



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL *of* **Indigenous Health**

PLAIN LANGUAGE GUIDELINES

What is plain language?

Plain language writing sets out important information in a way that a person with an average reading level can understand quickly and easily. It uses straightforward words and sentence structure to avoid misunderstandings and confusion.

Before you start

Make sure you know the following:

- Who is your reader? You can customize your message to suit their needs. Consider your reader's background, experience, education and reading levels.
- Why are you writing this document? It is easy to determine if you have met the goal if it is clearly defined from the start.
- What do you want to say? Focus on what the reader wants and needs to know. Have the most important information early in the document to get your reader's attention and interest.
- How will the reader use the information? Will a reader keep the document as a reference, read it cover to cover, or skim through it to read only certain sections? This should determine how you organize your work.

Speak to your readers

- Write the way you speak, and speak directly to your reader. Read what you have written aloud to hear how it sounds. Do people talk that way?
- Remember that readers cannot ask questions. Try to answer possible questions before they arise.
- While it is important to remember proper grammar, do not change well-known phrases and expressions because they seem to go against a grammar rule or some other convention (e.g., not: "This is the sort of English up with which I will not put." Sir

Winston Churchill. But: “This is the sort of English I will not put up with.” This may end with a preposition, but it is clearer—and the idea that sentences cannot end with prepositions is a false rule in any case.)

- Practical descriptions are more useful than the theory of the research, policies and programs. However, it is important to mention research goals and how the findings relate to those goals. Telling readers how the findings are relevant to them is even more important.
- Generally write in the active voice (subject does an action, not object has an action done to it). It is best to keep the subject and verb close together and near the front of the sentence.
- Write in a positive tone. Readers respond better to what they can and should do rather than being told what they cannot or should not be doing (e.g., not: “If you fail the exam, you will not qualify.” But: “You must pass the exam to qualify.”) However, use the negative form to emphasize a warning of danger or laws (e.g., “No smoking.”).
- Don’t say more than you have to, and get to the point quickly.
- Remember to include all useful information that could clarify an idea. Depending on length, the interest is sometimes in the details.

Choose your words wisely

- Remove unnecessary words (e.g., “He said ~~that~~ the ~~cutbacks~~ in the ~~health care field~~ have put hospitals in a crisis ~~situation~~.”).
- Use several short, simple, everyday words instead of one complicated one.
- Avoid French, Latin or other languages in English text wherever possible.
- Avoid jargon. Consider alternative expressions for technical terms. However, if the technical term must be used, explain it.
- Be consistent in what you call something. Two or more names for the same thing can be confusing.
- Keep abbreviations to a minimum. When needed, spell them out in full on first reference followed by the abbreviation in parentheses. The abbreviation can then be used in subsequent references throughout the document. Some abbreviations, such as USA or AIDS, are well known and do not need to be spelled out. If in doubt, spell it out. (See the APA manual for further guidance on abbreviations.)

Keep paragraphs and sentences simple

- Limit each paragraph to one idea unless you are linking related points such as comparisons.
- Sentences should be simply constructed and not overloaded with information. Related points should be in separate sentences.

- Varying sentence structure and length adds interest. If you must write a long sentence, follow it with a short, simple one to give the reader a break.
- Avoid using conjunctions (and, or) to join multiple clauses together to form longer, more complex, sentences. This can break up the flow of sentences. A simple and concise sentence is usually best.
- In sentences, keep introductory phrases and clauses short and simple, if they must be used at all.

Checks and tests

- Use your computer's spell check, but only as a guide. It will not catch misspelled words that spell another word correctly. It will also often want to change Canadian spellings to American. For correct spellings, consult the Oxford Dictionary, or dictionary that is considered the authoritative source in your country.
- It is important to have somebody else read what you have written to ensure clarity. Sometimes writers know what they meant to say but do not always clearly get there.
- If possible, get somebody who would be an intended reader to read the manuscript before submission to ensure it is understandable. Ask if it is useful, if it makes sense and if they would have read it if not specifically asked.

Formatting for easier reading

The way the information is presented on the page can be just as important as the words. Large blocks of text are dull and can be intimidating to some readers. The following are a few guidelines to supplement the IJH [Author Submission Guidelines](#) and APA style guidelines.

- Use an introduction to discuss what the document is and how it is organized. This is sometimes easier to write after the draft is finished.
- Use headings to break up blocks of text to make it easier to reference.
- A blank line before headings, lists, boxes and other visual elements draws attention to them.
- While justified (flush left and right) is good for shorter pieces, such as newspaper or magazine articles and brochures, larger documents should be left aligned or jagged right for ease of reading.
- Use bullets or point-form lists that are easy to grasp. Keep the lists short and to the point, grouping similar items together.
- Be careful using charts and graphics to explain information. Some people find charts difficult to understand. Consult the APA manual for guidance on effective visual display of information.
- Save bold for headings, and use italics appropriately in running text (see APA manual).

Plain language sample

INSTEAD OF:

USE:

accomplish	do
adequate number of	enough
advance planning	planning
after this is accomplished	then
ahead of schedule	early
approximately	about
ascertain	find out
at an early date	soon
at this point in time	now
attempt	try
by means of	by
carry out an examination of	examine
consequently	so
disseminate	send out, distribute
due to the fact	because
during such time	while
endeavour (verb)	try
excessive number of	too many
facilitate	make easier, help
formulate	work out, devise, form
give consideration to	consider
held a meeting	met
in lieu of	instead
in order to	to
in respect of	for
in the absence of	without
in the event that	if
it would appear that	apparently
substantiate	prove, support