



Inclusive Communication for State and Local Government

Making Written
Communication
Easy to Understand

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This document provides information and tools to help state and local governments improve their written communication. This work is 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

State and local governments reach a larger audience by using easy-to-understand language in their public messaging. Using direct, simple, and clear language can help many different groups 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 everyone access services and programs, and state and local governments connect with the public.

This document will cover:

- The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- What is plain language?
- How can plain language help your government entity?
- 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 state and local governments. It also requires equal access to programs, services, and activities. Examples of state and local government entities and services include public schools, courts, voting locations, public transportation, public recreation programs and facilities, state prisons, and state and local government offices.

The law applies to state and local governments' physical spaces and their communication with the public, including websites and other online and mobile app content. One important way state and local governments can comply with the ADA is to make their communication 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 state or local government entity?

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, nonprofits, or private businesses. However, using plain language can benefit state and local governments.

It leads to clear messaging that:

- Makes it easier for the public to understand and use the information shared and to access programs and services.
- Makes the content easier to accurately translate and helps state and local governments reach and better serve different communities.
- Helps state and local governments avoid costly mistakes due to misunderstandings.
- Saves staff time and resources spent answering questions and providing explanations.
- Helps build trust between state and local governments and the public.
- Improves communication during emergencies.

(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).

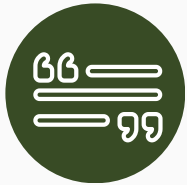
Tips to make written communication easier to understand



Know your audience.

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

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.



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:



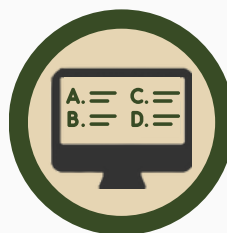
Provide clear instructions for each section.

- 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)

State and local governments 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 state or local government 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: The application must be completed by the applicant and received by the financial office by June 1st. (Word Editor, Grade 10)

After: We must receive your completed application by June 1. (Hemingway, Grade 6)

Example 2

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))



Examples of how plain language can improve understanding

Example 3

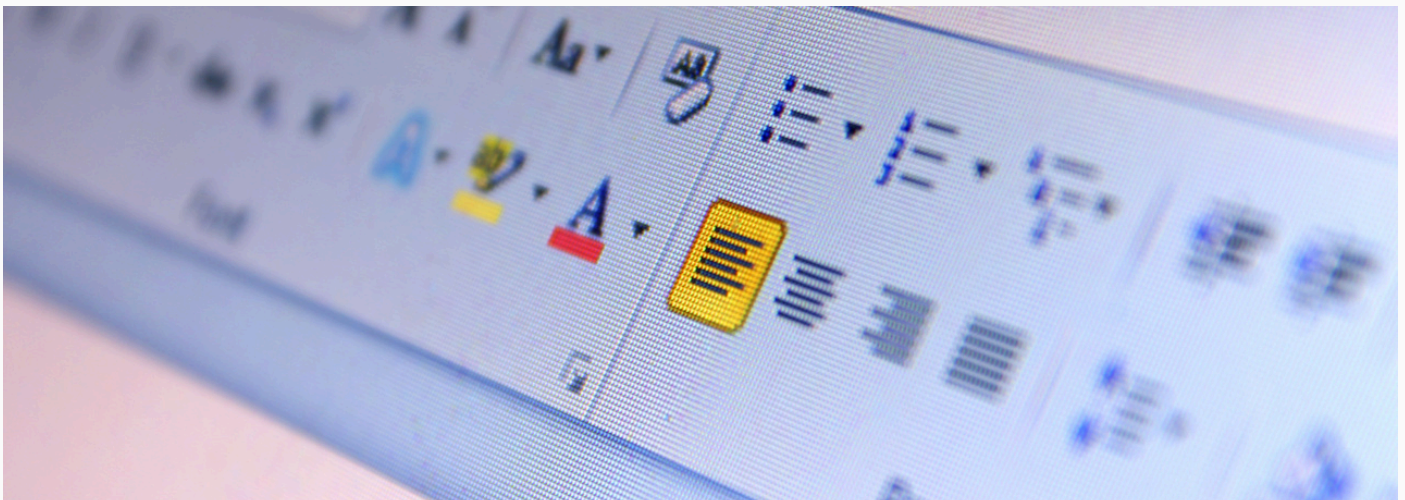
Before: Shatter the idea that employees can leave their personal lives at the door when coming to work. Recognize that there is a symbiotic relationship between work and home where learnings and challenges in one area seep into the other. (Word Editor, Grade 11)

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: This program promotes efficient water use in homes and businesses nationwide by offering a simple way to make product purchasing decisions that conserve water without sacrificing quality or product performance. (Word Editor, Grade 18.9)

After: This program helps you find products that will save water. You can decide which products are best for your home or business. You can help the Earth and enjoy good water quality. (Hemingway, Grade 5)



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](#)



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