levels of health literacy. In turn, this will help your staff/colleagues to develop the knowledge and confidence they need to improve their own health and wellbeing.

Our collective aim should be to:

- **provide written information that is easier for everyone to read**
- **improve the quality and accessibility of spoken communication**
- **recognise who may have lowered health literacy and that this level may vary with circumstance**
- **ensure that those who are digitally excluded are able to (and know how to) access internal and external services.**

### **Health Literacy: Guidance**

#### **1. Communicating with people**

To communicate well, you must provide information that can be understood. This can be written or spoken.

Being able to assess someone's literacy and numeracy level can be helpful. But it's best if we aim to **make all health communication accessible** to as many people as possible, by making it easy to understand.

To be health literacy aware, we also need to **ensure that people have understood** what they've been told and not just assume that they do.

The World Health Organization recommends taking "**universal precautions**". This means offering support to everyone, rather than assuming some people will understand and others won't.

**It is also helpful to think about different formats of information. People do not necessarily want written information as a substitute for verbal information.**

**Often good communication is not a case of using one method or another, but rather multiple methods.**

## 2. Spoken communication

Good communication does not just depend on the words you use. Non verbal cues are key to giving the right impression and encouraging people to engage with you.

### **Written information – how you write**

People are often given factsheets or booklets to help them make informed choices about their health and wellbeing. These will only be helpful if they are written in a way the reader can understand. **This also applies to all workplace communications, including policies and Staff Handbooks.**

To be sure that it's accessible, **written information really needs to be aimed at reading age 11 or below**. This means writing in simple language, or what is often called 'plain English'.

It's also important to think about what your staff/colleagues need to know.

- Think about the flow of your information. It will be easier for people to follow if it's in a logical order.
- Also consider what your people are likely to think is most important, and make sure those points stand out.
- A key part of creating written information is checking that your intended audience can understand it.

### **Writing in plain English**

The first step in plain English writing is to choose words that your reader is most likely to understand. It isn't easy to write health/workplace policy information in plain English. You may have to use a complicated term or words that people will have difficulty understanding. However, if you explain these well, it is helpful for the reader as they are likely to come across these terms again.

**Top Tip:** If you're working in Word, you can right click on a word and choose synonyms from the drop-down list to find alternative ways of saying something.

### **The way you write**

As well as the words and writing style you use, the way the words look on the page can make a big difference. Dense text is much harder to read (see design section below). Think about where you can put bullet lists to break up the text.

These are the main ways you can make your writing clearer:

- choosing the simplest words that you can
- using short sentences (less than 25 words)

- using active verbs
- using 'you' and 'we'
- using bullets for lists
- being direct

#### 4. Readability

This is a way of measuring how easy a document is to read and understand. Readability (eg. SMOG) tests take into account the length of sentences and the number of syllables in each word. So, in general, writing that has short sentences and short words score better.

#### 5. Involving your users

**Consultation and co-production:** To make sure that your target audience will understand the information you produce for them, it's best to involve them in the production process.

The cheapest and simplest way to user test web content is to sit with a colleague(s) while they use your website. You test, identify problem areas, make adjustments and then test again.

#### 6. Design

How information looks on a page makes a huge difference to how easy it is to read and understand. A leaflet or web page that looks cluttered, complicated or confusing will put off less confident readers from even trying to read it.

#### **Information in print**

As well as following plain language guidelines for the way you write, you need to pay attention to the design of your information, whether it will be a printed hard copy or digital information online.

### **Issues around the overall 'look'**

- White space should make up about half the page.
- Make sure there is enough spacing between lines of text or it will look crowded.
- Have good contrast between the colour of the text and the background – preferably black or dark blue on white.

### **Issues around type and text**

- Choose a plain font (typeface), such as Arial, Helvetica or Calibri.
- Use as large a type size as you can – at least 12 point.
- **Don't** use 'justified' text. (Justification means ending the lines evenly at the righthand margin by adjusting the spacing between words).
- **Don't** use capitals, italics or underlining – they are all harder to read.
- Lines of text that are too long or too short can make reading harder. Aim for 10-12 words per line.
- **Don't** wrap words round a picture or other image.

### **Organising your information**

- Use short headings that stand out – at least 2 points bigger than your main type size.
- Try not to phrase headings as questions
- Use bullet points for lists.
- Use **bold text** to help something important stand out.



