

# Health Literacy is a Collective Effort — and Organizations Play a Pivotal Role

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One of the most important questions public health professionals need to consider is not only what intervention will achieve the desired health outcomes, but what level of influence will be most effective. The social-ecological model of health [\[1\]](https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/communityengagement/pce_models.html#:~:text=The%20social%20ecological%20model%20conceptualizes,et%20al.%2C%202003) (https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/communityengagement/pce\_models.html#:~:text=The%20social%20ecological%20model%20conceptualizes,et%20al.%2C%202003) identifies factors that affect health at different levels — ranging from individual knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors to the family and community level and into the broader level of societal factors. Across all levels, health literacy is an important social determinant of health. As outlined in the Healthy People 2030 (https://health.gov/healthypeople/priority-areas/health-literacy-healthy-people-2030), health literacy is essential to achieving health equity. Health literacy empowers people to make informed decisions about their health — and to find and access resources that can help them protect their health.

In the past, interventions have largely focused on addressing the individual influences affecting health literacy. Healthy People defines individual health literacy as “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.” However, achieving population-level health equity requires contributions from multiple sectors across multiple levels of influence, including systems and organizations.

Organizational health literacy [\[2\]](https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/basics.html) (https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/basics.html) is “the degree to which organizations equitably enable individuals to find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others.” By practicing health literacy, organizations can not only improve health care and health outcomes for the people they serve, but also help alleviate persistent health disparities across the nation [\[3\]](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/disparities/index.htm) (https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/disparities/index.htm).

While this task may appear daunting, there are actionable steps organizations can take to adopt more health-literate practices. Here are some examples:

- **Learn about the attributes of health literate care organizations.** The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) has identified 10 core characteristics [\[4\]](https://www.ahrq.gov/health-literacy/publications/ten-attributes.html) (https://www.ahrq.gov/health-literacy/publications/ten-attributes.html) that set health-literate care organizations apart.
- **Conduct a self-assessment to determine how well your organization’s current practices align with health literacy.** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) offers Health Literacy Assessment Resources [\[5\]](https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/researchevaluate/organization-assessment-tools.html) (https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/researchevaluate/organization-assessment-tools.html) to guide your evaluation.
- **Develop and implement a health literacy plan within your organization.** Once you’ve assessed the status of health literacy in your organization, consider making a plan for improvement. CDC offers actionable steps to help you get started [\[6\]](https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/planact/develop/index.html) (https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/planact/develop/index.html).
- **Engage staff in ongoing health literacy training.** Activities focused on promoting health literacy help staff understand the importance of using health literacy strategies in their work — and actionable training modules, like those featured in CDC’s Clear Writing Hub [\[7\]](https://www.cdc.gov/clearwriting/) (https://www.cdc.gov/clearwriting/).

[www.cdc.gov/nceh/clearwriting/clear\\_writing\\_training\\_modules/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/clearwriting/clear_writing_training_modules/index.html)), can build capacity and skills within organizations.

- **Create materials that reach your audience where they're at.** Strategies include using simple language people can easily understand, providing clear action steps, and developing resources in multiple languages as appropriate. For tips on creating materials that meet your audience's needs, refer to CDC's Clear Communication Index [🔗](https://www.cdc.gov/ccindex/index.html) (<https://www.cdc.gov/ccindex/index.html>) and related resources.
- **Consider best practices for digital communication.** Health care organizations are increasingly using technology to deliver care, distribute materials, and optimize interactions with the people they serve. This poses both opportunities and challenges. Organizations can help support health literacy and health equity by developing digital resources that are clear and easy for consumers to navigate — for example, by following the evidence-based guidance in Health Literacy Online (<https://health.gov/healthliteracyonline/>).

Achieving health literacy is a shared effort — it requires the participation and interdisciplinary collaboration of multiple actors.

For more information on how to integrate health literacy into your work, check out ODPHP's health literacy resources (<https://health.gov/our-work/national-health-initiatives/health-literacy>) and AHRQ's tools, trainings, and related publications [🔗](https://www.ahrq.gov/health-literacy/index.html) (<https://www.ahrq.gov/health-literacy/index.html>).

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#### **Related Healthy People 2030 objectives:**

- Increase the health literacy of the population — HC/HIT-R01 (<https://health.gov/healthypeople/objectives-and-data/browse-objectives/health-communication/increase-health-literacy-population-hchit-r01>)