

Help with writing in plain language, readability of participant materials & presenting information

Help with writing in plain language

Some useful free resources exist to help you with writing in plain language, including:

The Plain English Campaign

- How to write in plain English:
<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/howto.pdf>
- The A-Z of alternative words:
<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/alternative.pdf>
- How to write medical information in plain English:
<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/medicalguide.pdf>

European Commission

How to write clearly (this guide is available in 23 languages)

<http://bookshop.europa.eu/en/how-to-write-clearly-pbHC3212148/?CatalogCategoryID=SIKABst.SEAAAEjGJEY4e5L>

For readers with additional needs (learning disabilities) you may need to produce easy read documents – an example of guidance on producing easy read documents is available from Mencap:

<https://www.mencap.org.uk/easyread-video>

Readability

Numerous tools exist to help you calculate the readability of your participant materials, for example: SMOG (grade level) and Flesch (artificial reading ease scale), and there are specific tools within Microsoft Word to assess readability:



<https://support.office.com/en-gb/article/Test-your-document-s-readability-85b4969e-e80a-4777-8dd3-f7fc3c8b3fd2>

Further guidance on readability can be found in the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education resource “Readability: How to produce clear written materials for a range of readers”:

<http://shop.niace.org.uk/readability.html>

Whichever readability tool you use it is worth noting the words of caution of Tony Maher (General Manager of the Plain English Campaign) and Rudolf Flesch (readability expert) about using readability indices:

Statement from Tony Maher (General Manager of the Plain English Campaign)

We always warn people not to rely totally on readability indices. They make a good starting point in making sure your writing is clear, but they are by no means everything. Their main weakness is that they take no account of context, design or meaning. For example, 'The cat sat on the mat' has exactly the same readability index as 'The mat sat cat the on.' Readability is also dependent on design - a document in 6-point type will not be as legible as one in 12-point type.

The formulae take account of the average number of syllables in each word. While this is useful, there can be many technical and uncommon words which, while having only a few syllables, will still be unfamiliar to many readers, and these will not adversely affect the readability score.

These formulae also assume that everyone finds every long word to be difficult to read - this simply isn't the case either.

We accept that doctors, lawyers and engineers will have an extended vocabulary of long technical words that they use in their professions. But, many manual workers such as plumbers, builders and electricians are just as likely to have a large extended vocabulary of long words.

A document written in plain English should only contain technical terms the intended audience can understand. If you are writing to a solicitor you can leave the legalese in - they will understand it. But, if you send the same letter to a member of the general public you must remove or explain the legalese.

To assess if a document is written in plain English you need to test that document is right for its intended audience.

The following tests (which use the number of syllables per word in their calculations) will be good at identifying simple documents but won't be able to identify a document written in plain English:

- * Fogg (number of years schooling scale);
- * SMOG (grade level);
- * Flesch (artificial reading ease scale); and
- * Flesch-Kincaid (grade level scale).

We prefer to use the passive percentage test and the average sentence length to analyse documents, as virtually all documents are made clearer by using active sentences and a relatively short sentence length.

(You can analyse text in 'Word' - if you type in the text it will give you the Flesch and Flesch-Kincaid levels.

Before you start any analysis it will be worth reading Sir Claus Moser's report on literacy and numeracy. This gives you a breakdown of the skills people have at various ages. You can get a copy of this off the Internet at: (www.lifelonglearning.co.uk).

Quote from Rudolph Flesch (readability expert)

“Some readers, I am afraid, will expect a magic formula for good writing and will be disappointed with my simple yardstick. Others, with a passion for accuracy, will wallow in the little rules and computations but lose sight of the principles of plain English. What I hope for are readers who won't take the formula too seriously and won't expect from it more than a rough estimate”.

Presenting information

The style of presenting information is equally important and guidance is available within the aforementioned resource: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education “Readability: How to produce clear written materials for a range of readers”:

<http://shop.niace.org.uk/readability.html>

Consideration should also be given to the accessibility of information, for example, for people with a visual impairment or colour blindness. Guidance about this exists, for example the Action for Blind People ‘Making it Clear’ guidance:

<https://actionforblindpeople.org.uk/support-and-information-page/information/everyday-life/tips-producing-printed-material/>