

# PLAIN LANGUAGE

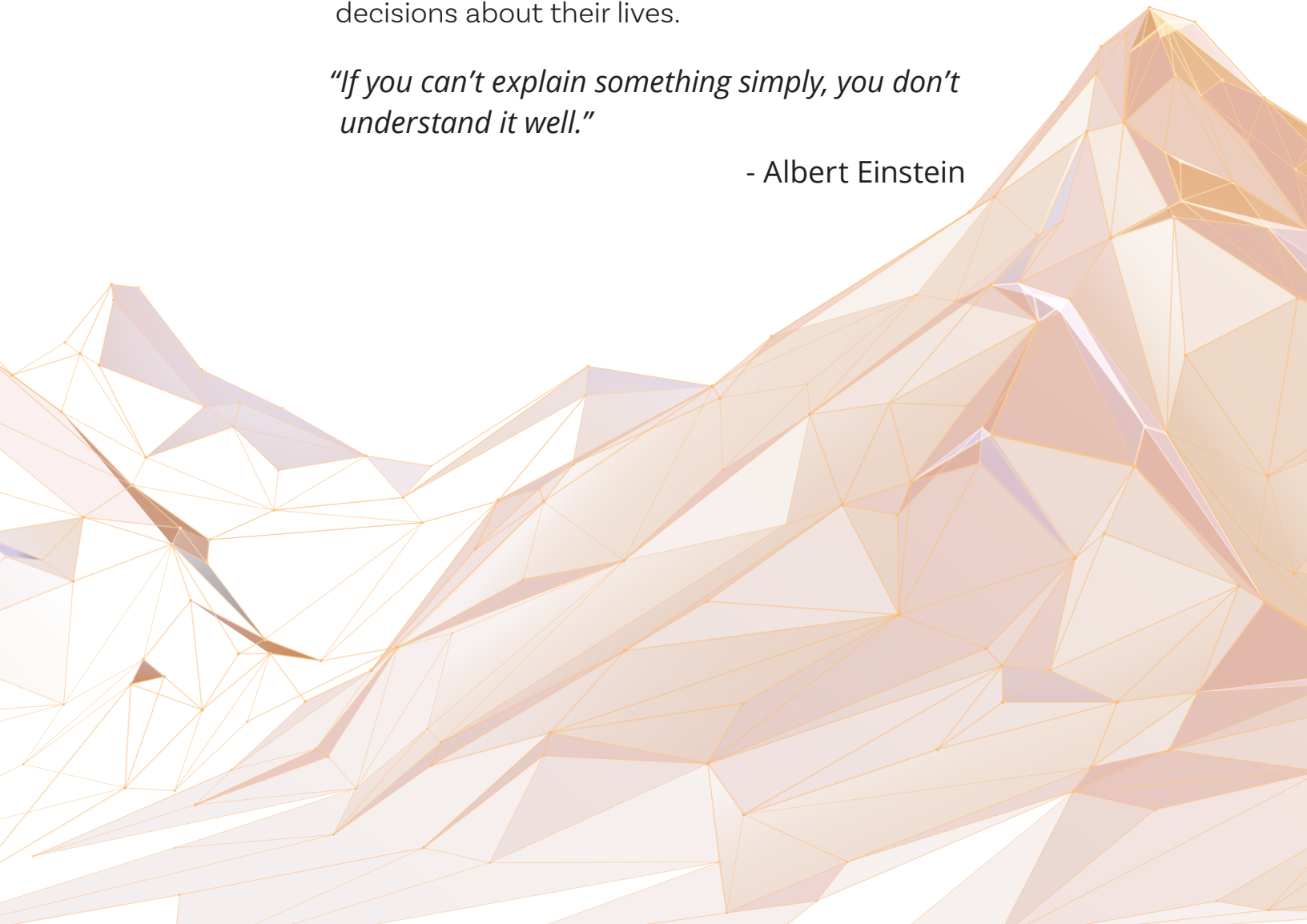
## Concepts to Consider

Developed through a collaboration between the NAU Institute for Human Development, Ability360, the Arizona Department of Economic Security, Diverse Ability Incorporated, and Encircle Families.

A plain language document makes information understandable and accessible; reduces barriers; and helps people with disabilities make informed decisions about their lives.

*"If you can't explain something simply, you don't understand it well."*

- Albert Einstein



## Introduction

The concepts involved in writing in plain language (PL) are not set in stone and are constantly evolving. The suggestions in this document are intended to provide a conceptual overview rather than a list of concrete rules. The most important take-away is that you should always know and write for your audience. Make sure they will be able to understand the information they need from your document or presentation.

