Plain Language: Getting Started or Brushing Up

Connecting with Your Readers

Your language choices will make or break your connection with your readers. Use language that is clear and direct to get your message across.

On the six cards below, learn about how to connect with your readers.

Connecting with Your Readers

Card 4

Construct your sentences carefully

Direct, simple sentences will help get your point across.

- Keep it short. The average length of your sentences should be 20 words or fewer.
- Keep it simple. Cover only one idea per sentence and one theme per paragraph.
- Take out the padding. Words like very, really, actually, and carefully usually don't serve any purpose.
- Be direct. Get to the point; don't wander around first.

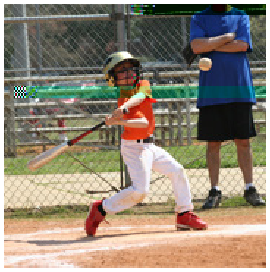
Consider this sentence:

> All states carefully screen each newborn for rare but potentially very deadly conditions at birth, so if there is a baby who has one of these conditions, this screening is really helpful because he or she will be able to get diagnosis and treatment a lot sooner.

That sentence ignores each of the four guidelines on the front of this card. How could you rewrite it to be more readable?

Card 5

Activate the power of verbs



You should use the active voice.

> Active: John hits the ball.
>
> Passive: The ball is hit by John.

Which sentence paints a more vivid picture?

Sometimes, people use the passive voice to be evasive:

> The funds were misplaced.

Who misplaced the funds? As a reader, you might think, "Is the writer trying to hide something from me?"

If you don't want to appear to be hiding something, you should use active voice:

> The accountant misplaced the funds.

Card 6

Get the tone right

Make your document something that your audience wants to read. Stop and hear what you're writing from their point of view. Is it:

- Boring or compelling?
- Finger-waving or inviting?
- Condescending or respectful?
- Forgettable or memorable?

Would somebody in your audience want to read it? Would you?

"It is easy for us to forget the power of words. We use them the way an engineer uses a slide rule or a surgeon uses a scalpel."

— Jonathan Capehart, Pulitzer Prize winner, The Washington Post, speaking at NIH (2009)

Ready to start writing in plain language? Refer to the checklist on pages 12–13 as you write.

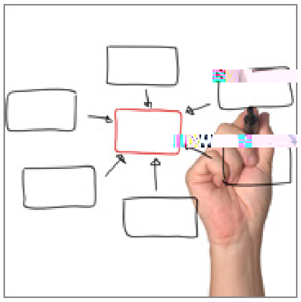
Presenting Your Information

How should you present a difficult, but vital, topic to non-specialist readers? By structuring your document carefully and defining difficult terms, you can explain anything your readers need to know with courtesy and clarity.

On the six cards below, learn about how to present your information to readers.

Card 1

Structured for success



A good structure will guide your readers through your document, even if you are covering a difficult topic. Your structure should anticipate and answer questions your readers will have about your topic.

Before you write a document, write down the questions that someone in your target audience would ask about your topic. Use this list of questions to structure your document.

Each sentence should convey one idea, and each paragraph or section should cover one theme. This will help your readers navigate your document. It also will make it easier for you to move sentences and paragraphs around as you edit.

Card 2

First things first

Put your main message at the beginning of your document:

- State the subject of an email in the subject line.
- Include an executive summary with a report.
- State the basic facts about a news item in the first sentence or two of a news release.

If your document is going to be long, an introduction is also helpful.

If you put your most important ideas up front, your readers will be more likely to get the main message.

Card 3

It’s all in the details

It’s easy to include a lot of detail when you write about a topic you know well. But too many details can dilute your main message and confuse or frustrate your readers.

- Include only the details your readers need to understand your message.
- Add exceptions to your message only if they are important—not just because you know them.

CROW
SOURCING

“Write it simply, but get it right.”

— Jeff Howe, Wired, speaking at NIH (2010)

Formatting and Visual Clarity

Visually appealing documents are easier to understand. Consider how your documents look: Layout, formatting, and visual aids can help you connect with your readers and better communicate your message.

