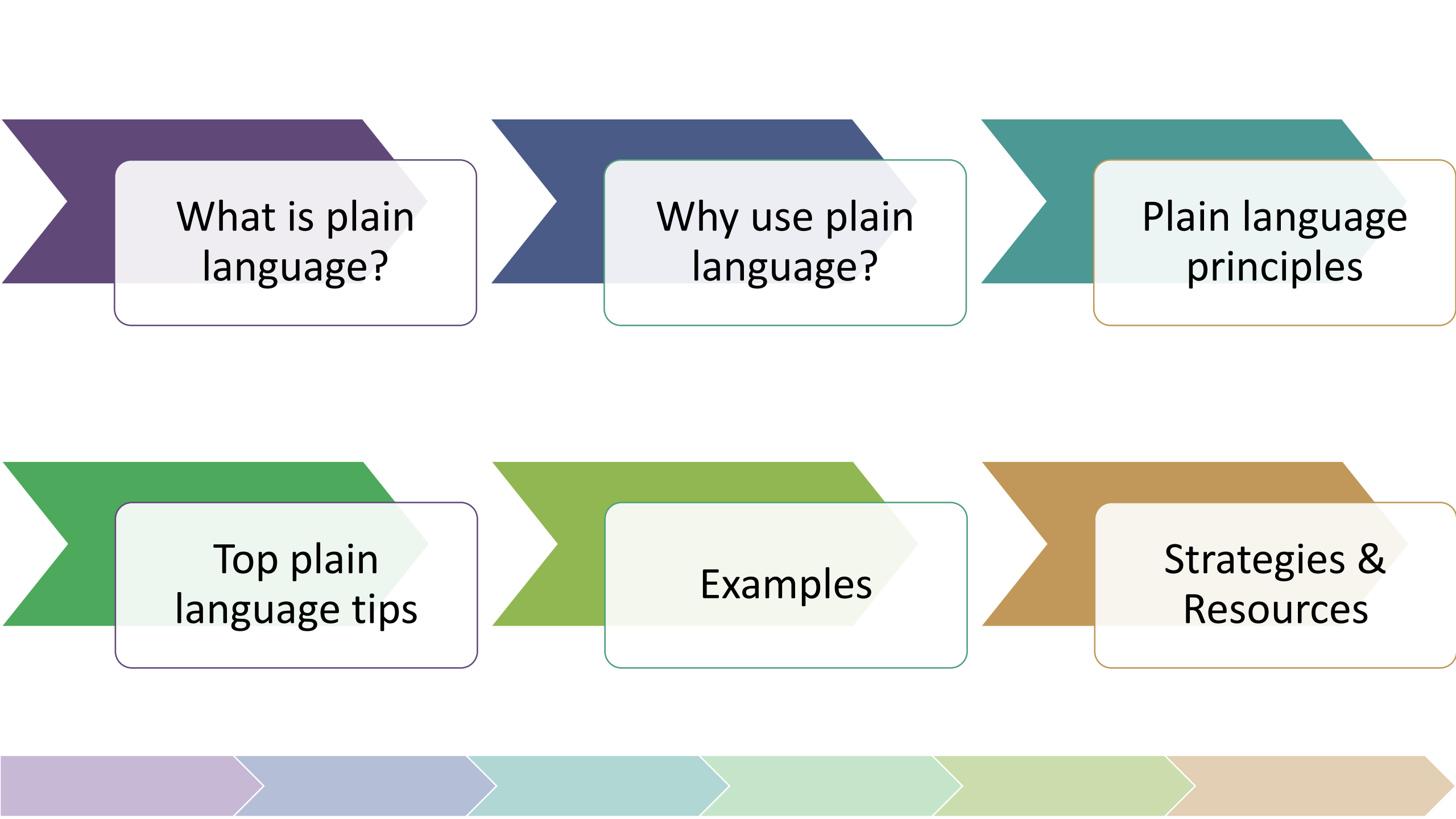


Language Matters

Creating web content that is accessible, usable and understood

Rachell Underhill, Director of Web and Information Systems, The Graduate School
runderhill@unc.edu



What is plain
language?

Why use plain
language?

Plain language
principles

Top plain
language tips

Examples

Strategies &
Resources

What is plain language?



What is plain language?

Plain language (also called plain writing or plain English) is communication your audience can understand the first time they read or hear it.



What is plain language?

It's the (federal) law!

The Plain Writing Act of 2010 defines **plain language** as:

“Writing that is clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field and intended audience.”



What is *not* plain language?



What is *not* plain language?

- Plain language is *not* "dumbed down" or baby talk.
- Plain language is *not* condescending.
- Plain language is *not* only for simple topics.
- Plain language is *not* unacademic or unscientific.



Plain Language is *not* boring

“Actually, plain English is typically quite interesting to read. It’s robust and direct—the opposite of gaudy, pretentious language. You achieve plain English when you use the simplest, most straightforward way of expressing an idea. You can still choose interesting words. But you’ll avoid fancy ones that have everyday replacements meaning precisely the same thing.”

-Bryan Garner,
Legal Writing in Plain English, 2001, pp xiv



Plain Language is *not* inaccurate

“Countless projects worldwide have shown that even complex subjects can be translated into plain language with no loss of accuracy or precision. If anything, plain language is *more* precise than traditional legal writing because it uncovers the ambiguities and errors that traditional style, with all its excesses, tends to hide.”

-Joseph Kimble
Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please:
The Case for Plain Language in Business, Government, and Law



Plain Language is *not* unacademic

“Some writers use an academic tone out of habit or try to impress readers with complex sentences and showy vocabulary. The misconceived notion that long sentences and big words make you sound smarter (or more professional) results in great sacrifices to readability and credibility.”