Using plain language increases the value of the information for everyone, making complicated issues understandable to more people. People should be able to pick up our work, understand it, and use it when making decisions about their lives and advocating for themselves.

Plain language is clear, straightforward, concise communication and includes strategies for content and word choice; reading level; formatting; and the use of pictures and icons.

## Key Elements

- Concepts and ideas are clearly explained and repeated throughout the document.
- Reading level at or below 6th grade (some variance on this).
- Focus on these elements.
  - Organize your material and use helpful headers.
  - Use at least 1 inch margins with extra white space (dense pages are harder to understand).
  - Use a clear, easy-to-read sans serif font like Arial, Open Sans, or Verdana, at least 14 point (or larger).
  - Use short paragraphs, not more than 5 on a page.
  - Use short sentences, 1 idea per sentence, 10-15 words max.
  - Use simple, familiar, short words – as few as possible.
  - Make reader-centered (use “you” and “we”).
  - Use active not passive voice.
  - Do not write out numbers (use 4 instead of four).
  - Do not use contractions (use “do not” instead of “don’t”).
  - Do not use metaphors, “fancy” language, or jargon.

# The Details

## Know and Write For Your Audience

- Ask yourself...
  - Who is my audience and what do they already know about the subject?
  - What do they need to know?
  - What questions will they have?
- Use language your audience understands and is comfortable with.
- Tell them why material is important to them. EX: "If you want to open a checking account, here is what you have to do."

## Page Setup

- At least 1 inch margins with extra white space (dense pages are harder to understand).
- Use a clear, easy-to-read sans serif font.

Hard to Read Font Examples	Easy to Read Font Examples
<i>Curly</i>	Arial
<i>Gigi</i>	Open Sans
<b>Jokerman</b>	Verdana

- Use at least 14 point (or larger).
- Text should be left justified (easiest to follow).
- Line spacing should be at least 1.5 per line.
- Do not use shading and borders - keep it clean.
- Use upper and lower case headings, not all caps.
- Highlight important concepts with simple formatting, use bold for emphasis (not underline) - but not too often, use italics for parenthetical info (like citations).

## Visual and Graphic Elements

- Keep the document clean and without unnecessary visual clutter.
- Use simple, commonly used icons and images to make meaning clear - this helps visual learners, but only use if they clarify content.
- Visually group related content.

On PowerPoints, each picture will need to be labeled for screen readers. Here is a link on how to do that: [Add alternative text to a shape, picture, chart, SmartArt graphic, or other object - Microsoft Support.](#)

*“Making the simple complicated is commonplace; making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that’s creativity.”*

- Charles Mingus

- Bulleted lists help to emphasize and organize ideas.
  - Use standard, solid round or solid square bullets (less distracting).
  - Do not use more than two types of bullets, it is better to repeat one than add a third one.
  - Use bullets when items are not sequential.
  - Use numbers when talking about a specific order or priority.
  - Make sure all items in a list start with the same part of speech.
- Use tables to make complex materials easier to understand (a table with “if” and “then” columns is helpful).
- Above all else, write to your audience.

## **Content**

### **Determine main ideas and key concepts**

- Focus on need to know, not nice to know.
- If making PL document from previous document, include all the same information – just explained differently. Do not remove content.

### **Organize your information and create an outline targeted to your audience**

- Use headings to organize your ideas (question or statement headings). EX: “What is affordable housing?”
- Divide content into smaller segments, it is less overwhelming. Try to limit your document to 5 or 6 sections, about 2 per printed page.
- Start your text by stating your purpose and goal for sharing the information - tell the reader what they are going to read about.
- Important information should be near the beginning.
- Repeat main ideas throughout the document.

### **Paragraphs**

- Do not have more than 5 paragraphs on a page. When possible, keep paragraphs on the same page.
- Give each paragraph/section a good introduction, 1 topic per paragraph.

## Sentences

- Sentences should be short, one idea per sentence, 10-15 words max.
- Use an active (not passive) voice - it is clearer, more direct, and easier to understand. Subject comes first to keep emphasis on the subject.
  - EX of passive: The ballots were counted by the volunteers.  
Instead use active: The volunteers counted the ballots.

