

Health Literacy for Health Sciences Librarians

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Objectives

- Review health literacy facts
- Consider effects of low literacy on patient behavior
- Discuss guidelines for clear health communication
- Introduce literacy evaluation tools

Components of Literacy

- Reading
- Understanding
- Listening
- Speaking
- Numeracy – the knowledge and skills required to apply arithmetic operations using numbers embedded in printed material - [National Center for Education Statistics](#)

Health Literacy

The ability to read, understand, **and act on** health care information

- Emphasizes inability of **patient** to deal with the information

Clear Health Communication

Health materials written clearly and presented in a simple, easy-to-read format

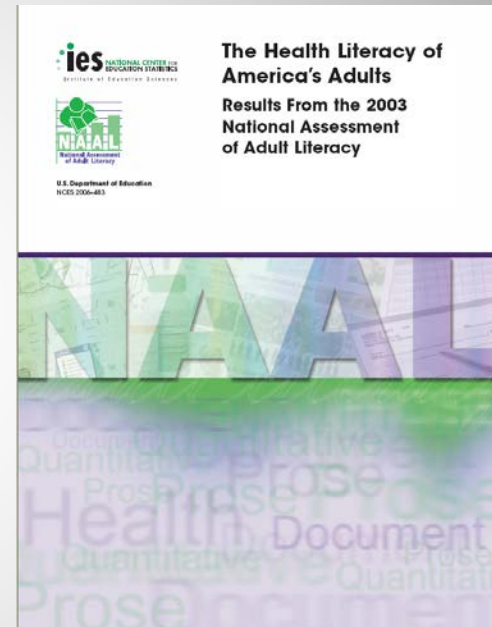
- Places the emphasis for change on **health care providers**

U.S. Literacy Facts

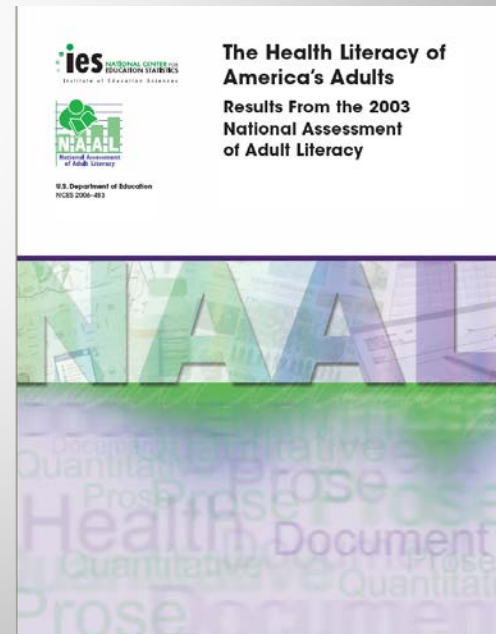
- The average adult reads at an **eighth-grade** level
- About 20% read at the **fifth-grade** level and below
- Low health literacy levels:
 - Older
 - Immigrants
 - Non-whites
 - Low income

The Health Literacy of America's Adults

Results from
the 2003
National
Assessment of
Adult Literacy
(9/6/2006)



45% of the United States population has only **basic** or **below basic** literacy skills



Most health-related materials are written at high school reading level or higher

Health care providers overestimate what patients are able to understand

- Kelly PA, Haidet, P. Physician overestimation of patient literacy: a potential source of health care disparities. *Patient Education and Counseling* 66: 119-122, 2007.

- Rogers ES, Wallace LS, Weiss BD. Misperceptions of medical understanding in low-literacy patients: implications for cancer prevention. *Cancer Control* 13:225-9, 2006.

