

# Plain Language: Getting Started or Brushing Up

This resource consists of five sections and a checklist. In each section, you will find a number of cards with information about using plain language in your work.

Where would you like to go? If you are new to plain language, begin with Before You Start Writing.



[Before You Start Writing](#)



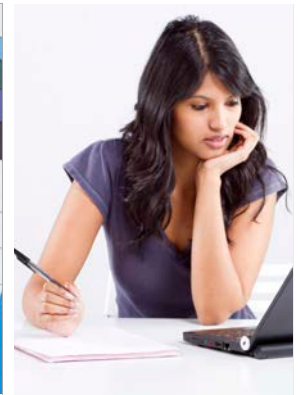
[Connecting with Your Readers](#)



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## Before You Start Writing

Plain language begins long before you put pen to paper—or keystroke to keyboard. Start by researching your topic, understanding your audience, and planning and organizing how you will present your information.

On the six cards below, learn about what to do before you start writing.

### Card 1

#### Who needs plain language?

We all do! From language learners to advanced readers, **everyone benefits from plain language.**

Plain language is one element of clear communication. It means you are communicating with your audience in a way that's understandable and direct.

Read more to see how plain language can be as **vivid** and **compelling** as any other type of language.



*“Science has always been a marathon, not a 100-yard dash.”*

— Francis Collins, M.D.,  
Ph.D., Director of the  
National Institutes of Health

### Card 2



*“If the writer doesn’t understand the subject, the reader won’t, either.”*

— Rita Rubin, *USA Today*,  
speaking at NIH (2007)

**Know your subject** before you start to write. If you’re confused about something, you won’t be able to make it clear to someone else. In fact, the concept will be even more confusing for your audience.

If you understand an idea and explain it well, you will win over your audience. If you don’t, the reader may feel as if he or she has missed something. Or, worse, you may make your readers feel as if they are not smart enough to grasp the idea.

### Card 3

#### Key questions—part 1

Before you hit your first key, think about what you’re writing and about who will read it.

Answer these two questions:

1. Who is my audience? (or, Who are my audiences?)
2. What is my purpose?

Your answers will be different depending on what you’re writing.

**Be specific.** There is no such thing as “the general public.” The audience for your “general public” website might be, for example, patients, worried parents, health educators, people with limited English skills, or \_\_\_\_\_ [you fill in the blank!].

Is your purpose **“to inform the reader”**? **Think again.** Most informative writing is actually meant to be persuasive, too. For example, besides informing your readers about their risk for heart disease, do you want to persuade them to get their cholesterol checked?

# Before You Start Writing

## Card 4

### Getting to know your audience



To write effectively, you need to know more about your audience.

- **Talk with them.** What can you learn from and about your audience?
- **Find examples.** Look for written materials that resonate with your audience. What can you learn from them?

More suggestions for getting to know your audience:

- **Immerse yourself.** What is your audience watching? Reading? Listening to? Pay attention to the vocabulary and the tone that resonate with them.
- **Determine if there is an intermediary.** Does your audience include people with low literacy or speakers of another language? If so, someone may be communicating your information to your audience for you. How can you help prevent transmission errors?

## Card 5

### Key questions—part 2



What do you want your document to accomplish? Answer these two questions before you start writing:

1. What is my message?
2. How urgent is my message?

Your message and its urgency will shape your document.

In your message, **be concrete and specific.** Some examples of concrete, specific messages are:

Consider participating in a clinical trial at NIH.

Include all five required parts in your Continuing Review submission.

**How urgent is it?** Is your message more like “Stop, drop, and roll!” or “Pay attention to portion control”?

## Card 6

### Draw up a blueprint

Just as an architect creates a blueprint before construction begins, you should **organize your content** before you start to write.

**Structure your document around the needs of your audience.**

- List the questions your audience will have.
- Organize the content around the questions. Each section should answer a question.
- Be sure your content has a logical flow.

Let’s say you’re planning to write a brochure about a clinical trial, and your audience is potential participants. You might write down the following questions:

1. What is the trial about?
2. Who can participate?
3. What does participation require?
4. What are the benefits of participating?
5. What are the risks of participating?
6. How do I get more information?



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

# 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.

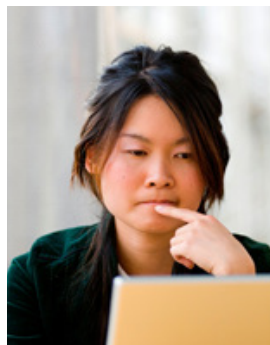
On the six cards below, learn about how to connect with your readers.

