

Three strategies to help you write clearly for a lay audience

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Abstract

When writing health and medical content for a lay audience, it is important to think beyond simply writing well. Defining your ideal readers, reducing medical jargon, and producing a well-formatted piece of work can all enhance your reader's understanding. In this article, I explain how these three key strategies will help you write clearer medical content for lay readers. I also give some exercises to help you put these strategies into practice.

When writing health and medical content for a lay audience, it is important to think beyond simply writing well. You need to consider about who you are writing for and how your readers might understand or misunderstand what you are saying. After describing strategies for addressing these issues, I provide exercises so you can practice putting them into action.

Strategy 1: Define your ideal readers

When writing health content for the general public, it's important to define your ideal readers before you start writing. Your ideal readers are never "everyone" – they are the group of people you want to educate or persuade. Because different publications have different requirements, you should define your ideal reader at the beginning of every new writing project. Doing so will help to:

- **Set the tone of your writing** – For example, decide whether you will opt for a chatty, empathetic, trusted friend, professional, scientific, humorous or sarcastic style of writing.



- **Dictate the type of content you will include** – For example, you might include evidence, anecdotes, stories, case studies.
- **Determine the overall topic/subject matter** – Understanding your audience's problems will give you ideas for unique content. What issues and concerns matter to them?
- **Shape the simplicity level of your content** – How educated are your readers?
- **Create highly targeted content** – This will give the article a better chance for success.
- **Create engagement** – You can engage your readers by answering a question of theirs or helping them with a problem or concern.

The following short exercise about your ideal readers can help you to stay focused as you write.

Step 1: Consider the basic demographics of your ideal readers: age, gender, location, industry, income level, education.

Step 2: Think about their preferences, habits, and what's important to them. What else do they read, like and share on social media? What is their health concern, and how can you help them by solving an important problem?

The more targeted your content is, the more chance it has of resonating. Without a solid understanding of your audience, you won't be able to measure the effectiveness of your messages.

Strategy 2: Remove jargon

Medical jargon can feel like a foreign language to non-medical people. Jargon refers to complicated medical terms that a lay person doesn't understand. Jargon can include drug names, disease names, biological terms, procedures, and

abbreviations. Here's an example of how jargon can create problems for lay readers:¹

Patient: "What caused my arm pain during my recent heart attack?"

Surgeon: "The pericardium is innervated by C3, 4, 5 (phrenic nerve). There may be some neuronal connections to the intercostobrachial nerves."

Around the world, health literacy rates are low – even in educated populations.² For example, nearly 9 in 10 American adults may lack the skills needed to manage their health and prevent disease, according to the US National Assessment of Adult Literacy.³

With this in mind, it's now more important than ever to produce clear medical content when writing for the general public. Reducing and eliminating jargon will help make scientific content easier to read.

Strategies to help you reduce jargon include:

- **Employing in-text definitions and explainers** – for example:
 - the area in your brain where ...
 - the section in your brain responsible for ...
 - a disease in which ...
- **Using straightforward analogies** – as well as similes and metaphors, for example:
 - Hoses and pipes for blood vessels
 - A 4-cylinder car engine for the heart's function
 - Preventative health check-ups are like servicing your car regularly
 - Resilience is like dam walls
- **Substituting** – Use simpler words or phrases where possible, for example:
 - *Kidney* instead of *renal*

- *Heart* instead of *cardiac*
- *Bones* instead of *skeletal*
- **Sharing your ideas with your target audience** – Ask non-scientific people to review your content.
- **Linking out** – When writing web copy, link out to a definition or clarification.

Strategy 3: Readability

“Readability” is the ease with which a reader can understand your writing. Readability is not just about producing high-quality writing – it’s also about making it as easy as possible for your readers to read and understand your content. For content to be readable, it should be aesthetically pleasing and welcoming.

Readability can be affected by:

- How fast or slow your reader reads
- Where your reader reads (a quiet library or a noisy café)
- The device your reader is using (book, paper, phone, tablet)
- Your reader’s abilities (health literacy skills)

Here are some strategies to help you produce more “readable” content when writing for a lay audience:

- **Include plenty of “white space”** – Add space between headings and paragraphs to make the text less dense.
- **Stick to short paragraphs** – Avoid paragraphs that are over four or five lines. Paragraphs of one to two sentences or even just one

sentence are acceptable for lay audiences.

- **Include lots of subheadings** – Your subheadings should contain key points helping the content to flow logically. Subheadings help the reader scan the text and quickly find the information they seek.
- **Use short sentences** – Avoid sentences longer than 1½ lines.
- **Use short words** – Avoid words with more than three syllables.
- **Insert bullet and numbered lists** – Lists break up the copy and are especially useful when describing symptoms, causes, and treatments.
- **Links** – Link out to relevant text to continue the user journey.
- **Avoid distractions** – Keeping the pages clean and minimalist will ensure the content is aesthetically pleasing.
- **Vary your sentence length** – A combination of long and short sentences helps readability.
- **Use a clear font size and type** – Ensure that your writing is legible and uses a consistent typeface.

