



TECC Support

## **Readability Guide:** A "How-To" Guide on Clear Writing



"Have something  
to say, and say it  
as clearly as you  
can. That is the  
only secret."  
- Matthew Arnold

**tecc**

Tobacco Education  
Clearinghouse  
of California

The Tobacco Education Clearinghouse of  
California is a project of ETR. [www.etr.org](http://www.etr.org)



# Readability Guide:

## A “How-To” Guide on Clear Writing

When developing your educational materials, it is important to follow best practices for writing text that is easy to read. Using plain language helps your audience understand the information the first time they read or hear it. This will make sure readers understand your messages and action steps you are asking them to take.

### TOPICS COVERED IN THIS GUIDE:

- + Keep it Short and Simple
- + Use Data and Statistics Effectively
- + Avoid Jargon
- + Speak to Your Audience
- + Choose an Appropriate Reading Level
- + Follow Good Design Tips
- + Organize Information Logically





## HEALTH LITERACY

Health literacy is the degree to which an individual has the capacity to obtain, communicate, process, and understand basic health information and services to make appropriate health decisions.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, almost **9 out of 10 adults struggle to understand and use health information.**

Even people who are highly literate might have challenges understanding health information—sometimes because of technical language and sometimes because they are trying to understand the information while they are feeling stressed or emotional. Health literacy can be improved if we practice clear communication strategies.

## FOUR KEY QUESTIONS

As you begin developing your educational material, and before you start writing, answer these key questions. They will help guide your material in the right direction.

- 1.** Who is your target audience? Be specific, choose **one** clearly defined audience.
  - + For example, choosing “parents of teens in Sacramento” and not just “the public” makes it easier to address your audience and deliver the appropriate information.
- 2.** What do you know about your audience’s health literacy skills?
  - + Is your audience familiar with the topic? What is their lived experience?
- 3.** What is your main message?
  - + Your audience may remember only one message—what do you want that to be?
- 4.** What is your call to action?
  - + What do you want your readers to DO after they read your material?



This is short. And simple.

## KEEP IT SHORT AND SIMPLE

People receive an overwhelming amount of information daily, or even hourly. Readers tend to scan materials quickly, so you will want to include only the most important information. The more text there is to read, the less your audience will want to read it.

### Ways to keep your materials brief:

- + Use one- or two-syllable words
- + Write short sentences with no more than 15–20 words
- + Limit the number of messages to no more than 3 or 4 main points
- + Avoid repeating the same types of information (for example, presenting 3 different statistics on the same topic)

### Sample paragraph:

You have a right to breathe smoke-free air where you live. The home is the most common place people breathe secondhand smoke. Secondhand smoke can drift from one apartment to another through hallways, doors, windows, and air vents.



## USE DATA AND STATISTICS EFFECTIVELY

### TIP

For information on how to frame health disparities data to promote equity, check out the TECC guide **Developing Effective Messages**. Available at [tecc.org](http://tecc.org) under "Tools"

Support your message with research or data but avoid overwhelming your audience with too much of it. One compelling data point is more effective and memorable than a long list of statistics. In fact, studies show providing too much data can backfire and cause people to doubt your message.

#### Round your numbers.

**Use:** Smoke can travel more than 20 feet...

**Instead of:** Smoke can travel 23 feet...

#### Replace specific statistics with "most," "many," and "half."

**Example:** Most youth who have tried tobacco started with a flavored product.

## AVOID JARGON

Avoid using jargon, technical/scientific language, and medical terminology whenever possible. Choose plain language equivalents to deliver your message.

#### Avoid jargon:

#### Choose plain language:

Respiratory illness..... Lung disease

Carcinogenic..... Can cause cancer

Tobacco control..... Protect our community from harms of tobacco



## SPEAK TO YOUR AUDIENCE

Speak directly to your audience and use pronouns like “you” and “we” where possible. Communicate as if you are talking to a friend.

**Use:** You could get sick from breathing secondhand smoke.

**Instead of:** Secondhand smoke exposure could cause adverse health effects.

Keep your message positive and tell your audience what they can do to stay healthy rather than what they should not do.

**Use:** Keep your home healthy and smoke-free.

**Instead of:** Don’t allow smoking in your home.

Use active voice when possible—it is much easier to understand. Active voice is when the subject of a sentence is the doer of the action. Passive voice is when the subject of a sentence receives the action.

