

# SIMPLIFIED MEDICINE

*A Guide to Writing Clear and Accessible  
Articles for the General Public*



**Dr Hidayatul Radziah Ismawi**

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by

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# PREFACE

As medical professionals, we are entrusted not only with treating patients but also with disseminating accurate health information to the wider community. However, bridging the gap between complex medical concepts and the public's understanding can often be a daunting task. This book aims to empower healthcare professionals with the knowledge and skills necessary to communicate effectively with diverse audiences. Whether you're a seasoned healthcare professional or a novice writer, this book is designed to support you on your journey towards becoming a more confident and proficient medical communicator.

# AUTHOR PROFILE










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Dr Hidayatul Radziah Ismawi was born in Kuala Lumpur and is an Assistant Professor (Pharmacology) at the Department of Basic Medical Sciences, Kulliyah of Medicine, International Islamic University Malaysia. In 2015, a book she helped translate and edit with Szakif Enteprize was nominated for the Dublin Literary Award. She is a columnist, translator, and the current Chief Editor for The Malaysian Medical Gazette, an online hub for doctors, specialists and healthcare professionals to spread awareness and health education to members of the public. She has also authored and edited several e-books, both medical and non-medical, and continuously advocates for her peers (and students) to engage in writing for the public.

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# INTRODUCTION

The pressure within academia to consistently produce scholarly publications in order to maintain professional credibility, advance one's career, and secure funding or tenure is often encapsulated in the term "Publish or perish". It reflects the competitive nature of academic research, where productivity and publication output are often used as metrics of success. And although this sentiment underscores the importance of research dissemination in contributing to the advancement of knowledge and academic recognition, it also highlights the challenges and pressures faced by researchers in achieving these goals.

The often arduous processes inherent in academic publishing can, at times, diminish the joy of writing and disseminating knowledge for many medical professionals. Focusing solely on academic publication also makes us lose sight of our most important target demographic, the general public. Writing for the public should be a fundamental aspect of our medical community. By bridging research and theory with real-world applications, it serves those who stand to benefit most from the knowledge we seek to attain.

# UNDERSTANDING YOUR AUDIENCE

## *Chapter 1*

### **Identifying the target audience**

When writing articles for the general public, the most important thing to do is identify your target audience. Who will read your article? Your neighbour googling why he has chest pain after exercise? The cashier at your local supermarket trying to figure out how to take care of her mother who was recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's? A teenager surfing the internet for information about anxiety? A medical student looking for a simplified explanation of a complex disease they learned in class?

It is important to acknowledge that the general public is made up of a variety of different people with varying needs. The best guide to identifying your target audience is actually - yourself. What is your speciality and field of interest? Surgeons will find it easier to target the patients they see daily in their surgical clinics, paediatricians can find a never-ending pool of parents trying to navigate their child's various health concerns, non-clinicians cater to those who seek information on the basic medical science behind their health concerns, and so on. Therefore, your target audience is the demographic that would benefit most from reading an article that you are knowledgeable or passionate about.



## **Recognising varying levels of health literacy**

It is imperative to understand that individuals possess different levels of comprehension and proficiency when it comes to health-related information. This encompasses a spectrum of abilities, ranging from basic understanding to advanced knowledge, influenced by factors such as education, culture, language proficiency, and prior exposure to healthcare information. Effective communication in healthcare requires tailoring information to accommodate these diverse literacy levels, ensuring that individuals can comprehend and act upon the information provided to make informed decisions about their health and well-being.

In much the same way as we are taught to communicate with our patients verbally during face-to-face communication, similar principles apply when we are writing health-related articles for public consumption. Researching the demographics of readers who use the platform where your article is published is also a helpful guide.

When writing articles in English or Bahasa Melayu, my aim is to reach Malaysians with at least a secondary school education. Setting this baseline allows me to gauge the health literacy level of my intended audience effectively.

