

✓ A Plain Language Checklist for Health Care Professionals

What is Plain Language?

Plain language is the practice of communicating – verbally or written – in clear, simple terms that a majority of audiences can easily understand. Plain language is more than using plain words. It's also about providing context and about the style of writing you use.

In health care plain language aims to make health information easier for patients and caregivers to understand and use.

Why Should You Use Plain Language When Engaging Advisors?

Ontario's health care system can be hard to get around in and understand, especially for those who don't work within it. Roughly 60% of Canadian adults and 88% of Canadian seniors have low health literacy. This means they struggle to get, understand and act upon basic health information due to its complex language and design. Plain language is an evidence-based solution that responds to the effects of low health literacy.

As you and your health organization engage patients and caregivers in your work, plain language becomes a useful way of making sure patient and caregiver advisors understand what it is you want to engage them in, when you want to engage them, and how. When advisors are supported to understand health information, they're able to participate in engagement activities in more meaningful ways. Use the plain language best practice checklist below to communicate clearly with the patient, caregiver and public advisors you work with.

A Best Practice Checklist

- ☑ **Focus Your Communication** – Know your audience and purpose before you begin. Always open your communication with the most important messages.

Tips for Email: Break your text into logical chunks of information and use headings to organize your key thoughts, questions and instructions for patient and caregiver advisors. Write in the [active voice](#) and try to personalize information by including "you" and other pronouns. Doing this means advisors are more likely to understand and respond to you.

- ☑ **Be Concise** – Too much information may overwhelm or intimidate patient and caregiver advisors. Try to limit each communication to four to six key messages. This helps advisors to focus on the details that matter most.

Tips for Email: Sentences that are fifteen words or less are easier to process and remember. Paragraphs that are four sentences or less help to break up bulky text.

- ☑ **Speak/Write at a Grade 8 Level** – Many people with low health literacy won't clearly understand information shared at a higher level. Sharing information at a Grade 8 level allows you to communicate clearly with the greatest number of advisors.

Tips for Email: Use a [readability calculator](#) to get the estimated grade level required to read your emails.

- ☑ **Use Bullet Points** – This makes documents easier to read and reference, and highlights key facts or instructions that need to be followed. Providing information in bullets instead of paragraphs also helps to break up text and add white space, which is a best practice in plain language communication.

Tips for Email: When you're giving advisors instructions to be followed in a specific order, use numbers instead of bullets. This helps readers gain a sense of the order instructions should be followed in.

- ☑ **Use Images** – Evidence shows that health info-graphics and other images are a great way to help patient and caregiver advisors visualize and understand key information.

Tips for Email: Use the Visualizing Health Project's [decision-making tool](#) to help you identify when and how to use images when you're sharing health information.

- ☑ **Avoid Using Jargon** – Choose words and numbers your audience knows. Words with fewer syllables are easier for people with low health literacy to understand.

Tips for Email: Use the [Centre for Disease Control's Plain Language Thesaurus](#) to find simple replacements for complex health terms.

- ☑ **Avoid Using Acronyms** – Avoid health system acronyms. If you must use acronyms, have a conversation with advisors about what they mean and when you plan to use them.

Tips for Email: Share a list of [health care acronyms](#) with patient and caregiver advisors.

Active Voice www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/quickreference/dash/dashactive.cfm

Readability Calculator www.readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-formula-tests.php

Decision-Making Tool www.vizhealth.org/wizard

Plain Language Thesaurus for Health Communications www.cdc.gov/other/pdf/everydaywordsforpublichealthcommunication.pdf

Health Care Acronyms www.hqontario.ca/Portals/0/documents/pe/list-of-health-care-acronyms.pdf

If you have any questions or comments, or would like more details on this topic, contact engagement@hqontario.ca.

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