Inclusive Communication for Businesses

Making Written Communication Easy to Understand

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This document provides information and tools to help businesses improve their written communication. This work is a part of the Inclusive Communication Project.

About the Inclusive Communication Project

The Inclusive Communication Project educates government agencies, private businesses, and service providers on the importance of plain language and offers practical guidance on putting it into practice. The Project also teaches individuals with disabilities how to translate difficult-to-understand content into usable information so they can more easily navigate day-to-day activities in their communities.

About the Center on Disability and the Public Health Institute

The Center on Disability provides education, advocacy, and support to advance the full and equal participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of society. The Center on Disability is a disability-led program of the Public Health Institute (PHI). PHI and its programs improve health, equity and wellness by discovering new research, strengthening key partnerships and programs, and advancing sound public health policies.

The importance of using clear communication

Businesses reach a larger audience by using easy-to-understand language in their public messaging. Direct and clear language can help many different groups of people better understand the information. These groups include people with intellectual and cognitive disabilities, English-language learners, and individuals with lower education levels or reading skills. Clear communication helps individuals access services, and companies connect with new and existing customers.

This document will cover:
- The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- What is plain language?
- How can plain language help your business?
- Tips to make written communication easier to understand
- Easy Read
- Guidelines for writing for the web
- Creating forms
- Tools to help you write in easy-to-understand language
- Examples of how plain language can improve understanding
- Resources for creating plain language and easy read text

The Americans with Disabilities Act

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities by businesses and organizations that serve the public, including non-profits. Examples include private schools, private daycare facilities, restaurants, movie theaters, and other businesses, no matter how many employees they have.

The law applies to both physical spaces and the businesses' communication with customers and others with disabilities. The ADA also covers businesses' websites and other online and mobile app content. One important way businesses can help avoid discrimination is to make sure their communication is clear and easy to understand.

What is plain language?

Plain language is writing that helps the reader quickly and easily understand all the information provided. Some questions to ask to see if your writing is in plain language:

- Can the audience easily find what they need?
- Can they understand it?
- Can they use it to meet their needs? [1]

How can plain language help your business?

The Plain Writing Act of 2010 requires federal agencies to provide information in a clear, concise, and organized manner that the public can understand. Those agencies are required to follow guidelines established by the federal government. A grade level is not specified. The Plain Writing Act of 2010 does not apply to state and local governments, non-profits, or private businesses. However, using plain language can benefit businesses.

It leads to clear messaging that:

- Makes it easier for customers to understand and use the information shared.
- Helps businesses avoid costly mistakes due to misunderstandings.
- Saves staff time and resources spent answering questions and providing explanations.
- Helps build trust between customers and businesses.

(2) (3)

According to the National Literacy Institute, 54% of American adults read below a 6th-grade level. (4) Plain language is typically written at a reading level between 6th and 8th grade when writing for the general public. Being direct and plainspoken does not mean talking down to an audience; it means clear communication.

When a specific audience has more specialized knowledge, using industry jargon and more complex language is okay.
Plain language documents for culturally, linguistically, or cognitively diverse populations should be written at or below a 5th-grade level. This level of plain language is referred to as "Easy Read." (5)

Tips to make written communication easier to understand

Know your audience.

Before writing or editing a document, decide who your audience is. A document for corporate executives may have a grade level different than one for all employees or customers.

Avoid writing for everyone. Consider your audience's reading level, the concepts and vocabulary they know, and the answers they want to find. Then, write for that audience. Ensure translations are accurate and appropriate for the intended audiences.

Lead with the most important message.

Start with the most important message and make sure it's visible on the page. Use active voice.

Review your writing.

Use a readability checker such as the Hemingway Editor. (6). (7).

Choose words that are familiar to your audience.

Use words that are simple and familiar to your audience instead of words that confuse readers.

When you have two competing terms with similar meanings, pick the most familiar term to your audience — the word more likely to be used by them. Define words they may not know.

Split content Into sections.

Break up content into sections that make it easy for the reader to find information.

Be organized.

Organize content logically. Use headings and structure your content.

Tips to make written communication easier to understand

Paraphrase legal terms.

Paraphrase legal terms so readers can understand the content easily.

Define acronyms, abbreviations, and jargon.

Define these terms in the context of how they are used in the communication.

Be clear.

Use precise language. Provide examples to explain concepts.

Be concise.

Use short paragraphs, sentences, and bulleted lists. A sentence should be no more than 15–20 words.

Easy Read

Those with intellectual or cognitive disabilities may need information broken down further. Easy read is a way of writing for people with difficulty reading due to a disability or limited language understanding.

If you get a request for an easy-read document, here are some tips:

- Have one idea per line.
- Put text on the left side of the page and an icon or simple picture explaining the text on the right side of the page.
- Aim for a 3rd to 5th-grade level.

