

Writing in Plain Language

Why should I use plain language?

We serve a diverse population, including people with different educational, work, and life experiences. Using plain language simplifies words, making them clear to the reader, no matter their background.

The [National Center for Education Statistics](#) reports about 1 in 5 adults cannot read a newspaper.

Do I always need to use plain language?

When you are addressing a general audience, use plain language. This may mean a 3rd to 5th-grade reading level.

If you are writing for professionals, you may use a higher reading level. When you write analytical or technical materials (for example, a research report), consider also writing a summary in plain language. Infographics and images should also use audio and text descriptions that are easy to read.

Additionally, plain language translates more easily into other languages. Consider those who are English language learners or depend on translated versions of text. Translations are much easier to understand when the words and phrases used are simple.

Some organizations are required to use plain language under the Plain Language Act of 2010. This law requires federal agencies to use communication that the public can understand.

What supports are available to help me use plain language?

Programs like Microsoft Office have built in readability statistics. You can use this as a guide to determine the reading level of written text.

Other software programs exist which measure not only reading levels of written materials, but can identify problematic sentences and words. For example, the app used by this author highlights sentences over 30 syllables and words are over 12 characters. These are red flags signaling complex writing.

Additionally, use of an online thesaurus makes it easy to look up alternatives for words. Thesaurus.com and wordhippo.com are two examples.

How can I make my content plain language?

- Use the same words and terms throughout. If you are writing about third graders, don't refer to them as students, children and third-graders. Choose one term and use it throughout.
- Rather than one long sentence, break into several more logical sentences.
- Sentences should be no more than 12-20 words.
- Paragraphs should be around four sentences.
- Reading time should be between no more than 20 minutes.
- Use bulleted lists rather than a string of phrases separated by a comma.
- Consider the age, education, culture, and language of your audience.
- Use familiar words and language. Explain complex or technical terms.
- Use present tense or active voice.
- Use direct address. When you want someone to complete an action, address the individual. You should... How do you... We will...
- Eliminate surplus words:
 - It goes without saying...
 - It is important to note that...
- Limit the use of qualifiers such as *often, that, very, only, important*.
- Scan for adverbs. Does the sentence still make sense if a word is removed?
- Omit unnecessary detail. Jargon or technical terms are not needed when there are simple words with the same meaning.
- Avoid abbreviations and acronyms.
 - An exclusion would be widely used abbreviations like Ph.D. or IQ
- Incorporate relevant illustrations to make points.

Where can I reach out when I have questions?

Plain language is part of Universal Design. Universal design elements enhance access for all in physical, learning and virtual environments.

The Human Development Institute at the University of Kentucky offers plain language as part of the University Lecture Series

<https://hdi.uky.edu/university-lecture-series> and the Universal Design Unit provides training and technical assistance in promoting opportunities for people with disabilities <https://hdi.uky.edu/category/priority-area/universal-design>

The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) hosts the Universal Design for Learning guidelines at <http://udlguidelines.cast.org/>