

Health Literacy Online

The updated guide to writing and designing easy-to-use health websites

Sandy Hilfiker, MA, CommunicateHealth | Stacy Robison, MA, MCHES, CommunicateHealth | Mary Ann Petti, MPH, CommunicateHealth | Ellen Langhans, MA, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion | Caitlin Blood, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion | Linda Harris, PhD, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion

The Guide

What is Health Literacy Online?

Health Literacy Online is a research-based guide developed by the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (ODPHP). The guide discusses *why* and *how* to design health websites and other digital health information tools for all users, including the millions of Americans who don't have strong reading or health literacy skills—as well as those who don't have a lot of time to find, process, and use complex health information.

Who's it for?

It's written for anyone involved in creating online health content, from start to finish—writers and editors, content managers, digital strategists, user experience strategists, web designers, developers, and others.

How was this guide developed?

The first edition of Health Literacy Online (2010) synthesized lessons learned from ODPHP's original research with more than 700 web users and the small but growing body of literature on the web experiences of users with limited literacy skills.




In this second edition, we've updated the recommendations to reflect findings from a more robust body of literature related to the cognitive processing and online behavior of adults with limited literacy skills, as well as additional original ODPHP research conducted during the past 5 years.

The Challenge

What do we know about users with limited literacy skills?

Literacy skills affect how people find, understand, and use information on the web. Users with limited literacy skills may get distracted easily, give up quickly, and struggle with dense text and complex navigation online. This is true across devices.

There's a growing body of literature related to the cognitive processing and online behavior of adults with limited literacy skills. This research helps us to understand reading and cognitive processing challenges such as:

-  Difficulty understanding navigation
-  Challenges with search
-  Likely to only have access to the web via a mobile device

Enter Health Literacy Online

The simple strategies described in this guide can break down literacy-related barriers and increase a user's odds of success.

Designing with limited-literacy users in mind results in health websites that are easy to use for **everyone**.



The Strategies

Here are the strategies outlined in Health Literacy Online, along with a few examples of how to implement them.

