Plain Language
LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Description
Plain language is a tool for improving health literacy. It is communication your patients or audience can understand the first time they hear or read it. Keeping messages short, using common living room language while avoiding technical terms or medical jargon and using an active voice are some of the key elements of plain language. In these series of activities, students will learn all six key elements of plain language and how to apply them in a clinical setting.

Competencies
C2. Effective Communication and Health Literacy

- C2.2 Plain Language
  - Name the six plain language principles and recognize them in written materials produced by others.
  - Speak slowly and clearly at a moderate pace with patients.
  - Recognize which kinds of words, phrases or concepts may be jargon to patients.
  - Avoid using acronyms and jargon in verbal and written communication with patients.
  - Define in lay terms unavoidable jargon in verbal and written communication with patients.
  - Communicate one to three “need-to-know” or “need-to-do” concepts with patients during a clinic visit.
  - Use examples or analogies to improve patients’ comprehension.
  - Use “chunk and check” by giving patients small amounts of information and checking for understanding before moving to new information.
  - Write materials at lower reading levels (goal: 5-8th grade).

Learning Outcomes
- Name the six principles of plain language.
- Recognize words, phrases or concepts in oral and written communication that are jargon or difficult to understand from a patient’s perspective.
- Evaluate the reading level of written materials.
- Rewrite materials using plain language principles.
- Practice patient communication using plain language.
Activities
Instructor shows introductory videos and provides didactic lecture on the principles of plain language (speak in a positive tone, keep messages short, put the most important messages first, use common words and avoid jargon, use active voice and use easy-to-read design features) with case examples.

Activity 1: Recognizing jargon, acronyms and difficult words
The instructor will prepare a document or paragraph (e.g. health education brochure, Medicaid letter, discharge instructions) to distribute to students. Students will underline or highlight jargon, acronyms and difficult words in the document or paragraph and discuss in groups.

Activity 2: Recognize passive voice and rewrite in active voice
The instructor will prepare a document or paragraph (e.g. health education brochure, Medicaid letter, discharge instructions) to distribute to students. This may be the same document as in Activity 1. Students will underline or highlight sentences that use passive voice. Next, students will rewrite those sentences in active voice.

Example passive sentence:
Medication directions will be provided in plain language by the doctor.

Rewrite to active voice:
The doctor will provide medication directions in plain language.

Activity 3: Rewriting technical or medical jargon
Individually or in groups, students practice rewriting technical or medical jargon for plain language. Instructor may develop their own jargon list or use Activity 3 – Practice using “Living Room” language from the Health Literacy 101: Focusing on Clear Health Communications presentation on the Minnesota Health Literacy Partnership website.

Activity 4: Assess reading level in health education materials
Students will practice using different readability formulas for assessing the reading level of written materials.
- The Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (Felsch, 1949)
- SMOG Readability (McLaughlin, 1969)
- Fry Graph Readability (Fry, 1976)
- Dale-Chall Formula (Dale and Chall, 1948)

Activity 5: Practice plain language in verbal communications
In this role playing exercise, students will work with a partner to practice their plain language skills in verbal communications. One student will play the part of the clinician and the other
student will play the part of the patient. The clinician may use a typodont or other model, illustration or handout to explain a disease process to the patient in plain language.

**Student Assessment**

- Quiz on principles of plain language and using readability formulas
- Level of participation in group discussion and activities

**Resources**

**Books**

- Redish, Janice (Ginny) (2012). Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works. Elsevier, Inc.: Waltham, MA.

**Videos**


**Websites**


**Suggested Placement within Curriculum**

Ideally, plain language concepts should be introduced into the students’ preclinical curriculum when patient education is addressed. These learning activities offer the student several opportunities to practice principles of plain language, which can be reinforced when providing clinical patient care.