# APPENDIX Q: PLAIN LANGUAGE TIPS FOR ASSESSING AND/OR DEVELOPING WRITTEN MATERIAL FOR CLIENTS[[1]](#footnote-1)

### Content

**Word Choice**

* Avoid noun strings
* **Original:** Children’s Hospital has a hospital employee relations improvement program.
* **Revision:** Children’s Hospital has a program to improve employee relations.
* Omit unnecessary words
  + **Original:** In the event that an earthquake occurs while you’re driving, park in a safe location and set the parking brake.
  + **Revision:** If an earthquake occurs while you’re driving, park in a safe location and set the parking brake.
* Use pronouns
* **Original:** The Department of Public Health believes that all Los Angeles residents should have access to safe drinking water.
* **Revision:** We believe that you should have access to safe drinking water.
* Use contractions
* **Original:** If you do not pay your co-pay, the doctor will not see you.
* **Revision:** If you don’t pay your co-pay, the doctor won’t see you.
* Replace passive voice with active voice
* **Original:** The pamphlet was created by the health educator.
* **Revision:** The health educator created the pamphlet.
* Avoid jargon
* **Original:** The patient is receiving positive-pressure ventilatory support.
* **Revision:** The patient is on a respirator.
* Use parallel structure
* **Original:** Public health accomplishments include developing vaccinations, ensuring safer work places, and the control of infectious diseases.
* **Revision:** Public health accomplishments include developing vaccinations, ensuring safer workplaces, and controlling infectious diseases.
* Simplify word choices

**Don’t Use**

* + Facilitate
  + Methodology
  + Parameters
  + Utilize

**Use**

* + Help
  + Method
  + Limits
  + Use

**Sentence Structure**

* Write short sentences. Short sentencesare those between 15-20 words
* **Original:** Often times, there are no symptoms of breast cancer, but signs of breast cancer can include a breast lump or an abnormal mammogram.
* **Revision:** There are often no symptoms of breast cancer. However, warning signs can include a breast lump or an abnormal mammogram.
* Avoid double negatives. Double negatives are two negative words used in one sentence
* **Original:** It was so hot, I couldn’t hardly breathe.
* **Revision:** It was so hot, I could hardly breathe.
* Place words carefully
* **Original:** Persons other than the patient may not view the test results.
* **Revision:** Only the patient may view the test results.
* Keep your writing positive
* **Original:** Patients may not, without first obtaining a referral, book an appointment with a specialist.
* **Revision:** Patients may book an appointment with a specialist after obtaining a referral.

**Words the Convey Negative Tone**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Anxious | Error | Neglect |
| Avoid | Incomplete | Never |
| Delay | Ineligible | Problem |
| Deny | Lack | Unclear |
| Dishonest | Mistake | Unless |

### Organization

In addition to content, a document’s organization affects the audiences’ ability to understand messages. The use of color, pictures, bullets, individual text boxes for important information, and white space make documents more visually appealing for the reader and can emphasize main messages. It’s also important to consider the following guidelines when organizing a document:

* Use white space effectively. Don’t crowd documents with too much information.
* Uses informative headings. This allows readers to quickly scan the document for needed and/or information of interest.
* Use bold and italicized font for emphasis.
* Contain vertical lists where necessary. Vertical lists are easier to see the content contained in paragraph form.
* Use left justified columns only to prevent irregular word spacing.

### Readability

Several tools exist to evaluate the readability of a document. They include:

* **SMOG:** A formula that estimates the reading level of your text. SMOG stands for “Simple Measure of Gobbledygook” and is a formula that estimates the reading level of documents. There are SMOG calculators online or calculate the grade level of your document manually. The formula uses the number of sentences and the number of polysyllabic words in a document to help calculate a reading level. More information is available online at: <http://www.readabilityformulas.com/smog-readability-formula.php>
* **Fry:** A graph that estimates the reading level of your text. To use the graph, randomly select three 100-word passages from a document. Use the graph to plot the average number of sentences in the 100 word passage and the average number of syllables to determine the corresponding reading level of the document. More information is available online at: <http://www.readabilityformulas.com/fry-graph-readability-formula.php>
* **Microsoft Word Readability Statistics:** A function that estimates three elements of readability: the percentage of passive sentences in the document, the Flesch reading ease, and the Flesch-Kincaid grade level. To enable enable readability statistics in Microsoft Word:
  1. Click the Microsoft Office button and select ‘Word Options’
  2. Click ‘Proofing’
  3. Check ‘Show readability statistics’
  4. Click ‘Spelling and Grammar’

The passive sentences score gives you the percentage of passive sentences in your text. Aim for a passive sentences score below 15%. The lower this number, the higher the readability. The Flesch reading ease score rates text based on the average number of syllables per word and words per sentence. The higher this score, the higher the readability. Aim for a score of 60 or higher. The Flesch-Kincaid grade level analyzes your text and rates it based on the U.S. grade level system. Aim for a grade level between 6 and 7 because **most U.S. adults read at or below a 7th grade reading level**.

1. Content taken from:

   County of Los Angeles Department of Public Health, Health Education Administration (HEA). “Say it Right the First Time: Using Plain Language to Improve Communication.” Presented by Susan Srabian on August 26, 2010 at the *HIV/AIDS Update* sponsored by the Office of AIDS Programs and Policy. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)