

HNECC Health Literacy Guide





We acknowledge and respect the traditional lands of all Aboriginal people and we extend our respect to Elders past and present. When we walk and work across the lands of our region we are respectful of the culture and traditions of the first custodians of these lands.





HNECC Health Literacy Guide for written information

Why do we need this guide?

Limited health literacy is associated with poor health and is a significant problem in Australia.

Only about 40% of Australian adults can understand and apply health information in the way it is usually presented. This means that six in ten Australian adults are not able to make informed choices about their health, or the care that they receive.

HNECC recognises the importance of clear communication in ensuring safe and high-quality health care, including the need for health consumers to be able to access, understand and appropriately act on health-related information.

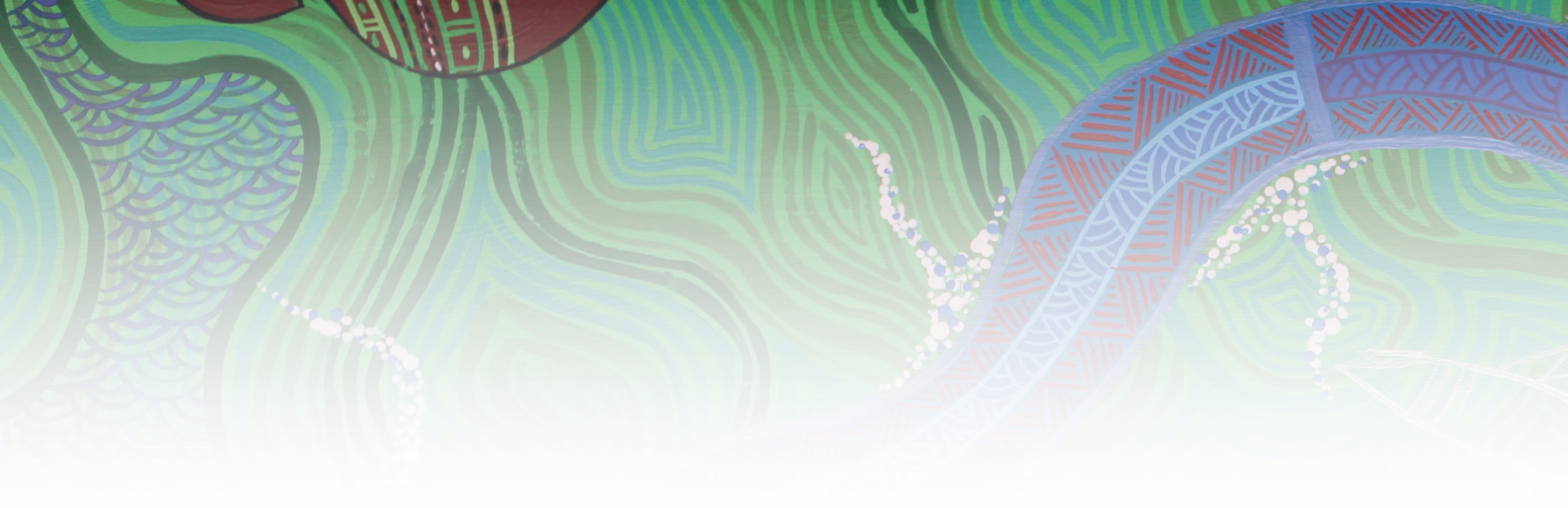
HNECC has developed this Health Literacy Guide to help service providers produce health information that is appropriate for all consumers, including those with low health literacy.

