

Writing and design tips



NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

National Adult Literacy Agency
Sandford Lodge
Sandford Close
Ranelagh, Dublin 6

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Check out our website

Go to www.nala.ie/plain-english for information on our plain English services and resources.

As well as the tips in this booklet, you'll find checklists to help you review your documents and links to our plain English guides to legal, political, environmental and financial terms.

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Why we produced this booklet

We thought it would be useful to produce a booklet of tips to make your materials easier to read and understand, especially for adults with unmet literacy needs. These people may find it hard to understand the information they need to exercise their rights and meet their obligations. It makes sense to present this information as clearly as possible to give everyone a fair opportunity to understand and act on what they read.



1 in **6** people has a literacy difficulty in Ireland

Literacy in Ireland

Literacy involves listening, speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology, and applying those skills in different settings. One in six adults in Ireland has a difficulty with the literacy tasks that are part of everyday life: filling in forms, understanding contracts, following instructions and so on. Many adults find it difficult to carry out straightforward tasks such as reading and understanding the dosage instructions on a medicine label.¹ But not all adults with literacy difficulties are the same – for example, some may be better at numbers than spelling and some may be better at reading than writing.

Changing demands on literacy skills

The literacy skills demanded by society are changing all the time. Some people with literacy difficulties may have left school confident about their numeracy and reading skills, but changes in their workplace and everyday life since then place new demands on their skills.

Literacy is like a muscle

You need to use and update your skills regularly or they weaken. Most adults with significant literacy difficulties can read short pieces of writing, but they may find it hard to understand longer or detailed documents, such as those produced by organisations.

If you or your organisation writes leaflets and other information for the public, you need to take this section of the population into account to make sure your efforts are as effective as possible.

¹ Results for Ireland of the OECD's Survey of Adult Skills, also known as the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult competencies or PIAAC, in 2012.

What is plain English?

Plain English is a style of presenting information that helps someone understand it the first time they read or hear it. It is a more efficient way of writing.

When you write in plain English, your reader can:

- find what they need,
- understand what they find the first time they read or hear it, and
- use what they find to meet their needs.

To write in plain English, you need to identify who your readers are and put yourself in their shoes.

What are the advantages of using plain English?

- Plain English increases the chance that everyone will understand your message, which saves time and avoids misunderstandings.
- Plain English makes good business sense. Studies have shown that when you use plain English, your reader can better understand your information. Organisations want to communicate well with their customers and customers want information that is quick and easy to understand.
- When you write your material clearly, people can make informed judgements. Most people do not want to be forced to read material more than once to understand the message and decide what to do next.

Plain English – before and after

To see the difference made by plain English, have a look at this 'before' and 'after' example.

Before

The hospital patient has the right to information relevant to his situation that must allow the patient the fullest insight into all aspects of his situation, medical and otherwise, and, on an informed basis, enable him to make his own decisions or to participate in decisions which have implications for his or her wellbeing.

After

You have a right to information about your condition that helps you fully understand it and make informed choices about your treatment.



Put yourself in their shoes!

Writing tips

Tips not rules

The tips in this booklet are not rules but guidelines to help improve your written information. Not all the tips will apply to every reader or every document, but they will go a long way towards making your information understandable to everyone.

Write for your audience

Keep your reader in mind and ask the following questions when writing your document.

- How familiar are they with the terminology your organisation uses?
- What subjects can you assume they understand?
- How will they read the document? Will they read it straight through or skip through it to the sections that interest them?
- Have you explained any details they may not be familiar with?
- Have you given the background to the information?

Use everyday words

There's nothing wrong with long words, but why use one when a short word will do? If you must use specialised language or jargon, however, explain what it means.

Be personal

Use 'I', 'we' and 'you' in your documents. This will help you to imagine your reader and help make the tone of your material less formal. It is easier for your reader to engage with the information when you address them directly.

Keep sentences short

Long sentences can be hard work to read. While there are no strict rules about sentence length, we advise you to keep sentences to an average of 15 to 20 words. Break up sentences with full stops rather than semi-colons, as people are more familiar with full stops.

Spell out acronyms

When using acronyms, such as NALA (National Adult Literacy Agency), spell them out the first time you use them. If your organisation uses lots of acronyms, make sure you have a list that spells them out.

Be consistent

Be consistent with any terms you use in your documents. For example, if you call something a 'review', use this term throughout your document. It can confuse your readers if you use the words 'evaluation', 'audit' or 'study' for the same thing.

