

# Word for Word

## Five tips for writing in plain language

If you've ever struggled to decipher a legal document or a technical manual, you understand the value of plain language. Plain language is writing in which the "wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended audience can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information."<sup>1</sup> This type of writing avoids complex sentence and paragraph structures, uses everyday language instead of specialized jargon and technical terms, and is visually presented in an easily accessible way. Plain language is *not* "dumbed down," oversimplified, or casual language.<sup>2</sup> Instead, it is a type of formal writing that is designed to be immediately and fully comprehensible to a specific audience and that is suitable for many purposes, including patient education materials.

The [Plain Writing Act of 2010](#) required US federal agencies (including the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control) to issue all new documents and forms in plain language instead of the "legalese" often associated with government regulations. The [Federal Plain Language Guidelines](#) contain useful principles for writing documents in plain language and creating written health information for the public, such as patient handouts, web pages, and surveys. Here are a few tips from those guidelines:



1. Use a conversational style. Address your readers as "you" and use the active voice and present tense.

**Original text:** The risk of cardiovascular disease is elevated in users of combustible tobacco products.

**Plain language revision:** If you smoke, you are more likely to have heart problems.

2. Use everyday words instead of technical jargon.

**Original text:** The aim of this study was to determine the incidence of HIV infection in the US population.

**Plain language revision:** We did this study to find out how many people in the United States have HIV.

3. Keep the subject and verb close together.

**Original text:** Patients undergoing MRI who have a history of claustrophobia or anxiety may require administration of an anxiolytic agent.

**Plain language revision:** Some people feel nervous during MRI scans, especially those who are claustrophobic or afraid of small spaces. If you usually feel anxious in enclosed spaces, tell your doctor. He or she may give you medicine to make you feel calm before your scan.

4. Use lists and tables to make reading easier.

**Original text:** Risk factors for hepatocellular carcinoma include chronic HBV or HCV infection, cirrhosis, heavy alcohol consumption, aflatoxin B1 exposure, nonalcoholic steatohepatitis, and cigarette smoking.

**Plain language revision:** You are more likely to develop liver cancer if you

- have hepatitis B or C
- have cirrhosis
- drink a lot of alcohol
- are exposed to aflatoxin B1
- have nonalcoholic fatty liver disease
- smoke cigarettes

5. Get to the point. Organize information from most important (the main message) to least important (background).

**Original text:** Cancer cells grow and divide more quickly than normal cells. Chemotherapy is the use of drugs that kill these quickly dividing cells. Some common side effects of chemotherapy include fatigue, hair loss,

nausea, and memory problems. Memory problems caused by chemotherapy are often called “chemo brain.” Patients who experience symptoms of chemo brain should talk to their doctors about symptom management.

**Plain language revision:** Because chemotherapy targets cancer cells and other quickly dividing cells, such as those in the brain, it can cause memory problems (“chemo brain”) in some people. If you have problems remembering things or concentrating during chemotherapy, tell your doctor.

Chemotherapy also kills normal cells in your hair and stomach. This is why chemotherapy can also cause hair loss and nausea.

For more information on using plain language in healthcare, consult the following resources:

Plainlanguage.gov guidelines for healthcare

<https://www.plainlanguage.gov/resources/content-types/healthcare/>

Plain Language Medical Dictionary (University of Michigan Taubman Health Sciences Library)

<https://www.lib.umich.edu/plain-language-dictionary>

CDC Clear Communication Index (widget to test public communication materials for their adherence to plain language guidelines)

<https://www.cdc.gov/ccindex/#>

CDC Everyday Words for Public Health Communication (“thesaurus” of common public health jargon words and their plain-language equivalents.)

<https://www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/everydaywords/index.html>

NIH Plain Language Training

[https://plainlanguage.nih.gov/CBTs/PlainLanguage/newuserreg\\_1.asp](https://plainlanguage.nih.gov/CBTs/PlainLanguage/newuserreg_1.asp)

--Amy Ninetto

## References:

1. Plain Language Association International. What is plain language? Accessed December 30, 2019.

2. National Institutes of Health. Plain Language at NIH. Accessed December 30, 2019.

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