

Plain language

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Here's the context.

What is plain language?

Plain language makes it easier for you to:



Find what you need



Understand what you find



Use what you find to meet your needs

Why is it important?

As many as 9 in 10 US adults have limited health literacy skills. About 30 million people in the US have below-basic literacy, which can hamper the understanding of research. Plain language helps facilitate comprehension.

What is required?

The Common Rule states that “the information that is given to the participant... must be in language that is understandable to the participant...”

Plain Writing Act of 2010: The law requires that federal agencies use clear government communication that the public can understand and use.

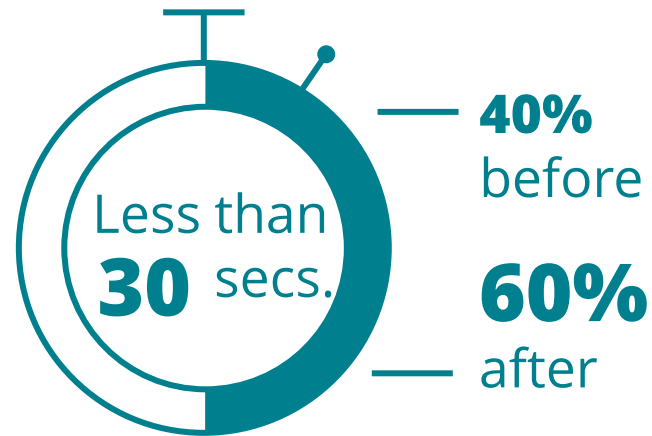
Three separate Executive Orders emphasize the need for plain language: E.O. 12866, E.O. 12988, and E.O. 13563.

<https://irb.upenn.edu/homepage/biomedical-homepage/guidance/recruitment-and-consent/informed-consent/>
<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ274/content-detail.html>
<https://www.archives.gov/files/federal-register/executive-orders/pdf/12866.pdf>
<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-1996-02-07/pdf/96-2755.pdf>
<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2011-01-21/pdf/2011-1385.pdf>

What are the benefits?

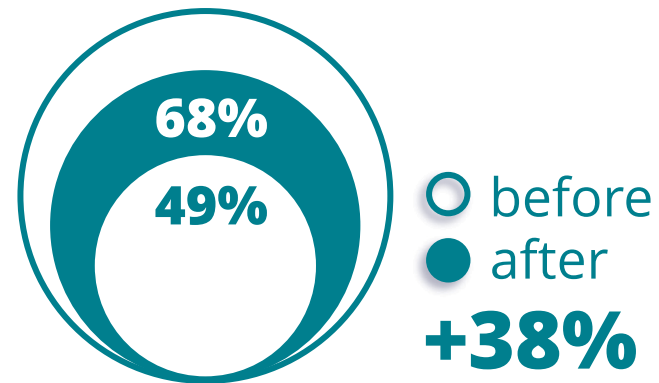
Fast reading

How long do you think it took you to read and understand this?



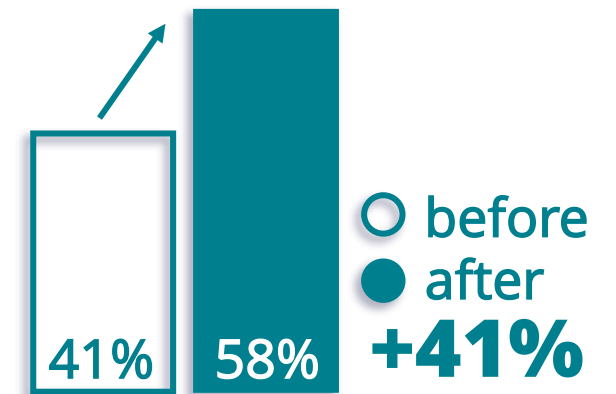
Quick understanding

I understood what I read.



Better message retention

Do you feel that you have memorized the information?



If you can't explain something simply,
you don't understand it well.

Albert Einstein

Plain language steps



1. STEP 1: Identify your audience.

2. STEP 2: Choose your words carefully.

3. STEP 3: Design your sentences and paragraphs.

4. STEP 4: Assess reading level.

5. STEP 5: Format.

STEP 1: Identify your audience.



Who is your audience?



Examples

Funders



Clinic staff



General public



Participants



What do
you need
them to do?



Examples

Continue funding us.



Post recruitment fliers.



Complete eligibility screening.



Answer survey.



What do
they want
to know?



Examples

Progress is being made.
Targets met.



No change in workflow.



Screening takes 3-6 minutes.



Earn \$25.

Plain language steps



1. STEP 1: Identify your audience.
- 2. STEP 2: Choose your words carefully.**
3. STEP 3: Design your sentences and paragraphs.
4. STEP 4: Assess reading level.
5. STEP 5: Format.

STEP 2: Choose your words carefully.

TIP: Choose active voice.

Readers are more likely to understand their responsibility when you use “you.”

Original text

1. Consent must be provided.
2. Payment will be made in 3 days.
3. Lab tests are needed.



Revised text

1. You must click “consent” to join study.
2. You will earn money in 3 days.
3. You must go to the lab.

TIP: Separate stacked nouns.

Avoid strings of nouns. Groups of nouns sandwiched together expect the reader to remember each word in the string as they get to the final noun. Readability suffers.