## Tailoring content to suit diverse audience needs

Navigating the diverse landscape of your potential audience can feel overwhelming, making it challenging to determine where to begin or which topics to prioritize. A straightforward approach is to adhere to the "common" rule: focus on important and widely relevant topics that impact a broad audience. While your expertise may lie in niche or rare subjects, considering a more commonly discussed middle ground can be beneficial.

For instance, instead of delving into an exhaustive analysis of a rare genetic disease, opt for a broader discussion on various genetic diseases or a simplified explanation of how genetics influence disease development. Similarly, rather than diving deep into the pharmacokinetic properties of a drug, concentrate on elucidating its mechanism of action and emphasizing the importance of consulting a healthcare professional before altering therapy.

By embracing this approach, you can ensure that your content resonates with a wider audience while still providing valuable insights and information tailored to their needs and understanding.



# PRINCIPLES OF CLEAR COMMUNICATION

## *Chapter 2*

### **Simplifying medical jargon and terminology**

The easiest method to enhance the clarity of any health-related article for the general public is by simplifying the abundant medical jargon commonly used by healthcare professionals. This entails replacing complex terminology with clear, easily understandable language accessible to a broader audience. Although it may be a hard habit to break since our day to day communication with our peers constitutes mostly of medical jargon but it may hinder our ability to reach our target audience. By eliminating technical terms and acronyms that may be unfamiliar to non-specialists, we can ensure that our message is comprehensible and engaging to readers from diverse backgrounds and levels of health literacy.

Simplifying medical jargon also fosters trust and rapport with the audience. By demystifying healthcare terminology, we empower individuals to take an active role in managing their health and making informed decisions. This approach promotes inclusivity and accessibility, aligning with the principles of patient-centred care and effective health communication.

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However, it is crucial to navigate this process with caution and avoid the pitfalls of oversimplification. Overly simplifying complex medical concepts can lead to the distortion or misrepresentation of information, potentially compromising the accuracy and integrity of the content.

One common pitfall of oversimplification is the loss of nuance and depth in conveying medical information. Complex health topics often involve intricate relationships and multifaceted considerations that cannot be adequately captured through overly simplistic explanations. By glossing over these nuances, there's a risk of providing incomplete or misleading information.

To avoid these pitfalls, it's essential to strike a balance between simplicity and accuracy when simplifying medical jargon for the general public. An example of oversimplification of a medical term is referring to cancer simply as "bad cells" or "cells that grow too much." While this description may be easy to understand for some, it fails to capture the complexity of cancer as a multifaceted disease involving abnormal cell growth, mutations, and the potential spread to other parts of the body. Instead of simply eliminating all jargon and terminology, it is possible to introduce it within the text but to follow it up with a simple definition. For example mentioning angina pectoris followed by chest pain or the term anti-coagulant is followed by blood thinner.

## **Breaking down complex concepts into digestible chunks**

Many medical concepts are complex and difficult to understand, hence why medical school was an arduous journey for many of us. The general public did not have the same exposure to these concepts and therefore require us to break them down for easy understanding.

For example, carcinogenesis can be explained as follows:

Carcinogenesis is the process by which normal cells undergo genetic changes that cause them to become cancerous. These changes can be triggered by various factors such as exposure to harmful chemicals, radiation, or viruses, as well as genetic predispositions.

Imagine your cells as diligent workers in a factory, each with a specific job to do. Sometimes, due to external factors or internal errors, a cell's genetic blueprint gets damaged or altered. This can cause the cell to start behaving abnormally, ignoring signals to stop growing and dividing when it should.

As these abnormal cells continue to divide and accumulate, they can form a mass called a tumor. Initially, this tumour may be benign, meaning it doesn't invade nearby tissues or spread to other parts of the body. However, if the genetic changes persist and certain mutations occur, the tumour may become malignant, meaning it has the potential to spread and invade surrounding tissues.

At this stage, the cancerous cells can break away from the original tumour and travel through the bloodstream or lymphatic system to other parts of the body, where they can form new tumours – a process known as metastasis.

### **Incorporating analogies and real-life examples**

Another way to engage the audience is to incorporate analogies and real-life examples in your text. This helps transform theoretical concepts to practical applications. Examples may be modified from experiences with actual patients or standard examples, very much like those used during medical exams.



