



  English

Happy Health Literacy Month!

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October was first recognized worldwide as Health Literacy Month in 1999 when Helen Osborne established the observance to help increase access to health care information. The Institute for Healthcare Advancement (IHA) is now the organization in charge, but the mission hasn't changed.

Health literacy is a broad topic, but I like to sum it up in one sentence – making health care easy to understand for all. Have you ever watched “Grey’s Anatomy” and had to look up half the words the doctor characters use? Have you ever left a doctor’s office and had to do the same thing? Either way, whether you’re watching a TV show for fun or needing to learn more about your health, you shouldn’t need to use a dictionary to understand what you just heard. This is the principle I apply to my work as a senior marketing coordinator for Colorado Access.

When I started working here in 2019, I had never heard of the term “health literacy.” I always prided myself on being able to decipher “doctor-speak” at my health care appointments or in letters from my health insurance company, and on

my knowledge that “contusion” is just a fancy word for a bruise, but I had never really thought about what that meant until I started writing member communications for Colorado Access. If you’re a member, and you’ve gotten a letter or newsletter in the mail from us or have been on some of our webpages recently, I probably wrote it.

Our policy is that all member communications, whether it’s an email, a letter, a newsletter, a flyer, a webpage, or anything else, **must** be written at or below a sixth-grade literacy level, and with plain language techniques. This is to make sure that everything we send to members is as easy to understand as possible. Sometimes, following this policy makes me objectively look like an inexperienced writer, because the very nature of writing at or below a sixth-grade literacy level means using shorter, choppy sentences and less complex words than I typically would. For example, this blog post is at a tenth-grade literacy level!

Although health literacy is a relatively new part of my life, it’s now an important part. I’m a copyeditor, so I am constantly editing anything I read for spelling, grammar, context, and clarity, but now I also edit with a literacy lens.

Here are some things I think about:

- What do I want the reader to know?
- Does my writing clearly explain that?
- If not, how can I make it more clear?
- Can I add things like headings or bullet points to make it even easier to read?
- Can I break up any long paragraphs to make it even easier to read?
- If so, can I substitute them with any less confusing and/or more common words?

you want to learn more about health literacy? Start with these links:

- hrsa.gov/about/organization/bureaus/ohe/health-literacy
- cdc.gov/healthliteracy/learn/index.html
- health.gov/healthypeople/priority-areas/health-literacy-healthy-people-2030
- health.gov/institutes-nih/nih-office-director/office-communications-public-liaison/clear-communication/health-literacy

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