Health literacy principles

In developing consumer information, providers should:

- 1) assume that most people will have difficulty understanding and applying complex health information, concepts and numeracy (a 'universal precautions' approach);
- 2) use a range of communication strategies including alternatives to written information where possible;
- 3) treat communication failures as patient safety issues;
- 4) test consumer information with the target audience as part of the development process; and
- 5) meet the needs of populations with different levels of health literacy without stigmatising or patronising consumers

Treat communication failures as patient safety issues



The following practices should guide the development of all consumer-oriented information:

Writing in plain language

- Use short words and short sentences; aim for words with only one or two syllables and keep most sentences between eight and ten words.
- Have a maximum of five sentences in each paragraph.
- Use language that is easy to understand. Don't use words that have more than one meaning.
- Use words or expressions your readers would use.
- Use grammatically correct punctuation.
- Be consistent in wording. Choose the most familiar words that can convey the required meaning and use them throughout your text - don't alternate with another term with the same meaning
- Use plain language rather than technical jargon. Define technical terms in language your readers will understand
- Avoid unnecessary abbreviations and acronyms; for familiar abbreviations and acronyms put the acronym first and then spell the words out in parentheses. For unfamiliar acronyms, put the full name first then the acronym in parentheses.
- Use examples and references that will be familiar to your reader.

Use language that is easy to understand.



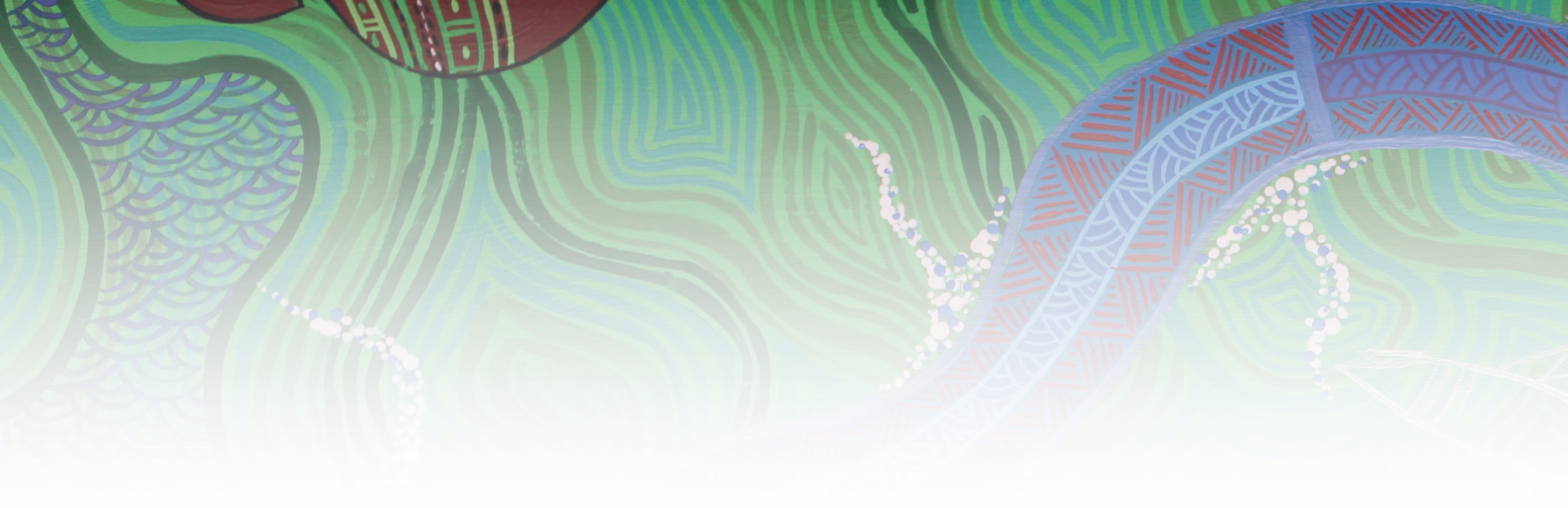
Writing Style

- Use the 'active voice' and speak directly to the reader. For example, say "we will send you a letter" rather than "a letter will be sent".
- Express things in a positive way; Tell readers what they should do rather than what they should not do (people are less likely to act on information if they are made to feel bad about their behaviour or health situation).
- Write in a conversational style, as if you were talking to a friend.
- If listing information, start each point with the same type of word such as a verb (doing word).

