

Using plain language in your writing

Many of the people who work at Toitū Te Whenua are subject matter experts – but we often communicate with people who aren't. We need to use plain language so everyone can understand what we're saying.

Only 16% of New Zealand adults have high literacy levels. If you use difficult words and long sentences a lot of people will struggle to understand you.

People with high literacy levels can read more complex text, but most prefer to read plain language.

Plain language:

- takes less effort to read
- is easier to understand (and is less likely to be misinterpreted)
- causes less frustration.
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Plain language doesn't mean you are 'dumbing it down' – research has shown it will actually make you seem smarter.

- Use clear, simple language.
- Avoid jargon.
- Break up long, complicated sentences into a couple of short, simple sentences.
- Aim for a friendly but trustworthy tone.
- Write directly to the reader (use 'you' and 'we' if appropriate).

Basically, write like you are explaining the topic to someone in an informal setting like a backyard barbecue. Flatter the reader by helping them understand a complicated topic (without being patronising).

Checklist for Plain Language

Wellington-based writing consultants Write Group have created a checklist to assess readability. The 10 statements 'describe the features of a clear, reader-friendly document'. If all of these statements are true, the writing should be easy to read.

Write Plain Language Standard

'Big picture' elements:

- The purpose of the document is clear at the start.
- The content supports the purpose of the document.
- The structure of the document is clear and logical to the reader.
- The headings signal the key content.

Language elements:

- The paragraphs are mostly short and focused on one topic.
- The sentences are mostly short and straightforward.
- The words are precise and familiar.
- The tone supports the purpose of the document.

Presentation elements:

- The layout and presentation help the reader absorb the message quickly and easily.
- The document is error-free and consistent with your style guide.

Remember that it's hard to judge your own writing in the same way that other people do. If you know the content well it's easy to follow the logic of your document, you'll understand the words you've used, and you might skip over typos or errors that other people would see. Ask someone else to critically assess what you've written and see what they think.

If your writing fails any of the items in the checklist, put it aside for a few days and try to look at it again with fresh eyes. The solution might be as simple as changing a few words or rearranging what you've written.

[Find out more about the Standard and Write Group on their website](#)

Online tool

Hemingway Editor

Ernest Hemingway is famous for writing in short, simple sentences. The Hemingway Editor encourages you to do the same by highlighting longer sentences and difficult words. If you fix these problems your writing will become much easier to read. To be sure most people can read our content we usually aim for a grade 6 or 7 reading age.

[Try Hemingway Editor](#)

Resources to read

plainlanguage.gov

The US Government's plain language guidelines include good instructions on writing for your audience, using simple language, and using a conversational style.

[Read the plainlanguage.gov guidelines](#)

Content Design London readability guidelines

Content Design London have produced a simple set of readability guidelines. These cover plain language as well content design and accessibility, such as what to bear in mind when you write for the web, and how to use images.

[Read the Content Design London readability guidelines](#)