

Are your written materials

missing the mark?

Educational and promotional materials are often written above the reading level of many older adults. Here's how you can ensure your 50-plus clients understand your information

by *Brigid McHugh Sanner*

Health and wellness professionals and educators spend a good deal of time and effort developing written materials. Brochures, pamphlets, booklets and other print materials on starting or maintaining a fitness program are readily available in most facilities. Reception areas, kiosks and waiting rooms often stock literature on health topics such as arthritis, osteoporosis, sports injuries, heart health and nutrition. Trainers, physical therapists, counselors and coaches routinely use public education print materials to supplement and reinforce their presentations. Unfortunately, materials that have been painstakingly researched, written and reviewed all too often fail as communications tools for older adults.

The problem is that industry professionals seldom take into account the appropriate reading level for the target audience. And graphic elements that could enhance the effectiveness of print materials for older and less literate individuals are often either not considered or disregarded in favor of trendy design and typography.

Ironically, much of the health education material provided to older people is written above the reading level of many midlife and older adults. Using a diagnostic test for functional health literacy, researchers studied more than 2,600 patients in the United States. They concluded that approximately 81% of English-speaking adults and 83% of Spanish-speaking adults ages 60 and older have inadequate or marginal

functional health literacy (Williams et al 1995).

To create print materials suitable for older adults, health and wellness educators must include literacy level and design in the development process.

A look at adult literacy

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which is part of the U.S. Department of Education, assesses the English language literacy skills of adult Americans through the *National Adult Literacy Survey* (NALS). Results of the 1992 NALS show that 25–30% of U.S. adults ages 55–64 and 44–53% of adults ages 65 and older fall into the lowest literacy level. In contrast, 21–23% of the overall U.S. population scores at that level.

Literacy levels of Canadians are higher than Americans, according to the 1994 *International Adult Literacy Survey*, an international comparisons program managed by Statistics Canada. Still 22% of Canadians rank lowest and 26% rank second lowest on the scale of literacy levels, says the Movement for Canadian Literacy, a national nonprofit organization. As with the U.S., Canada tends to have higher numbers of older adults falling into the lower literacy levels.

So what exactly is adult literacy? NALS defines it as “[t]he ability to use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.” NALS does not attach a reading grade level to its literacy levels, which range from level one, the lowest, to level five, the highest.

“Literacy levels are designed to simplify reporting of literacy results,” explains NCES. They are also designed “to represent the progression from simpler to more complex cognitive demands associated with the use of prose,

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document and quantitative literacy materials.” NCES adds, “A grade level score is an average score on a norm-referenced test given to schoolchildren. Schoolchildren do not take the adult literacy assessment, so there are no grade-level norms for the National Assessment of Adult Literacy.”

It is widely agreed that the average adult in the United States reads at an eighth-grade level. But a large number of adults read below the average level, especially in the older age groups.

Health communications professionals generally recommend designing adult-targeted public education print materials for about a fifth- or sixth-grade reading level, to accommodate individuals who read at lower levels.

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Health and wellness leaders and educators must take responsibility for assuring their messages are crafted and presented in a manner comprehensible to older people.

Tools to measure readability level

An easy-to-use tool to help gauge the readability level of materials exists in Microsoft Word software:

- Pull down the Tools menu on the Microsoft Word toolbar and choose Options. Click on the Spelling & Grammar tab, and ensure Show Readability Statistics is checked in the Grammar section.
- Pull down the Tools menu again. This time, choose Grammar (or Spelling and Grammar in some versions). This command instructs Microsoft Word to go through a document and do both a spell and grammar check.
- View the screen titled Readability Statistics, which appears after these checks are complete. Look in the Readability section for the Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level results. The Flesch Reading Ease score must be 60 or higher for an eighth-grade reading level, while the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level will provide the approximate grade reading level.

Although not considered as accurate for materials written at less than sixth-grade level, the SMOG Readability Formula is another quick, consistent and easy-to-use tool to determine reading level:

- Select three samples of 10 consecutive sentences each from different sections of text (at least 100 words total).
- Count the total number of words with three or more syllables in the 30 sentences.
- Calculate the number's square root by punching in the number on a calculator and hitting the square root key.
- Add three. The resulting number is the approximate reading level.

