

# Plain Language

Tips for Writing to the Public

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# What is Plain Language?

- Communication that your audience or readers can understand the **first time** they hear or read it.
- Language that is simple, clear, direct and uses common words.

# Goals of Plain Language

- Help the reader *find* what they need
- Help the reader *understand* what they find
- Help the reader *use* what they find to meet their needs

*If your document doesn't do all three,  
it's not plain language.*

1/3 of U.S. adults have trouble reading and acting on health related information



# Plain Language Myths

Plain Language is NOT:

- ✓ Imprecise
- ✓ An attempt to dumb-down information
- ✓ Stripping out necessary technical/legal information
- ✓ Just editorial “polishing” after you finish writing
- ✓ Something state leaders, legislatures will never go for
- ✓ Easy

# What You May Think

- Others will think you're not smart unless you use big words
- Think it sounds better
- Can't talk about hard, complex ideas in plain language
- Feel like you are talking down to people
- You want to fit in (it's the cultural norm, how it's always been done)

# What Your Audience May Think

- You don't care
- You don't want to want take the time to find a more plain way to write
- You want to show off
- You want to hide something not clear or not true

# Plain Language Characteristics

- Concise
  - Short sentences
  - Short paragraphs
- Conversational
  - Simple words
  - Relatable tone

# Active Voice

Passive voice	Active voice
The lake was polluted by the company.	The company polluted the lake.
New regulations were proposed.	We proposed new regulations.
The following information must be included in the application for it to be considered complete.	You must include the following information in your application.
Bonds will be withheld in cases of non-compliance with all permits and conditions.	We will withhold your bond if you don't comply with all permit terms and conditions.
Regulations have been proposed by the Department of Veterans Affairs.	The Department of Veterans Affairs proposed new regulations.

# Present Tense

<b>Don't say</b>	<b>Say</b>
These sections describe types of information that would satisfy the application requirements of Circular A-110 as it would apply to this grant program.	These sections tell you how to meet the requirements of Circular A-110 for this grant program.

# Avoid Hidden Verbs

<b>Hidden Verb</b>	<b>Uncovered</b>
<p>To trace the missing payment, we need to carry out a review of the Agency's accounts so we can gain an understanding of the reason the error occurred.</p>	<p>To trace the missing payment, we need to review the Agency's accounts so we understand the reason the error occurred.</p>
<p>If you cannot make the payment of the \$100 fee, you must make an application in writing before you file your tax return.</p>	<p>If you cannot pay the \$100 fee, you must apply in writing before you file your tax return.</p>

# Conversational Writing

- Use contractions.
  - “If you’re looking for...” instead of “If you are looking for...”
- Use pronouns.
  - “Physical activity is good for you” instead of “Physical activity is good for older adults.”
- Use one word rather than two.
  - “cheaper” rather than “less expensive”
- Use smaller words instead of big ones.
  - “great” rather than “excellent”

# Conversational Writing

- Use slang.  
Examples: “comfy” and “yep”
- Start sentences with “and” and “but.”
- Ask hypothetical questions.  
“What do you think?” and “Did you know...”

# Document Format

Use:

- Lists with bullets or numbers
- Headings
- Tables
- Images
- Examples

Choose the setting for the site. See common responses for gardens below.

<i>If the garden is at ....</i>	<i>Then choose....</i>
An elementary school and used during the school day (or summer school)	Schools (K-12, elementary, middle, and high)
An elementary school and used during the school day (or summer school) <i>and</i> during a before/after-school program	Schools (K-12, elementary, middle, and high)
An elementary school but <i>only</i> used during a before/after-school program	Before and after-school program



## Diabetes: Don't Sugarcoat It

There's a good chance you or someone you know has diabetes, but what exactly does being diabetic mean? Put simply, diabetes is a condition that occurs when blood sugar—formally called blood glucose—is consistently too high.

### Setting The Record Straight

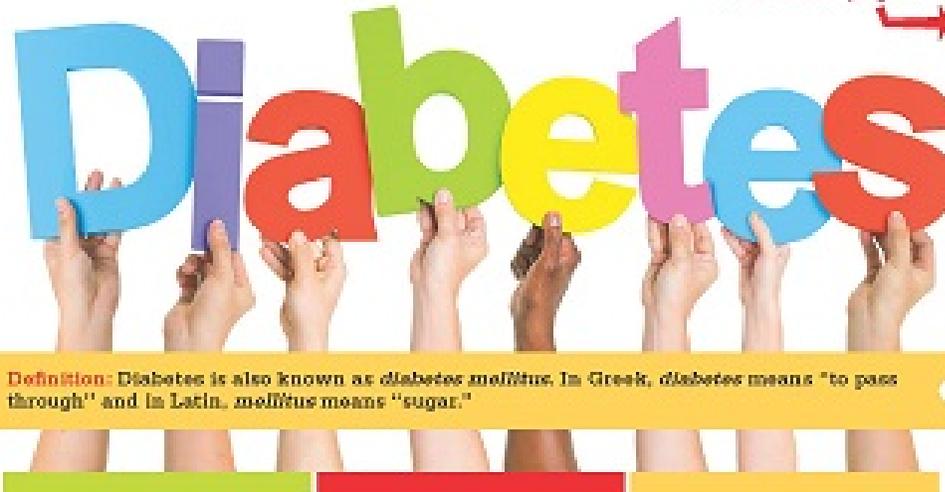
People occasionally say they have "just a touch of sugar," "borderline diabetes" or are only "a little" diabetic. The reality is, there's no in-between with diabetes - you either have it or you don't.

That doesn't mean you're in the clear if you aren't diabetic, but there's a cutoff doctors use

for the diagnosis. There's also a misconception that diabetes isn't that serious of a disease. In reality, it leads to more deaths every year than breast cancer and AIDS combined. On top of that, it almost doubles the risk of heart attack. Whether insulin is prescribed or not, diabetes is "serious."

With that said, there is a term that's increasingly used to describe individuals who routinely have higher than normal blood sugar levels, but not high enough to warrant a diabetes diagnosis. Does the word prediabetes ring a bell? Look for more on that in next month's newsletter.

*Learn more about  
diabetes on page 2!*



**Definition:** Diabetes is also known as *diabetes mellitus*. In Greek, *diabetes* means "to pass through" and in Latin, *mellitus* means "sugar."

# Plain Language Resources

National Institutes of Health – Health Literacy Initiative <https://www.nih.gov/institutes-nih/nih-office-director/office-communications-public-liaison/clear-communication/plain-language/plain-language-getting-started-or-brushing/>

Center for Plain Language – [www.centerforplainlanguage.org](http://www.centerforplainlanguage.org)

CDC Clear Communication Index

<http://www.cdc.gov/ccindex/>

[Plainlanguage.gov](http://Plainlanguage.gov)

Debra Landwehr Engle – [www.debenglespeaks.com](http://www.debenglespeaks.com)