Structure

- Clearly define the problem or issue that needs to be addressed.
- Limit the number of messages in a document; cover only three to five points.
- Give the most important information first then again at the end.
- Show the main message on the cover.
- Only include information that readers need to know; leave out details that are not essential.
- Stick to one idea at a time. Develop this idea fully before moving to the next idea.
- Present the complete idea on one page, don't make the reader have to turn the page mid-message.
- Break complex information into understandable chunks using headings and sub-headings
- Use headings that express a complete idea.
- Give information in short lists of 3-7 items using bullet points; break longer lists into sub groups.
- Give the reader direct instructions; clearly state the actions you want them to take.
- Write actions in the order that you want them carried out.
- Emphasise small, practical steps and provide examples of things they can do.
- Answer the "What's in it for me?" question.

Write in a conversational style,
as if you were talking to a friend.



Formatting

- Use font sizes between 12 and 14 points in the body of the text.
- For headings and subheadings use sans serif fonts at least 2 points larger than the main text.
- Use both upper and lower case letters. Do not use all caps.
- Use dark letters on a light background. Light text on a dark background is harder to read.
- Use bold type to emphasise words or phrases. Limit the use of italics or underlining as they are hard to read.
- Left justify headings and text.
- Leave plenty of white space around the margins and between sections; 10 to 35% of the page should be blank.
- Spread out headings and paragraphs; leave more space above headings and sub-headings than below them.
- Avoid splitting words on two lines.
- Repeat a key sentence (with correct punctuation) from the body of the document in a breakout box.
- Limit the use of quotation marks. If you want to include dialogue, find a different way to show who is speaking.
- Limit the use of symbols. If you want to include any symbols, check your target audience's understanding.
- The choice of a serif versus a sans serif font is subject to much debate. There is a widely held view that serif fonts are better on computer screens. However, the best advice is probably that the best font is the one where the readers do not notice the font but instead notice the message.

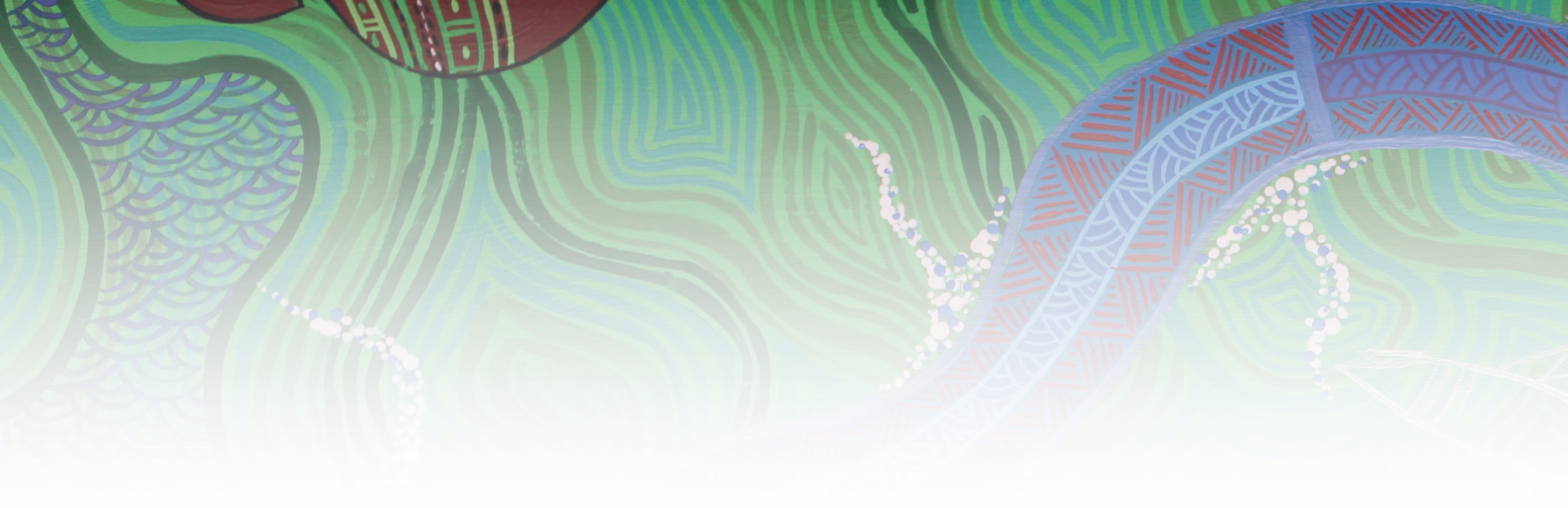
Repeat a key sentence from the body of the document in a breakout box