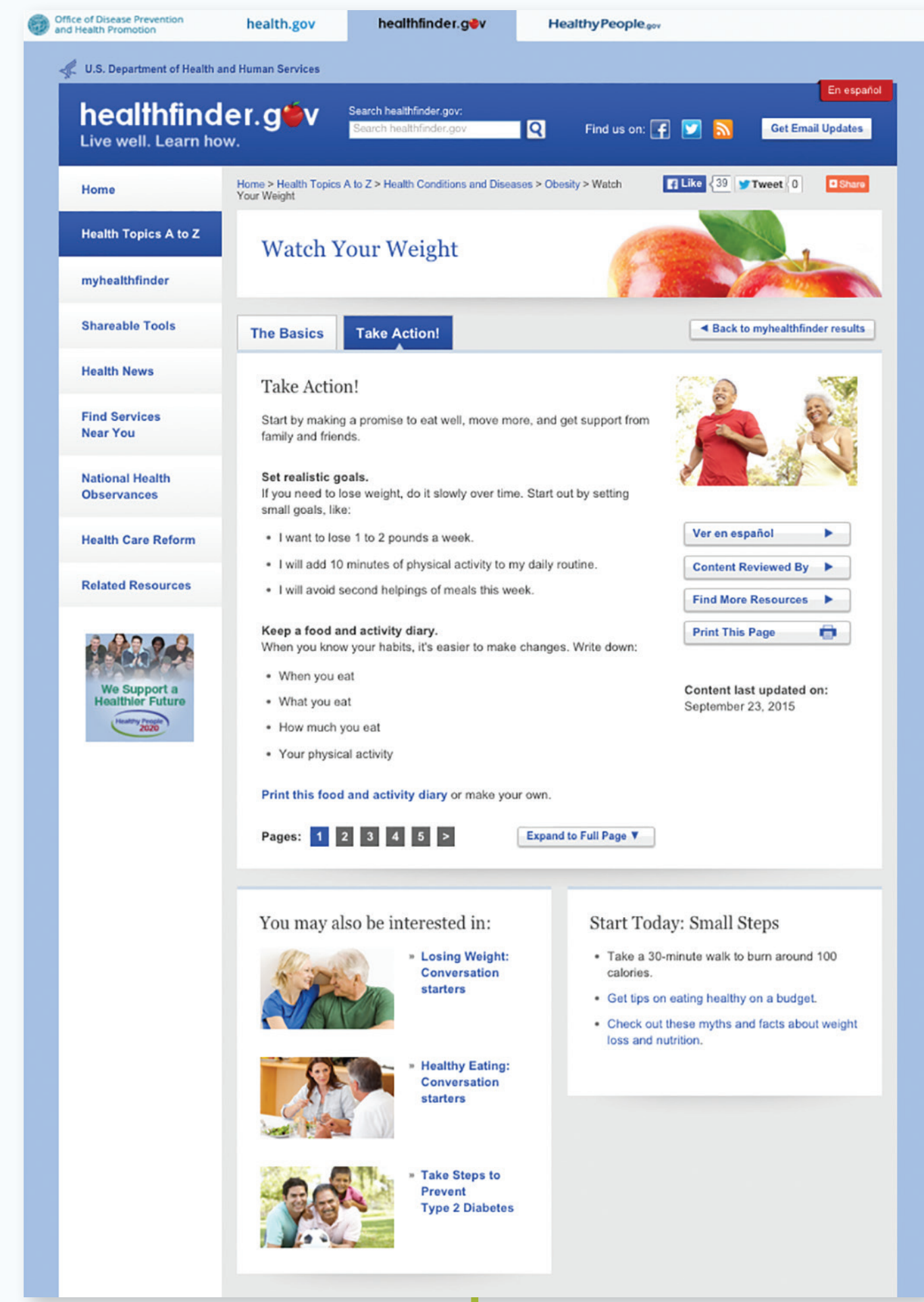
Write Actionable Content

Focus on the health behavior: tell users what you want them to do and give them steps to do it.

How you do it:

- Understand user motivations and goals
- Put the most important information first
- Describe the health behavior—just the basics
- Stay positive—include the benefits of taking action
- Provide specific action steps
- Write in plain language

This healthfinder.gov page has specific action steps—they're concrete and manageable.



“Just tell me what I need to know.”