Use active verbs

If you use active verbs your writing will:

- be clearer,
- seem more personal and direct,
- engage the reader, and
- usually need fewer words to say the same thing.

The table on page 11 gives some examples of active verbs and shows why they are easier to follow than verbs in the passive voice.

Don't ban the passive voice!

The passive voice puts a bit of distance between the person giving the information and the person receiving it. It is sometimes appropriate to use it – in some situations the active voice can seem too harsh.

For example: “If you do not pay us today, we will close your account.” This is active, but it may be the wrong tone for your organisation to use. In this case, you might prefer to use the passive voice: “If this account is not paid today, it will be closed.”

Because the passive voice can slow down someone when they are reading, you should use it only occasionally.

See how **active** verbs are easier to understand than **passive**

Passive verbs	Active verbs
<p>Sentences with passive verbs can be difficult to understand. These sentences are said to be written in the 'passive voice', in this order:</p> <p>object – verb – actor</p> <p>(You will sometimes see the 'actor' referred to as the 'subject'.)</p> <p>The cheque will be sent on Tuesday by John Smith.</p>	<p>Sentences with active verbs are easy to understand. These sentences are said to be written in the 'active voice', in this order:</p> <p>actor – verb – object</p> <p>John Smith will send you the cheque on Tuesday.</p>
<p>Passive sentences sometimes have no actor (subject) at all. This can be confusing because it is not clear who or what is doing the action.</p>	
Passive verbs	Active verbs
<p>The match was won.</p> <p>The cheque will be sent.</p>	<p>Ireland won the match.</p> <p>John Smith will send the cheque.</p>

Use plenty of signposts

Table of contents: In a long document, a table of contents helps people to find the information they are particularly interested in.

Introductory paragraph: If a section of a document is very long, it is a good idea to include an introductory paragraph that summarises the contents.

Headings: Headings and sub-headings help people to work their way around a page. They also make the text less intimidating.

Bullet point lists: Use bullet points to break down complex text into lists. This guide includes plenty of bullet point examples.

Use clear paragraphs

We recommend that you limit each paragraph to one idea. Leave some white space between each paragraph and avoid continuing a paragraph over a page.

Use questions and answers

Questions and answers are a great way to get information across or emphasise certain facts. They also mean people can go straight to the area that particularly interests them.

Checking your document

Proofread your document

It is vital that you proofread your document. It is best to do this some time after you have finished writing it – at least an hour later or preferably 24 hours later. This way, you will see it with fresh eyes and are more likely to notice errors. If possible, ask someone else to proofread it too.

Pay special attention to:

- spelling,
- numbers,
- names,
- dates,
- addresses,
- phone numbers, and
- e-mail addresses.

Use a house style

Most organisations have terms, phrases and internal jargon that they use repeatedly. It is very useful to have a 'house style guide' that everyone in your organisation uses. This can include the tips in this booklet and any writing or layout standards especially for your organisation.

To ensure the style guide remains useful, someone needs to keep it up to date and take on board suggestions from your staff or customers as new issues arise. Your house style can deal with specific points like those below.

Your organisation's name:

- How do you spell it?
- Do you use things like 'Limited'; 'Ireland Ltd'; 'Group'.

Job titles

- Do they take capital letters?
- Are they up to date?

Acronyms

- When do you use the acronym (for example NALA for National Adult Literacy Agency) for your organisation?
- What other acronyms do you use – in the organisation and when communicating with people outside it?

Jargon

- What jargon will everyone in your organisation understand?
- What are the standard explanations of internal jargon for people outside your organisation?
- What standard explanations for jargon might not be understood by everyone?

Test your document with readers

You should test your document to see that people will understand it quickly and easily. Even if it is an internal memo for a small number of staff, it is still worth asking people for their opinion.

People who know nothing about your area are sometimes the best at spotting unclear text. It is also worth testing your document with some of the people who are likely to use it.

Testing may save you money, time and energy in answering questions or in printing corrections later.

Avoid relying on readability formulas

Some people use readability formulas to calculate how difficult it is to read a piece of writing. You should treat these as broad guides, however, as they do not consider the content of your document, your reader's needs or whether your document helps your reader find information quickly. People are the best judge of any document.



Test your text with other people.

Document design tips

Whether you work regularly with a designer or design your own material in-house, you can use some of these guidelines to produce a publication that is easy to read and looks appealing.

Use good quality paper

Many types of paper are used for printing and each one reacts differently to ink. The best quality paper is 'uncoated'. Because of its surface, it takes ink well, which improves legibility.