## Using text boxes

*Text boxes can be useful in breaking up text and making important information prominent. Make sure there's enough white space round the text so it's not crowded.*

## Additional tips for digital information

Almost all of the points for print apply to digital/online information.

Make sure that the pages of your website display as intended, whether people are looking at it on a computer, tablet or mobile phone.

Websites may look different on different browsers (for example, Chrome, Firefox or MS Edge), particularly on older versions.

## Design issues when you're writing online information

There are some things to watch out for when you're putting information together:

- As with printed hard copies, make sure there is enough contrast between the background and the text. **Black text is really best**
- Don't use blue text - link text is traditionally blue on websites so it could confuse.
- Only link text should be underlined
- Links should have descriptive text e.g. using **more information about breast cancer** tells the user exactly where the link goes.
- Never use generic link text such as **click here**. People with vision problems using screen readers will only hear 'click here' and have no idea where the link goes
- **Colour** can make your pages attractive, but don't overdo it.

# Tips for Effective Infographics

Follow these tips to make your infographics easy to understand and use!

## Branding

Follow your organization's branding guidelines.



## White Space

Use white space to help users navigate and read the text.



## One Main Idea

Focus on just one main idea.



## Clear Data

Use a visual that shows your data clearly.



## Concise

Use short words and phrases.



## Appealing

Make the infographic attractive.



## For The Audience

Keep your audience's needs in mind.



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## Pictures, graphs and other images

Images in health information can include photographs, drawings, tables, graphs and infographics. Tables and graphs can be difficult for people to follow. So try to make sure that the information you are providing in a graph or table is summed up in the text.

An infographic uses images to communicate evidence-based information in a way that is easy for people to understand.

In health information, people like images that have a purpose - a picture or diagram that helps explain the text. Images that are added to break up the text are also helpful as long as you don't use too many.

Images should be of good quality and large enough for people to see them properly in your finished document. Poor quality images may make your information look unprofessional and less trustworthy.

It can be surprising how differently people can interpret the same image.

Select your images and put in place **before** doing any user testing.

## Reflecting your audience

Images should reflect the diversity of your audience.

The point is to show a range of people **appropriately**. For example, a leaflet with only images of white people may lead to people from different ethnic backgrounds thinking it's not for them.

## More information

The Plain English Campaign produce **tips for clear websites**, covering page design, text and technical display issues. They also produce a **guide to design and layout** for printed information.

The RNIB have a **guide to choosing colour and contrast in print materials for people with sight problems**. This link takes you to the guide on a Scottish disability organisation's website.

<https://pifonline.org.uk/resources/how-to-guides/web-accessibility-a-quick-guide>

## Other tools:

### Tool: How to write in plain English

This free [How to write in plain English guide](#) is produced by the Plain English Campaign.

### Tool: A-Z of alternative words from the Plain English Campaign

This [A-Z of alternative words](#) provides plain English alternatives to more complex terms that are often used in official writing. It isn't specific to health information but includes many words that are commonly used and that you may want to try and avoid, such as 'deficiency' ('lack of').

**Tool: Plain English Lexicon from the Plain Language Commission**

The [Plain English Lexicon](#) provides a searchable list of almost 3,000 words. These are arranged alphabetically, with simpler alternatives. It may look confusing at first glance, as there are several columns. The most relevant for us is the UK column, which gives the lowest reading age at which the average person will understand the word.

**Tool: Care and Support Jargon Buster from Think Local Act Personal**

The [Care and Support Jargon Buster](#) explains commonly used terms in health and social care. These are arranged alphabetically and are searchable. It doesn't cover many medical terms. But it does include a lot of words and phrases related to care systems and services. These may be useful for extending your own knowledge as well as in producing health information. There are useful 'see also' suggestions for many of the terms.

**Tool: A guide to producing written information in 'easy read' from North Yorkshire County Council**

Easy read is a style of producing information developed for people with learning disabilities. But it's also useful for people who speak English as a second language, people with memory problems or those with low literacy levels. It includes many of the principles of plain English information, but is simpler and generally uses more images.

This [guide to producing information in easy read](#) provides many 'top tips' that were developed in partnership with people with learning disabilities. It continues with a step by step guide to producing easy read documents.

\*Adapted from [NHS Health Literacy Toolkit, 2nd Edition, 2023](#)