References

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Author information

Michelle Guillemard is the founder of Health Writer Hub, an online education portal for health professionals and aspiring writers looking to improve their health and medical writing skills. Michelle is also the President of the Australasian Medical Writers Association and conducts medical writing training workshops for healthcare brands and businesses. An experienced medical writer, Michelle has worked with many leading health brands, businesses, hospitals and publishers, including the British Medical Journal and Elsevier. Michelle is passionate about creating better health outcomes and changing lives through effective healthcare communication.



For the very first time since 1996 and for the convenience of EMWA members attending the May 2017 Conference in Birmingham, the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences (BELS) is planning to hold its examination in Birmingham on the day before the conference is due to start (May 2, 2017 at 12:00) with the venue to be announced. The exam is offered world-wide

and tests proficiency in all aspects of manuscript editing. Candidates who pass this certification exam are allowed to use the credentials “ELS” after their names (Editor in the Life Sciences).

Delegates wishing to register for the BELS exam should contact BELS via www.bels.org. Delegates should note that while EMWA and BELS are co-ordinating the timing of these

events, the BELS examination is a separate event, and not part of the EMWA conference. EMWA accepts no liability arising from registration for, conduct of, or potential cancellation of the BELS examination event, and is not able to provide assistance with BELS registration, or authorised to answer any queries regarding the BELS examination.

Exercises

Exercise 1: Identifying your audience

Complete the following ideal reader profiles for the specified writing projects:

Patient handout on in vitro fertilisation (IVF)

- My content helps _____ who _____ and are _____ .
- For example: My content helps women who are trying to conceive and are feeling anxious.

Asthma infographic

- My content helps _____ who _____ and are _____ .

Skin cancer prevention leaflet

- My content helps _____ who _____ and are _____ .

High blood pressure prevention article

- My content helps _____ who _____ and are _____ .

Exercise 2: Reducing jargon

Explain these terms in plain English:

- Aphthous stomatitis
- Cholelithiasis
- Costochondritis
- Benign
- Control group

Exercise 3: Readability

This following text is from a published article.⁴

Rewrite it into more readable copy:

“Adults who have few social contacts (ie, who are socially isolated) or feel unhappy about their social relationships (ie, who are lonely) are at increased risk of premature mortality. The influence of social relationships on mortality is comparable with well-established risk factors, including physical activity and obesity. Yet, compared with our understanding of these risk factors, we know much less

about the implications of loneliness and social isolation for disease aetiology. Researchers have identified three main pathways through which social relationships may affect health: behavioural, psychological and physiological mechanisms. Health-risk behaviours associated with loneliness and social isolation include physical inactivity and smoking. Loneliness is linked to lower self-esteem and limited use of active coping methods, while social isolation predicts decline in self-efficacy. Feeling lonely or being socially isolated is associated with defective immune functioning and higher blood pressure. This evidence suggests that loneliness and social isolation may be important risk factors for developing disease, and that addressing them would benefit public health and well-being.”

Answer key

Below are my suggested answers.

Exercise 1: Your ideal reader

Patient handout on IVF

- My content helps women who are trying to conceive and are feeling anxious.
- **Comment:** The content should appeal to these emotions, using empathy and reassurance to connect with the target audience.

Asthma infographic

- My content helps mothers who have children with asthma and are looking for best-practice advice.
- **Comment:** The content should address mothers directly and relate to them, showing an understanding of the issues involved in raising a child with asthma.

Skin cancer prevention leaflet

- My content helps young people who spend a lot of time in the sun and are not aware of the dangers of skin cancer.
- **Comment:** The content should be written in language that suits the target audience – fun, friendly – without downplaying the risk or the importance of skin cancer prevention.

High blood pressure prevention article

- My content helps men aged 50+ who are at high risk of heart disease and are not aware of the risk factors or consequences.
- **Comment:** The content should address the reasons why the men should care about heart disease in order to instigate the behaviour change process.

Exercise 2: Reducing jargon

- Aphthous stomatitis – Aphthous ulcers are painful yet harmless mouth sores that usually go away in a couple of weeks.
- Cholelithiasis – Cholelithiasis refers to one or more gallstones in the common bile duct.
- Costochondritis – Costochondritis is redness and swelling (inflammation) of the cartilage in the rib cage.
- Benign – A benign tumour isn't cancerous and doesn't spread to other parts of the body.
- Control group – The group in a study that doesn't receive treatment is called the control group.

Exercise 3: Readability

Adults who have few social contacts (ie, who are socially isolated) or feel unhappy about their social relationships (ie, who are lonely) are at increased risk of premature mortality.

The influence of social relationships on mortality is comparable with well-established risk factors, including:

- physical activity, and
- obesity

Yet, compared with our understanding of these risk factors, we know much less about the implications of loneliness and social isolation for disease aetiology.

Researchers have identified three main pathways through which social relationships may affect health:

1. behavioural
2. psychological
3. physiological mechanisms

Health-risk behaviours associated with loneliness and social isolation include physical inactivity and smoking.

Loneliness is linked to lower self-esteem and limited use of active coping methods, while social isolation predicts decline in self-efficacy.

Feeling lonely or being socially isolated is associated with defective immune functioning and higher blood pressure.

This evidence suggests that loneliness and social isolation may be important risk factors for developing disease, and that addressing them would benefit public health and well-being.