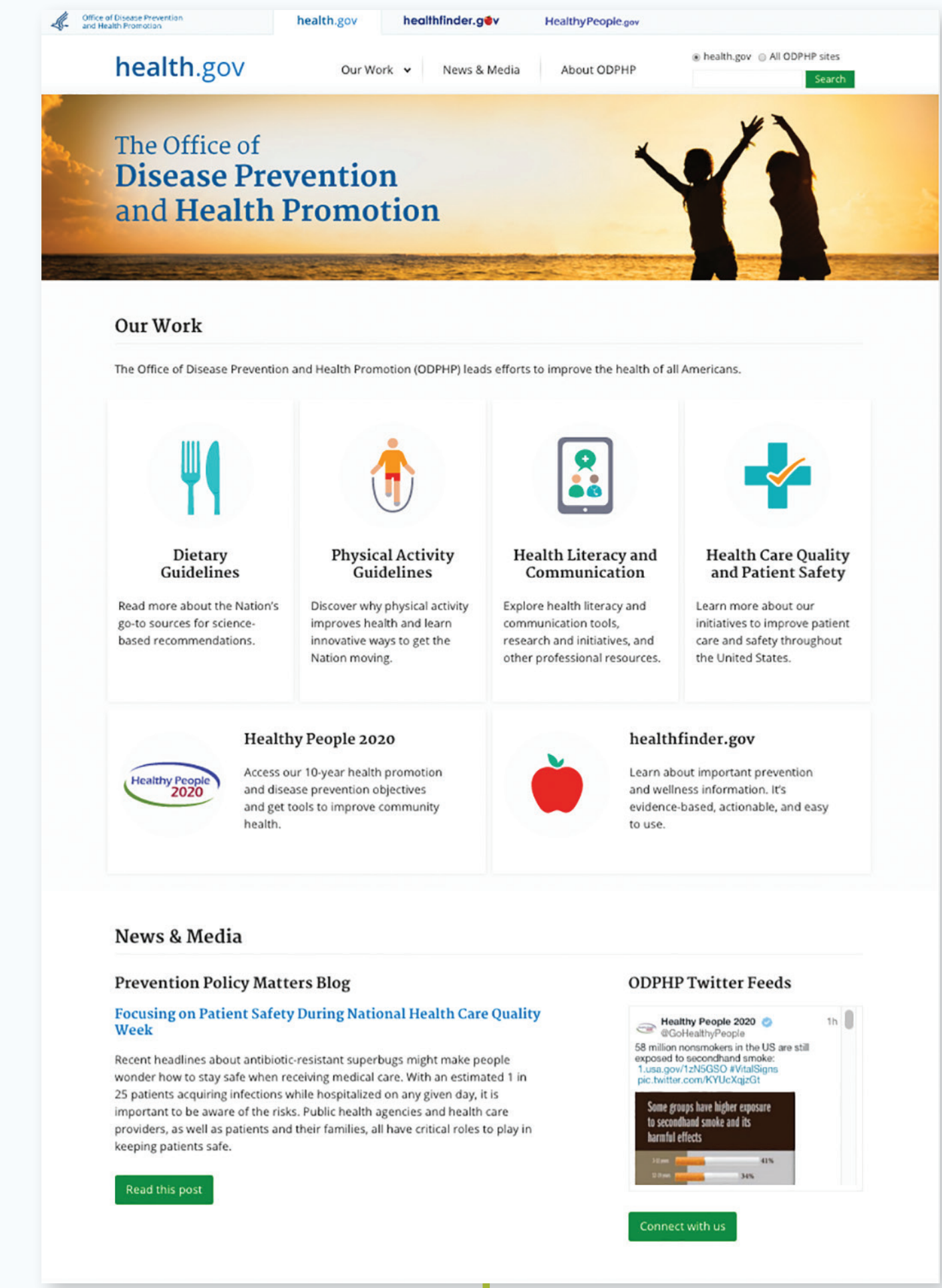
Display Content Clearly on the page

Content needs to look easy to read—both on desktop and on mobile.

How you do it:

- Limit paragraph size—use bullets and short lists
- Use meaningful headings
- Use white space and avoid clutter
- Label links clearly
- Use images that help people learn
- Make websites responsive

The health.gov homepage has a very clean look with lots of white space.



“I like when I can read the words without my reading glasses.”

