

PLAIN LANGUAGE REFERENCE GUIDE


Plain language = clear communication
Goal: easy to read by a broad audience

Overarching

- Write in plain language whenever possible. If it is not possible to make a document clear for all audiences, develop an easy-to-read version that can be linked or shared as an alternative.
- Ask yourself: Would someone who knows nothing about the topic understand?
- 5th – 8th grade (plain); 3rd – 4th grade (easy)

Conjunctivitis

8th Grade Reading Level




You have contracted conjunctivitis. This is an inflammation or swelling of the conjunctiva. Often called "pink eye," conjunctivitis is a common eye disease. It may affect one or both eyes. Some forms of conjunctivitis are highly contagious. You have bacterial conjunctivitis which you need to treat with prescription eye drops from the pharmacy. Follow the directions on the bottle. It may improve after three or four days of treatment, but you need to take the entire course of antibiotics to prevent recurrence. Good hygiene is important also.

25

Pink Eye

5th Grade Reading Level




You have an **eye infection called pink eye**. To make it go away:

- You need to get eye drops from the drug store.
- Squeeze eye drops into your infected eye 3 times per day (breakfast, lunch, and dinner).
- Use the drops until they are gone.

Pink eye is really **easy to accidentally give to another person**. To keep this from happening, wash your hands after you use the drops and before you touch another person (like shaking hands).

26

You have Pink Eye. To make it go away:



2nd Grade Reading Level

- Get eye drops from a drug store.
- Squeeze eye drops into your eye.

Use the drops 3 times a day.

☐ Morning ☐ Noon ☐ Night

Use the drops until they are gone.

Pink eye is really easy to give to another person.

Wash your hands a lot!

27

Plain Language Checklist

The following are guidelines for using plain language and other techniques to maximize readability. You may not be able to follow all of these all the time.

Words and sentences:

- Use basic, familiar words. Ask yourself: are there easier words to use?
- If you must include official or complex terms, define them.
Example: You are the beneficiary of your ABLE account. This means the money in your account is used to pay for things you want and need.
- Avoid acronyms. In some situations, you might want to include an acronym because it is what people are most familiar with (*Example:* DDA). If you use an acronym, explain what it means.
- Use active voice: Active voice makes it clear who is supposed to do what. The person or organization that is acting is the subject of the sentence. *Examples:*

<u>Passive voice</u>		<u>Active voice</u>
Services must be approved by DDA.	→	DDA must approve services.
The following information must be included	→	You must include the following information in your grant proposal.
- Put important information first.
- Be concise. Occasionally you might need more words to be clear and avoid complex terms.
- Use words with 3 or fewer syllables.
- Use short sentences. No more than 15-20 words per sentence.
- Use bullet points.
- Include one idea per sentence. Look for “and” in a sentence to see if there is an opportunity to make two sentences.
- Use shorter paragraphs.
- Use periods rather than colons and semi-colons.
- Use numerals for numbers instead of words. *Example:* 1 rather than one.
- Do not use contractions. *Example:* Will not rather than won’t.
- Do not split words with a hyphen at the end of a line.
- Avoid finishing a sentence on the next page. Instead move the whole sentence to the next page.
- Avoid graphs and statistics.

Other things to consider, if applicable:

- Emphasize or repeat important information.
- Provide examples.
- Speak to the reader. Use “you” and “we.”
- Ask someone who needs plain language to review what you wrote.

Format and Design:

- Avoid all caps, italics and underline. Bold is ok.
- Review spacing between lines: 1.5 is typically good.
- Use wide margins (at least 1 inch).
- Avoid columns.
- Use headings and subheadings to group information.
- Use page numbers.
- Use a font that is clean and clear like Arial or Calibri.
- If using pictures/graphics place them on the left because we read left to right.
- Do not place text over graphics.
- Uses color choices with high contrast.
- If you make a simplified, graphic document:
 - Include a picture/icon for each idea.
 - Use larger font (14 pt. or larger).

February 2021

Sources and Resources:

- Self Advocacy Resource and Technical Assistance Center:
<https://selfadvocacyinfo.org/resource/plain-language/>
- Checklist: <https://selfadvocacyinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Plain-Language-Checklist.pdf>
- Mencap’s Make it Clear guide: <http://accessingsafe.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/make-it-clear-apr09.pdf>
- Plainlanguage.gov
Hidden verbs: <https://plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/words/avoid-hidden-verbs/>
Active voice: <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/conversational/use-active-voice/>
- CDC guide for using everyday words when communicating about public health issues:
<https://www.cdc.gov/other/pdf/everydaywords-060216-final.pdf>