Graphics

- Include images that help convey your message; don't use visuals just to decorate.
- Choose the best type of visual for your materials; photographs for events, people and emotions, illustrations or line drawings to show procedures or socially sensitive issues, or to explain complicated or abstract medical concepts.
- Choose clear photos with a plain, non-distracting background and use simple drawings without unnecessary detail.
- Present one message per visual.
- Label visuals and position visual next to related text.
- Show the actions you want your reader to take. Avoid images that show what the reader should not do.
- Number each image if there is a sequence of activities.
- Place images in context. When illustrating internal body parts, for example, include the outside of the body.
- Select images that the intended audience will be able to relate to; include the same racial or ethnic group as your intended audience and include people with disabilities.
- Use cartoons with caution; not all audiences understand them or take them seriously.
- Limit each graphic to two or three colours.

Show the actions you want your reader to take.
Avoid images that show what the reader should not do.



How to produce user-friendly health information

- 1) Decide what you are trying to achieve with the material. Does it need to inform? persuade? Give directions? motivate?
- 2) Determine what you want the reader to do, what action you want them to take.
- 3) Decide how you are going to encourage the reader to do what you want them to do.
- 4) Identify your intended audience and demographic characteristics.
- 5) Learn about your intended audience through research and field testing. What are their beliefs, behaviours, culture, literacy skills, and current knowledge about the identified topic?
- 6) Determine the key concepts and messages appropriate for the target audience.
- 7) Determine the best way to communicate your message to the target audience (i.e. print, audio, video).
- 8) Design a draft of the material.
- 9) Test the material's reading level (Microsoft provides a readability assessment with its proofing tools).
- 10) Check the material for any potential bias or exclusivity including; reading level, ethnic or racial preferences, gender or age bias.
- 11) Pre-test materials with the intended audience.
- 12) Refine materials based on consumer feedback.

Pre-test materials with the intended audience.



Writing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Any written material prepared for, or likely to be read by, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should recognise and be respectful of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, beliefs and practices.

The cultural protocols outlined below provide a summary of the key cultural considerations. For more information about writing for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander audience, please see Oxfam Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Protocols at https://www.oxfam.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/2015-74-atsi-cultural-protocols-update_web.pdf.

- Use the term 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people(s)' in full and with capitals; do not shorten to ATSI or use the term 'Aborigines'.
- Refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (singular) when referring to individuals, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (plural) when referring to different Aboriginal nations, languages, communities, cultural practices or spiritual beliefs.
- Always use capitals for Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Indigenous and Elder.
- The term 'Aboriginal' does not include Torres Strait Islander people, and reference should be made to both if applicable.
- Where appropriate, use the local Aboriginal language to describe nations, clans and languages.
- Always seek permission to take or use any images of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or any cultural or intellectual property.
- Respect the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to determine how they are portrayed in images, text or other formats; try to use images, text and other material that empowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and reflects their cultural identity.
- Any material containing images or names of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should have the following warning displayed in a prominent position: "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this document/website may contain images or names of people who have since passed away."
- Remove any references to deceased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the public arena (websites, publications, community service announcements, etc) as soon as you are alerted to their passing.
- If you wish to use the name, image or voice of a deceased person, you will need to obtain permission in writing from the deceased's family or community.
- Where permission has been given to use an image or other material, include an acknowledgement that permission has been granted for this particular use in a highly prominent position.