**Active:** The child ate the cigarette butt.

**Passive:** The cigarette butt was eaten by the child.





## CHOOSE AN APPROPRIATE READING LEVEL

### TIP

To check the Flesch-Kincaid reading level of your material in Microsoft Word, watch our short TECCFlix tutorial available at: [www.tecc.org/teccflix-tutorials/educational-materials-development/checking-reading-level](http://www.tecc.org/teccflix-tutorials/educational-materials-development/checking-reading-level)

Choose the appropriate reading level for your audience. For general educational materials, guidelines recommend an 8th grade or lower reading level. Some people worry that 8th grade-level text will offend highly skilled readers. However, most people are pressed for time and will appreciate concise information written clearly. A lower reading level does not “speak down” to an audience, it is simply more accessible.

If you do not know anything about your audience’s health literacy skills, it is best to assume they’re average to low. A person’s reading skills may drop 4 grade levels when they are stressed or reading about a stressful topic.

### 5th Grade Reading Level:

Children who breathe secondhand smoke are more likely to get sick.

### 8th Grade Reading Level:

Breathing secondhand smoke increases the risk of health problems in children.

### 10th Grade Reading Level:

Exposure to secondhand smoke contributes to adverse health effects in children.



# ORGANIZE INFORMATION LOGICALLY

There should be a logical flow to the information provided in your educational material.

**Title:** Grab your readers' attention with a short title (no more than 8 words). Headlines that ask the reader a question help draw them in.

How Much Tobacco is Sold Near Schools?

**Main idea:** What is the one message you want your audience to remember?

When tobacco is sold near schools, youth are more likely to use tobacco.

**Talking points:** If possible, lead with one compelling statistic—your “hero statistic”—to support your main idea. Include 1 to 3 additional sentences that also support your main message.

Almost half of teens in the US attend a school within 1000 feet of a store that sells tobacco.

Tobacco ads on these storefronts make tobacco seem like a normal part of the environment.

**Solution:** When possible always include a solution.

Zoning laws can limit tobacco sales near schools.

**Call to Action:** Be clear about what you want your audience to do with the information you give them. It should be rare that your materials merely provide background information on a topic.

Join our coalition and make a change in your community!

**Contact information:** Include information on how people can reach your organization.

**Sources:** Include citations for sources of data.





## FOLLOW GOOD DESIGN TIPS

Good organization and clear layout ease the burden on your readers. Here are some design steps to help readers:

- + Place key information at the top or emphasize it with visual elements.
- + Use clear headers, they serve as a map and flag upcoming information for your readers.
- + Break up large blocks of text into smaller chunks to make information more accessible.
- + Add bulleted or numbered lists to organize information, but limit to no more than 7 bullets.

Key information  
and related visual

Clear headers

Small text blocks

Short bulleted list

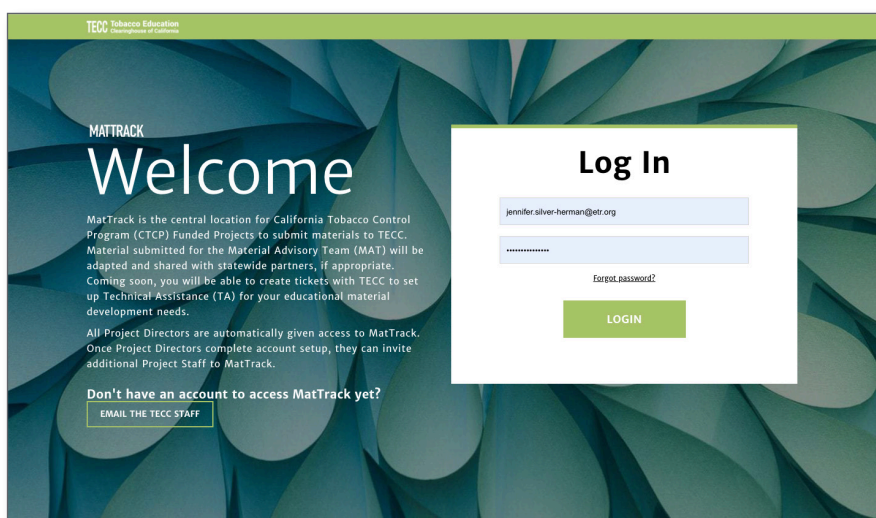




## NEXT STEPS

Once you have developed effective messages for your educational material, you are ready for graphic design!

For help with graphic design please go to your MatTrack account and submit a ticket for technical assistance. [www.tecc.org/mattrack](http://www.tecc.org/mattrack)



## SOURCES

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). What is Health Literacy? Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/learn/index.html>
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). Your Guide to Clear Writing. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/clearwriting/docs/clear-writing-guide-508.pdf>





## MORE RESOURCES

Visit us online at [www.tecc.org](http://www.tecc.org) for more resources and online development tools including our Developing Effective Messages Guide, Consumer Testing Guide, TECCFlix Tutorials, Tobacco-free Images Galleries, Social Media Toolkit, Social Media Message Library, and the Fighting Flavored Tobacco Toolkit.

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