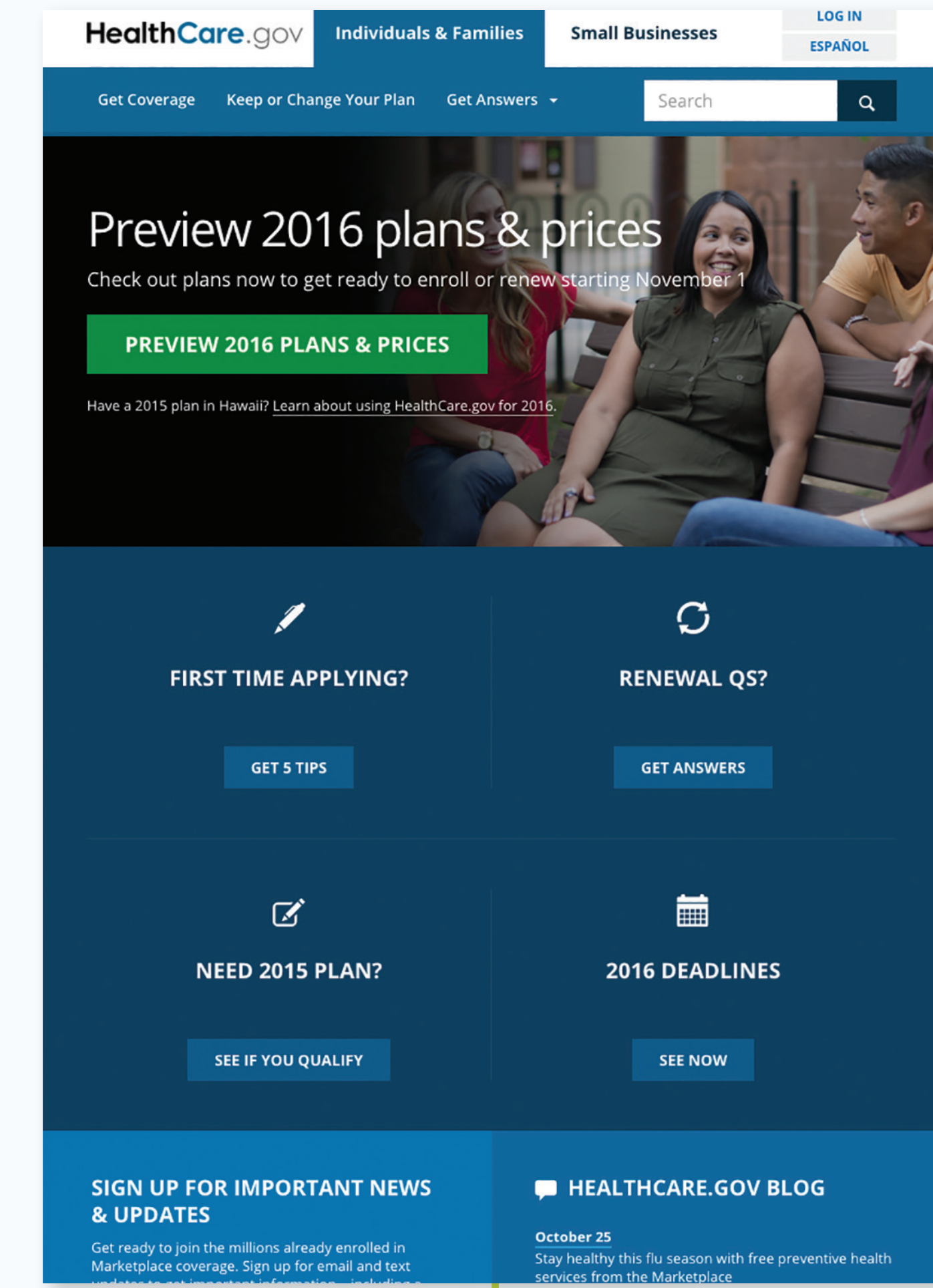
Organize and Simplify Navigation

Good content organization helps users find information quickly.

How you do it:

- Create a simple and engaging homepage
- Give buttons and links meaningful labels
- Make clickable elements recognizable
- Make sure the browser “Back” button works
- Offer easy access to home and menu pages
- Include a simple search function

The content is organized with users in mind. The buttons and links have meaningful labels.



“Get my attention. Then get to the point.”