## Word choice

- Concepts and ideas should be concise and clearly explained.
- Use simple, straightforward, familiar language.
  - Use short words instead of long (3 syllables or less).
  - Avoid jargon.
  - Choose a concrete word over an abstraction.
- Speak to the reader, use “you” and “we.” Define “you” early on, if possible. EX: “This document tells you, the loan applicant, how to secure a loan.”
- Keep the subject, verb, and object close together. Natural word order is subject, verb, object.
- Use as few words as possible (omit modifiers, redundant words, filler, and descriptive words).

*“The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do.”*

- Thomas Jefferson

Do Not Use	Use Instead
We are responsible for management of the program.	We manage the program.
At this point in time	Now
The Arizona Department of Economic Security and the Arizona Center for Disability Law issued a joint report.	The Arizona Department of Economic Security and the Arizona Center for Disability Law issued a report.
This information is really critical.	This information is important.
On a monthly basis	Every month
We worked together on a joint project to improve accessibility of health resources.	We worked together to improve health accessibility.

- Use the same term throughout the document. EX: senior citizens or the elderly. Pick one and use it.

- Use positive language and avoid double negatives. EX: If the application is not signed it cannot be approved. USE: The application must be signed to be approved.
- Do not write out numbers (use 4 instead of four).
- Avoid acronyms and abbreviations (common abbreviations like PhD and FBI are okay).
  - Spell out acronyms for the first use. EX: ADA means the Americans with Disabilities Act.
  - Consider a nickname rather than an acronym. EX: The Developmental Disabilities Council can be shortened to “the Council.”
- Do not use contractions (use “do not” instead of “don’t”).
- Do not use metaphors (“Tom is as slow as a sloth”), sarcasm, or figures of speech.
- Include real-world brief examples as they make a concept concrete and help understanding.

### Word replacement suggestions

Original Word	Use Instead
Accompany	Go with
Accomplish	Do, carry out
Additional	More
Advantageous	Helpful
Advise	Tell
Anticipate	Expect
Attempt	Try
Delete	Cut, drop
Demonstrate	Show, prove
Desire	Want, wish
Discontinue	Stop, drop
However	But
Shall	Must
Terminate	End, stop, cancel

### Final Thoughts

- Take a look at the final document for eye-appeal, ease of reading, and plenty of white space.
- Be sure it does not look visually confusing.

## Examples of Plain Language Documents

- Plain Language: The Flu Shot ([https://www.aucd.org/docs/PlainLanguage\\_FluShot.pdf](https://www.aucd.org/docs/PlainLanguage_FluShot.pdf))
- The DD Act in Plain Language ([https://www.aucd.org/uploads/urc\\_filetransfer/DD%20Act%20Plain%20Language\\_EasyRead.pdf](https://www.aucd.org/uploads/urc_filetransfer/DD%20Act%20Plain%20Language_EasyRead.pdf))
- Navigating Life Transitions: Arizona's Transition Resource Guide, developed by the Arizona Community of Practice on Transition, [AZCoPT - Transition Resource Guide](#)

## References and Recommended Resources

- Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD), [ABCs of Plain Language \(Short\)](#), and AUCD Plain Language Toolkit, [https://www.aucd.org/uploads/urc\\_filetransfer/resources/AUCD%20Plain%20Language%20Toolkit\\_Final.pdf](https://www.aucd.org/uploads/urc_filetransfer/resources/AUCD%20Plain%20Language%20Toolkit_Final.pdf)
- Center for Health Literacy, <https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/jeanne-mcgee-and-the-center-for-health-literacy-quick-checklist-for-plain-language/14281138>
- Center for Plain Language, <http://centerforplainlanguage.org/learning-training/five-steps-plain-language/>
- Digital.gov (previously plainlanguage.gov), <https://digital.gov/guides/plain-language>
- National Adult Literacy Agency, [Writing and Design Checklist](#)
- Self Advocacy Resource and Technical Assistance Center (SARTAC), <https://selfadvocacyinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Plain-Language-Webinar-SARTAC-August-22-2019.pdf> (plain language formats, pages 8-18)
- University of Arizona Sonoran Center for Excellence in Disabilities, Accessible Communication: Plain Language, a training developed by Drew Milne, together with the Autistic Self Advocacy Network, Self Advocates Becoming Empowered, and the Self Advocacy Resource and Technical Assistance Center (SARTAC). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWUbKpC7Toc>
- U.S. Department of Commerce plain language page has a simple but effective PL checklist near the bottom of the page, <https://www.commerce.gov/about/policies/plain-language>

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