Original text

1. We are recruiting Philly-based, low income people of color.
2. You are an American Heart Association-funded BETTER Center participant.



Revised text

1. We are recruiting people of color. You need to live in Philly. You also need to have low income.
2. You are a participant of the BETTER Center. The BETTER Center is funded by the American Heart Association.

TIP: Use familiar and consistent words.

Avoid jargon. Use the same words consistently.

Original text

1. CHW
2. Dual eligible beneficiary
3. Providers, clinicians, or health care staff



Revised text

1. Community health worker
2. Persons who have Medicaid and Medicare
3. Doctors

Plain language steps



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STEP 3: Design your sentences and paragraphs.

TIP: Shorten phrases.

Or use simple phrases.

Original text

1. On a monthly basis
2. A number of
3. A and/or B
4. In order to



Revised text

1. Monthly
2. Many
3. A or B or both
4. To

**TIP: Pick words
with 1-2 syllables.**

Original text

1. Assistance
2. Additional
3. Incentives

Revised text

1. Help
2. More
3. Money



1-2

TIP: Cut sentences to 8-10 words.

Write short sentences.

Express one idea per sentence.

Original text

The nicotine contained in nicotine gum, lozenges, or patches does not contain the chemicals that cigarettes have that cause cancer and other diseases.



Revised text

Cigarettes can cause cancer and other diseases. Cigarettes contain nicotine. When you use cigarettes, your body gets used to nicotine.

Patches, lozenges, and gum, have small amounts of safe nicotine. Patches, lozenges, and gum, are also called Nicotine Replacement Therapy (“NRT”). The safe form of nicotine in NRT helps you to quit smoking. With this help, your body will not need nicotine over time.

TIP: Limit paragraphs to 3-5 sentences.

Writing experts recommend paragraphs of no more than 150 words.

Original text

Why am I having hiccups, an upset stomach, or heart burn? If you are using gum, this is usually because you are chewing the gum too much. Chew the gum less. When you are not chewing, place it between your gums and cheek. If you are using lozenges, this is usually from chewing the lozenge or sucking on them. Make sure you do not chew the lozenge. Place them in your cheek and let them dissolve. If symptoms continue, contact your doctor for other ideas to stop these problems.



Revised text

Why am I having hiccups, an upset stomach, or heart burn?

If you use gum: This is usually because you are chewing the gum. Chew it only a few times. This will activate it. Then place it between your gums and cheek. Think of it as a wax instead of gum.

If you use lozenges: You may be sucking on or chewing the lozenge. Place the lozenge in your cheek and let it dissolve.

TIP: Keep close together subject, verb, and object.

The natural order of an English sentence is subject-verb-object. Readers struggle to understand when modifiers, phrases, or clauses separate these essential parts.

Original text

1. Money, assuming successful completion of the study, will be earned by the participant.
2. You may decline participation, like taking away permission to use your health information, at any time—including after the program ends.



Revised text

1. You earn money.
2. You may decline participation.

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STEP 4: Assess reading level.

One way to find out if you have succeeded (in writing clearly) is to show your draft to colleagues in other specialties. If they do not understand, neither, very probably, will The Lancet's staff.

The Lancet

Target 6th- to 8th- grade reading level.

Write in plain, “every day” language. Consent forms intended for the general population should be written at a 7th- to 8th-grade reading level.

Measure plain language.

Multiple calculators:

<https://www.wordcalc.com/readability/>

Simple Measure of Gobbledygook (SMOG):

<https://readabilityformulas.com/smog-readability-formula.php>

Fleisch-Kincaid Index:

<https://readabilityformulas.com/flesch-grade-level-readability-formula.php>

PEMAT:

<https://www.ahrq.gov/sites/default/files/publications/files/pemat-p.pdf>

Compare reading levels.

Reading level: 12

Original text

Healthy Lungs is a PCORI-funded clinical research study that investigates the impact of three smoking cessation interventions against a usual care baseline. Patients receive incentive and retention payments for their continued enrollment, completion of program activities, and submission of biochemical testing.

Reading level: 4.6

Revised text

See if you're a good fit for this program. Healthy Lungs is a special program to improve the health of your lungs. If you're a good fit for this program, we'll then reserve a space for you. As a Healthy Lungs participant, you would embark on a path with engaging activities, chances to earn money, and more!

Compare reading levels.

Reading level: 11.4

Original text

The nicotine contained in nicotine gum, lozenges, or patches does not contain the chemicals that cause cancer and other diseases. The goal of NRT is to support your transition away from cigarettes or other tobacco products.

Reading level: 6.5

Revised text

Cigarettes can cause cancer and other diseases. Cigarettes contain nicotine. When you use cigarettes, your body gets used to nicotine. Patches, lozenges, and gum, have small amounts of safe nicotine. Patches, lozenges, and gum, are also called Nicotine Replacement Therapy (“NRT”). The safe form of nicotine in NRT helps you to quit smoking. With this help, your body will not need nicotine over time.

TIPS SUMMARY: Reduce your reading level.



Aim for 6th- to 8th- grade reading level



Choose active voice.



Separate stacked nouns.



Use familiar, consistent words.



Shorten phrases.



Pick words with 1-2 syllables.



Cut sentences to 8-10 words.



Limit paragraphs to 3-5 sentences.



Keep together the subject, verb, and object.