# STRUCTURING YOUR CONTENT

## *Chapter 3*

### **Crafting engaging headlines and introductions**

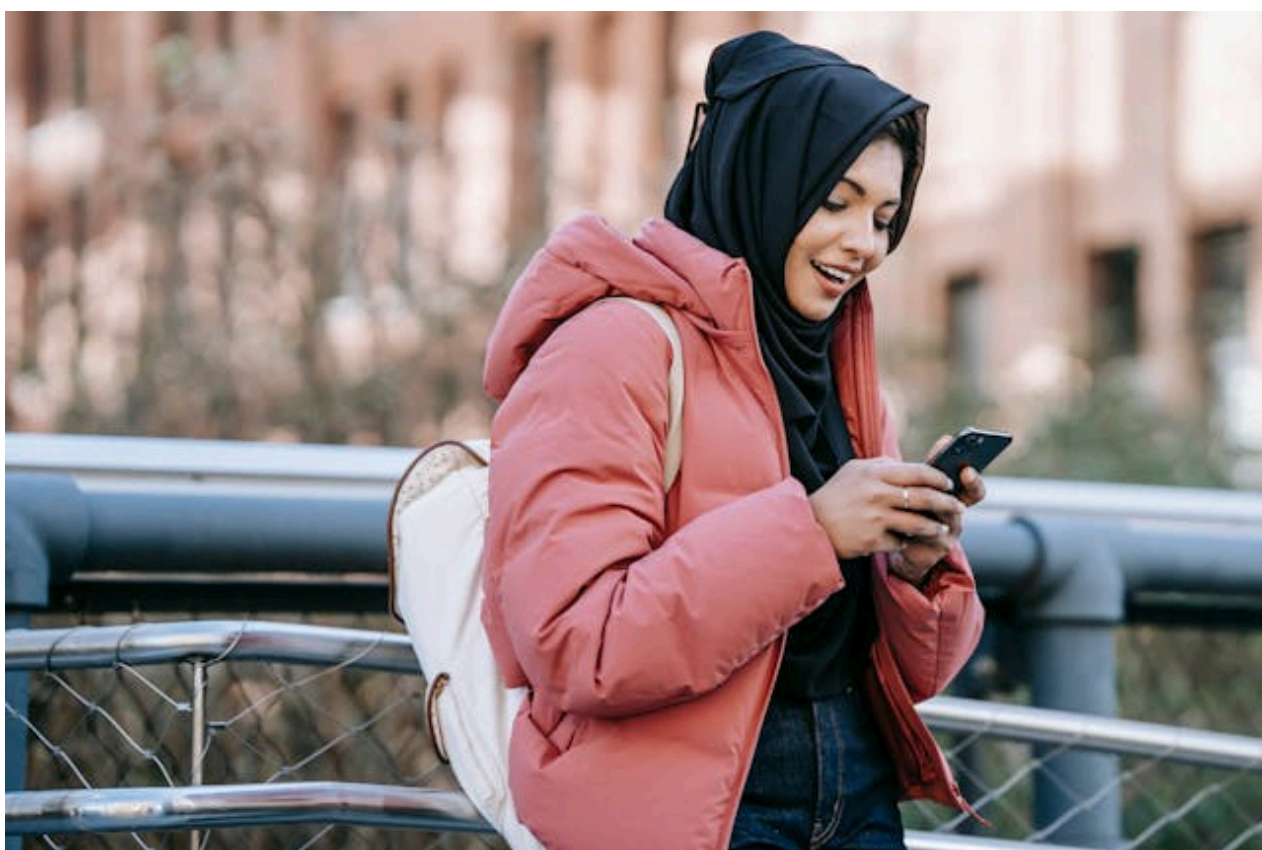
An engaging headline will hook the readers and entice them to read the whole article. Choose headlines that can pique the readers interest and reel them in. It should be concise yet captivating, offering a glimpse into what awaits within the article.

