

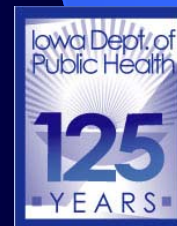
Plain & Simple

Health Communication Workshop



Don McCormick

Iowa Department of Public Health





Plain & Simple

A health literacy project for Iowa

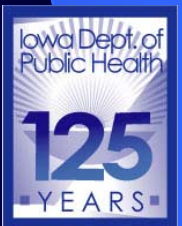


An Independent Licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association



Goals

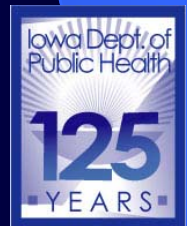
- 1. Learn about health literacy**
- 2. Learn about plain language**
- 3. Suggest improvements to sample documents**
- 4. Learn about *Plain & Simple: A health literacy project for Iowa***



What is health literacy?

“Health literacy is the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.”

*- Healthy People 2010 and
the Institute of Medicine*

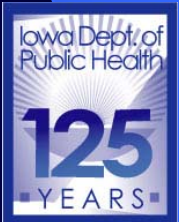


What does it feel like?

Health Literacy: Help Your Patients Understand



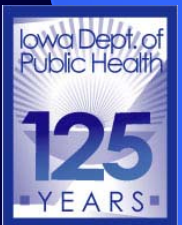
- American Medical Association



How important is health literacy?

“Low health literacy is a stronger predictor of a person's health than age, income, employment status, education level, and race.”

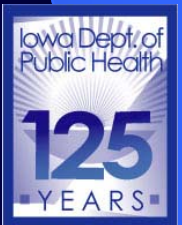
- *JAMA Feb 10, 1999*
American Medical Association



How important is health literacy?

“The main currency of health care is communication and information.”

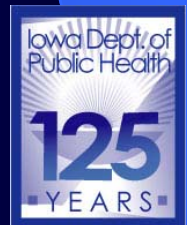
*Carolyn Clancy, director of the Agency for
Healthcare Research and Quality*



How many people have trouble?

90 million people in the United States, nearly half the population, have difficulty understanding and using health information.

*- Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion
Institute of Medicine*



TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR CARE.

MEDICAL STUDIES INDICATE

MOST PEOPLE SUFFER

A 68% HEARING LOSS WHEN NAKED.



GETTING THE MOST OUT OF A VISIT TO THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE

Take a friend, someone who will help you remember important information.



Educate yourself. Seek trustworthy information about illnesses or conditions that affect you.



Be up-front. Tell your doctors everything, or they might miss something important.



You have to ask in order to receive. If you want answers, you have to ask questions.

At United Health Foundation, we believe that the more you know, the healthier you will be. Which is why we partnered with the NATIONAL HEALTH COUNCIL to bring you these important health tips. We encourage you to get more involved in your care, to seek out information and to always make sure that the information you use comes from a reliable, evidence-based source. To find out more on this and other important topics, visit UHFtips.org.

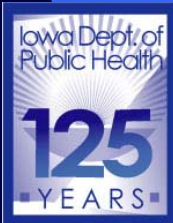


United Health Foundation



NATIONAL HEALTH COUNCIL

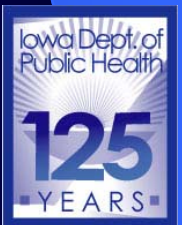
Edward G. Solovitz, M.D., M.P.H., Director of Patient Engagement, Department of Medical Diagnosis and Care and Center for Patient and Family Engagement, Harvard Medical School, Harvard University School of Public Health, Boston, MA 02115-7100



General literacy statistics

Approximately 30 million adults in the U.S. are functionally illiterate.

