



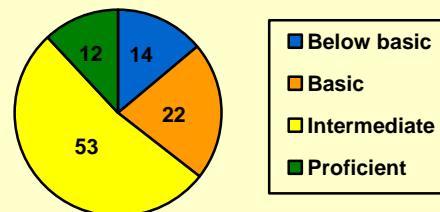
# Health Literacy and Public Health Preparedness

## What is Health Literacy?

Healthy People 2010 defines health literacy as: “The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.” Health literacy involves a number of skills, including the ability to:

- read text (e.g. reading a paragraph on anthrax),
- use and understand numbers (e.g. determining medication dosages),
- use forms (e.g. filling out a medical history form).

Health Literacy Scores of US Population (%)



### What do the literacy scores mean?

- **Below Basic scores** mean that individuals can perform no more than the most simple and concrete literacy skills.
- **Basic scores** mean that individuals have skills necessary to perform simple and everyday literacy activities.
- **Intermediate scores** mean that individuals have the skills needed to perform moderately challenging literacy activities.
- **Proficient scores** mean that individuals have the skills needed to perform more complex and challenging literacy activities

## Why is Health Literacy Important in Public Health Preparedness?

To encourage the public to prepare for and take appropriate actions during a disaster, we need to ensure that our communications are written at a level that matches their reading skills. Many Americans have limited reading abilities, yet most health education materials are written with college-level vocabulary. Also, while those who work in preparedness are familiar with disaster-related vocabulary, this language is foreign to the public, and thus hard to understand. Further contributing to the problem is the fact that during a crisis a person's reading ability tends to drop below normal levels. All of these factors make it vital that communications are written clearly and simply.

## What can I do now?

Start by reviewing your existing materials to determine whether they match your audience's reading skills (the tips and tools below can help you). If they don't, consider revising them. When you create new materials, keep health literacy in mind by aiming to write at the 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade level. Also, get feedback from members of your target audience to ensure that your materials are clear and communicate what you intend.

## How can I make materials easy to read?

- Aim to write at the 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade level (tools in the box below like the SMOG can help you assess and improve your material).
- Use direct language. Refer to the audience as “you” since this is more personal and engaging.
- Choose words that are familiar to the reader e.g. “police” rather than “law enforcement”, “get” instead of “acquire”. The a-z list of alternative words on the Plain English site below can help.
- If you need to use a technical term, clearly define it.
- Keep your language simple by writing in the active voice (e.g. write “make a supply kit” rather than “a supply kit should be made”).

## Online Literacy Resources for Public Health Professionals

- The SMOG (Simple Measure of Gobbledygook) online calculator assesses the reading level of materials: <http://www.harrymclaughlin.com/SMOG.htm>
- The Health Literacy Studies Center contains many resources on developing and assessing materials: <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/>
- Simply Put. This guide from the CDC helps you translate technical terms and provides tips for writing simply, using visuals, and organizing information for easy recall and understanding. <http://www.cdc.gov/od/oc/simpput.pdf>
- The Plain English campaign has many guidelines and lists of alternative words: <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/guides.htm>

### Sources:

1. Kutner, M., Greenberg, E., Jin, Y., and Paulsen, C. (2006). The Health Literacy of America's Adults: Results From the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NCES 2006–483). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education
2. Clear & Simple: Developing Effective Print Materials for Low-Literate Readers (1994). National Institutes of Health, National Cancer Institute. <http://www.nci.nih.gov/cancerinformation/clearandsimple>



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*The purpose of this newsletter is to provide preparedness information to public health professionals. If you have suggestions for future newsletter topics or to comment on preparedness issues, please e-mail us at [cphp@yale.edu](mailto:cphp@yale.edu)*  
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