

Tips for Writing in Plain English

LITERACY FACTS TO THINK ABOUT BEFORE YOU START¹

- Literacy is the ability to understand and use written information to function well. It brings together language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking with thinking.
- Approximately 45% of the Western Australian population has 'poor' to 'simple' literacy levels. This means they struggle to read every day printed materials².
- 35% of Western Australians have the minimum literacy skills considered necessary to cope with everyday demands². They are only able to cope with written material that is clearly laid out.
- Only 20% of Western Australians have 'good' to 'very good' literacy levels².

WHAT IS PLAIN ENGLISH?

- Plain English (also known as plain language) is language that is plain, simple and has as few technical terms as possible.
- Plain English is defined as "language that the intended audience can understand and act upon from a single reading".

PARENT AND PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENTS

An information statement is an important tool for a parent and participant deciding to take part in research.

- You will not know the literacy level of your parents or participants and so it is necessary to write as simply as possible.
- Try to imagine yourself as the parent or young person who is being asked to consider taking part in a research project – the information they need to get might be different from the information you would need to get.
- Readability is not only about the type of language you use, the design and layout of information is very important.

WRITING TIPS

Put the reader first

- Write directly to the reader, as though you are explaining the facts in person.
- Use "we" and "you". It addresses the person directly, it is familiar and friendly and the tone is warmer.

Use words the reader will know

- Avoid using technical or specialised terms unless you know your readers will understand them.
- If you need to use a specific term, don't forget to define it.

Use simple, common words

- Your writing will be easier to understand if it's in everyday language.

Clinical examination	<i>USE</i>	Medical check-up
Clinician/physician	<i>USE</i>	Doctor or nurse

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Use short sentences and brief paragraphs

- Write short sentences – an average of about 22 words per sentence.
- Vary sentence length: too many very short sentences will read like a book for pre-schoolers.
- Have only one or two ideas in each sentence.
- If you need to explain a term, use a separate sentence.
- Do not sacrifice clarity for brevity. Brevity means being short in speech or writing. Use more words if it will help people to understand.
- Organise your thoughts into brief paragraphs, with one central topic in each.

Use active rather than the passive voice

- The active voice is more to the point and lively.
- The passive voice makes your writing more long-winded.

<i>PASSIVE</i>	<i>ACTIVE</i>
A summary of results will be sent to all study participants	We will send you a short report of the results
A small blood sample will be needed from your child	We will take a small blood sample from your child

Organise your information into a logical order

- It is important to order the information of what a participant is required to do. It should correspond to the time sequence of your study.

Positive phrasing

- Plain language generally phrases statements positively: “do this” rather than “don’t do this”.
- It is advisable to use negative phrasing for warnings: “don’t give this drug to anyone else”.

Avoid overcapitalisation

- Use capitals for proper names only eg Dr Joanne Jones.
- Use of lowercase makes your document appear cleaner and more informal.
- The use of capitals is old-fashioned and can intimidate your reader.

Abandon unnecessary words, jargon and euphemisms

Use of he/she/they

- It is becoming more acceptable to use ‘they’ as a general term.

Consistency of language

- You can often say the same thing using a number of different words: “research project/study/trial”.
- Using one single term will not confuse your reader.

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DESIGN TIPS

Break up slabs of text

- Your readers will tune out of long slabs of texts.
- Break up your text by using paragraphs, bullet or number points, and tables or diagrams.

Use lots of white space

- White space is important for legibility.
- Use wide margins with plenty of space between paragraphs of text.

Choose a typeface for readability

- Use a clear typeface.
- Use one typeface and font size throughout the document.

Don't shout

- Avoid use of bold or italics.
- Avoid setting words, sentences or paragraphs in CAPITAL LETTERS.

Alignment of text

- Left-aligned/ragged right is considered the best alignment as it increases legibility. It means words are even and prevents hyphenation (breaking of words between lines).

READABILITY TESTS³

What a readability test can do

- Calculate the length of words and sentences and therefore (this aspect of) difficulty of reading.
- Be a general guide to the readability of your document.

What a readability test can't do

It can't tell you:

- how complex the ideas are.
- whether the content is in logical order.
- whether the vocabulary is appropriate for the audience.
- whether the material appears in a form and type style that is easy or hard to read.

How to do a readability test in Word

To switch on: go to Tools > Options > Spelling & Grammar tab > Check box Show readability statistics > OK.

To do the readability test: go to Tools > Spelling & Grammar (readability stats will appear after the grammar and spelling check).



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IMPROVING YOUR TEXT

- Allow time to review and re-draft your document.
- Delete any repetitive information or unnecessary words and phrases.
- Take out any information that is not related to the main concepts.
- Remember to spell check your document.
- Ask someone unrelated to the project to read what you have written. Better yet, ask someone who is not a researcher or clinician.

¹ This document has been modified for a Western Australian audience and has been used with permission from Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne.

² Aspects of Literacy: Assessed Skill Levels Australia 1996, ABS Catalogue No. 4228.0. Commonwealth of Australia 1997.

³ Adapted from All About Readability. Cheryl Stephens 2000. Plain Language Network.