

Your personal success – and that of your organization – hinges on being able to communicate in clear and simple language. It is key to building trust, influencing decisions and reducing confusion or conflict.

Taking time to plan and organize your information at the start will save you from hours of writer's block, drafting and revising.

1 Know your audience

Anticipate questions and consider your target audience's wants and needs.

Consider key questions like:

- What do they care about?
- What are their priorities?
- What do they know already?
- How will the information likely affect them?

2 Understand your objective

Think carefully about the outcome you hope to achieve.

Consider key questions:

- Why is this important right now?
- What do I want the reader to do?
- What do I need them to know / remember?
- How can I connect my objectives to their interests?

Before putting pen to paper, ask:

1. *What does the audience already know and believe deeply?*
2. *What do they want to know?*
3. *What do you want them to know and do?*
4. *How will you make your information easy to receive, understand and remember?*

3 Organize your information

Take time to sort and prioritize information according to your objectives and your reader's needs.

- Brainstorm and identify what matters most.
- Use an outline, sticky notes or other tools to collect and organize information. Create a logical structure, including headings, key facts and messages.
- Remember that people tend to scan, rather than read. Decide what subheadings make sense. What information – if any – lends itself to a fact box, call-out or other element that will highlight important information?
- Make it interesting. If appropriate, use anecdotes, compelling numbers or examples to bring the information to life.
- Demonstrate concern and empathy when appropriate.

4 Write in plain language

Readers will find it easier to understand and act on plain language information.

Short paragraphs: Paragraphs should be three to five sentences each and about one topic. Place the most important information at the beginning or end, to engage those who are scanning.

Short sentences: Sentences should be an average of 20 words. Sentence length should vary for readability and flow – not too choppy, but no run-ons either. If a sentence contains too many ideas, try splitting it into two sentences. Use bullet points to break up long lists or steps.

Active voice: Sentences should be direct and to the point. Passive voice is muddy and bureaucratic because it is less clear who is doing what. Less than 15% of sentences should be passive.

Passive	Active
The cookies were eaten by my boys.	My boys ate the cookies.

Short words and simple phrases: Avoid extra words that add no meaning. Opt for a direct verb rather than a phrase.

Wordy	Simple
In order to	To
Utilize	Use
Conduct an analysis	Analyze

Words with common understanding: Avoid technical jargon by imagining how you might explain the content to a neighbour or family member. Use neutral words. Avoid terms that are open to subjective interpretation, like activist or environmentalist.

Positive language: Positive language is easier to understand and avoids misunderstandings.

Negative	Positive
If you fail to pass the examination, you will not qualify for admission.	You must pass the exam to qualify for admission.

Avoid acronyms: Acronyms can mean different things to different people. If they must be used, spell out acronyms the first time and provide the acronym in parentheses so it is understood in subsequent paragraphs. Use alternatives, if available.

An actual conversation:

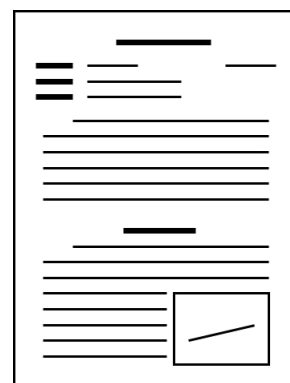
Physician: We are concerned about VOCs.

Chemical engineer: Volatile Organic Compounds?

Physician: No, Variants of Concern.

Inclusive language: Put people first, rather than identifying by ability, race, culture or sexual orientation. If your audience prefers “a person experiencing homelessness” rather than “a homeless person,” go with that.

Clean layout: Use readable font sizes and styles, with white space and charts to make the document more inviting. Use headings and subheads to direct the reader. Graphs should be relevant and clear, and illustrate a single point.



5 Edit three times

Content: Is the purpose clear? Does the content address potential reader questions or concerns? Is everything included that should be? Remove extra or repetitive information.

Structure and style: Examine your words, sentences and paragraphs. Make sure paragraphs and sentences are clear. Avoid run-on sentences. Use strong opening sentences and write paragraphs that flow nicely into the next paragraph.

Copy-edit and proofread: Check for grammar, misspellings, consistent numbers, capitalization, etc. Follow your organization’s style guide, if one exists.

Aim for a Grade 8 to 12 reading level.