Tip Jar for PHSA web & POD editors

In this issue

Did you know that almost 46% of British Columbians don't have the literacy required for everyday tasks? Here are some basic principles of plain language to help patients, clients, and families easily understand PHSA's web content.

What is plain language, and why is it so important?

Plain language, as the words suggest, is about making writing easy to understand. Clear writing avoids complicated grammar or words.

At PHSA, we provide services to all British Columbians. Research shows that even higher literacy people prefer plain English. We tend to scan text rather than read word for word when it comes to online content, hence the word 'browsing'. Using plain language helps readers find the info they're looking for much more efficiently.

Short words, simple sentence structure, and short paragraphs are your best friend. Why go the difficult route when it's easier to K.I.S.S.? (Keep It Simple, Silly!)

Use first or second person

Use the first person rather than the third person when referring to our organization. Instead of referring to "PHSA", use "**we**."

Use the second person rather than the third person when referring to readers. Instead of "the patient", use "**you**". Avoid he/she, him/his, and her/hers.

Using first or second person makes your writing clearer and more conversational.

Use the active voice

The active voice uses a direct, clear tone to get your point across more efficiently. That being said, it doesn't always equate to having fewer words; being descriptive is the goal here. On the other hand, sentences in the passive voice can be vague and unnecessarily wordy. Here's a common example in the health care setting:

Passive voice: **Appointments can be made at locations across the province.**

This is a poor sentence and begs more questions for the readers. Are there specific locations to make an appointment? Who can make an appointment?

Active voice: **You can make an appointment at any location across the province.**

Note that the action, 'to make an appointment' is emphasized first. It's straight to the point and avoids confusion.

Other common examples of improved sentences

Before	After
New mothers often experience postpartum symptoms in the first six weeks after birth.	New mothers often go through a recovery period in the first six weeks following childbirth.
The patient needs a doctor's referral to book an appointment.	You need a referral from your doctor to book an appointment.
We have a number of handouts and materials in several languages including Chinese and Punjabi.	We have clinic brochures and patient handouts on cancer screening. These are available in English, Chinese (Traditional and Simplified), and Punjabi.

The four 'do's'

Not sure where to start? Here are the four 'do's on how to improve the overall accessibility of your content. **Do use:**

- Descriptive and specific words. Be as concise as possible.
- Short sentences. Use lists instead of long paragraphs, whenever possible.
- The active voice in the present tense, instead of passive.
- Short headings. A heading should be brief but descriptive.

Plain language resources

The Web Editor Hub has 10 simple ways to use plain language in your content, along with tips and common examples in a health care setting.

The Hemingway Editor app highlights complex sentences and common errors, helping you to assess the readability of your work easily. Simply copy and paste your content into the Editor and it will do its magic!

Your action

Before you publish your webpage, go through the four 'do's, the Web Editor Hub checklist, or the Hemingway Editor to make sure you created content that people can read and understand easily.

Resources for PHSA web editors   Read past Tip Jar articles