High literacy level needed to

- Share personal information with providers
- Engage in self-care and chronic-disease management
- Understand mathematical concepts such as probability and risk
- Navigate the healthcare system and setting

The Healthcare Setting

- Maps, directions, signs, schedules, and instructions posted
- Unfamiliar phrases, symbols and abbreviations
- Large number of signs and postings = high literacy demand

Patients with low health literacy

Less likely to:

- Seek help early in the course of a disease
- Follow medical regimens
- Keep appointments
- Complete forms correctly

Additional factors that may hinder understanding:

- Intimidation, fear, vulnerability
- Shock upon hearing a diagnosis
- Extenuating stressors within the patient's family
- Multiple health conditions to understand and treat

Health Literacy:: Health Status

- In the United States, limited literacy skills are a stronger predictor of an individual's health status than age, income, employment status, education level, and racial or ethnic group.

Health literacy: report of the Council on Scientific Affairs. *JAMA* 281(6): 552-557, 1999.

Health Literacy Interventions and Outcomes: An Updated Systematic Review

Differences in health literacy level were consistently associated with:

- increased hospitalizations
- greater emergency care use
- lower use of mammography
- lower receipt of influenza vaccine
- poorer ability to demonstrate taking medications appropriately
- poorer ability to interpret labels and health messages
- among seniors, poorer overall health status and higher mortality

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, March 2011

Clear Health Communication

- Short words/sentences/paragraphs
- Conversational tone
- Active voice
 - Scientists conduct experiments to test this theory (**not** Experiments are conducted to test this theory)
 - The pharmacist is filling your prescription (**not** Your prescription is being filled)

Sentences

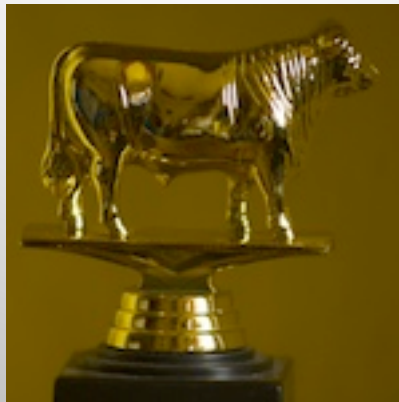
- Short sentences (15 words or less)
- Simple sentence structure
- Present tense when explaining or instructing
 - “Clean the site with warm tap water.”
- Future tense when writing about things to be expected
 - “We will ask you to come in to the clinic.”

Clear Health Communication

- Use commonly understood words
 - example: Lab test (**not** assay)
 - example: Under the skin (**not** subcutaneous)

GOBBLEDYGOOK

- Something written in an overly complex, incoherent, or incomprehensible manner
- An English term used to describe nonsensical language
- Incomprehensible or pompous jargon of specialists



WRITING GUIDES FOR CLEAR HEALTH COMMUNICATION



UNIVERSITY of MARYLAND
Health Sciences and
Human Services Library

Home Resources Services Assistance General Information Suggestion Box ILLiad ASK US!

Library » HS/HSL Guides » Health Literacy Resources

Admin Sign In

Health Literacy Resources

This guide provides links to resources on health literacy in the United States and guides for clear health communication.

Last update: Dec 5, 2011 URL: <http://guides.hshsl.umaryland.edu/healthliteracy> Print Guide RSS Updates SHARE

Introduction to Health Literacy Assessment Cultural Diversity Funding Guides Informed Consent Instruction
Patient Resources Podcasts/Videos/Webcasts

Guides [Print Page](#)

Search: This Guide

WRITING GUIDES

- [Beyond the Brochure: Alternative Approaches to Effective Health Communication](#)
- [C-CAT Patient Centered Communication \(AMA\)](#)
- [Clear & Simple - National Cancer Institute](#)
- [Guide to Evaluating Written Nutrition Education Materials](#)
- [Guide to Writing and Designing Easy-to-Use Health Web Sites](#)

CLEAR HEALTH COMMUNICATION

Selected examples of clear health communication

- [Asthma: Key Words in Plain Language](#)
- [Healthy Shelter Living](#)
- [How Can I Keep Track of Physical Activity and Eating?](#)
- [Pills for Type 2 Diabetes:A Guide for Adults](#)

<http://guides.hshsl.umaryland.edu/healthliteracy>

Clear Health Communication



define: metatarsal

Google Search

I'm Feeling Lucky

Clear Health Communication

- Explain technical terms but avoid using them more than once
 - Short word (technical term in parenthesis)
 - example: ECG (electrocardiogram)

You will be scheduled for an ECG (electrocardiogram) at 2 pm on Monday. The ECG is a test that measures heart activity. You may eat lunch before the ECG if you are hungry.