## Card 1

### It's all about you and me

Personal pronouns—*I, you, we*—have a subtle way of **connecting the reader and the writer**. These pronouns can make your document more conversational, which can help your reader focus on your message rather than your language.

A conversational tone can increase a document's clarity, but it's not always appropriate. When you write something, ask yourself whether personal pronouns would be right for your content.



What's the difference between these two sentences? Which is more compelling to you?

Investigators who have additional questions about this funding opportunity should contact the program.

Contact us if you have additional questions about this funding opportunity.

## Card 2

### Match your words to your audience



You might be drawn to words that are common in *your* environment. But are they also common in *your audience's* environment?

When you have a choice between words—especially when writing for non-specialists—**use the common, everyday word**.

Which word in each pair has the broadest appeal?

Hypertension	High blood pressure
Use	Utilize
Disease	Malignancy
Myocardial infarction	Heart attack

Sometimes you have to use a technical term, even when you're writing for non-specialists. In the next section, you can learn how to do this in a reader-friendly way.

## Card 3

### More word choice considerations

Choose words that will help your readers.

- **Use positive, not negative, words.** Negatives like *don't* in front of a verb can make some readers stumble.
- **Avoid long strings of nouns.** Sentences with several nouns in a row can be difficult to navigate smoothly on the first try.
- **Use inclusive language.** Unless your document is about men, don't use only male pronouns (*he, his*).

The positive verb in the second sentence makes it more straightforward:

Don't forget to refill your prescription.

Remember to refill your prescription.

Which sentence reads more smoothly?

I talked to the medical device sales representative today.

I talked to the sales representative for medical devices today.

# 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.



*“Write it simply, but get it right.”*

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



# Presenting Your Information

## Card 4

### What does that word mean?



Sometimes you need to use a technical word when you're writing for non-specialists. If a technical word is necessary to your message, use it—but **include a definition.**

Ways to define a word or acronym:

- **Parenthetically.** "Inflammation (heat, swelling, and redness) is caused by the body's protective response to injury or infection." You can also use dashes or commas.
- In a simple **declarative sentence.** "When your body is hurt or becomes infected, it has a protective response of heat, swelling, and redness called inflammation."
- With an **extended definition.** A complicated concept might require its own paragraph or sidebar. (See "Guiding your readers" for a discussion of extended definitions.)

## Card 5

### Readability vs. readability scales

Readability scores and grade levels are not the be-all and end-all of plain language. The most important consideration is whether your document communicates your message clearly.

Including a definition may increase your score on the Flesch-Kincaid or other readability scale. But, in context, definitions make your material more readable by explaining important concepts to your readers.



(If you've never heard of Flesch-Kincaid, now you know that it's a readability scale—thanks to a brief definition in context.)

## Card 6

### Guiding your readers

Be sure that you don't simplify an important but difficult word so much that it loses meaning. Instead, **lead your audience into understanding** with an extended definition.

Let's say you're writing a fact sheet about glucose testing. Your audience needs to understand "A1C test" and "glucose." How can you explain them?

The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases explained these complex terms step-by-step, in context:

A1C is a diabetes test. It is important for a person who is being diagnosed with diabetes to know this term.

The A1C test is a blood test that provides information about a person's average levels of blood glucose, also called blood sugar, over the past 3 months.

The A1C test is sometimes called the hemoglobin A1c, HbA1c, or glycohemoglobin test.



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

# 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.

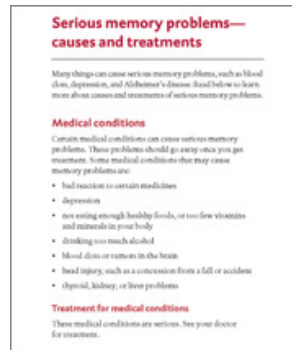
On the six cards below, learn about how to use layout and formatting.

## 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.



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.”



There are several ways to write a heading:

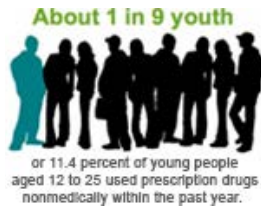
- **Question.** “What are the two types of breast reconstruction surgery?”
- **Phrase.** “Two types of breast reconstruction surgery”
- **Declarative sentence.** “There are two main types of breast reconstruction surgery.”