The other benefit of uncoated paper is that it does not reflect light. Documents printed on uncoated paper are more accessible because there is no glare from the page. All NALA publications use uncoated paper.

Watch out for shadowing

Make sure your paper is heavy enough to avoid 'shadowing' – this is what happens when images or text on one side of a page can be seen through the paper. This makes reading difficult, so use a heavier or thicker paper to avoid this problem.

We printed this booklet on paper weighing 135gsm.

Ask your printer or paper supplier for advice, as some paper is more transparent than others.

Ensure a good contrast

White or light cream paper usually makes your text most readable. But you can use a light coloured paper or a solid background colour to make your publication more colourful.

For best results, make sure there is a strong contrast between the text and the background.

For example, this text is dark grey printed on a background of white.

When you use light coloured text on a dark background, use a bold font. This helps prevent the problem of ink filling in parts of the letter. This happens most often with a serif typeface.



Use at least 12 point type

We use 12 point (pt) text with all NALA publications because it is easy to read.

Make important points stand out clearly

When you want to emphasise a heading or a paragraph of text use a **bigger size** or **bold**.

Do not use all capital letters (also called upper case) to make points stand out. AS YOU CAN SEE FROM THIS EXAMPLE, THEY CAN BE DIFFICULT TO READ AND MAKE IT SEEM THAT YOU ARE SHOUTING AT YOUR READER!

Choose a readable typeface

Fonts are generally grouped as 'serif' or 'sans serif' (see illustration). If you use a computer, you will have access to a wide range of typefaces. But it is best to stick to clear, easy-to-read sans serif fonts like Arial or Helvetica. This booklet uses Avenir.



Word

The serif typeface is distinguished by a short stroke that projects from the end of the letter.

The other major group of typefaces is the sans serif, from the French word sans, meaning without.

Watch your line spacing

Line spacing refers to the amount of space from the bottom of one line of text to the bottom of the next line. Too little space and the reader will drop lines. Too much and the reader will be unsure if the lines of text refer to each other. If you are using 12 point text, the recommended line spacing is 18pt (or 1.5).

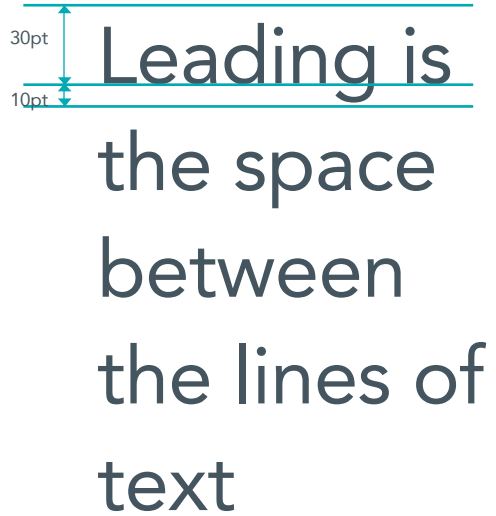
A similar term is 'leading' (pronounced 'ladding'), which refers to the amount of space between lines of text. The term is taken from the days when printers placed lead between lines of text to space them out.

Leading

The text opposite is 30pt and there is 10pt of space between the lines. This means the leading is 10pt.

Add the 30pt type size to the 10pt leading and you get the line space, which is 40pt.

If you were to ask a designer to lay out your text like this, you would ask for '30pt on 40pt' which is written 30/40pt.



Leading is
the space
between
the lines of
text

Avoid background images

Avoid using background images behind text. Many organisations use illustrations as a background image. This makes text harder to read, especially if the background image is very colourful.

Test your document on a number of people to see if they will understand it quickly and easily. Even if it is an internal memo, it is worth asking people for their opinion.

