

Plain-language writing guide

Practical rules and worked before-and-after examples for turning technical findings into something a busy decision-maker will actually finish reading.

Why this matters

A finding that isn't read doesn't change anything. Decision-makers are busy, not careless — writing that respects their time gets acted on more often than writing that impresses.

Core rules

1. **Lead with the point.** Put the takeaway in the first sentence — not the third paragraph.
2. **One idea per sentence.** If you need "and" plus a comma to fit it in, split it.
3. **Use common words over technical ones.** Define any term you must keep, the first time you use it.
4. **Prefer active voice.** "We found" reads faster than "it was found that."
5. **Write to a specific reader.** Use "you" when you know who's reading.
6. **Replace vague magnitude words.** "Significant" and "substantial" mean nothing on their own — say what changed, compared to what.
7. **Break paragraphs at the natural pause,** not just when they get long.
8. **Read it aloud.** If you stumble, so will your reader.

Before → after

BEFORE

"Utilization of the intervention was found to be positively correlated with a statistically significant increase in self-reported wellbeing among participants in the treatment cohort relative to control."

AFTER

"People who used the program more often said they felt better than people who didn't."

BEFORE

"Stakeholders expressed a desire for enhanced modalities of communication moving forward."

AFTER

"People told us they want us to communicate with them more often, and in plainer language."

BEFORE

"The data suggest that barriers to access were multifactorial in nature."

AFTER

"People faced more than one obstacle to getting help — not just one."

BEFORE

"It is recommended that resource allocation be optimized in accordance with observed demand patterns."

AFTER

"Put more staff and budget where people are actually asking for help."

Quick self-check before you publish

- ☐ Could a reader repeat the main point after one read?
- ☐ Is there a word a reader would have to look up?
- ☐ Is there a sentence over ~25 words that could be split in two?
- ☐ Is passive voice hiding who actually did something?
- ☐ Is there a number without a plain-language sense of scale?

Want help putting this into practice?

Connect with CometX to talk through your evaluation, research, or reporting needs.

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