

Plain Language Quick Guide

Impact

Accessible content will reach the broadest audience. Plain Language is a style of copywriting that makes your content easy to understand because it reaches audiences with various reading levels and cognitive abilities.

Overview

Plain language is a way of writing so that more people can easily read and understand your content. Typically it is written at a 6th-8th grade reading level for the United States. It also helps with language translation; especially auto-translations like Google.

It not only means changing terms to simpler ones, but it also means simplifying and organizing your content so that it prioritizes the meaning and any instructions for your audience. This web page discusses how you can use plain language to create more accessible communications.

How to

How to Organize Your Content

Organize your content with a wide audience in mind. Organizing your content is important in breaking down ideas into well-structured, digestible information.

1. First, draft your ideas in an outline.
2. Use the outline to formulate your headings.
3. Break up content into digestible sections.
4. Limit writing within paragraphs to 3-5 sentences or less.
5. Use images to convey meaning and visually break up walls of text.
6. Use steps to guide the reader.

Use Headings to Make Your Content Easy to Understand and Navigate

Create your headings so that they provide easily scannable information that readers can easily understand. There are three types of headings that can help with this:

1. Question headings: If you know what questions your audience is asking you can use the question-and-answer format to help your audience scan the document and find specific information.
2. Action headings: Guide the user to take an action or perform a specific task.
3. Topic headings: Topic headings are generally the least useful type of heading because they are often generalized or vague. Try and be specific if using this type of heading.

Be sure to use the heading levels in sequential order. Screen readers use headings to help the reader navigate content. It is very important to ensure that heading levels are not skipped (e.g. do not skip from heading level 2 to heading level 4).

Topic-Based Introductions

Topic-based introductions can help give your readers context before providing details. Include 1 or 2 topic-based introductory sentences just after each heading.

- Move the introduction up front and let users know where you are going.
- Do not make readers hold a lot of information in their heads before getting to the point.
- Give each paragraph a good introduction to help readers easily scan for what they are looking for.

Lists

Lists highlight a series of steps, requirements, or pieces of information in a visually clear way. Use lists to help your user focus on important material. They also help outline necessary steps or processes in a step-by-step manner using a list format.

Lists are useful because they:

- Highlight levels of importance
- Help the reader understand the order in which things happen
- Help readers skim and scan
- Make it easy to identify all steps in a process
- Add white space for easy reading
- Are an ideal way to present items, conditions and exceptions

Use Guiding Language

Guide readers through the content by using transition words or phrases. Use a transition word or phrase (usually in the topic sentence) to clearly tell the audience whether the paragraph expands on the paragraph before, contrasts with it, or takes a completely different direction.

Types of transitions include:

- Pointing Words: Words that include this, that, these, those, and the – referring directly to something already mentioned.
- Echo Links: Words or phrases that echo a previously mentioned idea. They often work together with pointing words.
- Explicit Connectives: Words such as further, also, however, and therefore — supply transitions.

Create a Conversation

Speak directly to your audience when you can. However, know when a little formality is appropriate.

- Use the first person, not the second or third person. e.g. “We advise that you do this.”
- Use an active voice and avoid a passive voice. Passive voice obscures who is responsible for which action. An exception to this rule is when you are quoting a statute, rule or regulation.
- Use the words like “need to” or “must” (not shall) when indicating a requirement.
- Use verbs to help create power and direction in your content. Verbs tell your audience what to do. Make sure it’s clear who does what.

Choose Words Carefully

Words are the most basic building blocks of written communication. Don't complicate your written content. Leave literary flair to novels and stories. Keep writing simple and to the point. Also, use inclusive language to engage your readers and help your content resonate with them.

Use a familiar word over a complex or unusual word.

- Do not use legalese, technical terms and jargon.
- Limit the use of acronyms and abbreviations. If you use acronyms, be sure to spell out what it stands for when you first use the word and list the acronym after it, e.g. Governor's Office of Information Technology (OIT).
- Use contractions where appropriate. This is a departure from traditional business and governmental writing techniques, but it helps your writing sound more natural and approachable.

Design for Reading

Dense, cluttered writing deters people from taking the time to read your content. Set up your written content to be easily read.

- [Use easy-to-read, accessible typography \(fonts\)](#), WebAIM.
- Highlight key elements using boldface font only (no caps, italics or underlining).
- Avoid complex punctuation and slashes except when writing a fraction. It creates ambiguity and confusion.
- Minimize cross-references. This can cause confusion if readers bounce around your content too much.
- Use tables to organize data only, not to format written content.
- Break up information into manageable chunks. Keep your sentences and paragraphs short and concise.
- Use supplemental content and non-text-based icons to help convey meaning.
- Use imagery and graphic elements that add value to the content to help with breaking up long sections of text.
- Images should help add context and be relevant to the information.
- Try and find alternatives to screenshots in order to convey meaning.
- Be sure to use alternative text whenever you use an image to ensure screen reader users also understand why the image is being used.

Test Your Assumptions

You can test your assumptions about how you are conveying meaning and speaking inclusively in a variety of ways.

- Read your writing out loud to determine if it flows in the same way that you speak.
- Also, have colleagues from diverse backgrounds review content for inclusion and equity.
- Take a long look at the appearance of the content for visual appeal. Be sure it doesn't look visually confusing.
- [How to check reading level in MS Office Products](#)
- The [Hemingway App](#) highlights lengthy, complex sentences and common errors.