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1. *Who, exactly, are you trying to reach?*

Adults learn on their own terms. Adults ask:

- **"Why do I care?!"** Adults are motivated to learn if they know **why** they need to learn something.
- **"Do I want this now?"** Adults are self-directed: they decide **what** they want to learn, **when and how**.
- **Does what I'm learning now make sense based my own experiences?"**
- **"Now I get it!"** Adults **learn experientially**—by doing. The real learning happens when they apply the learnings in their personal, real-world setting.

Adapted from Malcolm Knowles' Adult Learning Theory

As a communicator, ask yourself:

A. Who is the *primary audience* for this message? Also, who are *secondary audiences*? (Examples: general public, family and clinicians. Also: family members, office staff, colleagues of the primary audience)

B. What is this audience like? (Define their demographics.)

Before crafting any message, know who your audience is. Some details that might be relevant:

- **Age Range**
- **Gender**
- **Income**
- **Lifestyle And Life Stage**
- **Education & Health Literacy**
- **Occupation**
- **Nationality, Ethnicity**
- **Geographic Location, Including Home Or Work**
- **How They Learn.** (Seeing, hearing, doing, asking, etc.)

Other relevant details of audiences you work with: _____

2. What are your *key messages*?

These messages relate to what **your audiences need or want to know**, not what *you* want to tell *them*.

- Ex. A. Workplace policy: "ABC Company does not tolerate harassing language or actions in the workplace."
Better: Every employee deserves a safe environment free of distractions. So ABC Company does not tolerate harassing language or actions. If you feel harassed....(whom to contact)."
- Ex. B. Healthcare example. "Patients with high blood pressure are at higher risk for heart attack, stroke or vascular diseases."
Better: It's important for you to know if you have high blood pressure, and to learn how to keep it under control if you do. Keeping it under control can help you to avoid heart attack, stroke and other heart and vascular (vein-related) diseases."

3. Use *clear, plain communication* in words and images. It matters.

- Be clear and precise.
- Avoid meaningless, “flowery” and official-sounding language.
- Use active voice:
NO: *Your form must be completed and approved before you can get payment.*
YES: *To get payment for care:*
 - *you must complete the form AND*
 - *we must approve it.*
- Break up long sentences, phrases and paragraphs.
- Use bullet points and subheadings.
- Use clear charts and graphics.
- Keep design uncluttered.
- Test your documents, images, websites, etc. for:
 - clarity
 - organization and usability (See www.PlainLanguage.gov: writing and designing for the web.)

*"You really shouldn't need a medical degree to have a reasonable conversation with people who are caring for you or your loved one."
--Frustrated relative*

RESOURCES

(✓ = personal recommendations)

Blog: Plain Language Matters (<http://centerforplainlanguage.org>)

Books:

✓ Osborne, Helen. M.Ed., OTR/L, *Health Literacy From A to Z, Second Edition: Practical Ways to Communicate your Health Message*, 2011 (online discount at www.healthliteracy.com/buy.asp?PageID=10584)

Redish, Janice C., *Writing Web Content that Works*, 2007, Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, San Francisco

Conferences:

- ✓ Center for Plain Language (<http://centerforplainlanguage.org>), in Washington, D.C.
- ✓ International PLAIN conference (Plain Language Association InterNational) (<http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org>) at locations internationally

Podcast:

- ✓ Health Literacy Consulting, Helen Osborne. At iTunes and <http://www.healthliteracy.com/podcast.asp>

Videos:

American Medical Association. Search the web for “health literacy, ama” or “health literacy, YouTube”

Webpages:

✓ Health Literacy Toolkit, free 200-page download with step-by-step guidance, by The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) www.ahrq.gov/qual/literacy/healthliteracytoolkit.pdf

✓ “How-To” guidance to achieve plain language via writing and the Web in all industries: **Federal Plain Language Act of 2010** requires the federal government to write all new publications, forms, and publicly distributed documents in a “clear, concise, well-organized” manner. Search the web for “www.PlainLanguage.gov, how-to guidelines”

The Health Literacy Environment Activity Packet. Exercises to survey and test your organization’s media for health literacy/plain language. www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/files/activitypacket.pdf