NEW YORK STATE | Council on Developmental Disabilities

Using Plain Language

Plain Language Goals

Help your audience to:

- **Quickly find** what they need
- **Understand** what they find
- **Use** what they found

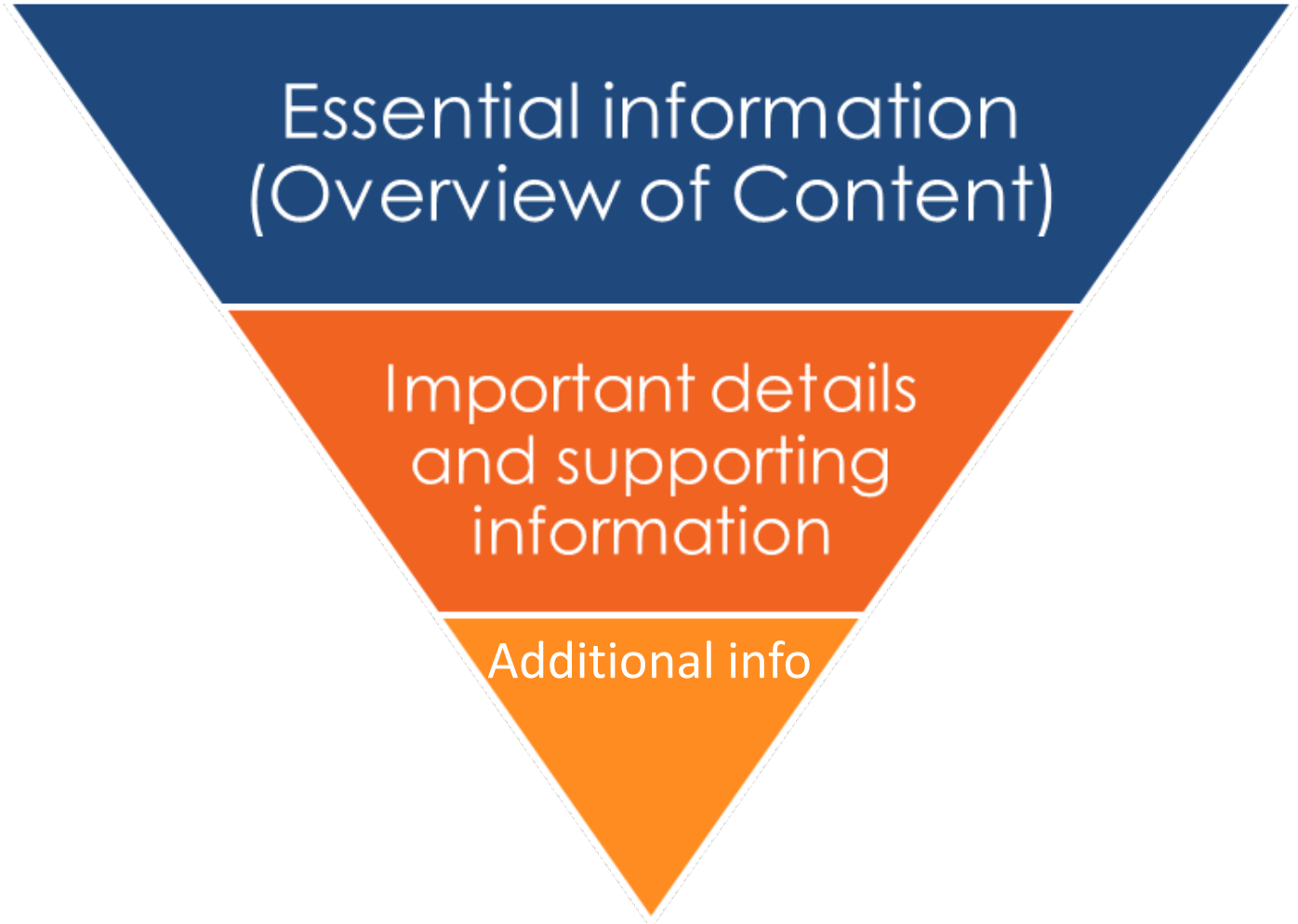
Overview

- Write for your audience
- Important information first
- Use thoughtful headings and formatting
- Shorter sentences
- Use more common words
- Use clear & straightforward language
- Give definitions for more complex terms/jargon
- Avoid unnecessary information

Who is this for?

- Who is my audience?
- What does my audience already know?
- What does my audience need to know?
- What questions will they have?

Get to the point.



For example:

Apply to be a Council Member!

To apply complete the form on the CDD website: CDD.NY.GOV

Council members have many duties. They:

- serve on committees and subcommittees,
- attend full Council and committee meetings,
- take part in discussions, presentations, development of projects and initiatives,
- review and vote on funding motions, and
- review and approve State Plans.

NEW YORK STATE Council on Developmental Disabilities

Use headings to organize the text

Main Heading

Sub-headings

Policy Recommendations

Invest in Infrastructure and Explore New Ways to Fund Transportation

To empower all people to explore their communities, investments must be made in strong infrastructure. Curb-cuts, accessible signals, ramps and accessible stops and stations build inclusive communities. Access and accommodations need to improve across all modes of transportation, from walking to flying.

Reliable transportation can be expensive for people with disabilities, even though some transportation is covered through government funding like Medicaid. As an alternative, the state could provide reimbursement or funding to allow people with developmental disabilities to pay friends, family members or neighbors for rides.

Educate Transit and Paratransit Professionals

Increased education and training are necessary for professionals across all modes of transportation. Education should include giving respect and dignity to people with disabilities, as well as practical, hands-on training in passenger assistance. All drivers, conductors and attendants should know the laws around access. This includes the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA). Airport personnel should learn to safely handle wheelchairs and other assistive devices. Anyone handling baggage should know the risks people face with lost or damaged equipment.