Clear Health Communication

- Lists rather than long paragraphs
- Diagrams, charts, pictures
- Ample white space
- Consult plain language thesaurus, dictionary, consumer health resources
- Use pre- and post-tests; check for understanding

Clear Health Communication

- Use the second person—"you" or "your child"
- Use "he or she" NOT "he/she" or "s/he"
- Avoid polysyllabic words whenever possible

Paragraphs

- Start each paragraph with a strong topic sentence
- Use one idea per paragraph to emphasize each important concept
 - **Damital is a medicine used for migraine headaches. It takes away the pain and upset stomach caused by migraines. People who take Damital say that it works quickly. Damital comes in pill form and is easy to swallow. Some patients feel sleepy after taking Damital, but report no other side effects.**

Measure Readability

Easy-to-read:

- 5th – 6th grade reading level
- Will reach majority of patients

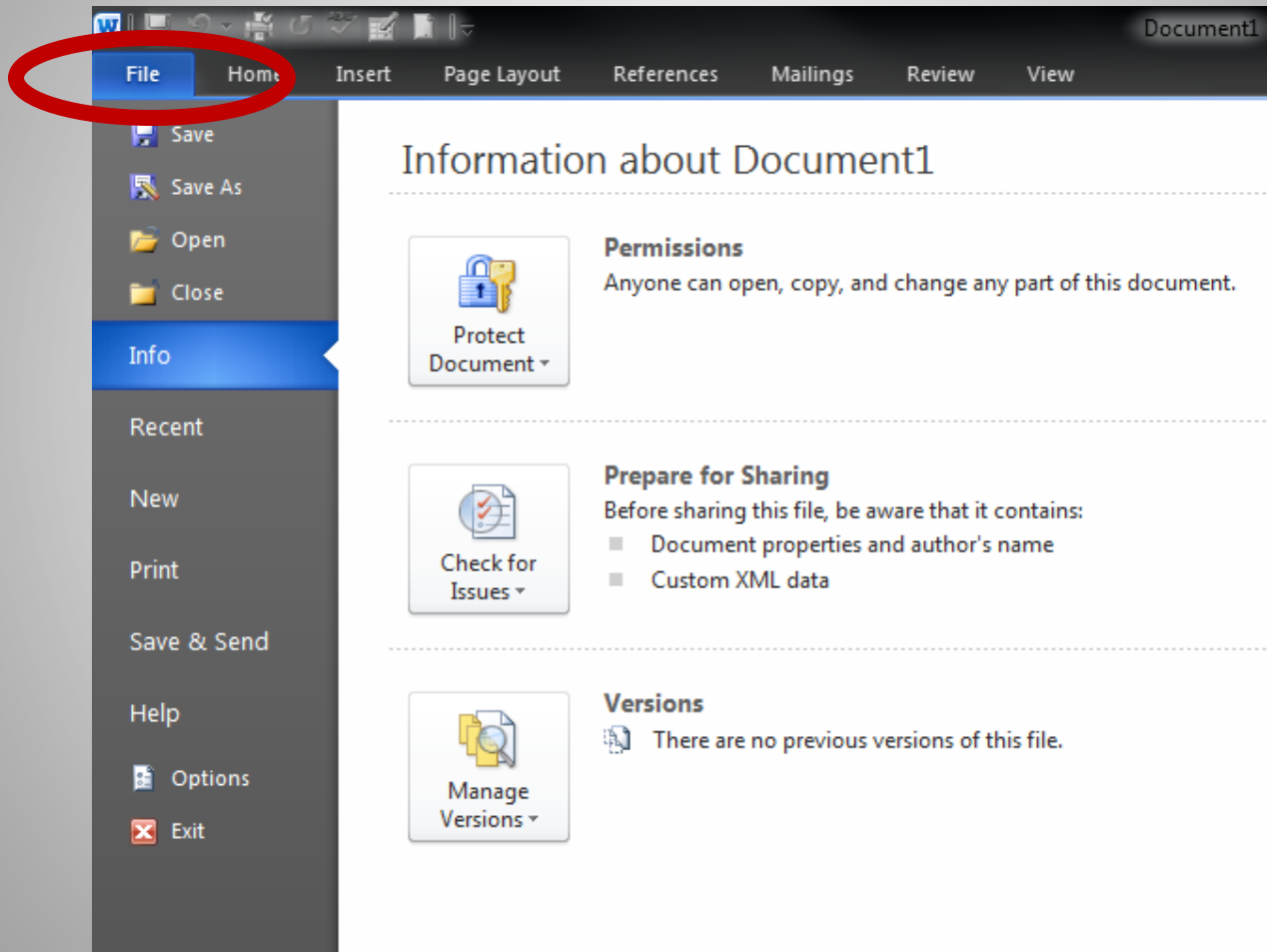
Difficult-to-read:

