How Do I Write in Plain Language?

Follow the tips below when writing information in plain language. Check your writing at each step by answering the "ask yourself" questions below.

1. Use short sentences

Ask yourself

Are my sentences at 10-15 words or less?

Writing tip

Break-up long sentences by looking for "connectors" (such as "and/but" or dashes/commas). Many times, these "connectors" can be turned into separate sentences.

Hint

Writing tools like Microsoft Word™ and Google Docs™ include a word count. Highlight the sentence or section you are working on to check if your writing is less than 10-15 words.

2. Use common words

Ask yourself

Is my writing at a 6-8th grade level?

Writing tip

Sometimes you will need to use large or uncommon words in a sentence. These words can increase the reading level of your writing. When using an uncommon word, **bold** the word the first time it is used and give a plain language definition.

Hint

Check the reading level of your writing by using Microsoft Word's Editor tool. You can also check reading levels by visiting websites like *Hemingway*.

3. Put the most important information first

Ask yourself

What information do I want people to know?

Why do I want them to know it?

Writing tip

Putting the most important information first helps readers to quickly understand what they need to know. If your writing is long, repeat the main idea multiple times.

Hint

People remember the information they read at the beginning of a list or document better than information that is in the middle of a document (Cheung, 2017).

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4. Use examples in your writing

Ask yourself

Did I give an example the first time I defined a new word or idea?

Writing tip

Examples are a great way to make your writing easy to understand. Writing out examples is especially helpful to use when introducing new words or big ideas.

Hint

Good examples can replace long explanations in your writing (PLAIN, 2011). Think about how you would explain something during a conversation to help you write out your examples.

5. Ask for feedback

Ask yourself

Who is my audience?

Who could give me feedback on what I wrote?

Writing tip

If possible, ask multiple people to review your writing to make sure it is accessible.

Hint

Writing in plain language can be a back-and-forth process. Give yourself enough time to review and edit your work.

References

Cheung, I. W. (2017). Plain language to minimize cognitive load: A social justice perspective. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication, 60*(4), 448-457.

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Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN). (2011). *Federal plain language guidelines.*

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