

Plain Language Writing/Editing Tips

Know your reader and purpose

- Who should read your writing? How well do they read? What do they know about the topic?
- What do you want them to do? Act, learn, or decide?
- What can you do in your document to help them do what you want?

Organize your ideas and text

- Organize the material to help readers find it. For example:
 - general to specific
 - most important information first, followed by background
- Break up the content into chapters, sections and paragraphs.
- Use headings to show chapters, sections, and new ideas.
- Begin paragraphs with a topic sentence so readers can remember it better.
- Link new information to information your reader might already have.
- Use lists to:
 - help readers scan the text
 - show steps in a process
 - show levels of importance

Write in a simple, clear, human style

- Use mostly who-did-what sentence style. Keep these facts close together.
- Convey one idea in each sentence.
- Use about 15-25 words in each sentence, and no more than 40.
- Cut out unnecessary words. But make it easier to read, not shorter.
- Prefer common words to less-familiar words.
- Explain technical terms you must use. Avoid the shorthand you use with colleagues.
- Use respectful language and a helpful, positive tone.

Use visual cues where you can

- Use charts, graphs, tables and images when those will be more effective than words.
- Let lines of text end naturally at the right margin so readers can scan the text.
- Make the space between lines of text bigger than the type.
- Use sans serif fonts (like Arial or Calibri) for emails and other online writing.
- Use boldface or italics for emphasis only when you can't use words to do this.
- Use different type sizes and colours for headings to show different levels of information.