Use a conversational tone: Explain the information like you would if talking to someone in a casual conversation.

More resources on easy read are provided at the end of this document.
 (5)

Guidelines for writing for the web

Be concise and brief.

Aim for 50% or less of the text you would use in a hard-copy publication. Reading from

Break up text.

Write short blocks of text so people won't skim and miss key information. Keep pages short so that you can keep scrolling to a minimum.
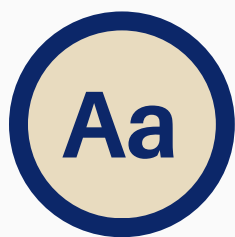

Split complex information into multiple pages.

Use precise language. Provide examples to explain concepts.

Creating Forms

How to make forms easy to read and easy to understand:

Use a sans serif font like Arial, Helvetica, or Verdana.

- Serifs ("feet" on the ends of a letter) can make words harder to read.

Don't use italics, underlining, or all caps for emphasis.

Use white space, generous margins and good spacing between sections.

Use the plain language tips from this document.

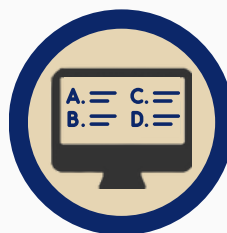## How to make forms easy to fill in:

Provide clear instructions for each section.

- Use a numbering system that is as straightforward and logical as possible.
- Do not use Roman numerals.

(8)

Ask for information in a logical order.

Provide space.

- Leave enough space for the answers you are asking for.

Follow a consistent pattern.

- The questions and the answer spaces should line up horizontally or vertically.

Tools to help you write in easy-to-understand language

Microsoft Word

Microsoft Word has built-in tools to help you see the grade level of your writing. Click on the "Editor" tab in the top right corner of your Word document. Go down to "Insights" and click on "Document Stats". The Flesch-Kincaid Grade-Level score tells you the grade level of your written information.

Hemingway Editor

Hemingway Editor is a writing tool that helps improve the readability and clarity of a document. You can find it at HemingwayApp.com. The browser version is free, but you can pay for a desktop app with additional features.

Copying and pasting text into Hemingway will give you a grade level. You can then use Hemmingway's notes and suggestions to change the text to a more appropriate grade level.

Grammarly

Grammarly is a writing tool that helps identify and correct the spelling and grammar of a document. Typing or pasting text into Grammarly will give you correction suggestions. Grammarly has both a free version and a paid version. The paid version has additional features.

Use one or more of these tools to determine the grade levels or readability scores of your text.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Businesses can use Artificial Intelligence (AI) to help convert text into plain language. AI technology is advancing rapidly, and the AI tools we use today may be replaced by other tools in the future.

When using AI, it is important to check for biases, plagiarism, and accuracy.
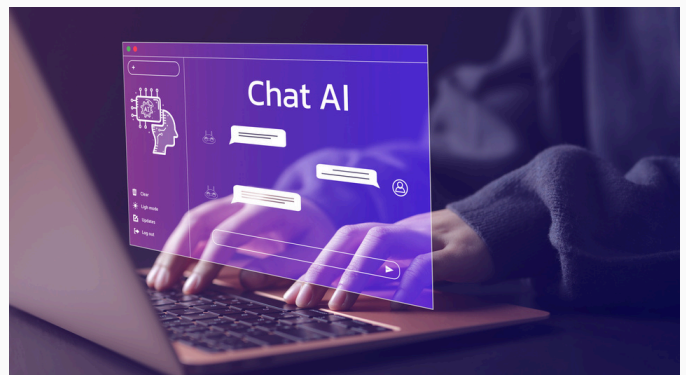
How to use ChatGPT to make documents easier to read

- Create a ChatGPT account. (https://chatgpt.com/)

- Find the box that says "message ChatGPT."

- Add what you want ChatGPT to do before the text. Example: "Make this paragraph read at a 6th-grade level", or "simplify."

- Copy and paste your text.

- Click the black arrow button.

- ChatGPT will generate a response for you. If you think it needs further simplification, you can give additional commands to break it down further (see next section).

Do not forget the Human Test.

Always reread the new text created using the tools. Make corrections and rewrite the text, as needed. To achieve the desired grade level, you may need to break up sentences, use more common words, and rerun the edited text multiple times through Grammarly, Hemmingway, and/or ChatGPT.

Although these tools are not perfect, they are helpful. Creating versions of a document at different grade levels is easier once you have the important information in plain language. It is also easier to translate plain language documents into other languages.

Examples of how plain language can improve understanding

Below are examples of a business's original communication, followed by an easy-to-understand version in plain language. The grade levels and language changes were determined using Word, Hemingway, Grammarly, and ChatGPT.