40%

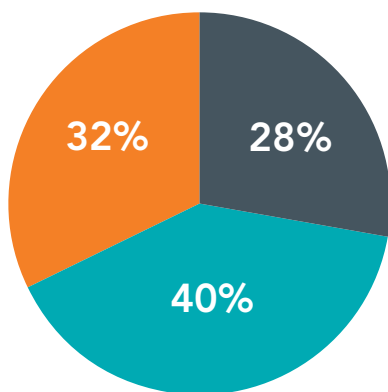
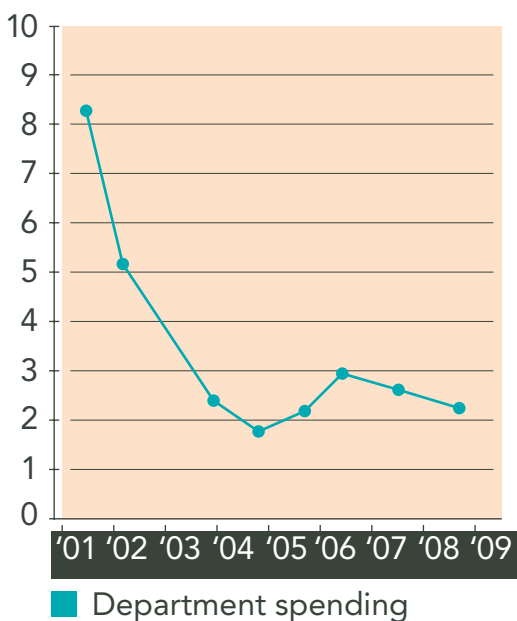
Test your document on a number of people to see if they will understand it quickly and easily. Even if it is an internal memo, it is worth asking people for their opinion.

15%

Background images, even if faint, make text difficult to read.

Graphs can help

Graphs and images can complement and offer a break from large amounts of text. When you use them thoughtfully, they can be a great way of emphasising important facts and figures. This means placing them near the relevant text and making sure they genuinely clarify or add something to your message. But remember your audience. Some people are not familiar with pie charts and bar charts and may not understand how they work.



Avoid justified text

Avoid using justified text because this can lead to large white space between words. This makes sentences difficult to read. It is best to use left aligned (also called ragged right) text, as shown below.

Justified text

This type of text can be called either 'left aligned' or 'ragged right'.

Try not to justify text, as this can lead to gaps in words. It is best to use left aligned and right ragged margins. Be generous with your margins.

Try not to justify text, as this can lead to gaps in words. It is best to use left aligned and right ragged margins. Be generous with your margins.

Words and phrases to avoid

In this part of the booklet, we include some common complicated words and long-winded phrases and suggested alternatives.

We also include samples of medical, legal and financial jargon and suggested alternative words or phrases that are more likely to be understood by non-specialist readers. Please note that some suggestions are intended to be broad alternatives rather than strict definitions or equivalents.

We recommend you use everyday words as much as possible, but if you must use jargon, consider using the suggested alternatives in your definitions.

Everyday words

Instead of	Consider
accompany	join
alternatively	or
ascertain	find out
audit	review
avail of	take up, take
benchmark	standard
beneficial	helpful, useful
bi-annually	twice a year
calculate	work out
cease	end, finish
commence	start, begin
confiscate	take from
consequently	so
constitute	make up, form
demonstrate	show
determine	check
disseminate	share, spread
endeavour	try, aim
eventuality	situation
facilitate	make easier, help, enable

Everyday words (continued)

Instead of	Consider
fundamental	basic
herewith	with
in lieu of	instead of
incremental	gradual, little by little
inter alia	among other things
interim	temporary, meantime
irrespective	regardless
locality	place
modification	change, alteration
operational	working
optimum	best, greatest, most
participate	take part
particulars	details
persons	people
quarterly	every three months
resident, residing	living
terminate	end, finish
utilise	use

Concise words

Instead of	Consider
adequate number of	enough
adjacent to	beside
as a result of	because
at the present time	now, currently
by means of	by, with
come to the conclusion	conclude
draw to your attention	point out, show
during such time	while
excessive number of	too many
for the duration of	during, until the end
for the purpose of	to
give an indication	indicate, signal
give consideration to	consider, think about
hold discussions, meetings	discuss, meet
in conjunction with	with
in possession of	have, own
in proximity to	near, close to
in receipt of	receiving, getting
in reference to	about
in respect of	about, for

Concise words (continued)

Instead of	Consider
in the course of	during, while
in the event that	if
in view of the fact that	because
it would appear that	apparently
large proportion of	many
make an application	apply
not in a position to	unable to
notwithstanding the fact that	despite, even if, however
not later than	by, on or before
on a daily basis	daily, every day
on behalf of	by, for
on condition that	if
on the part of	by
provided that	if, as long as
subsequent to	after
sufficient number of	enough
take exception to	disagree with, object to
under the provisions of	under
until such time that	until
with regard to	about

