

## GUIDE TO WRITING IN PLAIN LANGUAGE

### WHAT IS LITERACY?

The definition of 'literacy' has changed over time. Traditionally, literacy was the ability to read and write a little bit. These days the meaning of the term has expanded to include the ability to use language, numbers and images, as well as the skills required to use technology and solve problems.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics measured adult literacy skills in 2006 and found 46% of Australian adults had below average literacy skills – meaning they struggled to use information from texts such as newspapers, magazines and brochures. This group were considered to have skills that were unable to meet the complex demands of everyday work and life.

### WHAT IS PLAIN LANGUAGE?

Plain language (also known as plain English) is a way of writing or presenting information so that readers can understand it quickly and easily.

Plain language should be easy to read, understand and use. Plain language avoids verbose or convoluted language, jargon, euphemism, and ambiguous language.

### INFORMATION STATEMENTS & CONSENT FORMS (PICF)

A PICF is an important tool to allow a parent and/or participant to make an informed decision to take part in a research study.

PICFs should be:

- relevant to the reader
- clear and concise
- easy to follow
- designed to help readers find important information

### PLANNING

Before you start writing, think about your readers. Do you know?

- the education level of your readers
- if English is their first language
- how old they are
- their cultural background
- their level of prior knowledge

## WRITING TIPS

### Make it personal

- Put the reader first and write as if you are explaining the facts in person
- The warmer the tone, the more engaged your reader will be
- Use “we” and “you” as it addresses the person directly, and it is familiar and friendly

### Use words the reader is likely to know

- Use simple, common words – it will be easier to understand if it is in everyday language
- Avoid using technical or specialised terms unless you know your readers will understand them
- If you need to use a specific term, do not forget to define it
- Explain any abbreviations or acronyms when first used

TERMINOLOGY	PLAIN LANGUAGE ALTERNATIVE
Clinical examination	Medical check-up
Clinician/physician	Doctor or nurse
Cohort	Group
Prior to	Before
Administer (the drug)	Give (the drug)
Biased	Not true or correct

### Use short sentences and brief paragraphs

- Make the sentence length an average of 15-22 words
- Vary the sentence length: too many very short sentences will make the reading dull
- Have only one or two ideas in each sentence
- If you need to explain a term, use a separate sentence
- Do not sacrifice clarity for brevity - use more words if it will help people to understand
- Organise information into brief paragraphs, with one central topic in each

### Favour the active voice

Active voice sentences clearly identifies the action and who is performing that action. The active voice is more to the point and lively. Unfortunately, a lot of writing uses the passive voice, which gives documents a wordy, bureaucratic tone.

Writing in the active voice is straightforward if you follow the “who-does-what” sequence: (subject) followed by (action) followed by (object).

PASSIVE VOICE	ACTIVE VOICE
The TV (object) was watched (action) by Peter (subject)	Peter (subject) watched (action) the TV (object)
The inhaler (object) was used (action) by Amanda (subject) today	Amanda (subject) used (action) her inhaler (object) today

### Write tight

- Only use as many words as you really need
- Cut the waffle – delete unnecessary words or details

### Organise the information

- Put the important details early
- Place information in a logical order to help the reader locate the details they need

### Positive phrasing

- Plain language generally phrases statements positively: “do this” rather than “don’t do this”
- It is advisable to use negative phrasing for warnings: “don’t give this drug to anyone else”
- Negative language can be unclear and the meaning can be misinterpreted

### Avoid CAPITALS

- When text is in capitals, it LOOKS LIKE YOU ARE SHOUTING!
- CAPITALS are harder to read because the letters are less distinguishable from one another
- Use capitals for proper names only eg Dr Joanne Jones

### Use ‘they’ as a singular pronoun

English... such a tricky language! All our singular pronouns “he, she, him, her” are tied to gender. Writing he/she or him/her or his/her throughout a document is clunky and tiresome. The use of ‘they’ or ‘their’ as a singular gender-neutral pronoun is often considered ungrammatical. However, its use is common and widely accepted.

Example: “We would like to invite your child to take part in this research because they are having their tonsils removed.”

### Consistency of language

- You can often say the same thing using a number of different words eg “research project or study or trial; study drug or medication or treatment
- Using one single term will not confuse your reader

### Types of language to avoid

Jargon: use of words and phrases only understood by people who do the same type of work eg medical professionals or academics.

Euphemism: use of an inoffensive word or expression in place of one that may be found offensive or suggest something unpleasant

Ambiguous: language that may have a different meaning to different people eg ‘de-identified data’.

### What are they trying to say?

*Only the researchers will have access to the questionnaires and they will be destroyed at the end of the project.*

The researchers will be destroyed at the end of the project!

*Dental examinations of the child were conducted by blinded dental examiners...*

Dentists with a sight impairment?

## DESIGN TIPS

### Clear layout of a document increases its legibility

- Break up large paragraphs of text. Dense text will cause readers to switch off or tune out
- Use bullet or number lists, and tables or diagrams to break up complicated text

### Use lots of white space

- White space is important for legibility
- Use wide margins with plenty of space between paragraphs of text

### Choose a typeface for readability

- Use a clear typeface
- Use one typeface and font size throughout the document
- Avoid use of bold or italics

### Alignment of text

Justified text may look neater but it is more difficult to read. Left aligned (ragged right) makes for easier reading and the spacing between words is the same throughout the document.

## WHAT IS A READABILITY TEST?

Microsoft Word contains a function that will assess the readability level of a text. The Flesch-Kincaid Reading grade level is calculated by a formula that presents a US school grade level result.

### What the test cannot do:

- determine the complexity of ideas in the text
- establish if the content is in logical order
- decide if the vocabulary is appropriate for the audience
- assess the layout and legibility of the text

Running your text through the Spelling & Grammar function to calculate a readability score should be used with caution. It can help to gauge the approximate reading level of a text, but should not replace careful proofreading and testing with the intended audience.

## IMPROVING YOUR TEXT

- Allow time to review and re-draft your document
- Remember to spell check your document
- Ask someone unrelated to the project to read what you have written. Better yet, ask someone who is not a researcher or clinician

## RESOURCES

Free Guides from the Plain English Campaign UK <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/free-guides.html>

Health in Plain English <http://www.healthinplainenglish.com/index.php>

Plain language medical dictionary app <https://itunes.apple.com/au/app/plain-language-medical-dictionary/id443405990?mt=8>