

Making your health information clear and readable

When writing for consumers, aim for clear, simple information which can be easily read and understood by your audience. Some tips:

- **know the audience you are writing for** – especially their language and cultural characteristics
- **use simple words, short sentences and short paragraphs** – they are more likely to be read and understood
- **use an appealing layout** with some 'open space' – try not to be 'text' heavy
- **consider using pictures** to illustrate key points
- **emphasise desired behaviours**, rather than medical facts
- **use active terms** and be direct and clear – eg 'drink water' not 'water should be drunk'
- **be personal** – eg use 'you might' not 'the patient might'
- **use familiar words** and avoid jargon and abbreviations
- **use lower case** letters for most of the text as they are easier to read
- **seek feedback from your audience** on the appeal, readability and ease of understanding of your information. This is the most valuable thing you can do.



Readability tools

Readability tools provide a guide to the reading level of your information. The lower the reading level, the easier your information is to understand.

Aim to get as close as possible to a reading level of about 7-8 which equates to the 7-8 school year level of education. Using shorter words and shorter direct sentences will reduce the reading level.

There are many readability tools available to calculate reading level. Information about two tools is provided below.

1. The Flesch-Kincaide Grade Level Index – available with Microsoft Word

This tool is a convenient one to use as it is included in Microsoft Word. It automatically calculates a measure of readability called the Flesch-Kincaide Grade Level Index.

To operate, go to Tools, in your tool bar. Go to Spelling and Grammar, then Options, and ensure the 'Display readability statistics' option is ticked. With your Word document open apply 'Spelling and Grammar' through to the end of your document. Reading level statistics will be displayed, including the Flesch-Kincaide Grade Level Index.

2. SMOG – Simple Measure of Gobbledygook

SMOG is a commonly used readability tool. It works by applying formulas to determine a 'Word Count'. When the 'Word Count' is known, the SMOG Table can be used to identify the reading level.

We provide information on how to calculate the 'Word Count' for material which is less than 30 sentences in length. This is because many pamphlets and information sheets are likely to be quite short.

We also provide information on calculating the 'Word Count' for material longer than 30 sentences.

Applying SMOG to material less than 30 sentences

The process of applying SMOG using the steps below looks quite complex! However, we are sure you will find it reasonably easy to use once you are familiar with it.

What you need to do is:

Step 1. Count all of the words in your material that have 3 or more syllables. Call your answer 'a'.

Step 2. Count the number of sentences in your material. Call your answer 'b'.

Step 3. Divide the number of words with 3 or more syllables by the number of sentences. That is, 'a' divided by 'b'. Call your answer 'c'. ($c=a/b$)

Step 4. Now work out how far your material falls short of being 30 sentences. You have already counted the number of sentences (b), so calculate 30 minus 'b'. Call your answer 'd'. ($d=30 - b$)

Step 5. Multiply your answers to Steps 3 and 4. That is, 'c' multiplied by 'd'. Call your answer 'e'. ($e=c \times d$)

Step 6. Add 'e' to the number of words with 3 or more syllables. That is, add 'a' from Step 1 and 'e'. (Word Count = $a + e$) You now have your 'Word Count'!

Locate your 'Word Count' figure in the SMOG table and identify the grade/reading level of your material.

Adapted from:
www.health.state.mn.us/communityeng/groups/test.html

Applying SMOG to material longer than 30 sentences

- Mark off the material in 3, 10-sentence sections, one at the beginning, one towards the middle and one at the end of the text.
- Count every word with 3 or more syllables in your 30 sentences, even if the same word appears more than once. This is your 'Word Count'.
- Locate your 'Word Count' figure in the SMOG table and identify the grade/reading level of your material.

Tips for counting syllables

- Numbers should be pronounced to determine the number of syllables they contain.
- Words with hyphens should be considered as one word.
- Acronyms and abbreviations should be considered as the whole word they represent.

SMOG Table	
Word count	Grade 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
111-132	14
133-156	15
157-182	16
183-210	17
211-240	18

Making information easier to understand

The following is 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 revision

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.

Further information

Writing quality health information

Centre for Health Care Strategies, Inc has 9 fact sheets on aspects of health literacy at www.chcs.org/usr_doc/Health_Literacy_Fact_Sheets.pdf

University of Utah, Health Sciences Centre has fact sheets for authors of health information at www.med.utah.edu/pated/authors/, including more about the SMOG formula at www.med.utah.edu/pated/authors/readability.html

Minnesota Department of Health has information about the SMOG test at www.health.state.mn.us/communityeng/groups/test.html

Writing about treatment options

DISCERN: Quality criteria for consumer health information on treatment choices, is an internet tool and handbook with examples of communicating information about treatment options, risks and benefits. www.discern.org.uk

National Health and Medical Research Council (2000). *How to present evidence for consumers: Preparation of consumer publications*. Canberra, AGPS. www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/_files/cp66.pdf

Centre for Health Promotion

Other documents in this series available from the CHP

Developing quality consumer health information

Evaluating health information with consumers

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