

SO, WHAT IS PLAIN LANGUAGE?

Plain language is a way of talking and writing more simply. Using plain language helps make sure that as many people as possible can understand what you are trying to say.

WHY IS PLAIN LANGUAGE IMPORTANT?

Plain language makes information easier for people to read and to understand. This is also called accessibility. Plain language improves accessibility for everyone, but especially for people who have trouble reading, who have a cognitive or intellectual disability, or for those whose main language is not English.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires “effective communication.” Plain language can help you meet this requirement.

- Plain language helps reduce barriers to accessing information. It increases fairness and equity because more people can benefit from what you are saying.
- You will spend less time explaining what you mean if it is written or spoken more simply, and more people will understand what you are saying.
- If you are giving instructions (telling people how to do something) more people will be able to follow your instructions if you use plain language.

WHAT IS THE RIGHT READING LEVEL?

Below are three examples of ways to say the same thing. The grade level (also called readability) score for each is noted. This is based on the Flesch Kincaid Readability score. Microsoft Word also uses this scoring.

We will be scheduling a meeting of all of the IEP team members to discuss the transition aspects of Melissa's IEP. Melissa will need to determine whether she wants to attend her IEP meeting and what input she desires to provide regarding her future plans for post-secondary activities. *10.0 Reading level*

We will hold Melissa's IEP meeting on August 15. Melissa needs to tell us whether she is coming and what she would like to talk about regarding her plans for after high school. *7.6 Reading level*

Melissa's IEP meeting is on August 15. Melissa can let us know if she is coming. She can talk to us about what she wants to do after high school. *4.4 Reading level*

A good level to aim for when writing is grade 4-6. If you are giving information to people with cognitive or intellectual disabilities, you may want to try for a grade 2-3 reading level.

Using plain language is not easy. Many of us use long sentences and big words when writing. But think about how much easier it will be for Melissa to understand what you are saying in the last example.

There are programs on the internet that can help you see if you are using plain language. Here are a few:

- [What is Readability and How Can You Use Readability Scores in Your Writing? | Grammarly](#)
- [Test Readability and Improve your Writing | Readability Score](#)
- [Free Readability Formulas, Tools and Calculators | ReadabilityFormulas](#)

HOW DO WE WRITE IN PLAIN LANGUAGE?

To write in plain language, you need to look at:

- the words you use,
- the way the words are put together,
- how you arrange or organize what you are saying,
- and what the information looks like on paper.

Think about who you are writing for (your audience). Is it students, teachers, parents, professionals? If you have more than one audience, you should write at the level that the most people can understand. So, if you are writing for students and teachers, you should write at the student level.

Questions you may want to ask about your writing:

1. Can your reader easily find the information they need?
2. Can the reader understand the information?
3. Will the reader be able to use the information the way you wrote it?

DOES PLAIN LANGUAGE MEAN CHANGING THE CONTENT?

No, using plain language does not mean you have to change the content. Saying or writing something in plain language means you make the information easier to understand. You want the content to be simpler, not different.

If you change the information or take out important ideas, the people you are writing for or talking to won't have the information they need. But other people who get the complete information will. This is not fair or equitable.

Plain language may not work for everyone. Your job is to try your best to improve people's understanding of what you are trying to say.

WHAT ARE SOME TIPS?

Here are some things that experts have said are important to communicating in writing, with plain language.

How to Write the Text

- Think about key messages. What are you trying to say and what is the easiest way to say it that still provides complete information?
- Use active voice as much as possible. (For example, instead of *Dinner will be brought to the table by the waiter in 10 minutes*-- say, *The waiter will bring dinner to the table in 10 minutes.*)
- Use shorter words. (Instead of *gratified*, say *happy*. Instead of *due to the fact that*, say *because*.)
- Use short sentences. Avoid run-on or multi-part sentences.

- Pay attention to punctuation. Try to avoid semi-colons. Just start a new sentence.
- Don't put too much information in a single paragraph. Keep each paragraph to one thought or idea.
- Avoid jargon (terms that only certain people use--like professionals in the field) and acronyms. If you have to use either, be sure to define and explain them.

How to Format Text

- Use 1-1/2 spacing or double space.
- Use headings to divide up text.
- Make sure there is white space so that the page is not crowded.
- Add pictures or diagrams to break up text. Use alt text with images (a caption that provides a description of the image).
- Align text to the left.
- Use bullets or numbered lists to break up information.
- Use hyperlinks that describe the web address (e.g., instead of <https://peatc.org/trainings-workshops/workshops/> convert the link to [PEATC Workshops](#).)
- Use high-contrast colors. Black on white is best. If you use colors make sure they are contrasting. For example, white text on a light blue background will be hard to read. White text on a dark blue background will be easy to read. Avoid neon and pastel colors.

Fonts

- Use fonts that are called San Serif. These fonts don't have the extending features (like curves) and are easier to read. These include Arial, Calibri, Helvetica, Verdana. Serif fonts (curvy) like Times Roman, Courier or Comic Sans are harder to read.

Here is a helpful website for choosing fonts: [Accessible Fonts: How to Choose a Font for Web Accessibility](#)

- Don't use too many fonts. One or two is best.
- Use a 14-point font or higher. Some people who are vision impaired may request a larger font like 18 or 24.

Resources Used to Develop this Document

[5 Steps to Improving Readability | Readable](#)

[Checklist for Plain Language | Plain Language Action and Information Network](#)

[How Language Can Impact Accessibility and Inclusion | RAISE Center](#)

[Plain Language Writing-An Essential Part of Accessibility | Forbes](#)

[Use Simple Words and Phrases | Plain Language Action and Information Network](#)

[What is Plain Language? | Plain Language Association International](#)

[Why Use Plain Language? | Plain Language Action and Information Network](#)

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