Train People with Disabilities and Their Families and Caregivers

People with disabilities and their families need to understand their rights. This will help them better advocate for themselves. More people with disabilities can find their independence using public transportation. Travel training and wayfinding can help people with various disabilities navigate their communities. Most people learn about transportation by talking to people they know. [10] Education should target people with disabilities, local organizations, non-profits with existing connections and family members or caregivers. This might also include parent-groups or community centers. Information should be available in accessible language and in languages other than English.

Shorter Sentences

- The ideal sentence is 10-15 words or fewer

Tips for shorter text

❑ Phrases like “In order to” can just be “to”

❑Look for commas, parenthesis, dashes, and joining words

❑Can these be made their own sentence instead?

Example:

Original: Compared to their non-disabled peers, people with disabilities take fewer trips outside their home per day and stay out for less time, as a result of the many barriers this population faces in transportation.
(34)

Plain Language: People with disabilities take fewer trips outside their home daily. (10) When they do go out, they stay out for less time. (11) This is because this population faces many barriers in transportation. (10)

Using Common Words

- Try to keep language basic
- Be on the look out for simpler words that mean the same thing
- Don’t be afraid to use a thesaurus
- Ask yourself is this word only common to me because of my field of work? Because my friends are highly educated?

Using Common Words

I'll attempt to assist → I'll try to help

There may be more than one way to simplify. Pick the translation that best matches your meaning

The process is labor intensive → The process is difficult
The process takes a lot of work.
The process takes a lot of time.

Explain complex words or jargon

- Sometimes complex words or jargon are unavoidable
  We usually keep terms that readers are likely to encounter again outside of our document. Like “affordable housing” or “care management”
- The definition should come right after the first time you use a complex term.
- You only need to define the term one time
- The definition can be more than one sentence

Explain complex words or jargon

- They were institutionalized.
- This means they lived in buildings that were only for people with disabilities. A lot of people lived in the building. They could not leave when they wanted. They were separated from people who did not have disabilities. They couldn’t decide how they lived their own lives.

Explain complex words or jargon

- When you keep complex words, it might make sense to have a “words to know” section which lists the words and definitions.

Affordable Housing: Housing which costs less for people who make less money.

Use Examples

- Third-person examples can help people contextualize and understand.

Original:

If you want travel training, you might try and call the Program, but they might not have an open spot.

Plain Language:

Sarah wants to get travel training. She wants to learn to ride the bus. She calls the Program. The next class is already full.

Avoid unnecessary language

- Leave out information your reader doesn't need.
- Unnecessary info can distract from the main point and/or confuse readers.
- Be deliberate. What is the point of each sentence?
- So what?

Avoid unnecessary language

- Example
  - People from the convention often carry bags from table-to-table to pick up resources at each table in the center because lots of agencies participate.
  - A lot of agencies come to the convention. They put out resources on each table.

Use Clear Language

- Be careful with pronoun use
  - With words like “they” “this” and “it” it must be clear who or what it refers to.
    - How many subjects could the pronoun be referring to?
  - Sometimes it is better to say the subject again instead.

Use Clear Language

- Example
  - People with disabilities often work with support staff. They help them to be a part of the community. That is important for them to meet goals.
  - People with disabilities often work with support staff. Support staff help people with disabilities to be a part of the community. Being a part of the community is important to meet the goals of people with disabilities.

Use Straightforward Language

- Avoid sarcasm, metaphors, and figures of speech
- Read each sentence literally. Can it be misunderstood?
- For example:
  - Registering is a piece of cake!
  - Registering is easy!

Use Active Voice

- In active voice, the **subject** performs the **action**.
  - Sam stole the cake → Active
  - The cake was stolen → Passive

Use Active Voice

One was to help identify passive voice is to add “by Jeff Goldblum” after the **verb**.

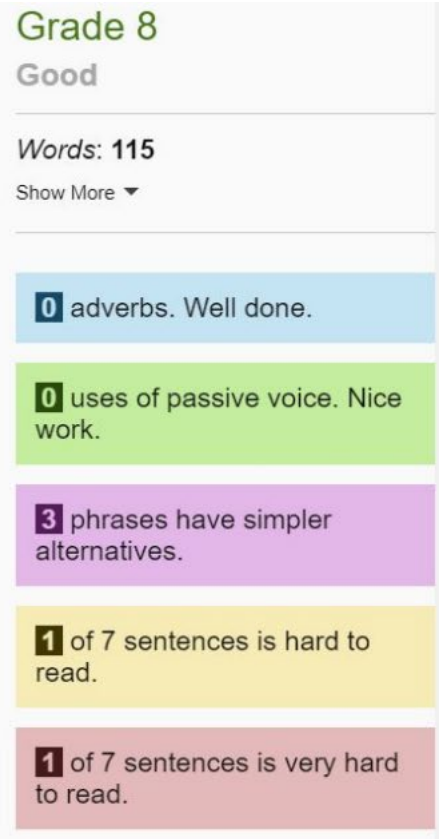
- The cake was stolen by Jeff Goldblum
- Sam stole by Jeff Goldblum the cake

If the sentence still makes sense, it is passive

Check Reading Levels

Hemmingway Editor: https://hemingwayapp.com/

All reading level checkers score reading level using a group of scales. These scales can show a wide range of reading level scores for the same content.
It is generally easiest to take the average of all of these scores as your overall reading level. However, you should also go through the document and check places that the websites flag as being less accessible.
Some of these flags may be for reasons that don't matter. For example, many readability checkers flag adverbs as being difficult to understand, even though our readers have never had trouble with them.
Other times, these flags may be a good hint to shorten a sentence or change a word.



Questions?