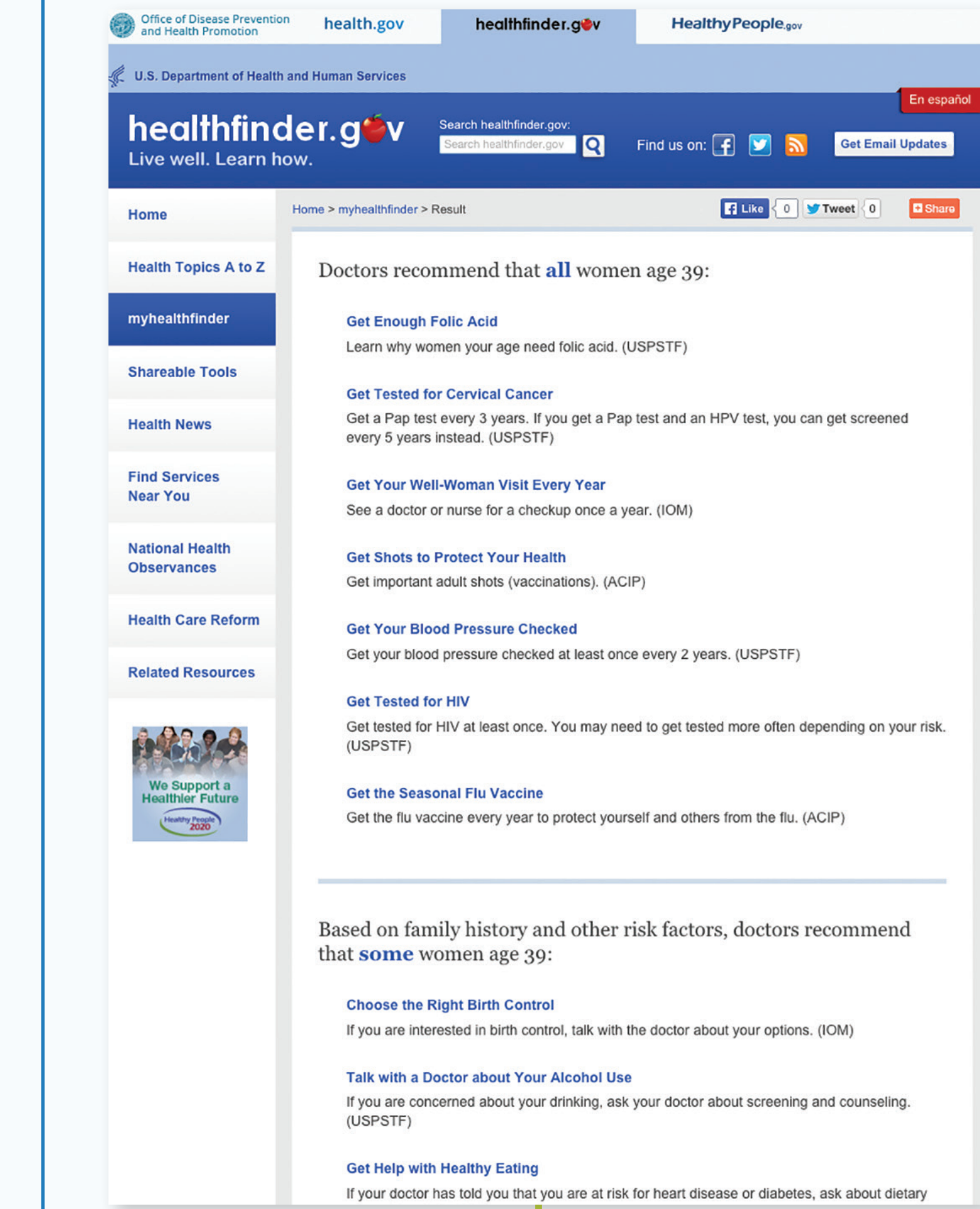
Engage Users

Use multimedia like video, audio, graphics, and interactivity to engage users.

How you do it:

- Share information through multimedia
- Design intuitive interactive graphics and tools
- Provide tailored information
- Create user-friendly forms and quizzes
- Consider social media sharing options

Users can enter their age and sex to receive tailored information.



“I'm very comfortable [entering my age]. That way, I get exact information for me, not different age groups.”

Test your site with users with limited literacy skills

Have users try out your website as you plan, design, and develop it—early and often.

