



Health Literacy and Health Equity

Communication is at the core of everything we do in prevention. There isn't one prevention strategy that doesn't include communication as the foundation. Yet, for many of the communities we serve, understanding communication materials can be a challenge. This document provides information on health literacy and its connection to social inequities and health disparities.

Definitions

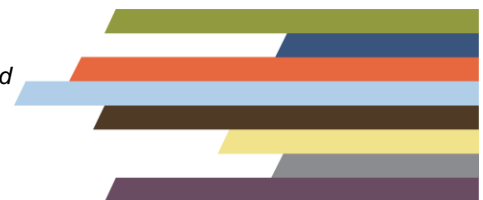
Literacy	Using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential. ⁱ
Prose Literacy	Written text like instructions or newspaper article. ⁱ
Document Literacy	Short forms or graphically displayed information found in everyday life. ⁱ
Quantitative Literacy	Arithmetic using numbers imbedded in print. ⁱ
Health Literacy	The degree to which individuals have the ability to find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others. ⁱⁱ
Plain Language	Plain language is a <i>technique</i> for communicating clearly. It is one tool for improving health literacy. ⁱⁱⁱ

Connection to Other Social Inequities

Literacy has multiple components, including oral literacy (listening and speaking skills), print literacy (writing and reading skills), numeracy (the ability to understand and work with numbers), and cultural and conceptual knowledge.^{iv,v} Research indicates that limited language skills and low literacy skills are associated with lower educational attainment and worse health outcomes.^{vi}

Literacy is connected both individual and systematic factors:

- **Communication Skills** – effective communication involves the skills of the individuals served AND the skills of the professional. Therefore, we carry ownership in providing services that appropriate for the literacy level of the communities we serve.
- **Prevention Knowledge** – knowledge is key to understanding risk, and low literacy skills can make it challenging to understand the prevention message.
- **Cultural Influence** – cultural bound beliefs and practices about substances can influence an individual's understanding of the prevention message.



- **Prevention Services System** – engaging with communities typically requires a process (recruitment, enrollment, service delivery, evaluation), and the process can become challenging for those with low literacy skills.
- **Social Factors** – environmental stress affect learning and understanding. It's important to consider how socio-environmental factors create barriers to learning and understanding.

Creating a Plan of Action

Maintaining mindfulness concerning the literacy of your audience is important! Here are a few simple steps for improving your prevention communications:



Use plain language. [Click here to find out more.](#)



Check the reading level and keep it at a 5th grade level, with 8th grade being the max reading level.



Seek feedback from the community your serve. Your audience will let you know if your message is hard to understand.

How to Check Reading Level in Word

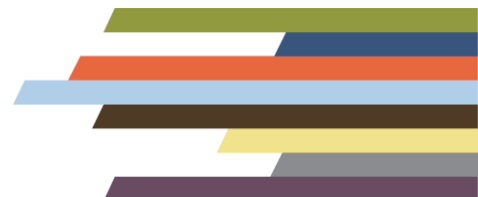
Windows

1. Select **Proofing**.
2. Under **When correcting spelling and grammar in Word**, make sure the **Check grammar with spelling** check box is selected.
3. Select **Show readability statistics**.

After you enable this feature, go to **Review > Spelling & Grammar**. When Word finishes checking the spelling and grammar, you will also see information about the reading level of the document.

macOS

1. H4 On the **Word** menu, click **Preferences**. *You must have a document open to see preferences.*
2. Under **Authoring and Proofing Tools**, click **Spelling and Grammar**.
3. Under **Grammar**, select the **Check grammar with spelling** check box.
4. Select the **Show readability statistics** check box, and close the Spelling & Grammar dialog box.
5. On the **Tools** menu, point to **Spelling and Grammar** and click **Spelling & Grammar**.



After you enable this feature, go to **Review > Spelling & Grammar**. When Word finishes checking the spelling and grammar, you will also see information about the reading level of the document.

ACTIVITY: Check the reading level of this document*

Other Reading

National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy. (2010). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. [Click here to access the document.](#)

References

- ⁱ National Center for Education Statistics (2003). National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) - Three Types of Literacy. [Click here to access the webpage.](#)
- ⁱⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021). What Is Health Literacy? [Click here to access the webpage.](#)
- ⁱⁱⁱ PlainLanguage.gov (2011). Federal Plain Language Guidelines. [Click here to access the document.](#)
- ^{iv} Kirsch, I. S. (2001). The framework used in developing and interpreting the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 16(3), 335–61. DOI: 10.1007/BF03173187
- ^v National Academies Press (2004). Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion. Nielsen-Bohlman L., Panzer, A. M., & Kindig, D. A., editors. DOI: 10.17226/10883
- ^{vi} The Annie E. Casey Foundation. Early warning! Why reading by the end of third grade matters. Baltimore (MD): Author; 2010. [Click here to access the document.](#)

*10.7 Reading Level