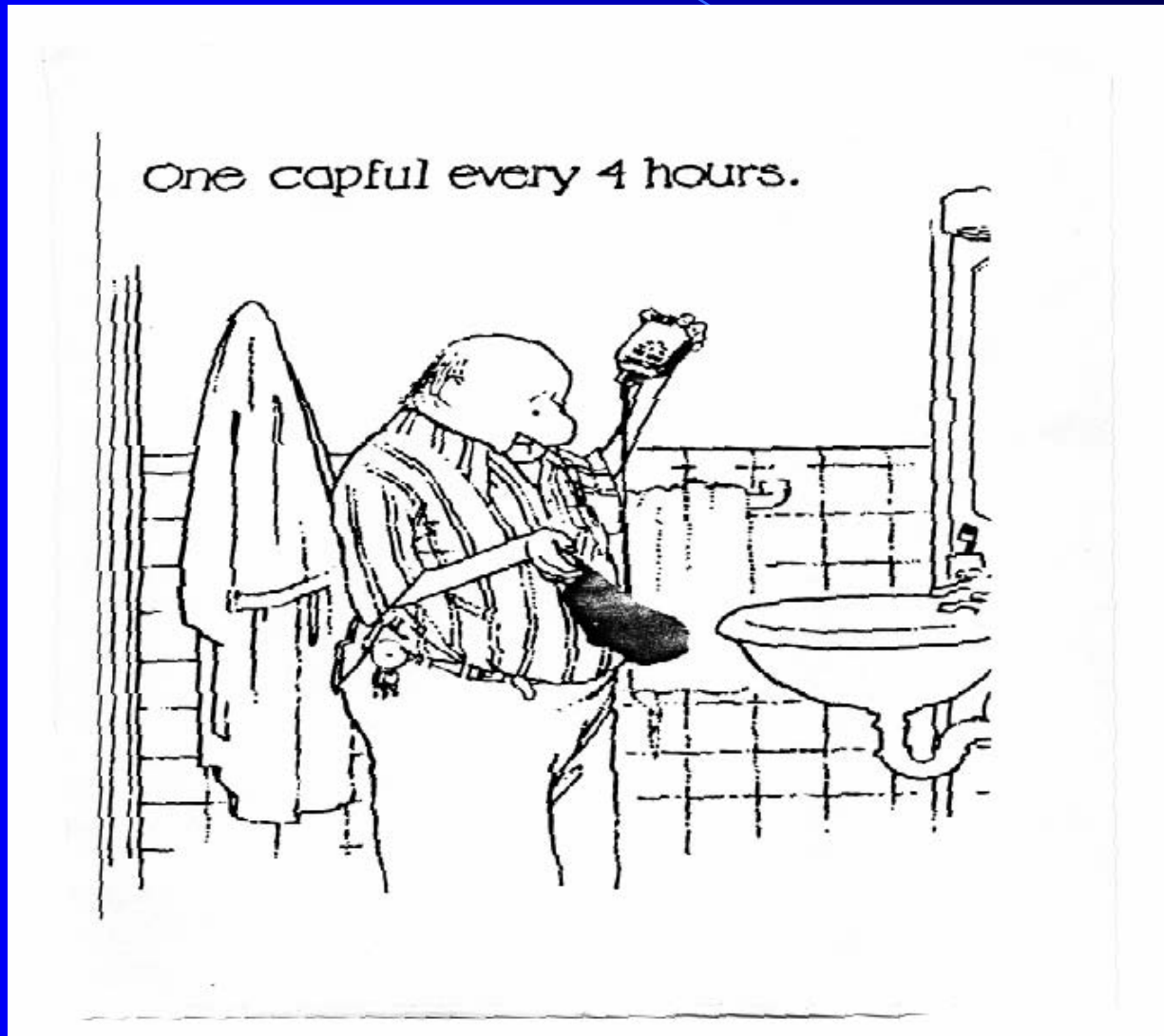
Approximately 63 million are marginally illiterate.