For example, instead of a generic headline like "Understanding Diabetes," consider something more attention-grabbing like "Unlocking the Secrets of Diabetes: What You Need to Know to Take Control." This not only hints at the informative content but also entices readers with the promise of valuable insights and practical advice.

Once you have grabbed the reader's attention with the headline, the introduction should be interesting enough to maintain their interest. Unfortunately, in today's fast paced world, where encyclopaedias of knowledge are at their fingertips, the average time a random person spends on a single page is mere seconds. Therefore, the introduction should addressing their interests or concerns and highlighting the relevance of the topic to their lives.



You may choose to begin with a relatable anecdote, a thought-provoking question, or a startling statistic to grab attention. For instance, "Did you know that over 400 million people worldwide are living with diabetes, and many may not even realize it?". By crafting engaging headlines and introductions, you not only capture readers' attention but also lay the foundation for a compelling and impactful health article.



### **Organising information logically and utilising visuals for clarity**

Logical organisation ensures that your article flows smoothly from one point to the next, guiding readers through the content in a coherent and understandable manner. This means structuring your article in a way that makes sense, with each section building upon the previous one to create a cohesive narrative.

For example, if you're writing about the benefits of exercise for heart health, you might start by discussing the importance of cardiovascular health. This can be followed by an explanation of specific ways that exercise can improve heart health, such as reducing blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Finally, you might conclude with practical tips for incorporating exercise into daily life.

Visuals can greatly enhance the clarity and accessibility of your article. Whether photographs, infographics, or charts and graphs, visuals provide a visual representation of complex information that can be easier for readers to understand and remember.

For instance, if you're explaining the symptoms of a particular condition, you might include a diagram or illustration highlighting the key signs to look out for. Or if you're discussing the benefits of a healthy diet, you might include a colourful infographic breaking down the components of a balanced meal.



image by freepik

## Maintaining a conversational tone throughout the article

Academic writing may be formal and often dry, sticking strictly to the facts, but when it comes to crafting health articles for the public, imagine it more like a cosy chat over a cup of tea.

Instead of bombarding readers with dry facts, imagine inviting them to join in on the conversation. Ask questions that pique their interest and encourage them to think deeper about their health. For example: "Ever wondered why some people are more likely to have certain diseases compared to others?"

Think about everyday scenarios that everyone can relate to. Whether it's comparing the body to a well-oiled machine or likening a balanced diet to a symphony orchestra, drawing parallels helps make complex topics more digestible. Also, injecting a bit of wit and charm into your writing can go a long way in keeping readers engaged.



# ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

## *Chapter 4*

### **Maintaining accuracy and integrity in medical writing**

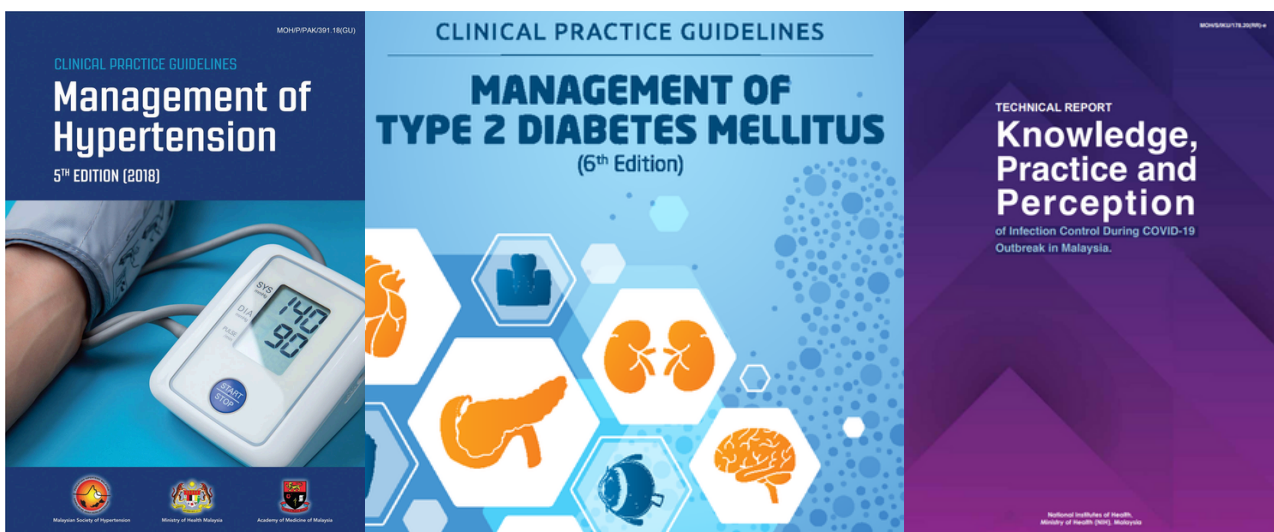
While it's tempting to prioritise friendliness over precision, remember, accuracy is essential even in the most reader-friendly content. After all, the primary goal of writing for the public is to raise awareness and impart accurate medical knowledge. Unfortunately, in today's landscape, there's a growing fixation on popularity, leading some doctors or health professionals to prioritise fame over knowledge. While becoming a medical influencer on TikTok might seem more glamorous than writing articles, it is crucial to recognise that good writers garner respect and a following for their dedication to accuracy and integrity.