Medical terms

Instead of	Consider
acute	sudden and severe
administer	give
antenatal	before birth
anterior	front
audiology	hearing
benign	harmless
biopsy	studying tissue to check for disease
cardiology	studying and treating the heart
catheter	tube
central nervous system	brain and spinal cord
chemotherapy	treating cancer with drugs
chronic	long-lasting, slow to change
coagulate, coagulation	clot, clotting
congenital	from birth
contagious	spreading easily
contraindication	reason not to take
contusion	bruise
diagnosis	identifying a health condition

Medical terms (continued)

Instead of	Consider
dosage	how to take
elective	optional
epidermis	skin
excise	cut out
gastroenteritis	stomach illness
haemophilia	severe bleeding
hypertension	high blood pressure
immunise	protect
incision	cut
inhalation	breathing in
intravenous	through a vein
lateral	at (on) the side
malignant	harmful, cancerous
mammogram	breast x-ray
medication	tablets, injections (specify)
monitor	keep track of
myopia	short-sight
negative (test results)	you do not have, you are not
normal range	as it should be
ophthalmic	eye

Medical terms (continued)

Instead of	Consider
physician	doctor
positive (test results)	you have, you are
post-operative	after the operation
prognosis	likely outcome, chance of recovery
renal	kidney
respiration	breathing
rheumatology	muscles and joints
symptoms	signs of a sickness
therapy	treatment
trachea	wind pipe
ventricle	lower chamber of the heart

Legal terms

Instead of	Consider
aforementioned	already mentioned
annul	cancel
assign	transfer, give
benefactor	person giving money (or other support)
beneficiary	person who benefits
breach	break, disobey
consent	agree
convey	transfer, give
counterfeit	forged
duress	pressure
emolument	salary, fee
execute	carry out
force majeure	uncontrollable event
forfeit	lose
heretofore	before now
indemnity	promise not to sue, compensation
jurisdiction	power
legal representative	solicitor, barrister

Legal terms (continued)

Instead of	Consider
litigation	suing
merchantable	suitable for sale
misrepresentation	lying
negligence	carelessness
non-negotiable	cannot be changed, cannot be sold
non-transferable	cannot be given away
onus	duty
plaintiff	person bringing a case to court
proviso	condition
rescind	cancel
statutory rights	legal rights
subject to	depending on
summons	order to attend court
testify	give evidence
title	ownership, right to own
undertaking	promise
void	not valid
waive	give up a right or benefit

Financial terms

Instead of	Consider
accrue	build up
arrears	money owed after it is due
asset	property
balance	amount
benefit in kind	perk
capital	amount of money being invested
credit	loan
credit limit	maximum loan
creditor	person or company owed money
debit	payment from an account
debt consolidation	combining debts
debtor	person or company owing money
deeds	proof of ownership
default	miss a payment
depreciation	drop in value
exclusion	not covered
exempt	free from
expenditure	spending
gross	total
instalment	payment

Financial terms (continued)

Instead of	Consider
liabilities	debts
lump-sum	once-off payment
mature	come to an end
means	income or property besides a family home
net income	income after tax
outgoings	expenses, spending
overdue	not yet paid
overheads	costs
per annum	a year
policy	plan
policyholder	customer
premium	contribution, payment
principal	loan amount
remittance	payment
remuneration	pay, earnings
signatory	person who signs
surcharge	extra charge
transaction	payment into or out of an account
variable	can change
withdraw	take out

NALA services

NALA works with organisations to help them consider literacy issues across all their departments and in all their dealings with customers and with potential and existing staff.

Our services includes:

- guidance on literacy-proofing policies, practices and procedures,
- editing and training support to put documents into plain English,
- literacy awareness seminars for staff, including managers,
- advice, information and support on integrating literacy into staff training, and
- advice and information on workplace basic education programmes.

We have already provided advice, editing support and a range of training to:

- government and state departments,
- state agencies,
- local authorities,
- companies,
- further education and training centres, and
- voluntary organisations.

For more information about our services, please contact us on (01) 412 7900 or at info@nala.ie.

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Some of the listed words and phrases to avoid are reproduced from the Plain English Campaign's 'A-Z Guide of alternative words'.

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is a charity and membership based organisation. We work to support adults with unmet literacy and numeracy needs to take part fully in society and to have access to learning opportunities that meet their needs. NALA does this by raising awareness of the importance of literacy, doing research and sharing good practice, providing online learning courses, providing a tutoring service and by lobbying for further investment to improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

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National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)

Sandford Lodge

Sandford Close

Ranelagh

Dublin 6

Phone: 01 412 7900

Freephone: 1 800 20 20 65

www.nala.ie

www.learnwithnala.ie

info@nala.ie



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