





# A Way with Words: Guidelines for Writing Oral Health Materials for Audiences with Limited Literacy




About 90 million adults (approximately half of the population) in the United States read at a 5th- to 8th-grade level. These adults have difficulty reading most printed materials distributed by health organizations. According to a report from the Institute of Medicine, individuals with limited literacy usually have limited health literacy, defined 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.”

This document provides tips that can help you write educational oral health materials that are easy for everyone to understand. Try these techniques to make your writing clearer.

## Use



**Simple words.** For example, instead of “smoking cessation,” use “quitting smoking” or “stopping smoking.” Instead of “monitor,” use “watch for” or “look for.” Instead of “be aware,” use “know.”



**Active voice.** For example, instead of “cleaning your infant’s gums should be started before her teeth come in,” use “start cleaning your infant’s gums before her teeth come in.”

**Concrete words and examples.** For example, instead of “good oral health care is important to the health of teeth and gums,” use “for healthy teeth and gums, brush twice a day and floss once a day. Also, visit the dentist every 6 months.”


**A positive tone.** For example, instead of “adults with gum disease should brush and floss more often,” use “if you have gum disease, brushing and flossing often can help make your gums healthier.”

**A simple layout.** For example, use an uncluttered layout with lots of white space.

## Eliminate

**Unnecessary words.** They make writing harder to understand and follow.


## Create



**Short sentences, written mostly in subject-verb-object order.** However, you also need to vary your sentence style, or the writing won’t sound smooth. Try to create a flow from one sentence to the next. Keep sentences under 15 words.

**Short paragraphs, with one major idea that comes in the first sentence.** Try to create a flow from one paragraph to the next. Keep your paragraphs under 100 words.

**Short lists with a maximum of seven items.** Bullets, numbers, or letters can all be used.



**Headings that give information or ask an important question.** For example, use “What Is Tooth Decay?” or “When Should a Child First Visit the Dentist?”

## Explain

**Technical or unfamiliar terms.** If you have to use technical terminology, try to place it after simpler terminology. For example, instead of “fluoridated toothpaste,” use “toothpaste with fluoride.” Or consider following the term with a guide to how it is pronounced (e.g., “fluoride [floor-ide]”). People with limited literacy may be able to understand the word if they see how to pronounce it.

These are a few simple tips to make the educational oral health materials you produce easier to read. The result? People who read your materials will be more likely to understand the messages they need to improve their oral health.

## Resources

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This fact sheet has been produced by Ruth Barzel of the National Maternal and Child Oral Health Resource Center, supported under its grant (H47MC00048) from the Maternal and Child Health Bureau, Health Resources and Services Administration.

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