



# Plain Language for Public Health

**PUBLIC HEALTH**   
**COMMUNICATIONS**  
**COLLABORATIVE**

## Contents

About Plain Language.....	2
Prepare Your Communications .....	3
Develop and Organize Your Communications.....	5
Review and Testing .....	7
Plain Language Resources .....	9

# About Plain Language



## What is Plain Language?

Plain language is communication that is clear, accessible, and useful. The Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN) offers a three-part definition of plain language:

Plain language helps your audience to:



**Find** what they need



**Understand** the information the first time they read or hear it



**Use** the information to meet their needs

Source: Digital.gov. (n.d.). Plain language principles. <https://digital.gov/guides/plain-language/principles>

## How Can Plain Language Advance Public Health?

Effective public health communications are critical to help people stay informed and make decisions about their health. Information about public health can be confusing, jargony, and fast-changing, so communicating in plain language helps to translate and distill what people need to know. When accurate information about public health is hard to find or understand, it also becomes easier for false and misleading information to take hold.

Using plain language can advance health literacy, build trust in your organization as a source of information, and promote overall community health. While plain language won't solve every public health communication challenge, all health communications can be made more effective by communicating plainly.

## How to Use this Guide

In this guide, you'll find plain language principles, simple techniques that can make your communications more accessible, and resources to learn more about plain language. The sections of this guide contain best practices and tools to use before you start writing, when you're organizing your content, while you're writing, and when you're reviewing and testing your communications. The guide ends with additional resources to help you continue to build your plain language communications skills.

This guide is organized into four sections:

- Step 1: Prepare Your Communications
- Step 2: Develop and Organize Your Communications
- Step 3: Review and Testing
- Plain Language Resources

## STEP 1

# Prepare Your Communications

Before creating your messaging materials, you should know who your **audience** is and the **goal(s)** of your content. This section covers what you should know about your audience and how to define the goals of your messages and content.



## Audience

Understanding your audience’s needs and interests will help you create messaging that is simple, relevant, engaging, and clear. Because you need to communicate with diverse groups of people, think about your audience in specific terms, and not just as the “general public.” The more you know about your audience and the more specific you can be, the better you can tailor your message.

Before you start writing, try to answer the following questions.

Question	Why do you want to know this?
<b>Who is my target audience? Consider age, language, cultural background, household size, occupation, etc.</b>	These factors will influence how you write and deliver your message—and how your message will be heard.
<b>Is there a smaller group within my audience that I need to address directly?</b>	Being as specific as possible will ensure that the appropriate people receive and understand your message.
<b>What does my target audience understand and believe about this topic?</b>	Based on what your audience already knows, thinks, and feels, you can make decisions about how much background you need to provide and what other information they need to fully understand your message.
<b>What questions might my target audience have about this topic?</b>	Anticipate their questions and include them proactively.
<b>Where and when are they most likely to see this communication?</b>	Considering the place, time, and medium (e.g., digital, print) they will get this information will help you share your message in a timely and appropriate way.
<b>What steps do I need to take to ensure my message is accessible?</b>	Understanding the ways that people receive information, along with the barriers they might face to receive information, helps you create a message that reaches your target audience. Consider your audience’s language, technology, and access to communications channels. Apply <a href="#">accessibility best practices</a> to content across formats.



## Example: Defining Your Audience and Goals

Imagine you are preparing multilingual communications on the importance of flu vaccines for populations at high risk for severe illness. The process of determining your audience may look like this:

### Who is my target audience?

- Older adults, caregivers of young children, and their families.
- English-speakers, Spanish-speakers, Vietnamese-speakers. (See *call out box for more information*)

### What do they already understand or need to know more about this topic?

They are likely aware that the flu season is coming up, but they might need a refresher on:

- The value of flu vaccines.
- Where and when to schedule a flu vaccine.
- Who is most at risk for severe illness from the flu.

### Where and when are they most likely to see this communication?

People in these communities have responded well to postcards and email marketing, so I will include messaging in our regular e-newsletter and monthly community brochure mailing. Also, it will be important to make information available at schools, health clinics, and community centers.

### What questions might they have?

- Do I really need a flu shot every year?
- Is it too early or too late to get a flu shot?
- How do I schedule an appointment?
- Is the flu shot safe for me?
- What else should I do to keep my family and myself safe?

### What are your communication goals?

Knowing the goals of your communications will help you decide what to include and where to publish your content. Before you start writing, determine what the intended outcome of your message is.

Goals for this communication may include:

- Provide updated guidance about the flu season.
- Increase awareness about who is most at risk for severe flu.
- Increase the flu vaccination rates in the specific target communities.
- Correct misleading information about the flu shot.



## Plain Language and Translations

Before you start writing, decide what languages are most effective to communicate with your audiences. Prioritizing translations and multilingual communications from the start, as needed based on the context, will help you create materials that are accessible, understandable, and culturally relevant.

