

Handout: Plain language essentials for WIC

Use this handout to review and practice plain language skills and explore more resources from the WIC Statewide Meeting in August 2026.

Plain language is clear, concise, and well-organized writing that helps readers:

- **Find** what they need
- **Understand** it the first time
- **Use** the information to make informed decisions

Using plain language takes practice and may feel different from how we learned to write in school or in professional roles. Over time, it becomes easier and more natural.

Write for your audience

Write with your specific reader in mind by using words, examples, and a tone that matches what they need right now. It ensures the information feels relevant and digestible. When you tailor the detail and tone, readers quickly recognize what's meant for them and how to use it.

As you write, ask yourself:

- Who will read this?
- What do they need from me right now?
- Did I remove anything they didn't need?
- Does my tone sound human, direct, and helpful?

Tip: Using “you” can help you speak directly to your reader when appropriate.

Make the main point clear and say it early

Start with your purpose or key message in the first one or two sentences. People often skim. Leading with what matters helps busy readers immediately understand what they need to know, do, or decide.

As you write, ask yourself:

- Does the first sentence state the purpose?
- Would a busy reader know what to do and why it matters?
- Did I skip unnecessary background before the main point?

Remember: Most people spend about 15 seconds reading a message before moving on.

Break up ideas

Limit each sentence and paragraph to one clear idea and use headers to group information. Breaking up ideas makes text easier to scan and prevents readers from getting overwhelmed. Clear headers help them quickly find the information they came for.

Ask yourself:

- Does each sentence contain just one main idea at a time?
- Does my paragraph stick to one topic?
- Does my header summarize the section and include an answer or action?

Note: Connecting words like “that”, “which”, “though”, “but”, “so”, “and”, or “therefore” often make sentences longer and harder to follow.

Use active voice

State clearly who is doing the action. Active voice builds trust and clarity by showing responsibility. It also makes instructions direct and easier to follow.

As you write, ask yourself:

- Did I say who is doing the action?
- Can I start my instructions with a verb?
 - Ex: “Documents are submitted here” → “Submit the documents here”

Use everyday words

Choose familiar, simple words your audience uses in daily life. Everyday words reduce confusion and make information sound friendly and conversational, instead of overly formal or technical.

Ask yourself:

- Can I swap this for a shorter word with the same meaning?
- Would I say it this way out loud?
- Does this sound too formal, bureaucratic, medical, scientific, or academic?

Tools to check and improve your plain writing

Use free tools to spot long sentences, complex words, and reading level. These tools highlight where clarity may slip and can guide adjustments. They support—but don't replace—plain language judgment and knowledge of your audience.

Hemingway Editor

Paste your text to check sentence complexity and reading level.

OHA recommends a 6th–8th grade reading level for general audiences. Use your professional judgment to choose the level that fits your readers. The tool flags dense or confusing sections.

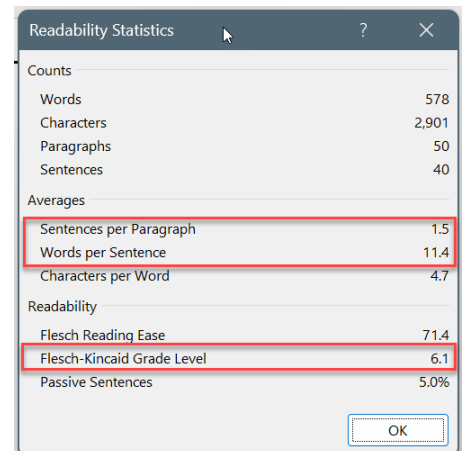
Link: <https://hemingwayapp.com>

Microsoft Word Editor

Provides readability statistics and highlights complex areas.

Steps:

1. Go to Review
2. Select Editor
3. Under Insights, choose Document Status
4. Readability Statistics will appear



Readability Statistics	
Counts	
Words	578
Characters	2,901
Paragraphs	50
Sentences	40
Averages	
Sentences per Paragraph	1.5
Words per Sentence	11.4
Characters per Word	4.7
Readability	
Flesch Reading Ease	71.4
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	6.1
Passive Sentences	5.0%

CDC: Your Guide to Clear Writing

A free PDF guide that expands on skills for writing clearly.

<https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/clearwriting/docs/clear-writing-guide-508.pdf>

Oregon Department of Administrative Services (DAS)

Plain language information and resources from the State of Oregon.

<https://www.oregon.gov/das/Pages/writingplainlanguage.aspx>

Plainlanguage.gov (Digital.gov)

Federal resources on plain language practices and writing tips.

<https://www.plainlanguage.gov/resources/>