By using these tools, developers of materials can have some idea whether

older adults will find their information accessible. But these tools only measure readability. While they can help with fine-tuning materials, they are no substitute for thoughtful, age-friendly writing.

Writing at the right level

Although writing for lower reading levels may seem easy in theory, it can pose a surprising challenge to educators and writers in practice. The following guidelines can help health and wellness professionals create written materials at an appropriate reading level for older adults.

Select words with care. Generally, the more syllables in a word, the more difficult it is for people to understand. Although industry professionals and educators can still use words with three or more syllables, they should try to use simpler words or phrases with the same or similar meaning whenever possible.

Examples:

- *Right* or *correct* in place of *appropriate*
- *Add* or *total* in place of *calculate*
- *Heart* in place of *cardiovascular*
- *Bones* in place of *skeleton*
- *Food* or *what you eat* in place of *nutrition*

Instructors, coaches and trainers need to think about the words they use when referring to physiology—even in verbal communication. *Deltoid* or *quadriceps* may be common terms to health and wellness professionals, but an older person just beginning a fitness program will more likely understand *the large muscle on your shoulder* or *the big muscles on the front of your thigh*. Similarly, abbreviated words such as *pecs*, *quads*, *glutes* or *delts* may mean nothing to adults not engaged in an intense fitness program, regardless of their age.

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Written or verbal instructions as simple and direct as *Complete two sets of eight to ten reps* may also have little value for an older adult who does not readily comprehend what *set* or *rep* means.

Pay attention to sentence structure.

Barbara Van Horn, M.Ed., codirector of the Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy at Penn State University, offers the following advice for making copy more readable. “Use short sentences, but avoid making your text choppy,” she says. “It is also a good idea to keep sentence structure simple and avoid starting sentences with dependent clauses.”

Limit concepts. Van Horn advises educators and writers to address no more than three to five concepts in one document, and to include concrete examples to explain the concepts. She also suggests that they use examples relating to the experiences of the target audience.

“Limiting the number of concepts in a written piece is especially important when material is being developed for older adults,” says Van Horn. “It is not that older people cannot comprehend more than three to five concepts at one time,” she explains, “but it often takes [them] more time to integrate new information with prior knowledge, resulting in reduced comprehension of the entire piece.”

Other suggestions for creating readable copy include the following:

- Avoid contractions, e.g. use *do not*, instead of *don't*.
- Define technical or complex terms in a way older adults will easily understand:
 - *Aerobic activity* means you use more oxygen and large muscle groups, such as your legs; or

- *Exercising at a conversational level* means you can talk to your friend easily while you exercise.
- Be aware of the impact of specific words. For example, AARP, a nonprofit membership organization for adults ages 50 and above, conducted marketing research as part of the Active for Life physical activity initiative. AARP's findings show that those in the 50-plus age group respond positively to the phrase *physical activity*, but negatively to the word *exercise*.

Graphics and design affect readability

Effective writing plays a critical role in creating materials for older adults. But health and wellness professionals need to pay close attention to appropriate design to ensure their materials succeed with older people.

Colin Wheildon, author of *Type and Layout: How Typography and Design Can Get Your Message Across—or Get in The Way*, tested one million Australian adults and found that more than five times as many readers comprehended text in serif type (i.e. Times New Roman, Garamond) than sans serif type (i.e. Arial, Univers).

The nonprofit organization Lighthouse International, a worldwide resource on vision loss and vision impairment, also recommends serif typefaces in its brochure *Making Text Legible: Designing for People With Partial Sight*. Lighthouse suggests that print materials developed for older adults, as well as for people with visual impairment, should have a type size of 16–18 points, with wide spacing between lines. This ideal type size may prove impractical for many public education materials. However, designers should strive to keep type size as large as possible.

16 point serif type looks like this.

16 point sans serif type looks like this.