Reasons for limited literacy

- **Lack of educational opportunity**
- **Decline in cognition in older adults**
- **People who do not read regularly**
- **Learning disabilities**

The effects of low health literacy



The effects of low health literacy

On the individual:

- Medication errors
- More emergency room use
- Less knowledge of self care
- Less likely to make use of screening
- Less likely to seek treatment when appropriate
- More hospitalizations
- Wrong diagnoses
- Increased personal health care costs

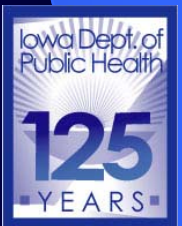
The effects of low health literacy

On the health care system:

- Health care costs increase
- Quality of health care is compromised
- Legal issues
- Organizations become less efficient

The bottom line

The time you spend on making things easier to understand is an *investment* in the people you serve, your organization and yourself.



What is plain language?

Plain language means writing that's clear to most readers the first time they read it.

The essence of plain language

“Give it to them briefly so they will read it, clearly so they will appreciate it, picturesquely so they will remember it and above all accurately so they will be guided by its light.”

Joseph Pulitzer, 1847 - 1911



Use simple vocabulary

Difficult

- sodium
- terminated
- comply
- enroll
- exposure to

Easy

- salt
- ended
- meet the program rules
- join
- risk of getting

Use simple vocabulary

Difficult

- chronic
- provider
- confidential
- assistance

Easy

- long-term
- doctor
- private
- help

Use simple vocabulary

Before:

My situation is subject to verification by X and other state or federal agencies.

After

I understand that X (or other state or federal offices) might check to see if my information is true and correct.

Use simple vocabulary

Before:

Only health care providers or health maintenance organizations (HMOs) that are enrolled or contracted as Medicaid providers may serve MediKids enrollees.

Use simple vocabulary

After:

Only health plan providers or providers who take Medicaid can give health services to children who are in MediKids.

A provider is a doctor, nurse, physician assistant, hospital, clinic, or other health care professional.

Use simple vocabulary

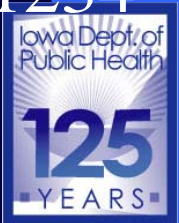
**Shorter words are
easier to read.**

**Everyday words are
easier to read and
understand.**

Write simple sentences

Before:

X Corporation will take all appropriate steps to keep any personal information you share with us confidential, and will not sell, rent, or give away personal information gathered for use in selling another company's products or services. Any information we do gather will be used to improve our relationships with our members. If you have questions about this confidentiality policy, you may contact us at xcorp@xcorp.org, or call toll-free at 1-800-123-1234 M-F 8:00a.m. to 4:30p.m. CST.

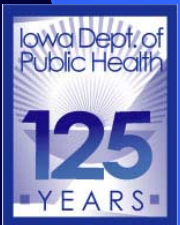


Write simple sentences

After:

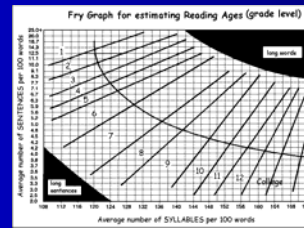
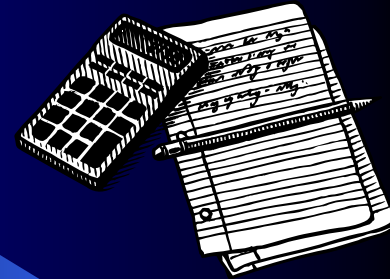
X Corporation will keep your information private. We will not let another company use your address, phone number, etc. We collect personal information only to improve our relationship with you.

Questions? Write to xcorp@xcorp.org or call 1-800-123-1234. The call is free. We are open weekdays 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., central time.