While many of the plain language best practices in this guide are relevant across languages, some of the tips may not always be relevant. For more plain language resources in languages other than English, visit plain language around the world.

Ask yourself:

- Are you working with a professional translator? Do you need to share any localized context to inform the translation?
- How can you involve individuals from the community in the creation or review of the material?
- Are you using imagery? Are the images and photos culturally relevant?
- Are there words, phrases, or topics that are culturally sensitive or have different connotations across audience?

## STEP 2

# Develop and Organize Your Communications

Now that you have a strong understanding of your audience and the goals of your message, it's time to develop your material. In this section, you'll find tips on how to create clear, audience-centered messaging and how to effectively organize your messages for different platforms.



## Audience-Centered Writing

You will likely address community members differently than you would your public health colleagues. You should center your audience when communicating about public health, using the following tactics:

**Use everyday words and avoid jargon.** When working in a professional setting within your field, you might use words that are not widely understood by your audience. When you need to use scientific or technical terms, define or reword them as needed in plain language.

### ✘ Non-Conversational (uses jargon)

Our organization's Q1 goals and objectives led to this year's increase in capacity for our community cardiovascular health support group. If you are interested in submitting an application, please detail your interest and contact information.

### ✔ Conversational (uses plain language)

There are 35 spots available for our local heart health support group! If you're interested in joining, please fill out the form below, and we'll be in touch.

**Use short sentences with an active voice.** Short, concise sentences are more conversational and easier to understand. You should use the active voice where the sentence starts with the subject followed by the verb and object. When using the passive voice, the subject (often the most important piece of information) is near the end of the sentence. This active voice puts the important information (who? what?) at the beginning of the sentence, which requires less mental effort from your reader.

### ✘ Passive Voice

Taking the time to visit the dentist twice a year for a cleaning is recommended for most people over the age of two years old.

### ✔ Active Voice

Everyone ages 2 and older should get their teeth cleaned every 6 months.

**Use "you."** Writing in the second person makes your content more conversational and accessible. It helps the reader understand that you are sharing information meant specifically for them.

### ✘ Third Person

All students are encouraged to wash their hands often to prevent the spread of germs.

### ✔ Second Person

Remember to wash your hands! Washing your hands will protect you and your classmates from germs.

## User-Friendly Organization

The words you use matter, but it also matters how you organize them on the page. In the age of fast-paced messaging, people generally skim content, whether in print or online. [User experience experts have learned a lot](#) through eye-tracking research about how individuals review and process information. Based on this research, there are many simple design and organization choices that make interacting with your message as easy as possible—including headings, bullets, and other formatting. Whether you're creating web content or writing an email, article, e-newsletter, or social media post, consider the following techniques.

**BLUF.** BLUF is an acronym that stands for **Bottom Line Up Front**. Put the most important information you want your audience to read and understand at the front/top of the document. Even if they don't read the document through the end, you may still achieve the goal of your messaging using this technique.

### ✘ Burying the Lede

There has been a water main break in the City of Waterville. City technicians are determining the scope and source of the problem and are at work to fix the issue. Until then, drinking, brushing your teeth, washing produce, and feeding your pets with tap water may pose a health risk. A boil water advisory is in effect until further notice.

### ✔ Bottom Line Up Front

Do not use tap water to drink, brush your teeth, wash produce, or feed your pets as it may pose a health risk. City of Waterville residents should use boiled and cooled water only until further notice.

The boil water advisory is the result of a water main break. City technicians are working to fix the issue. We will update you when the issue has been resolved.

**Headers and Lists.** Headers are a great way to make text-heavy content more digestible. Break your content into sections and include headers for each section so that readers can jump to the information they need. Also break up paragraphs and make bulleted or numbered lists to make your content more digestible.

### ✘ A Long Trail of Commas

To reduce the spread of flu you should get vaccinated, wash your hands, stay home if you're sick, avoid close contact with people who are sick, and avoid touching your eyes, mouth, or nose.

### ✔ A Bulleted List

There are many ways to reduce the spread of flu. You should:

- Get your flu shot
- Wash your hands
- Stay home if you're sick
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick
- Avoid touching your eyes, mouth, or nose.

**Descriptive Links.** Descriptive links can support accessibility within your message. Readers want to know what hyperlinks lead to, and descriptive links will help them decide whether they want to click. Descriptive links also support SEO as search engines will be able to better determine the content of your webpage.

### ✘ Click Here

Good ventilation can help prevent you from getting and spreading respiratory viruses. To review 6 tips to improve ventilation and air quality in your home, [click here](#).

### ✔ Descriptive Link

Good ventilation can help prevent you from getting and spreading respiratory viruses. Here are [6 tips to improve ventilation and air quality in your home](#).

## STEP 3

# Review and Testing

You've determined your audience and goal, centered your audience when writing, and organized your content in a way that's easy to navigate and understand. Now, another best practice is to review and test your material before you release it.

Whenever possible, testing your public health communication will help determine whether your audience can understand and engage with the content successfully. This section covers how to approach internal review and user testing.