- Above 8th grade level, especially if medical jargon is present

Measure Readability using *Word*

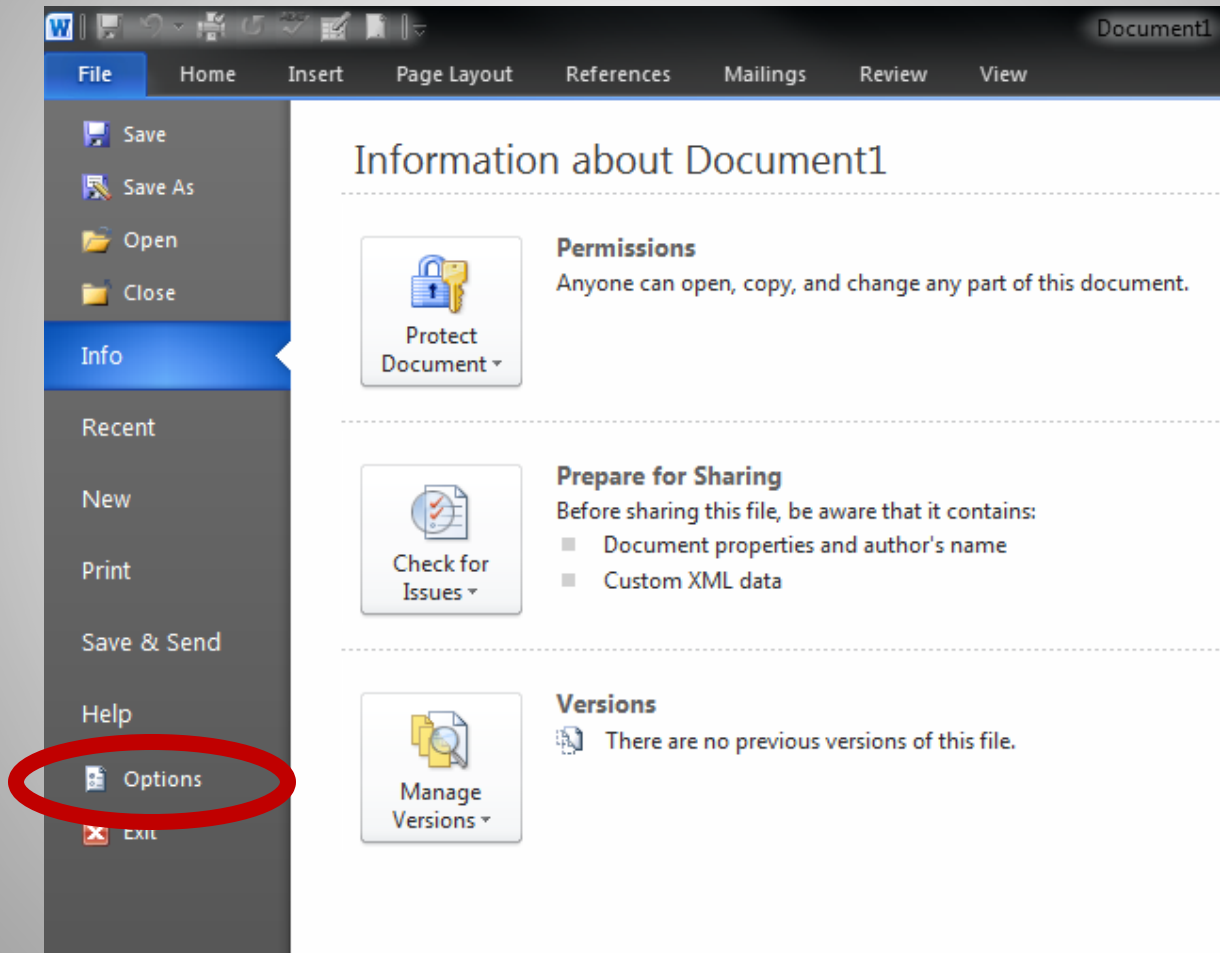
- Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level
 - Rates text on a U.S. school grade level
- Flesch Reading Ease Score
 - Rates text on a 100-point scale
 - The higher the score, the easier it is to understand the document
 - Aim for a score of 60 to 70