Example 1

Before: We are providing the following information about a rebate check you indicate you have not received and think may be missing. We have given our accounting department the necessary information to enable them to trace the check in question and requested they respond to your inquiry. (Word Editor, Grade 14)

After: We received your email about your missing rebate check. We asked our accounting department to look into what happened to your check. They will let you know what they find. (Hemingway, Grade 5)

Example 2

Before: By ensuring full access to individuals with disabilities, businesses can expand their customer base and increase their revenues. Americans with disabilities have more than $200 billion in discretionary income and are important potential customers.

There are approximately 56.7 million Americans with disabilities, comprising roughly 18% of the population. Moreover, if businesses increase their accessibility, their facilities will be safer and more user-friendly for everyone, including older customers and aging baby boomers. (Word Editor, Grade 15)

After: If you make your business easier to use and get around, you can get more customers and increase your profits. About 56.7 million Americans have disabilities (around 18% of the population). They have a lot of money to spend (over $200 billion). They also care about accessibility. An accessible business is safer and easier for everyone, including older customers. (simplify command in ChatGPT and Hemingway, Grade 7)

# Examples of how plain language can improve understanding

Example 3

Before: Shatter the idea that employees can leave their personal lives at the door when coming to work. Recognize that there is a symbiotic relationship between work and home where learnings and challenges in one area seep into the other. (Word Editor, Grade 11)

After: People cannot leave their personal lives behind when they come to work. Work and home life influence each other. What happens in one place can affect the other. (Hemingway, Grade 5)

Example 4

Before: It takes many hands to craft the perfect cup of coffee. The farmers tend to the red-ripe coffee cherries, the master roasters coax the best from every individual bean, and the barista serves the resulting brew with care. We are committed to the highest standards of quality and service, embracing our heritage while innovating to create new experiences to savor. (Word Editor, Grade 12)

After: Making the perfect cup of coffee involves many people. It starts with the farmers who grow the coffee cherries. Then, expert roasters bring out the best flavors in each bean. Finally, a barista serves the perfect brew with care. We work to provide the best quality and service. We also hope to honor our traditions and find new ways to create enjoyable experiences. (Hemingway, Grade 6)
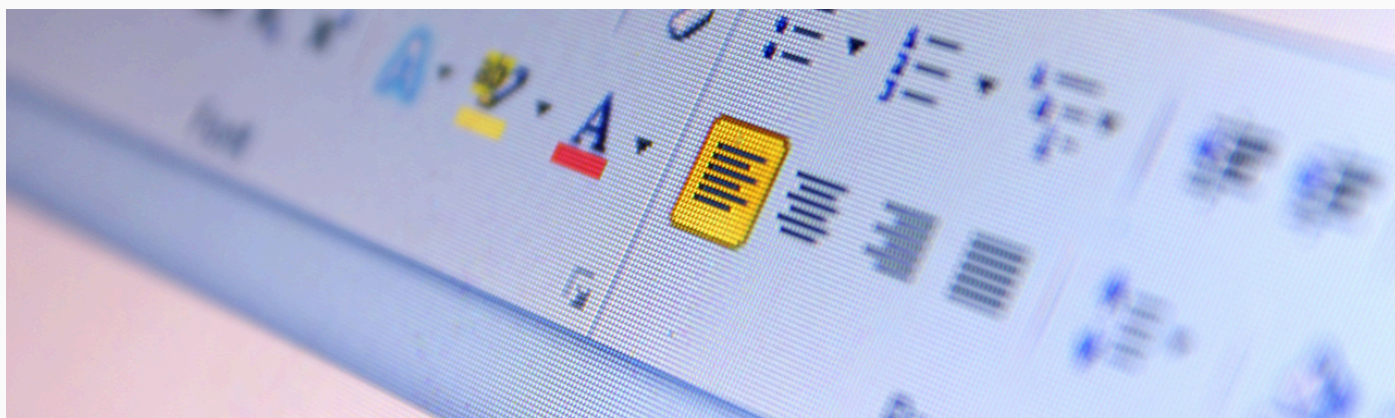
Resources for creating plain language and easy read text

- [One Idea Per Line: A Guide to Making Easy-Read Resources](#)

Autistic Self Advocacy Network

- [Guidelines for Minimizing the Complexity of Text](#)

University of North Carolina

- [Plain Language Quick Reference Guide](#)

U.S. Department of Labor

- [Use Simple Words and Phrases List](#)

 U.S. Department of Labor

- [Hemingway Editor](#)

- [Grammarly](#)

References

1. PlainLanguage.gov

2. U.S. Office of Personnel Management

3. Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business

4. The National Literacy Institute

5. One Idea Per Line: A Guide to Making Easy Read Resources

6. Nielsen Norman Group

7. ScienceNewsExplores

8. Plain English Campaign

Center on Disability

PUBLIC HEALTH INSTITUTE®

CALIFORNIA SCDD
State Council on Developmental Disabilities