

The Power of Plain Language

Connect and Reach Across the Web

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After this talk, you will be able to:

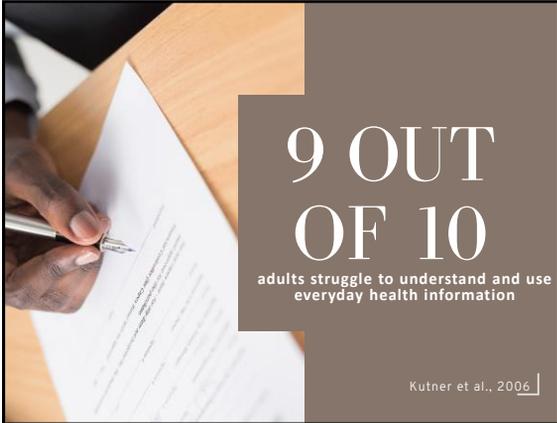
- Recognize the importance of plain language
- Identify ways to improve your writing using plain language

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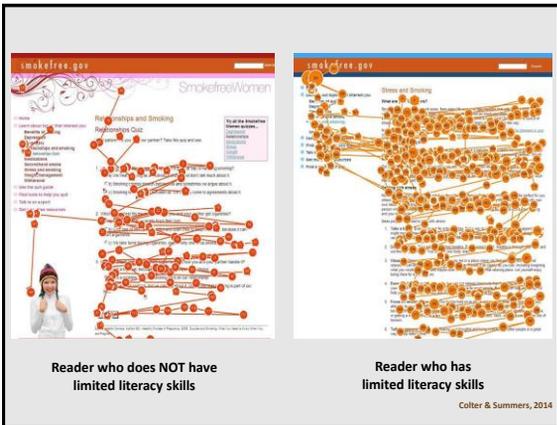
“The curse of knowledge:
when we are given knowledge,
it is impossible to imagine
what it's like to
LACK that knowledge.”

•Chip & Dan Heath,
Made to Stick

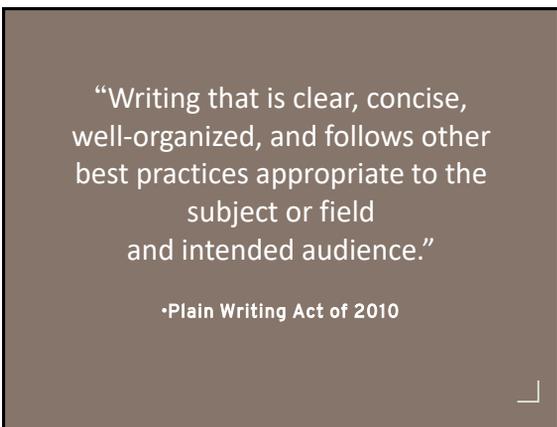
3



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Plain language is defined by results.



It is easy to understand, read, and use.

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Nielsen (2008) found that people read an average of 18% of the content on a web page. The percentage goes down with more text.

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Plain Language Principles

| | |
|---|---|
| Simplify complicated words Intermittent | Better term: Off and on |
| Explain terms as they are introduced Bone density screening | Further explain: A test to see how strong your bones are |

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Plain Language Principles

| | |
|--|---|
| Be specific Don't lift anything heavy. | Further explain: Don't lift anything over 25 pounds. |
| Avoid abbreviations PRN | Better: As needed |



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PASSIVE VOICE

Tests will be ordered by the doctor.

ACTIVE VOICE

The doctor will order tests.



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INDIRECT

The patient will submit the form to the doctor's office.

DIRECT

You will submit the form to the doctor's office.



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DIAGNOSIS

How Can I Prevent Getting Hepatitis C?

There is no vaccine to prevent **Hepatitis C**, but there is research being done to develop one. Currently, vaccines are only available for **Hepatitis A** and **Hepatitis B**. If you don't have Hepatitis C, you can reduce your risk of becoming infected by doing the following:

- If you're injecting street drugs, try to get into a treatment program. If you continue to use drugs, don't share needles or other equipment with anyone else. Many cities have needle exchange programs that provide free, sterile needles.
- Make sure all equipment has been sterilized if you're getting body piercings or a tattoo.
- If you're a healthcare worker follow your institution's safety precautions. For example, wear protective clothing and gloves and dispose of contaminated sharp objects properly.

Liverfoundation.org

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Shorter isn't always better

Version A: You can prevent problems from diabetes. You should lose weight. You should take your insulin as prescribed.

Version B: If you lose weight and take your insulin as prescribed, you can prevent problems from diabetes.

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“No matter how wonderful a sentence is, if it doesn't add new, useful information it should be removed.”

