



# Ink Matters

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## Plain Language Can Save a Child's Life

Writing in plain language is more than substituting three syllable words with two or one syllable words. It's more than shortening sentences, eliminating jargon, or simplifying the layout. Writing in plain language is an art.

In March 2003, a study on the readability of child car seats was published in the medical journal *Pediatrics* (Vol. 111 No. 3, pp. 588-591).

The study assessed the readability of manufacturers' car seat manuals and concluded that consumers would have difficulty reading, understanding, and following instructions.

The authors used the SMOG (Simple Measure of Gobbledygook) to test readability on a sample of instruction manuals. They sam-

pled sections most relevant to injury prevention issues. They did not test headings (unless part of a sentence) or illustrations and related captions. They did test government mandated language, but did so separately.

Most manuals tested at a 7th to 12th grade level with an overall mean SMOG score of 10.34.

Car accidents are the leading cause of death in children, and nonuse or misuse of a restraint is the single strongest risk factor for injury.

Seventy-nine to 94% of Americans install their car seats incorrectly and *don't even know it*. They either can't read the instructions or find them confusing.

It's not easy to install a child car seat. Neither is it

easy to write the accompanying instructions. I have, and I found the process to be more than the usual writing-in-language challenge.

This is, in part, because there are several variables to installing child car seats: the design and purpose of the child restraint; the make, model, and year of the vehicle; the type of seat belts in the vehicle; and whether or not the consumer still has their vehicle manual—important to properly installing a car seat.

To quote plain language guru Audrey Riffenburgh, "Plain language goals are always to deliver clarity, ease of use, and information relevant to the reader's needs."

As in the case of writing car seat instructions, it can save lives.

"Child safety seat instruction manuals are written at a reading level that exceeds the reading skills of most American consumers."

—From "How Readable Are Child Safety Seat Installation Instructions?" by Mark V. Wegner, MD, MPH and Deborah C. Girasek, PhD, MPH, published in *Pediatrics*

## It's a Fact

- ⇒ 23.6% of patients with low health literacy did not understand instructions to take medication 4 times a day.
- ⇒ Over 80% of patients with low literacy skills could not read the rights and responsibilities section of a Medicaid application.
- ⇒ 40 million Americans over 16 years old read at or below the 5th grade level.
- ⇒ 50 million read at or below the 8th grade level.
- ⇒ A Louisiana study found that about 67% of parents tested in an outpatient clinic read at a 9th grade level or less.
- ⇒ Even patients who read well can have trouble understanding medical information.
- ⇒ A lack of literacy skills does not indicate a lack of intelligence.

Remember we moved! Our new address is:  
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Kristina Anderson has been in the freelance writing and editing business since 1990. Her wide range of experience includes managing bookstores, volunteers, and nonprofit programs. She works with health promotion publishers, health providers, nonprofit organizations, literacy organizations, marketing agencies, educational institutions, technical companies, corporations, book publishers, and authors. Her expertise includes writing for low-literacy and limited English-speaking audiences and assessing readability and literacy levels of printed materials.

### Consider this....

In an East African country, a tin of baby food had a picture of a healthy baby on the label, but no one was buying the product. It was eventually discovered that the people in this rural area thought that the content consisted of ground up babies!

—Shirley Robbins, Capsal Plain Language Centre, [www.capsal.co.za](http://www.capsal.co.za)

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## I Was Not in Need of a Cell Phone, but....

Recently I received a product brochure that I think is a great example of clear, concise marketing communication.

The brochure from Cricket Communications had an immediate hook, and although I was not in need of a cell phone, I kept reading. Here's what caught my eye....

The 8"x10" brochure is a bright lime color with white typeface. The copy is clean and written in a large font. The information is chunked, and it gets right to the point, no distractions, no fine print. And, it's clever. As a reader,

you *get* it. Boom. Just like that.

The copy lists four easy-to-read, easy-to-understand benefits:

1. Unlimited calls
2. No high-priced ads.
3. Easy to understand bills.
4. No background checks ("You're getting a cell phone, not buying a house.")

Harvey White, Cricket's CEO, is quoted on the front and back of the brochure, certainly not uncommon, but in this case, he could be your next door neighbor telling you about a great deal he came across while running errands. In

other words, you trust what he is saying.

The copy, format, typeface, and illustrations are playful and informal, leaving the impression that Cricket is a small company. It's not. But again, the way they present their company invokes immediate trust that they have a good product backed with great service. Whether this is actually the case, I cannot say, but if I were in need of a cell phone, they would be the first company I would call.

By the way, the brochure tests out at a 6-7th grade reading level.