

Health Literacy Specialist Model Job Description¹

Summary

A Health Literacy Specialist (HLS) plays an ever-increasing role within agencies/systems and communities. A Health Literacy Specialist guides and promotes evidence-based healthcare in a patient- and family-centric manner to improve quality outcomes and equity within healthcare organizations and communities. An HLS also acts to reduce unnecessary healthcare services, avoidable expenses, and health disparities attributable to limited health literacy.

To guide health literacy strategy and meet an organization's health literacy goals and objectives, an HLS must demonstrate knowledge and experience in 7 established content domains:

1. Communication
2. Public Health
3. Education
4. Language, Culture, and Identity
5. Organizational Systems and Policies
6. Community Engagement
7. Ethics

Following are the competencies necessary to fulfill key job responsibilities of an HLS.

Job Competencies

Communication

- Incorporates plain language principles into oral and text-based forms of communication.
- Reviews health information to ensure that it is understandable and actionable [e.g., using Suitability Assessment of Materials (SAM), PE-MAT, CDC Clear Communication Index].
- Evaluates learners' understanding of any information provided (e.g., teach back).
- Identifies and addresses the intended audience's characteristics, needs, and interests when communicating health information.
- Assesses text-based information using readability formulas (e.g., SMOG, Fry, Flesch Reading Ease).
- Understands and conforms to commonly accepted standards of appropriate grammar, punctuation, and style for health literacy (writing like people talk, using a conversational tone, etc.).

¹ The Institute for Healthcare Advancement commissioned a structured job analysis study and developed this job description based on the results. The job description includes a comprehensive list of possible competencies needed to perform in a health literacy role. Organizations can determine which competencies are most appropriate for their particular needs and settings. You can access an executive summary of the study, including a description of the methodology and findings at IHA4health.org.

- Incorporates evidence-based health literacy writing, organization and design principles and practices into the creation of education materials.
- Collaborates with subject matter experts in the development of health messages.

Public Health

- Initiates and leads the development and execution of data-informed strategies to address the needs of groups at risk for limited health literacy.
- Uses plain language in public health information and health behavior recommendations.
- Develops health and safety information that is understandable, accessible, and actionable.
- Applies a health literacy perspective to health promotion, disease prevention, risk communication, and chronic disease management programs.

Education

- Assesses the learning needs and preferences of individuals, community members, and groups, and develops appropriate, audience-specific plans to meet those needs.
- Creates training programs that implement health literacy priorities. (e.g., Ten Attributes of Health Literate Health Care Organizations, teach back).
- Develops evidence-based health content for a limited-literacy audience (e.g., booklets, guides, fact sheets, web content, videos).
- Uses best practices when communicating about numbers to address common challenges with numeracy.

Language, Culture, and Identity

- Integrates health literacy in the development, implementation, and evaluation of language access plans and services provided by interpreters and translators.
- Adapts health literacy interventions to accommodate specific individual needs (e.g., low vision, cognitive impairment, behavioral health challenges).
- Demonstrates an understanding of diverse cultures, languages, and perspectives (e.g., rural, urban, adolescents, individuals who are hearing impaired).
- Incorporates cultural factors and diverse perspectives into health literacy activities.

Organizational Systems and Policies

- Addresses the strong relationship between the social determinants of health and health literacy in action plans.
- Integrates health literacy universal precautions throughout the organization.
- Advises on the development of policies and procedures that reflect evidence-based health literacy principles.
- Identifies high-risk situations that impede understanding of health information and services, and develops strategies to remove or mitigate effects of these impediments.

- Applies health literacy research and best practices to health programs and interventions.
- Builds organizational awareness of the consequences of limited health literacy, including the financial implications of limited health literacy and the health literacy interventions designed to address it.
- Confirms that health literacy practices and materials comply with accreditation, standards, and regulations (e.g., CLAS, Federal Plain Writing Act, Medicaid, National Health Education Standards).
- Evaluates health literacy outcomes of quality and performance improvement initiatives.

Community Engagement

- Formulates and implements plans to facilitate community-based participation in health activities.
- Ensures the intended audience and those who support them are included in the design, implementation, and evaluation of health education, information, and services.
- Facilitates connections among adult literacy programs, health organizations, and community partners to address health literacy needs.
- Advocates for community representation on committees and in policy development.
- Develops partnerships with key community stakeholders, community-based organizations, and business or government partners that advance health literacy in the community.

Ethics

- Uses nonjudgmental, non-shaming behaviors with people who have limited literacy or limited health literacy.
- Contributes a health literacy perspective to organizational or community-based initiatives (e.g., community consultation, public health campaign).
- Interacts with all stakeholders in inclusive ways that build trust, open communication, and strengthen transparency.
- Understands the vital role health literacy plays in advancing health justice and achieving health equity.

Other Professional Development Qualifications and Education

The following education, experience, and professional development activities can support effective performance of the defined competencies and tasks.

- Educational achievement appropriate to the complexity of the position is likely to include advanced degree(s) or experience in such fields as public health, health education, communications, nursing, sociology, or equivalent.
- 7 to 10 years of health literacy experience specific to best practices in communication, the educational needs of patients, families, organizational systems, and communities.

- Participates in ongoing professional development necessary to maintain awareness of relevant health literacy research and best practices.
- Acquires and maintains relevant professional certifications.