# Formatting and Visual Clarity

## Card 4

### A visual aid should clarify



Visual tools can help explain your content. (Flip for more examples.)

**Infographics** can provide a clear visual representation of data, relationships, or ideas.

**Tables** can make complex information easier to understand. They're useful for making comparisons and showing relationships without using a lot of text.

**Lists** group similar items. Lists are much easier for readers to skim than paragraphs. Numbered lists are ideal for items that are sequenced or ranked; other lists may be bulleted.

Other examples include inserts, charts, maps, and checklists.

Make sure the tool you use matches your content and the needs of your audience. You can't explain everything with a pie chart!

## Card 5

### The importance of white space



White space in your document breaks up your text and makes it easier to understand.

You can create white space by providing **adequate margins** and **space between sections**. **Headers** and design tools like **lists** also create white space.

## Card 6

### What type of typography?

**Typography** refers to fonts and other visual elements in a document, such as bullets and italics.

Some styles of typography are easier to read than others. Choose a style based on readability, not fanciness.

*Is this font easier to read...*

...than this one?

How about this font...

...compared to this one?



You can change the typography in your document to emphasize or set off certain words or phrases:

- You can highlight key ideas in **bold** to catch the eyes of a skimming reader.
- You can *italicize* new vocabulary words and underline the main part of a definition.



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

# Testing and Revising

Your work doesn't end when you finish a draft. By testing, revising, and rewriting your document, you will ensure it does what it's supposed to do.

On the four cards below, learn about testing and revising your work.

## Card 1



*“No matter how far you go down the wrong road, turn back.”*

— Burkey Belser, designer, speaking at NIH (2006)

## Card 2

### Put your document to the test



After you've drafted your document, **test it**. This might mean:

- Asking target audience members to read it.
- Re-reading it carefully.

After you test your document, **revise** it based on what you learned.

Find at least one person who is part of your audience. Ask him or her to read the piece and give you feedback. Find out:

- Whether this reader understood your main ideas (ask questions to check).
- Whether he or she has any unanswered questions about your topic.

Or, put your document down overnight and come back to it the next morning with fresh eyes. Make sure the document answers all the questions your readers will have.

## Card 3

### What to look for

Look over your document for:

- Correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
- Consistency in style, tone, and reading level.
- Correct dates and page numbers (if needed).
- Visual appeal.
- Consistency and effectiveness of layout and typography.
- Line breaks that reduce clarity by splitting up content like names or dates.

Usually, **misfit words**—words that are too difficult or technical for your document—will stick out when you reread it. Ask yourself, “Which of these words is not like the others?”

Watch out for a common grammar mistake: **non-parallel construction**. In a sentence that contains a list, each element in the list should fit with the subject and the verb. Here's an example of parallel construction:

Mary bought shoes, a purse, and a new dress. (*Mary bought shoes. Mary bought a purse. Mary bought a new dress.*)

# 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.



# A Plain-Language Checklist for Reviewing Your Document

## Do I know my audience?

**Consider your potential readers.**

Who is your audience, exactly? Are there multiple audiences? Remember, there is no “general public.”

**Evaluate the needs of your readers.**

What do they want to know? How much detail do they need? What is the right tone for this audience? What action do you want readers to take?

**Engage your audience.**

Use style, word choice, voice, organization, and visuals to draw your readers into your message.

## Did I organize my document or product for my reader?

**Provide a clear take-away message.**

Your document should convey a clear, specific message, such as *Consider participating in a clinical trial at NIH.*

**Put your main message first.**

In most cases, readers appreciate documents that begin with the main point.

**Answer their questions.**

Before writing your document, write down the questions your readers have about your topic. Make sure each section or paragraph of your document answers a reader’s question.

## Have I used an easy-to-read style?

**Use first-person and second-person pronouns when appropriate.**

Using the pronouns *I*, *you*, and *we* make your document more conversational and help your reader focus on your message.

**Use familiar, concrete, non-technical words.**

Unless you are writing for a group of experts such as *bombesin peptide receptor* scientists, limit the use of jargon and technical terms.

**Consider whether each adjective and adverb adds meaning.**

Avoid padding your writing with words like *very*, *really*, *actually*, or *carefully*.

## 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](http://www.nih.gov/plainlanguage/gettingstarted)