



Plain Language Quick Reference Guide

Plain language benefits both your reader and you. It allows your readers to find the information they need, understand it, and use it to meet their needs. It allows you to carry out your agency's mission by communicating information clearly.

When writing, consider the following:

Identify your audience

- Who are your readers?
- What do they need to know?
- What do they already know?
- How can you grab their attention?
- Why are you communicating with your readers?
- If your audience is too broad, can two or more documents with more specific content work better than one?

Organize content

- Organize content to answer your readers' questions.
- Organize content in a logical way. For example, list the steps of a process or present information chronologically.
- Lead with the main point. Place main ideas, important information, or general information first, followed by details and other information.
- Use lists, tables, charts, graphics, or images.
- Use question, statement, or topic headings. For example, "Where do I submit my application?"
- Use hyperlinks or sidebars for information that may be helpful but does not need to be in the body.

Write clearly

- Use active voice.
- Use common everyday words; avoid technical terms unless necessary.
- Use short sentences and paragraphs.
- Use correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation.
- Avoid double negatives.
- Limit use of acronyms.
- Don't be redundant.

Evaluate your document

- Proofread your document or have another person review it and provide feedback.
- Confirm that your document complies with plain language principles.
- If you were not familiar with the document's content, could you easily find and understand the information?
- Does your layout present the information in the most effective way?
- Could any sentences or paragraphs be shorter, without losing the message?

Proofread using this checklist:

Check structure and organization

- Is there a logical structure the reader can follow?
- Did you put the most important information at the start?
- Is text broken down into short paragraphs?
- Are you keeping your reader engaged?
- Did you use headings?
- Did you use tables, charts, or other visual tools, if applicable?

Check simplicity and clarity

- Did you eliminate unnecessary words or content?
- Did you find simpler equivalents for complex words without sacrificing meaning?
- Did you replace wordy phrases with simple phrases?
- Did you use "must" to express requirements?

Check grammar, spelling, and punctuation

- Did you avoid double negatives?
- Did you change passive voice to active voice when appropriate?
- Did you check your grammar, spelling, and punctuation? Spellcheck is not enough!

Check overall

- Did you carefully review and evaluate your document?

Choose simple

This chart lists common plain language word substitutions. For a more detailed list, visit plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/words/use-simple-words-phrases.

| Instead of writing: | Write: |
|---------------------|----------------|
| Anticipate | Expect |
| Assist | Help |
| Attempt | Try |
| Commence | Begin |
| Concerning | About |
| Demonstrate | Show |
| In the event of | If |
| Promulgate | Issue, publish |
| Utilize | Use |