## Citing reliable sources and avoiding misinformation

To uphold the integrity of your health article before publication, a reliable strategy is to include citations from reputable sources. While we may be experts in our respective fields, referencing textbooks, clinical practice guidelines, health reports, and scientific articles ensures that we approach writing for the public with the same rigor as academic journal publications. While the citation volume may not match that of a scientific journal, incorporating one or two well-chosen references enhances reader trust and maintains the practice of conveying evidence-based facts, even in public communication.

For example, when writing about treatment of hypertension, citing the latest clinical practice guidelines used by Malaysian doctors would be far more relevant compared to western guidelines.



## Respecting patient privacy and confidentiality

While writing articles for the public, we must prioritise the privacy and confidentiality of any patients referenced within the text. This involves obtaining explicit consent before sharing any patient-related information or images, and diligently censoring or altering details to safeguard anonymity. When illustrating concepts with examples or scenarios, it's imperative to ensure that the information disclosed cannot lead to the identification of the individuals involved. This may entail altering names, locations, and specific circumstances to maintain anonymity.

Additionally, it's essential to exercise discretion when sharing anecdotes or stories about patients. Unless such narratives serve a clear educational purpose or provide valuable insights for readers, it's best to refrain from divulging potentially embarrassing or sensitive details. Instead, focus on narratives that offer genuine teaching value or serve as cautionary tales, always mindful of respecting the dignity and privacy of the individuals involved.



# SAMPLE WRITING PROMPTS

## *Chapter 5*

This chapter will provide a variety of writing prompts designed to help you practice writing health articles for the public. Remember to simplify these complex medical concepts without sacrificing accuracy. Let's get started!



## **Prompt 1: Explain a Common Medical Condition**

**Objective:** Explain a common medical condition in simple terms. Remember to cover its symptoms, causes, diagnosis, treatment, and prevention.

**Example Topic:** Hypertension (High Blood Pressure)

### **Guidelines:**

1. Define hypertension in a sentence or two.
2. Describe common symptoms and potential causes.
3. Explain how it is diagnosed by healthcare professionals.
4. Outline typical treatment options, including lifestyle changes and medications.
5. Offer advice on prevention and managing risk factors.

### **Sample Start:**

Over 30% of Malaysians suffer from hypertension, and some may not even know it. It often has no symptoms but can lead to serious health problems like heart disease and stroke ...



## **Prompt 2: Demystifying Medical Procedures**

**Objective:** Break down a medical procedure to make it understandable and less intimidating for the average reader.

**Example Topic:** Colonoscopy

### **Guidelines:**

1. Explain what a colonoscopy is and why it is done.
2. Describe the preparation required before the procedure.
3. Detail the steps of the procedure itself.
4. Discuss what patients can expect during and after the procedure.
5. Address common concerns and questions.