## Testing Messages

When you hear “testing” in the context of public health communications, you might think about research that explores how different messages resonate with a target audience. As a plain language practice, the goal of testing is to make sure your audience can find what they need and understand what they find. In this guide, we're discussing testing for plain language and comprehension—and not about other kinds of message testing (like polling and focus grouping) that focus on framing and resonance.

Test your materials as early as possible, revise based on the feedback you receive, and then test again.

You can conduct internal reviews and/or user testing, and ideally you would do both. Internal review is a good first step, as it can help you quickly get feedback about how clear your materials are, and you can make needed changes before conducting an external review. However, internal reviewers aren't an exact match for your target audience, or even if they are, they might have subject matter expertise that the typical person doesn't. Testing materials with members of your target audience helps you understand a lot more about how much your materials resonate and if your materials elicit the intended outcome. User testing is more expensive and takes more time, so it may not always be possible depending on your budget and how quickly you need to release your materials.

## Internal Review

Internal review is a useful first step in determining whether a message is clear and serves its intended purpose. Internal review can be done by a colleague who didn't write the material. Seek feedback from a colleague who isn't in your department and is not involved with the subject material. If you make any edits to put the material in plain language, a subject matter expert should then review it to make sure that the content is still accurate.

### *Questions to Ask Your Reviewer*

- In your own words, what do you think the goal of this content is?
- Who do you understand the audience of this message to be?
- How could we make this messaging more relevant to our target audience?
- Is the most important information clearly stated?
- Have we included the appropriate call(s) to action for our goals?
- Are there any words that are confusing or technical that can be replaced with a simpler word?
- Did you have to read any section of the draft twice before you understood it?

## User Testing

After completing an internal review, testing your materials with people in your target audience can help you confirm and add new or additional details to the internal feedback you received. In particular, user testing helps you understand more about how relevant, useful, and resonant the content is.

The approach to testing your materials may vary across type of material, rapid response vs. planned content, and other organizational factors. That said, here are a few questions to discuss internally when creating your user testing strategy:

- **Who should be included in the user testing?** The people reviewing your content should represent your target audience. Consider what you know about your audience and goals when deciding who should review your messaging.
- **What are we testing for?** Decide what information you want to gain and design your testing approach and any questions for your audience accordingly. There are many themes and questions you can ask your audience when testing your public health content:



### Readability

- Is the content easy to read and understand?
- Are there words or phrases that are confusing or not detailed enough?
- How many times did you have to read this message to understand it?



### Accessibility

- How did you access this content? Does this work on different browsers and on desktop and mobile?
- Is this graphic easy to read and understand?



### Relevance

- Does this relate to you or someone you know?
- Do you feel like this content was designed to support your lifestyle and health needs?
- Would you be able to easily relay this message to a friend or family member?



### Reactions

- How does the information make you feel (e.g., excited, anxious, scared)?
- What does this information make you want to do (nothing, share the content, another action)?

- **How should we test?** Start by creating your own plan for testing or developing a simple survey. There are many testing techniques to explore. PLAIN offers additional information on testing techniques to help you decide which would work best for your organization's needs:
  - » **Paraphrase testing:** In paraphrase testing, the reviewer will share their interpretation of the information in your message. Their understanding can help inform whether your message is being accurately presented.
  - » **Usability testing:** In usability testing, the reviewer uses your document, website, or other resource to find information. Their ability to find the information can help inform whether your resource can be easily used to provide readers with the information they need.
  - » **Comparative studies:** In controlled comparative studies, two resources are compared in testing to give quantitative data on which version leads to the goal.
- **What do we do with the feedback?** Once you make revisions to the original content based on the feedback you received, you should plan to test the content again.

LEARN MORE

## Plain Language Resources

Communicating in plain language can help your organization advance health literacy, build trust, and promote overall community health. Additional resources are available to help make your public health communications even more effective and clear.



### Plain Language Resources

- [Talking Health: A New Way to Communicate About Public Health](#) | de Beaumont Foundation
- [Toolkit for Making Written Material Clear and Effective](#) | Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services
- [EveryDay Words - Search](#) | Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- [Federal Plain Language Guidelines](#) | PlainLanguage.gov
- [Checklist for Plain Language on the Web](#) | PlainLanguage.gov
- [Readability Tool](#) | WebFX
- [Vaccine Messaging Guide](#) | Public Health Communications Collaborative



Public Health Communications Collaborative



[publichealthcollaborative.org](http://publichealthcollaborative.org)

### About PHCC

The Public Health Communications Collaborative is a learning and information hub for professionals who communicate about public health. Through relevant, timely, and practical communications tools and learning opportunities, we advance a public health system where everyone has what they need to make informed decisions about their health.

As a collaborative, PHCC draws on the expertise, insights, and on-the-ground knowledge of its partner network and public health leaders. Five organization partners steer the collaborative: CDC Foundation, the de Beaumont Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, Trust for America's Health, and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF).