



Use plain language

Plain language is for everyone

The main points

1. Using plain language is about safety, efficiency, fairness and effectiveness.
2. Choose your words carefully.

Plain language gets your message across

The Tasmanian Government Communications Policyⁱ states agencies must use plain language to ensure target audiences can understand information being communicated. A key resource on written communication is the [Communicate Clearly](#) booklet put out by 26Ten Tasmaniaⁱⁱ.

Plain language (or plain English) is everyday language written clearly, concisely and with the reader in mind. Using plain language is about safety, equity, fairness, respect, efficiency, effectiveness and customer service. It's *your* responsibility to make sure your audience understands what you write.

Plain language is different to Easy English, which is a way of writing for people who have difficulty reading. Writing in plain language means using words and grammar that are widely understood, and explaining terms your readers are unlikely to be familiar with. It's both a science (following well-tested rules) and an art (applying those rules in engaging ways).

When you use plain language, it gets your message across in the shortest time possible. More people will take the time to read your document and there is less chance your document will be misunderstood (so less time spent in time-consuming explanations). Your reader will get the information they need in language they understand. This makes it more likely they'll follow through with instructions, remember your message/s and feel involved and empowered.



Choose your words carefully

- **Sort out the ‘nice to know’ and the ‘need to know’ information.** Focus on the latter but tell your reader where he/she can get more information.
- **Organise information from your reader’s point of view** (for example, in the chronological order that things will happen) **and use headings**
- **Know your target audience** and use the words your target audience uses, this will help readers understand what you are writing.
- **Aim for a reading level of Grade 6–8** (typically ages 11–13 years)
- **Use the active voice, identifying who is doing the action.**
 - **Write:** *The nurse will check your dressing*
 - **Not:** *Your dressing will be checked by the nurse.*
- **Use ‘you’ and ‘we’** to talk directly to your readers. The reader is ‘you’. The health service or government agency is ‘we’. This will help engage your reader.
- **Keep it short!**
 - Aim for no more than five sentences per paragraph and 20 words per sentence. Phrases like ‘in the event of’ or ‘in accordance with’ rarely add value.
 - Take out the padding. Words like ‘very’, ‘really’, ‘currently’ and ‘actually’ often serve little purpose.
 - Don’t use long words when short words will do. Look for any words with three or more syllables and check that you really need to use them.
- **Avoid clichés** (‘go cold turkey’) **and jargon** (‘acute’, ‘renal’). To become a health professional, you had to learn the language of health care. Your audience didn’t. Remember, you are writing for your target audience, not a colleague.
- **Explain any jargon you need to use.** If there is no plain language alternative, use jargon but explain the term the first time you use it. For example: *A CAT scan is a painless test using a special X-ray machine to take pictures of what’s inside your body. When you have a CAT scan, you need to lie very still on a bench inside a dough-nut shaped machine that circles the body.*
- **Don’t overuse abbreviations.** If the word or name you want to abbreviate only appears once or twice in your document, spell it out each time.
- Focus on the positive, not ‘should’ and ‘don’t’. This will help you create friendly tone that readers will be more receptive to. For example:
 - **Write:** *It’s very important to keep weight off your injured foot during your recovery. The injured tendon needs rest in order to heal.*
 - **Not:** *Don’t do any activities that put weight on the injured foot. You should rest.*

ⁱ Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Tasmanian Government Communications Policy*, DPAC, Hobart, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Tasmanian Government, 26TEN. *Communicate Clearly, A Guide to Plain English*, Hobart (2013).