•Kurt Vonnegut

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Remove unnecessary words

| | |
|-----------------------|--------|
| A large number of | Many |
| In the event that | If |
| At this point in time | Now |
| Present a report | Report |
| Utilize | Use |



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Keep it conversational

- Contractions are okay.
- Avoid trendy abbreviations (you're not UR).
- Use first and second person (I, we, you).
- Write like you talk.



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Let's recap...

- Simplify words
- Explain terms as they're introduced
- Be specific
- Avoid abbreviations
- Use active voice
- Speak directly to readers
- Shorter isn't always better
- Remove unnecessary words
- Keep it conversational



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What about readability?

- Readability formulas assess difficulty of vocabulary and sentence structure
- Several options (Flesch-Kincaid, SMOG, Fry Formula)
- Results are often reported as a grade level

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How do they calculate readability?



1. Sentence length
(average words/sentence)

2. Word length
(average syllables/word)

Photo Credit: Andrew Roberts

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Hemingway App makes your writing bold and clear.

- Check inspection scores. **Check a restaurant's score at your health department's website** link the health department for a copy of the report, or look for it when you get to the restaurant.
- Look for certificates that show kitchen managers have completed food safety training. **Proper food safety training can help improve practices that reduce the chance of spreading foodborne germs and illnesses.**
- Look for safe food-handling practices. **Sick food workers** **Can't** spread their illness to customers. **Most kitchens are out of the customer's sight, but if you can see food being prepared, check to make sure workers are using gloves or utensils to handle foods that will not be cooked further, such as deli meats and salad greens.**
- Order food that's **properly cooked**. **Certain foods**, including meat, poultry, and fish, need to be **cooked** to a temperature high enough to kill harmful germs that may be present. If you've served **undercooked** meat, poultry, seafood, or eggs, send them back to be **cooked** until they are safe to eat.

Hemingway

Readability

Grade 7

Good

Words: 583

Share Here

- A Verbs: Aim for 3 or fewer
- B Uses of passive voice: Cut 50% of them
- C Prunes have simpler sentences
- D If 20 sentences are hard to read
- E If 20 sentences are very hard to read

Hemingway App

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The screenshot shows the Readable app interface. On the left, a document titled 'Untitled Document' is open, with several paragraphs of text. The text includes instructions about checking inspection scores, asking for health department reports, and food safety practices. On the right, a sidebar displays various metrics: 'FAVORS' (star icon), 'GRADE' (B), 'ISSUES' (21), 'REACH' (100%), and 'WORDS' (209). Below these are sections for 'Language Issues' (Spelling Issues: 2.1%, Grammar Issues: 3.27%), 'Readability Issues' (Sentences > 30 Syllables: 3.27%, Sentences > 20 Syllables: 8.67%, Words > 6 Syllables: 0.0%, Words > 12 Letters: 0.0%), and 'Writing Style Issues' (Passive Voice Count: 6.0%). The bottom of the sidebar shows 'app.readable.com'.

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The infographic is titled 'Simplify Numbers in Your Writing'. On the left, a bar chart shows 100 human figures, with 55 of them shaded brown to represent 55 out of 100. Below the chart, the text reads: '55 out of 100 adults struggle with quantitative skills' and '-National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 2003'. On the right, a list of tips is provided:

- Use absolute risk over relative risk
- Use frequencies, if possible
- Avoid decimals and fractions

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The infographic compares two ways of stating risk reduction for Alzheimer's disease. The top section, labeled 'RELATIVE', states: 'New drug reduced Alzheimer's risk by 50%'. The bottom section, labeled 'ABSOLUTE', states: 'New drug reduced Alzheimer's risk from from 2 per 100 people to 1 per 100 people'. A small icon of a person is in the bottom right corner.

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Beyond words and numbers

- Keep sections and paragraphs short
- Avoid typing in all caps
- Create white space
- Omit slashes and semicolons
- Create lists to break up text
- Use headers to guide your readers



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“In well-educated and well-trained adults, short-term memory can rarely store more than seven independent items at one time.”

•Doak, Doak, & Root (1996)



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A few notes on headings

- Use strong verbs and active voice
- Be as descriptive as possible
- Use questions to form headings



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Example 1

- What ketones are
- Why ketones are produced
- What happens when ketones are produced
- When to test for ketones
- How to test for ketones
- What ketone tests are available

Example 2

Ketones: What are they?
 What ketones are
 What happens when ketones are produced?