### **Sample Start:**

Having a camera attached to a tube enter your nether regions may not sound like the best experience but a colonoscopy is a crucial screening tool for colon cancer...

### **Prompt 3: Simplifying Scientific Research**

**Objective:** Summarise a recent scientific study in a way that highlights its significance and relevance to public health.

**Example Topic:** The effect of coffee on diabetes mellitus.

#### **Guidelines:**

1. Briefly introduce the study and its purpose.
2. Summarise the methodology in layman's terms.
3. Highlight the key findings and their implications.
4. Explain how these findings can impact daily life or public health recommendations.
5. Include quotes from experts or researchers if available.

#### **Sample Start:**

Your morning cup of coffee may be helping control your blood sugar levels but how? ...

## **Prompt 4: Clarifying Health Myths**

**Objective:** Debunk a common health myth with facts and clear explanations.

**Example Topic:** The Myth That Vaccines Cause Autism

### **Guidelines:**

1. State the myth and its origins.
2. Present scientific evidence that disproves the myth.
3. Explain the importance of vaccines and how they work.
4. Discuss the potential consequences of believing in the myth.
5. Encourage critical thinking and reliance on credible sources.

### **Sample Start:**

Despite persistent rumours, extensive research has shown that vaccines do not cause autism. This myth began with a now-discredited study from the 1990s. Vaccines are crucial for preventing serious diseases...

## **Prompt 5: Introducing New Health Technologies**

**Objective:** Explain a new health technology or innovation and its potential benefits to the public.

**Example Topic:** Wearable Health Monitors

### **Guidelines:**

1. Describe what wearable health monitors are and how they work.
2. Discuss the types of data they collect and how this data can be used.
3. Explain the benefits of using wearable health monitors.
4. Mention any limitations or concerns.
5. Provide examples of popular devices and their specific features.

### **Sample Start:**

That smartwatch may be stylish but it may also be good for your health. Wearable health monitors, like fitness trackers and smartwatches, are devices that you can wear on your wrist to track various health metrics. They can monitor heart rate, steps taken, sleep patterns, and more...

## **Prompt 6: Addressing Health Inequities**

**Objective:** Raise awareness about health disparities and suggest ways to address them.

**Example Topic:** Access to Healthcare in Rural Areas

### **Guidelines:**

1. Describe the problem of healthcare access in rural areas.
2. Discuss the factors contributing to this issue.
3. Highlight the impact on the health of rural populations.
4. Suggest potential solutions and initiatives to improve access.
5. Include personal stories or case studies if possible.

### **Sample Start:**

Imagine having to ride a sampan and walk 15 km to reach the nearest health facility. In many rural areas, access to healthcare is a significant challenge. Factors like distance from medical facilities, a shortage of healthcare providers, and limited transportation options contribute to this issue. As a result, residents often face...

## **Prompt 7: Highlighting Preventive Health Measures**

**Objective:** Educate readers on preventive health measures to improve their overall well-being.

**Example Topic:** The Importance of Regular Exercise

### **Guidelines:**

1. Explain why regular exercise is important for health.
2. Describe the types of exercise beneficial for different age groups.
3. Offer tips on how to incorporate exercise into a daily routine.
4. Highlight the long-term benefits of maintaining an active lifestyle.
5. Address common barriers and solutions to staying active.

### **Sample Start:**

Do you have 20 minutes of free time today? If so, try using it to exercise. Regular exercise is one of the most important things you can do for your health. It helps control weight, reduces the risk of chronic diseases, improves mental health, and boosts overall well-being. Whether it's a daily walk or joining a gym...

# CONCLUSION

The most effective way to communicate health information to the public is to simply start writing. Armed with an understanding of our target audience, a commitment to clear communication, and a dedication to maintaining integrity, let's embark on a journey toward bridging the gap between complex medical concepts and public comprehension. May we always remember that each article we pen (or type) has the power to inform, educate, and empower.

Disseminating knowledge is the  
human duty, sharing it about so  
that all can benefit.

– Tracy Rees



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