

Quick guide: plain language

Writing in plain language helps everyone. When you write in plain language, users understand your message and know what to do next.

Whenever you write, think about who you are writing for. Ask yourself:

- What do they need to know?
- What do they need to do?

There are 4 key things you can do to write in plain language:

- structure your content
- choose your words carefully
- use active voice
- write short sentences.

Structure your content

Headings, lists and paragraphs help to break up content. Most users will scan content before they read it. Structured content is easier to scan and less intimidating than long blocks of text.

Put the most important thing first

Users might not read to the bottom of your content. So, make sure the most important message is at the start.

Use headings to signpost information

Headings should be clear and short (no more than 70 characters, including spaces).

Put keywords (words that people commonly associate with the topic) in the first 2 or 3 words of headings.

Use sentence case and minimal punctuation.

Write short paragraphs that each contain one topic

Start each paragraph with a topic sentence that introduces the topic. Use active voice. Topic sentences help users follow your meaning as they scan the content.

Use lists for a series of items

Use bullet lists to group related information – this helps users scan content.

Use numbered lists to show an order of steps or to arrange information by its importance.

Choose your words carefully

Use everyday words that most people understand. Using common, simple words makes content more accessible to people with low literacy, disability and English as a second language.

Complex language, jargon and technical words also slow down the scanning process.

Use keywords

Include keywords in your first paragraph so users know what the content is about. To identify keywords, think about familiar words that people use when searching for your topic.

Use simple words

Choose words that most people understand. Most complicated words have simpler alternatives. Use a thesaurus to find simpler words that mean the same thing.

Don't use jargon

Jargon excludes people. It is specialised language used by a specific group. It's likely to include technical terms or acronyms that people outside that group won't understand.

Convey complex information simply

If your content is complicated:

- explain technical terms
- include a glossary
- provide a plain language summary
- include pictures and diagrams.

Use active voice

Active voice emphasises the person or thing doing the action, which makes it easy to understand who is doing what. Passive voice emphasises the receiver of the action. Active voice is more direct and often uses fewer words than passive voice.

Example

Evan reviewed the report. [Active voice]

The report was reviewed by Evan.
[Passive voice]

We will assess your eligibility. [Active voice]

Your eligibility will be assessed by the department. [Passive voice]

Write short sentences

Long sentences are harder to understand and place a heavier cognitive load on users.

- Aim for an average of 15 words per sentence.
- Sentences should be no longer than 25 words.
- Use a mix of longer and shorter sentences for readability.
- To make a sentence shorter, it's okay to start a sentence with a conjunction such as 'and', 'but' and 'or'. But don't overdo it.

Use positive sentences

Positive sentences are usually shorter than negative sentences. Use positive sentences when asking users to do something. People are more likely to respond to positive instructions than to negative instructions.

Example

Please answer every question on this form. It will help us decide if you are eligible. [Positive]

If you don't answer every question on this form, we won't be able to decide if you are eligible. [Negative]