Testing for Ketones
 Why test for ketones
 When to test for ketones
 How to test for ketones
 What ketone tests are available

Example from:
 Doak, Doak, & Root (1996)

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A few notes on using lists

- Lead-in sentences give context (be sure to use parallel structure)
- Great to use when order is important
- Creates white space on the page
- Don't overuse

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Without lead-in sentence

Appointment needs

1. Your insurance card
2. Payment method for your co-pay
3. A list of questions for your doctor

With lead-in sentence

When you come to your appointment, please bring:

1. Your insurance card
2. Payment method for your co-pay
3. A list of questions for your doctor

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| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Without parallel structure</p> <p>At your appointment, your doctor will ask to review your:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • health history • current health concern • verify your medication list | <p>With parallel structure</p> <p>At your appointment, your doctor will ask to review your:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • health history • current health concern • medication list |
|---|--|

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About Arthritis

1. What is arthritis?
 Arthritis is a general term for conditions that affect the joints or tissues around the joint. There are more than 100 types of arthritis.

Most types of arthritis cause pain and stiffness in and around the affected joint or joints. Some types of arthritis, such as rheumatoid arthritis, also affect the immune system and some internal organs of the body.

Learn more about common forms of arthritis in the [Arthritis Types](#) section.

Experts use different definitions to gather information about arthritis in the population. Learn more on the [Arthritis Case Definitions](#) page.

2. What are the most common types of arthritis?
 The most common form of arthritis in the United States is [osteoarthritis](#). Other common types of arthritis include [rheumatoid arthritis](#), [psoriasis](#), and [fibromyalgia](#). Fibromyalgia is included in arthritis for public health purposes.

3. What are the symptoms of arthritis?
 Different types of arthritis have different symptoms. Pain and stiffness in and around one or more joints are common symptoms for most types of arthritis. Depending on the type of arthritis, symptoms can develop suddenly or gradually over time. Symptoms may come and go, or persist over time.

For information about the symptoms of specific types of arthritis, visit our [Arthritis Types](#) section.

4. What causes arthritis?
 Experts don't know the causes of many forms of arthritis. However, we do know that [gout](#) is caused by too much uric acid in the body. Sometimes specific infections can also cause arthritis.

Scientists are studying the role of factors such as genetics, lifestyle, and environment in different types of arthritis to learn more possible causes and risk factors.

For information about known arthritis risk factors, visit the [Risk Factors](#) page.

Source: CDC

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White Space ←

Diabetes

Diabetes is a disease in which blood sugar (glucose) levels in your body are too high. Diabetes can cause serious health problems, including heart attack or stroke, blindness, problems during pregnancy, and kidney failure.

Q: What are the different types of diabetes?
A: The three main types of diabetes are:

- **Type 1 diabetes.** If you have type 1 diabetes, your body does not make insulin, so you must take insulin every day.
- **Type 2 diabetes.** This is the most common type of diabetes. With type 2 diabetes, your body does not make enough insulin or is not able to use its own insulin correctly.
- **Gestational diabetes.** Gestational diabetes happens only during pregnancy. Gestational diabetes can cause health problems for the baby and the mother if not controlled.

Q: Am I at risk for diabetes?
A: Risk factors for **type 1 diabetes:**

- Age: It often develops in childhood.
- Family health history

Risk factors for **type 2 diabetes:**

- Overweight or obesity
- Older age: 45 or older
- Family health history
- Family background of African-American, American Indian/Alaska Native, Hispanic, Asian-American, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- Having a baby that weighed 9 pounds or more at birth
- Having diabetes during pregnancy (gestational diabetes)
- High blood pressure: Taking medicine for high blood pressure or having a blood pressure of 140/90 mmHg or higher. (Both numbers are important. If one or both numbers are usually high, you have high blood pressure.)
- High cholesterol: HDL cholesterol of 35 mg/dL or lower and triglycerides of 250 mg/dL or higher
- Lack of physical activity: People who are active less than three times a week
- Having polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)
- Personal history of heart disease or stroke

Source: CDC

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Always
check your
employer's
style guide



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Guidelines and Toolkits for Writing

Federal Plain Language Guidelines
<https://plainlanguage.gov/>

Teaching Patients with Low Literacy Skills
<https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/resources/teaching-patients-with-low-literacy-skills/>

Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Written Materials Toolkit
<https://www.cms.gov/Outreach-and-Education/Outreach/WrittenMaterialsToolkit>

ADA National Network, Guidelines for Writing
<https://adata.org/factsheet/ADANN-writing>

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Tools to Get You Started

Icon Array
<http://www.iconarray.com/>

Readable
<https://readable.com/>

Hemingway Editor
<http://www.hemingwayapp.com/>

University of Michigan Medical Dictionary
<https://www.lib.umich.edu/plain-language-dictionary>

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“Anyone who says writing is easy isn’t doing it right.”

•Amy Joy

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Questions?

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References

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