In WORD 1. Choose the **File** tab



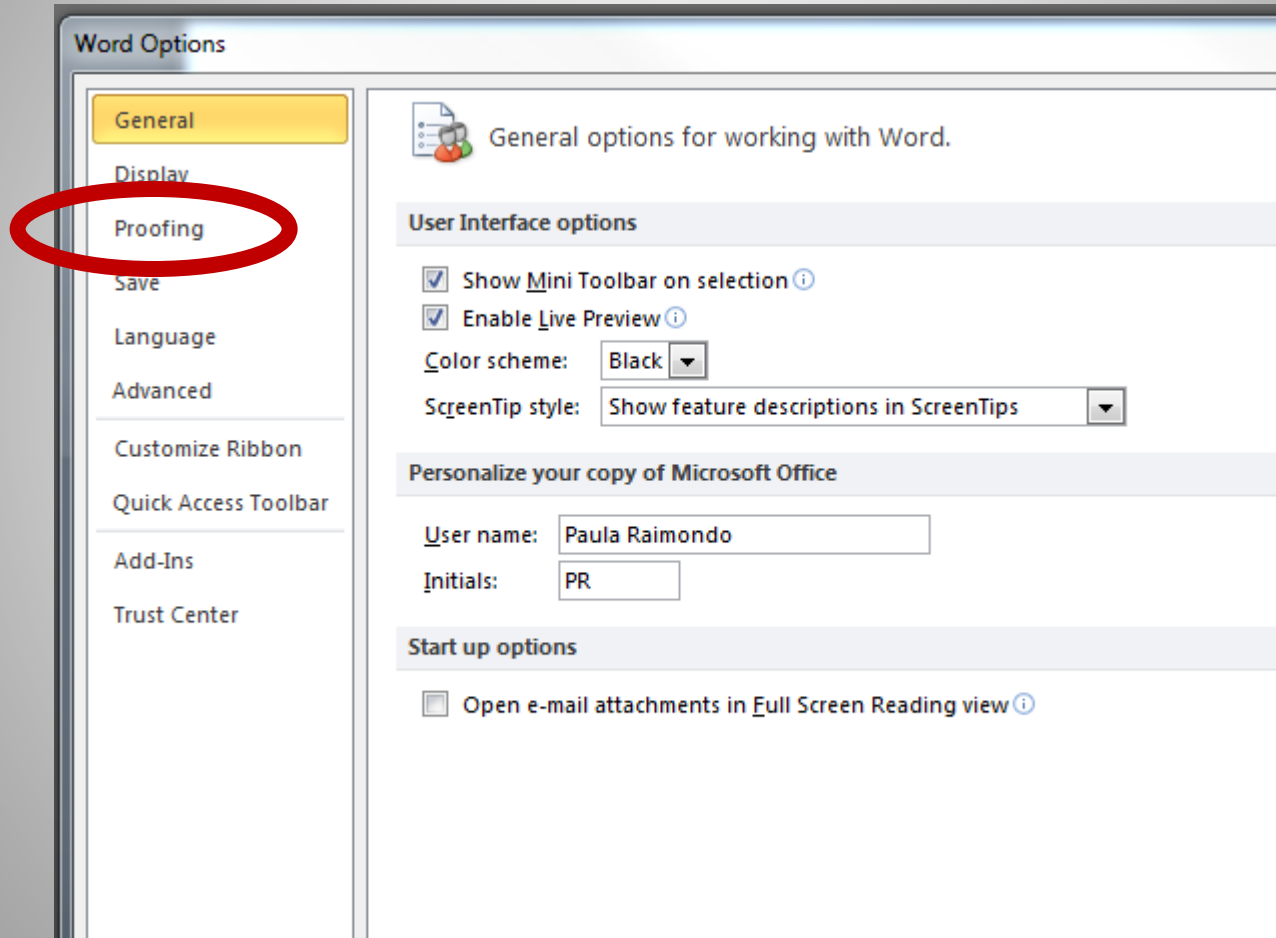
In WORD

2. Choose Options



In WORD

3. Click Proofing

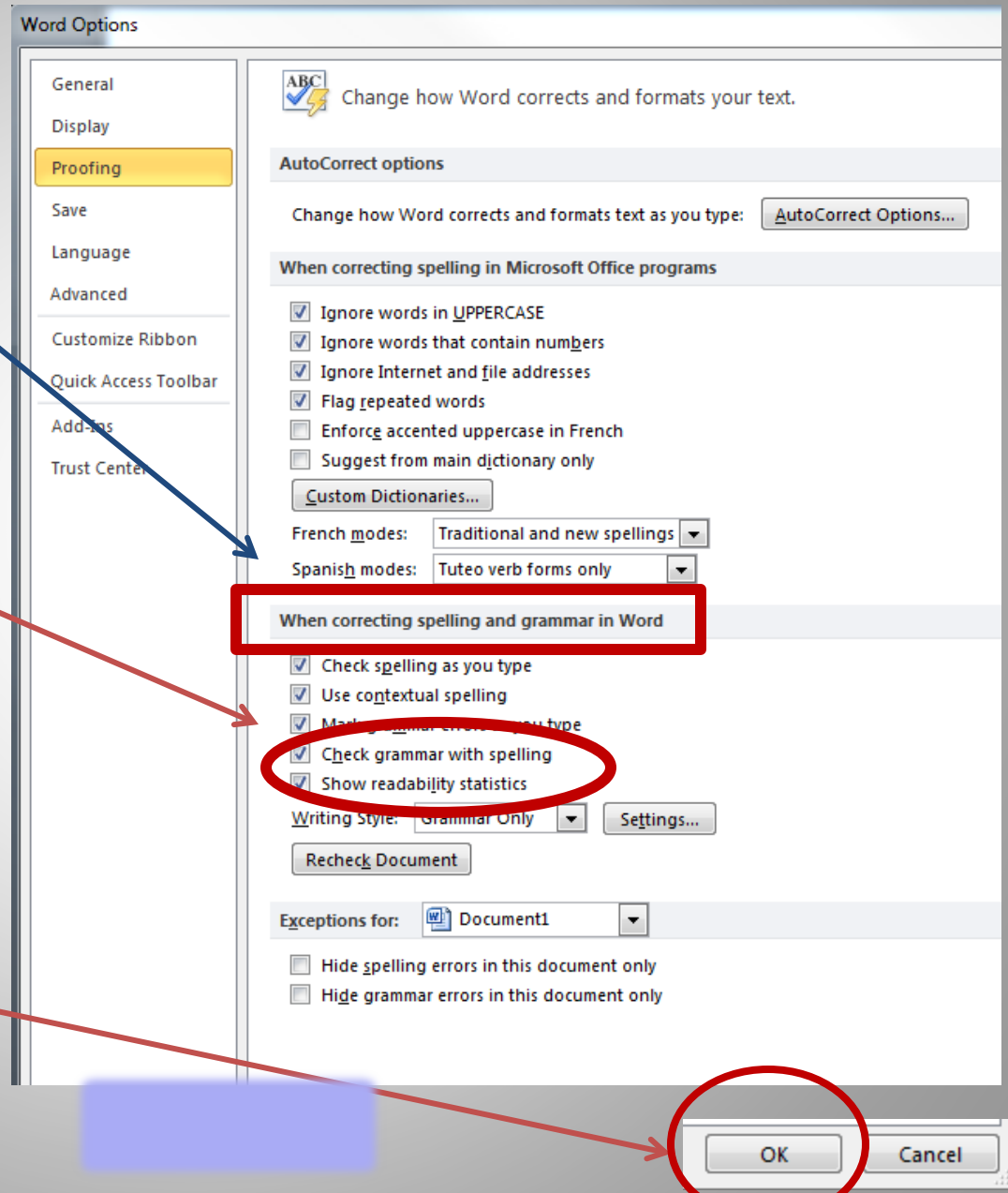


4. In the “When correcting spelling and grammar in Word” area

✓ Check grammar with spelling

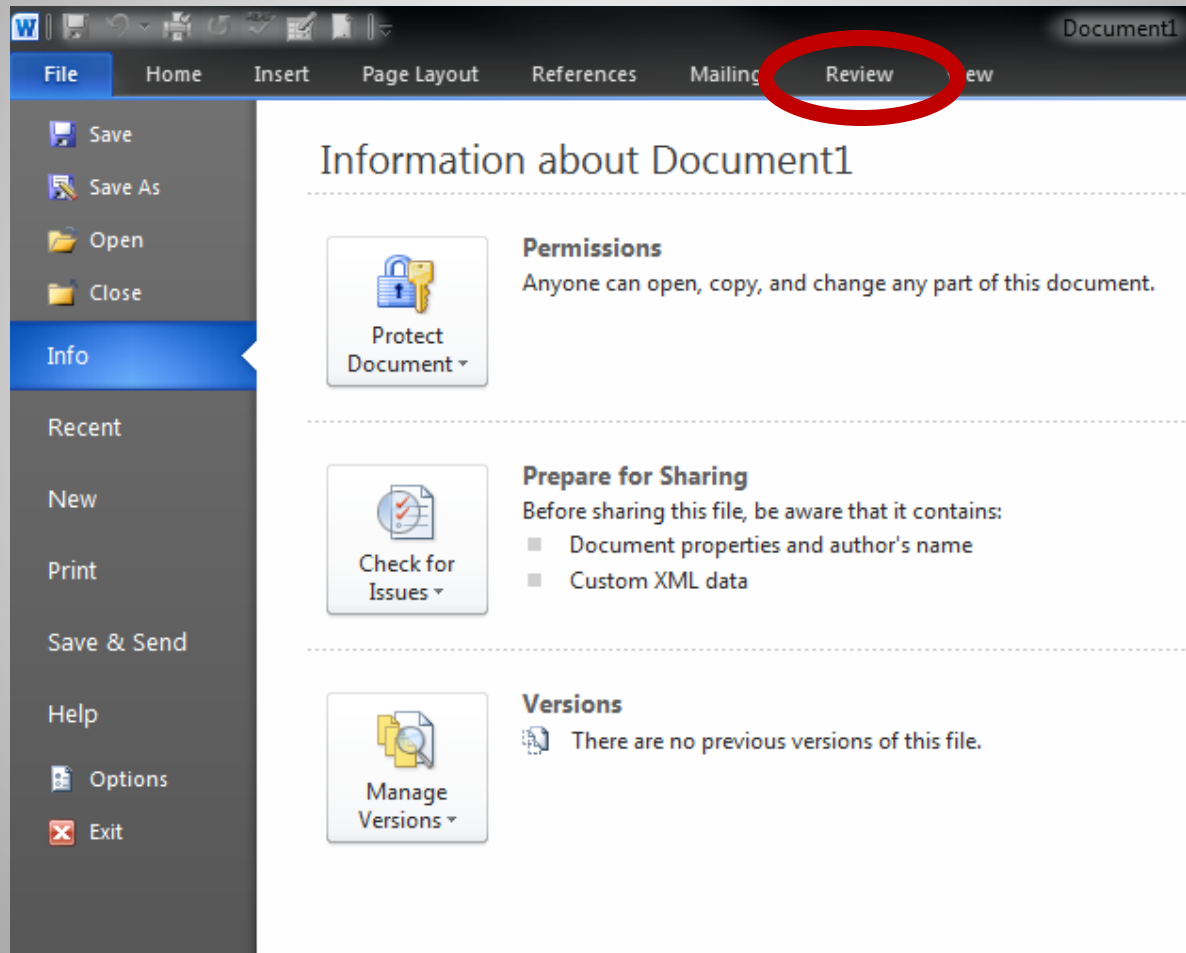
✓ Show readability statistics

✓ Select OK

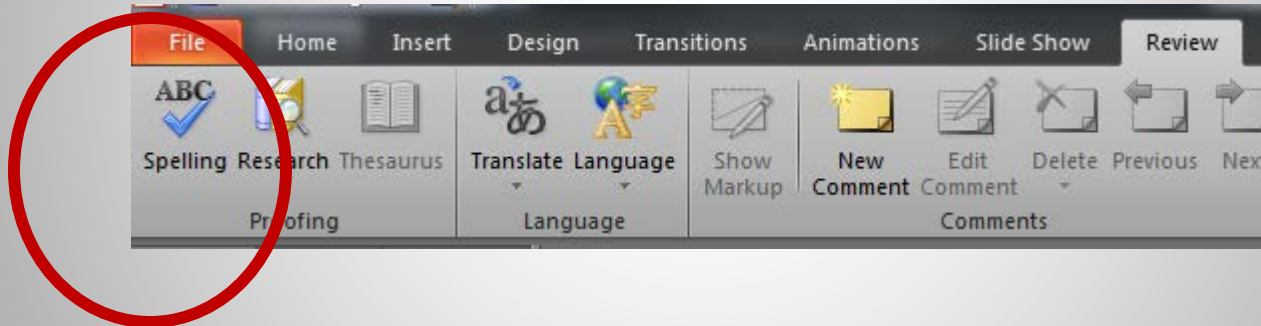


In WORD

5. In the Review Tab



6. Check Spelling



Word Readability Statistics

Readability Statistics	
Counts	
Words	1931
Characters	9114
Paragraphs	23
Sentences	95
Averages	
Sentences per Paragraph	6.7
Words per Sentence	20.0
Characters per Word	4.5
Readability	
Passive Sentences	33%
Flesch Reading Ease	50.7
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	11.1
OK	

Assessing Literacy

REALM *Rapid Estimate of Adult Literacy in Medicine*

- 3 to 6 minute test; measures patient's ability to recognize and pronounce common medical terms
- 66-item health-related word recognition test arranged in order of increasing difficulty
- *REALM-R*, test shortened to 8 items; average administration time: 2 minutes

Assessing Literacy

TOFHLA *Test of Functional Health Literacy in Adults*

- Uses hospital materials to test reading comprehension and numerical skills; 20-25 minutes; Spanish or English
- Participants given passages of text about medical topics with certain words replaced with blank spaces. - Participants fill in the blank spaces using words selected from a multiple choice list.
- *Short Test* reduced to 2 reading comprehension passages at 4th and 10th grade reading levels
- 8 to 12 minutes

QUESTIONS?

- Contact me:

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