

Plain Language Guide



People understand plain language

Information in plain language is easier and cheaper to translate into alternate formats.

Know your audience.

Use everyday language that readers are familiar with.

Use short, clear sentences (15–20 words).

One idea in a sentence is best.

Keep paragraphs short with one subject in one paragraph.

Avoid using a multi-syllable word when a shorter one will do.

Avoid jargon, acronyms, technical words and details. If you must use an acronym, always provide a full version the first time you mention it.

Use active rather than passive verbs, e.g. “All government agencies signed the Charter” rather than “the Charter was signed by all government agencies”.

Use “you” and “we”.

Give straightforward instructions, e.g. “please sign this Charter”.

Be helpful, human and polite.

It’s okay to use bulleted lists.

Use clear print principles

As a general rule, type sizing should be no smaller than 12pt (for print) or 16px (for screen). Some typefaces are more readable than others, consider this when you are designing for print or screen.

Consider accessibility of the typefaces you select and how you use them. For example, sans-serif fonts can be easier to read, highly stylised or simulated handwriting can be challenging to read. Typefaces are available in different weights. Light options have less contrast between the paper and the text. Select typefaces with accessibility in mind and ensure you use your selected font in ways that support their legibility.

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Avoid italics, which can make text difficult to read for some people.

Bold type can be used to emphasise text.

Avoid using all capital letters in words. The human eye reads by recognising the shape of words and a word in all capitals interferes with this recognition.

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Other design characteristics

Be consistent with numbering, generally small numbers (1–10) should be written as words and larger numbers (over 10) should be written numerically.

Use a typeface that makes numerals distinct.

Avoid underlining.

Line length should be about 60 characters.

Align text to the left-hand margin and avoid right-justified text.

The space between lines should be 1.5 and twice the space between words.

Words should be evenly spaced.

Make sure there is a strong contrast between the text and the background.

Use plenty of white space around text and images and separate the different elements of the page.

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Avoid using text over images or patterned backgrounds.

Avoid using colour shading and screens that reduce the contrast between text and background.

To accentuate pieces of text, use white spaces or boxes.

Leave a space between paragraphs for ease of reading.

Avoid fitting text around images if this means lines of text start in different places and are difficult to find.

Avoid using watermarks in the background of content, such as “draft” and “confidential”. Instead, signal these clearly on the front page and include them in the running header or footer.

Allow extra space/widely spaced lines on forms for people to write on or for signatures.

Consistency is important, for example make sure page numbers are in the same place on each page.

Paper

Use matte or satin paper rather than glossy paper.

Use paper of enough weight so the print does not show through on the other side.

Binding

Printed documents should open flat. Ensure you budget for binding if printed documents are a critical part of your information dissemination plan.