Other design and layout pointers include the following:

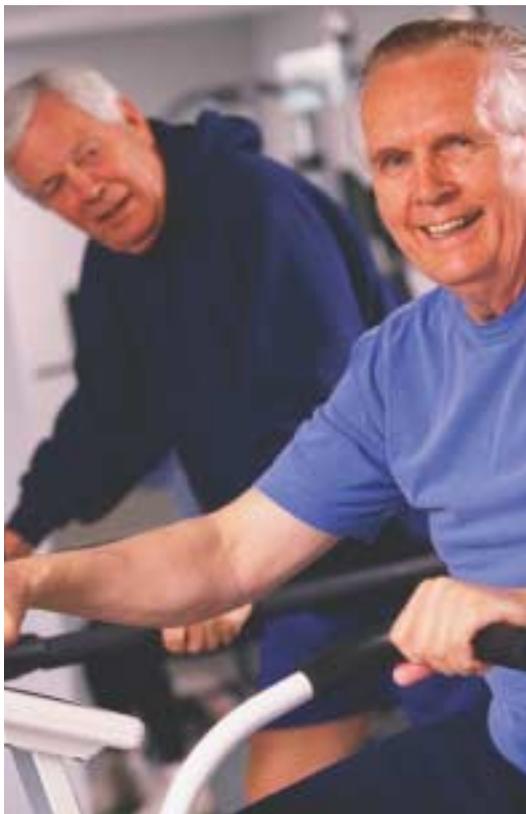
- Provide lots of white space (or space without printing) on a page. In fact, the more white space, the better. Extra wide margins and space between sections of text enhance readability and allow people to make notes.
- Use bulleted points to help readers comprehend ideas more quickly and easily.
- Opt for a mix of uppercase and lowercase type, instead of uppercase only. This combination is easier to read.
- Select a comfortable size and shape for printed materials. For example, an older person may find a brochure that unfolds like a road map cumbersome to handle and manipulate. Materials on the other end of the scale, such as a wallet card, may also give an older adult trouble to read and handle. Also, small pieces do not provide enough margin space for handwritten notes.
- Print text with the highest contrast possible. A good, standard rule is black letters on a white background.
- Choose paper with a matte finish. Glossy paper creates glare, which presents a problem for many older people.

Illustrations, photographs, charts and tables. Graphic elements can prove especially helpful for older or less literate readers when used appropriately. Drawings and cartoons succeed when well prepared, printed in high quality

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and easily understood by the target audience. Photographs are more effective when they depict people who look like the audience.

Health and wellness materials intended for midlife and older adults should use photographs showing people of a similar age who resemble the audience and wear the same type of clothes. Marketing research done by AARP shows that midlife and older adults do not relate to young models in formfitting athletic wear. Materials should include pictures of both men and women, and people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

Charts and tables need to be simple and quickly understood. Any chart or table appropriate for a professional presentation or publication probably

will not suit a public education piece, especially one intended for older adults.

Finally, Barbara Van Horn suggests that designers keep graphic elements closely connected to the concept they illustrate in the text, i.e. on the same page.

Graphic design should enhance the readability of materials. The use of a large serif typeface, clear and easily understood graphics, and plenty of white space increase the likelihood of older adults comprehending printed information.

Always keep the audience in mind

To create communications materials that work for older adults, health and wellness professionals and educators must pay attention to readability and design. They must also become familiar with and understand their intended audience(s).

Some suggestions for learning about audiences include the following:

- Consider the attributes that define an audience as a group, i.e. age, physical abilities, fitness level, life experiences, socioeconomic status, culture, regional and educational backgrounds.
- Use available population and demographic research to understand the audience better.
- Engage the audience in focus group research to gain insight into their beliefs and values.

Most older adults will hesitate to tell a health or wellness professional that they do not understand something the person has written (or said). That's because they do not want to feel embarrassed, appear uneducated or have the individual think they cannot read. Health and wellness leaders and educators must take responsibility for assuring their messages are crafted and

presented in a manner comprehensible to older people. They should also keep in mind that written materials may not be the best teaching tool for some groups or individuals. For optimal success, industry professionals should consider using various forms of communication. ▼

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