

Quick Reference Guide for Improving Readability

Guiding principles of plain language include:

- Use language your audience can easily understand.
- Write in a conversational style, as if you were speaking.
- Organize and filter content with your readers' needs in mind.
- Use reader-friendly formatting so that your document *looks* easy to read.

The following specific strategies will help you adhere to these principles:

Check the reading level.

- Choose a readability formula, but be aware that they all have limitations—getting a “good score” is not a guarantee that your document is easy to read.

Choose common, everyday words.

- Replace multi-syllable (or short but complex) words with simpler vocabulary. Avoid research and medical jargon whenever possible. If you must use a complicated term, define it in plain language and provide an example, an analogy, or a visual aid.
- Refer to the list of Alternative Wording Suggestions and other online resources, as necessary (see page 37).

Use active voice.

- The subject of your sentence should act, instead of being acted upon. “We will ask you questions about your health” is active, while “You will be asked questions about your health” is passive

Write in the first-person.

- Use pronouns, such as “I,” “we,” and “you.” This encourages the use of active voice and will be clearer and more engaging to the reader.

Keep sentences short and to the point.

- Break up sentences joined with conjunctions or semicolons. It's okay to begin a complete sentence with “And” or “But.”
- Try to vary sentence length. Sentences should average 15 words or less.

Limit paragraphs to one main idea.

- Start with a clear and concise topic sentence. Remove or relocate details that do not relate to the central topic. A paragraph of 1 or 2 sentences is okay.

Use clear and descriptive headings.

- Meaningful headings that describe the content of different sections will give your readers “road signs” and help them navigate your document more easily.
- Use large font, bold, or other emphasis to ensure the headings stand out.

Consider the needs of your audience.

- Include only the information that your audience really needs to know.
- Use large font and/or age-appropriate or culturally-sensitive language to meet the needs of special populations like the elderly, children, minorities, or people with chronic health conditions, etc.

Organize and format your document so that key information is clear and easy to find.

- Lead with the most important information, and sequence the information in a logical fashion that the audience can easily follow.
- Use bold, larger font, bullets, or graphics to emphasize critical information. *Do not* use justified margins or put entire sentences in all caps or italics.
- Put long lists of items into bulleted lists whenever practical. Use numerical lists whenever if the items need to be understood or completed in order

Use adequate white space and margins.

- Break up dense copy by using ample white space between paragraphs and headings. Consider using all white space that may be leftover by adding space between paragraphs or increasing the font size of headers or text.
- Avoid decreasing margins to force text to fit on one page. Top and bottom margins should be at least 1”, and side margins should be at least 1.25.”

Read your document aloud.

- This is one of the best ways to find errors and test for overall flow and clarity when you proofread. It can also help you troubleshoot—when you get stuck, try just speaking your thoughts.

Ask others to read and edit the document.

- Someone unfamiliar to the project is more likely to notice text that is unclear.
- The person who will use the document most—such as the person who will administer informed consent—should always have a chance to review it.

Use fresh eyes when you edit or proofread.

- Whenever possible, set the material aside for a day or two and proofread it again after taking a break. This step, along with reading your document out loud, is a good way to find errors that may have been overlooked before.

Double-check names and contact information.

- Call all phone numbers and check all links and email addresses. Confirm that all names have been spelled correctly and that all titles are correct.