Use images, text and other material that empowers
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
and reflects their cultural identity.

Checklist

Is the material written in plain English; short, simple words, short sentences and grammatically correct?	
Is the material written in an active voice?	
Is the material written in a conversational style?	
Is the material written in a positive tone explaining what should be done, rather than what should not be done?	
Is it easy for the reader to understand what actions they have to take?	
Have you given instructions in the order you want them carried out?	
Have you told the reader what's in it for them?	
Are there fewer than five different issues covered in the material?	
Is the most important information provided first/on the cover and repeated at the end?	
Is each idea fully developed before the next idea is introduced?	
Has a large sans serif font been used for headings and subheadings?	
Appropriate font between 12 and 14 points been used for the main text?	
Has a dark text been used on a white or light background?	
Is there plenty of white space?	
Are headings and text left justified?	
Do lists have seven points or fewer?	
Are key sentences repeated in a breakout box?	
Have appropriate visuals been used to help convey key messages?	
Does each visual convey only one message?	
Are visuals labelled where appropriate and linked to text?	
Do visuals reflect the target audience?	
If someone read the captions only, would they understand the main message(s)?	
Have you checked the reading level of the text? Aim for less than 7th grade.	
Have you pre-tested the materials with the target audience?	



Example

This example is written at a reading age of 12.2. It does not use health literacy principles and will be difficult for many people to read and understand.

What is a healthy weight?

Body Mass Index (BMI), which can be used to determine overweight and obesity, is calculated by dividing weight in kilograms by height squared. BMI has limitations however as it can be influenced by age, gender and ethnicity. Also, BMI does not distinguish fat mass from lean mass, nor does it necessarily reflect body-fat distribution.

For example, a woman 1.7m in height and weighing 89 kilograms would have a BMI of 30.8. This falls outside the healthy weight range and is considered moderately obese, placing the woman at higher risk of chronic disease including cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

This example has been written with a reading level of 4.3. It uses health literacy principles so most people will be able to read and understand it.

What is a healthy weight?

You can work out if you weigh about the right amount by calculating your Body Mass Index or BMI. This is a number that is worked out by comparing your weight to your height. Most healthy people have a BMI of more than 18.5 and less than 25.

Your BMI may be able to tell you if you weigh too much or too little, and if your weight might make you sick. It doesn't work for everyone though. Your BMI cannot tell the difference between muscle and fat and it cannot tell where the fat is on your body. If you have a lot of muscle your BMI might be high even though you are healthy.

To work out your BMI you will need to know how tall you are in metres and how much you weigh in kilograms. You will also need a calculator.

I am _____ metres tall

I weigh _____ kilograms

Using the calculator, put in your height and times it by the same number. This is called your height squared. If you are 1.7 metres tall, put 1.7×1.7 .

My height squared is _____ (height) \times _____ (height) = _____

In the calculator, put in your weight in kilograms. Divide this number by your height squared. If you weigh 89 kilograms, put $89 \div$ height squared. This is your BMI.

My BMI is _____ (weight) \div _____ (height squared) = _____



Pam is 1.7 metres tall and weighs 89 kilograms. This is how we worked out Pam's BMI.

Pam is 1.7 metres tall

$1.7 \times 1.7 = 2.89$

Pam's height squared is = 2.89

Pam weighs 89 kilograms

Pam's height squared is 2.89

$89 \div 2.89 = 30.8$

Pam's BMI = 30.8



This means that Pam is above a healthy weight range. She might be healthier if she lost some weight.

If you are concerned about your weight, please see your doctor.

HNECC PHN ACKNOWLEDGES THE TRADITIONAL OWNERS AND CUSTODIANS OF THE
LANDS THAT WE LIVE AND WORK ON AS THE FIRST PEOPLE OF THIS COUNTRY

THIS GUIDE HAS BEEN MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH FUNDING PROVIDED BY THE
AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT UNDER THE PHN PROGRAM