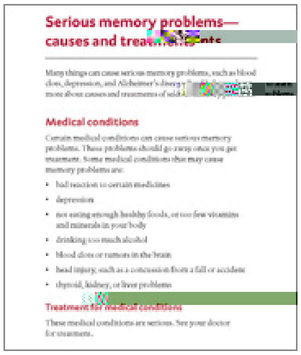
On the six cards below, learn about how to use layout and formatting.

Card 1

Let them skim

Most readers will glance over a document before they start reading to try to find the information they're looking for. Their eyes will move quickly down the page, drawn to any visual clues about what's there.

Readers on the Web, in particular, will move on to something else if they don't find what they're looking for quickly. You can make your document more user-friendly by providing cues that promote skimming.



Serious memory problems—causes and treatments

Many things can cause serious memory problems, such as blood clots, depression, and Alzheimer's disease [illegible]

Medical conditions

Certain medical conditions can cause serious memory problems. These problems should go away once you get treatment. Some medical conditions that may cause memory problems are:

- bad reaction to certain medicines
- depression
- not eating enough healthy foods, or too few vitamins and minerals in your body
- drinking too much alcohol
- blood clots or tumors in the brain
- head injury, such as a concussion from a fall or accident
- thyroid, kidney, or liver problems

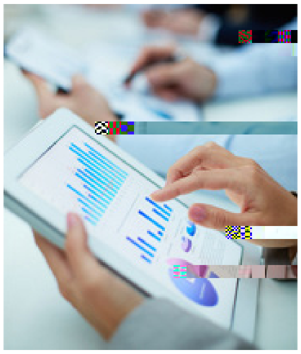
Treatment for medical conditions

These medical conditions are serious. See your doctor for treatment.

Visual elements like bolded words, lists, and headers help readers skim over your document.

Skim this page. What elements catch your eye? How are those elements set off from other content on the page? Why is some content set off while other content is not?

Card 2



> *"Design is not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works."*
>
> — Steve Jobs, inventor, entrepreneur

Card 3

Make your organization clear

Show your readers how your document is organized. Headings help your readers scan your document to locate the information they need. In longer documents, add a table of contents at the beginning, too.

These devices improve readability because:

- They make it easier for readers to find what they want.
- They make your content less intimidating by dividing it into "chunks."

WHERE?
WHAT?
WHO?
HOW?
WHY?
WHEN?

There are several ways to write a heading:

- Question. "What are the two types of breast reconstruction surgery?"
- Phrase. "Two types of breast reconstruction surgery"
- Declarative sentence. "There are two main types of breast reconstruction surgery."

Testing and Revising

Card 4

What's in it for me?

Plain language doesn't just benefit readers. Writing and revising for plain language helps writers, too. You'll learn to:

- Focus on each element of your writing.
- "Hear" and understand your audiences.

These skills will improve your writing, but they'll also make your writing more effective. If your content is communicated clearly, people will like what you write, and—more importantly—they'll use it!

Ready to start writing in plain language? Refer to the checklist on pages 12–13 as you write.

Have I written this as concisely as possible and kept the message?

☐ Keep sentences and paragraphs short.

Try to write paragraphs of no more than 5 to 7 sentences and sentences of 10 to 20 words.

☐ Write sentences focused on one idea.

Write paragraphs that have a single theme. Sentences and paragraphs that focus on developing an idea are easier for readers.

Have I used the right visuals?

☐ Use illustrations or visuals.

Visuals, such as lists, tables, and infographics, can help the reader understand your message.

☐ Use typography and white space appropriately.

Fonts and other typographical elements should make your document more readable, not fancier. Having enough blank space in the margins and between sections also increases readability.

Have I written in the active voice?

☐ Use the active voice whenever possible.

The active voice makes it clear who or what (the subject) is doing the action (the verb). Passive sentences often do not clearly identify who is performing the action.

Did I make my document “skimmable”?

☐ Use headings.

Headings enable your reader to skim your document. Write headings in the form of questions, sentences, or phrases.

☐ Use vertical lists (numbers or bullets).

Lists, which group similar items, are easy for readers to skim. Choose numbers when presenting a list with items in a specific sequence or rank order. Use bullets when the items listed are equivalent in importance.

For more information, visit Plain Language: Getting Started or Brushing Up at www.nih.gov/plainlanguage/gettingstarted