Calculating reading level

$$\text{Grade level} = 0.39 \left(\frac{\text{total words}}{\text{total sentences}} \right) + 11.8 \left(\frac{\text{total syllables}}{\text{total words}} \right) - 15.59$$



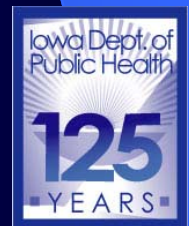
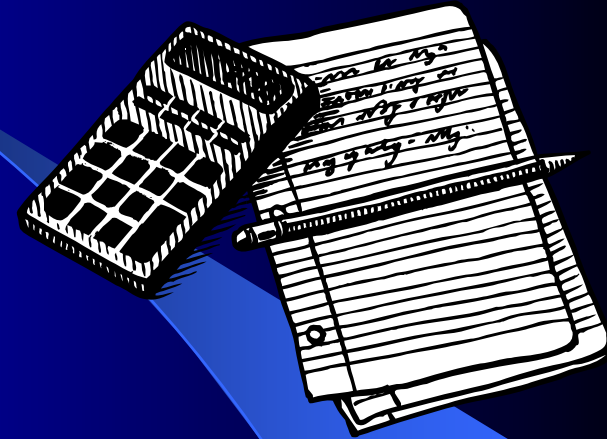
$$\text{Reading Ease} = 206.835 - 1.015 \left(\frac{\text{total words}}{\text{total sentences}} \right) - 84.6 \left(\frac{\text{total syllables}}{\text{total words}} \right)$$

$$\text{Grade level} = 3 + \sqrt{\text{number of 3 or more syllable words} \times \left(\frac{30}{\text{number of sentences}} \right)}$$

$$\text{Grade level} = 0.4 \left(\left(\frac{\text{number of words}}{\text{number of sentences}} \right) + 100 \left(\frac{\text{number of 3 or more syllable words}}{\text{number of words}} \right) \right)$$

Calculating reading level

Luckily, there is another way.



Use the active voice

Before:

Babies born to women who are covered by one of Iowa's health care programs are covered through the month of their first birthday provided the baby continues to live with the mother and reside in the state of Iowa.

After

If a pregnant woman gets health coverage from an Iowa program, her baby will also get coverage. The baby's coverage will last until the end of the month of his or her first birthday. The baby must live with the mother in Iowa.

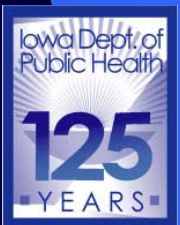
Use an inviting tone

Before:

It is time to determine your continuing eligibility for benefits. The redetermination must be completed or your benefits will be terminated.

1. Call the number at the bottom of the page for an appointment.
2. Bring the completed form to the scheduled appointment at [date].

You must answer every question on the application form, even though nothing may have changed. You must provide the proof listed on the enclosed form. Contact us by [date] if you need to reschedule the appointment.



Use an inviting tone

After:

It's time to see if you can still get benefits.

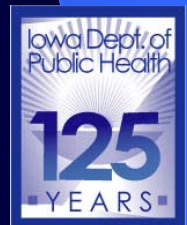
Here's what you need to do:

- 1. Please call us by [date] to set up a meeting. You can call Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Call 1-800-123-4567. The call is free. If you do not call by [date], we may have to stop your benefits.**
- 2. Fill out the application that came with this letter. Answer each question and gather the proof that we ask for in the application.**
- 3. Bring the application and all proofs to our meeting.**

Remember: Call 1-800-123-4567 to set up a meeting.

Questions?

If you have any questions or need to change your meeting day or time, call us at 1-800-123-4567.



Review

- **Use simple vocabulary**
- **Write simple sentences**
- **Use the active voice**
- **Use an inviting tone**

Other tips

- **Write one-topic paragraphs**
- **Write documents that address the reader's main questions**
- **Make next steps clear and offer help**
- **Tighten up the text to remove unnecessary words such as self repeaters**
- **Test and revise**

Next steps

- Visit the Plain & Simple Web site
 - www.idph.state.ia.us/health_literacy
- Get on the mailing list
 - Write to dmccormi@idph.state.ia.us
- Contribute your successes

Thank you!



Plain & Simple
A health literacy project for Iowa

