

Plain Language Cheat Sheet

Written and Spoken

- Use personal pronouns (you, he, she, they).
- Keep it simple. Avoid jargon and technical terms (if you must use them, explain their meaning).
- Be clear. Use words and phrases your audience is familiar with.
- Use active voice - the subject performs the action (Active: "The team completed the project." Passive: "The project was completed by the team.").
- Be organized and logical so your audience can follow and understand.
- Write out every abbreviation the first time you use it. (For example, PIN (Personal Identification Number))

Written (paper and electronic)

- Be concise. Use short sentences (maximum of 15 words) and short paragraphs (4–5 sentences). (Academic or technical writing may need more detail.)
- Write in a respectful, yet conversational style.
- Organize your content by creating a logical layout with headings, bullet points, and lists.
- Use meaningful headings to help readers navigate.
- Select a font and type size that's easy to read.
- Make sure there's plenty of contrast between the text and the background.

- Make it visually appealing. Include white space, images, and graphics for clarity.

Speaking (Presentations and Speeches)

- Also consider visual devices such as tables, diagrams, charts, photos, and lists to present information in an accessible and engaging form.

Check Your Work

The following ideas can help you check your work.

Read it out loud: Reading aloud helps you find awkward or unclear sections and identify areas that are complex or difficult to understand.

Ask for feedback: Ask someone else to review your writing and use their input to help improve it. Pay attention to their reaction to complex concepts, areas that caused them confusion, or where your reviewer asked for more clarity. Sometimes it's just about pointing out where something might land differently than intended.

Use online tools: Use the AI tool included with your word processing program and ask it to “evaluate” your text and provide editing suggestions. Or use the readability tool to determine the grade level of the text. Aim for a grade 7 or 8 reading level, if possible.