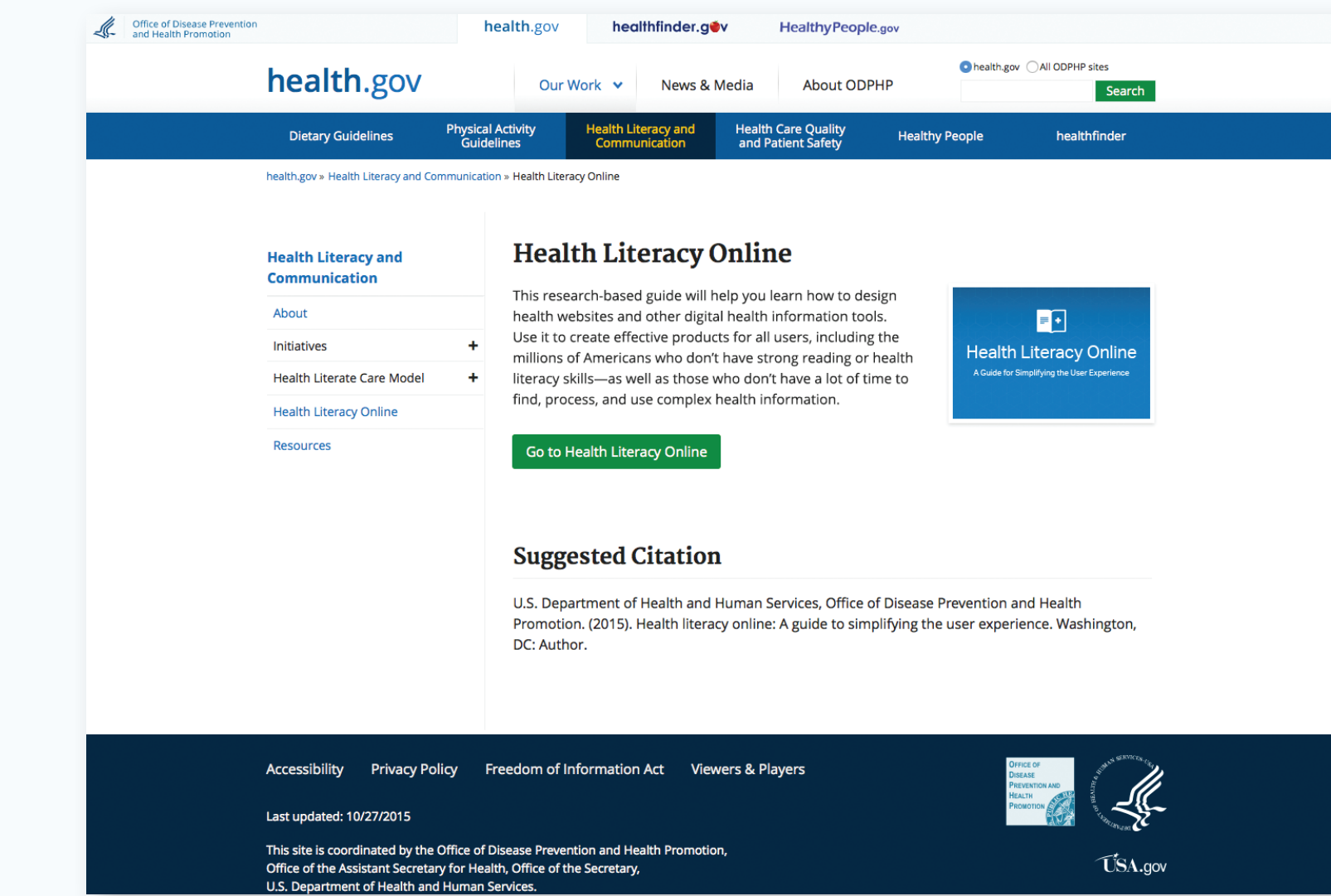
How you do it:

- Identify and eliminate logistical barriers to participation
- Create plain language testing materials
- Test whether your content is understandable and actionable
- Pretest your moderator's guide
- Use multiple strategies to make sure participants understand what you want them to do

Try it!

Get more research-based guidelines to help you create user-friendly health websites and digital health information tools by visiting:

<http://health.gov/healthliteracyonline/>



The Bottom Line

As many as half of U.S. adults have limited literacy skills. Even more Americans—**up to 9 in 10**—have limited health literacy skills.