-Nielsen Norman Group

[“Plain Language Is for Everyone, Even Experts”](#), October 8, 2017



Plain Language is *not* unacademic

“According to GOV.UK, ‘Research shows that higher literacy people prefer plain English because it allows them to understand the information as quickly as possible’. At St Andrews, we want the smartest students. But we don’t want them to get frustrated spending time figuring out what we’re trying to say.”

digitalcommunications.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2019/08/23/plain-english-for-the-web



No one has ever complained that a text was too easy to understand.

-Nielsen Norman Group

“Plain Language Is for Everyone, Even Experts”



Why use plain language?



Is plain language part of accessibility? Yes!

WCAG 2.1, Guideline 3.1: Readable

“Make text content readable and understandable.”

“UNC is committed to creating an inclusive digital experience.”

-UNC Digital Accessibility Office

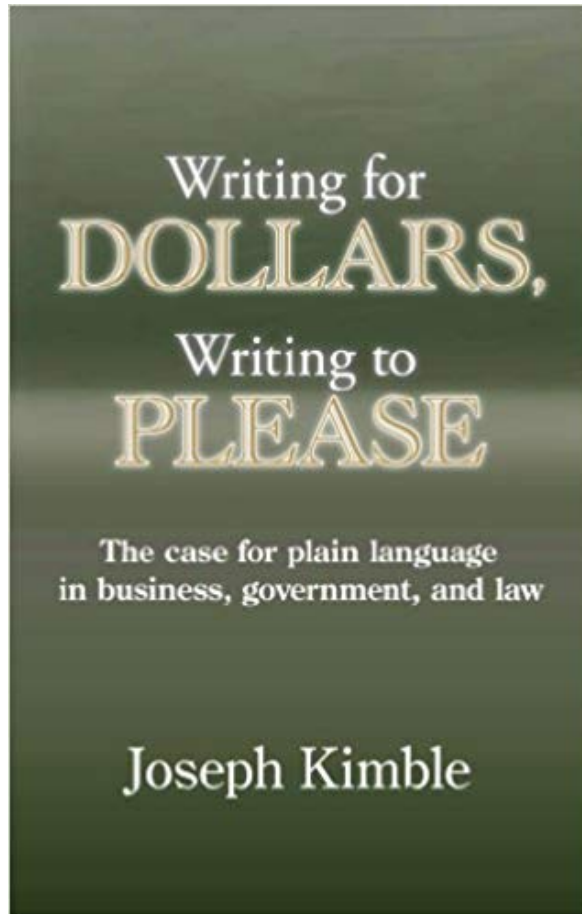


Are there other benefits? Yes!

- Improved usability
 - Improved comprehension
 - Improved adherence to instructions
 - Improved SEO
 - Improved writing
-
- Reduced frustration
 - Reduced phone calls, questions, mistakes



Plain Language Case Studies



Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please: The Case for Plain Language in Business, Government, and Law

Joseph Kimble

December 12, 2013



Improved usability

- Readable = Usable
- Are your readers...
 - ...busy?
 - ...distracted?
 - ...multi-tasking?
 - ...non-native English speakers?



Improved comprehension

Case Study: Business Memos to U.S. Naval Officers

- Officers who read the plain memo, besides having significantly **higher comprehension**, took 17% to 23% less time to read it and only half as many officers felt the need to reread it.
- U.S. Navy determined that if its officers routinely read plain writing the savings would total between \$110 and \$151 million.



Improved adherence to instructions

How many of you have struggled with getting your constituents to read something?

- "It's in the email!"
- "It's on the website!"
- "Students (faculty/staff/people) just don't read!"



Improved adherence to instructions

Case Study: Memos to U.S. Army Officers

- When the U.S. Army rewrote a memo to 129 officers, suggesting that they perform a specific task, those who got the more readable memo were ***twice as likely to act on the day they received it.***



Improved adherence to instructions

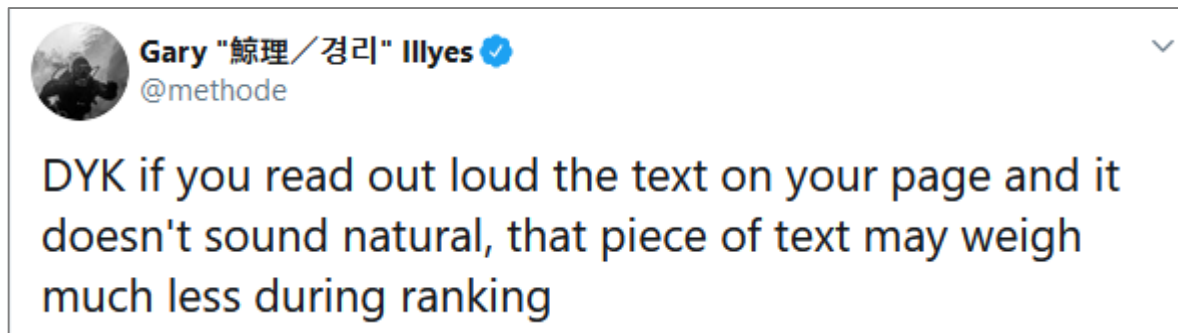
Case Study: medical pamphlet for parents on polio vaccines

- Only 49% said the chances were very good to excellent that they would read the original pamphlet. But 81% said the chances were very good to excellent that they would read the revised pamphlet.
- “There you have the ultimate value of plain language in public documents: *it motivates readers to read.*”



Improved SEO

- Improved search engine rankings
- Plain language is search-optimized language.
- Google's Gary Illyes:



Improved writing

- “..use plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences. That is the way to write English—it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it; don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in.”

-Mark Twain

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

-Thomas Jefferson



Reduced frustration

Poorly written or incomprehensible web content....

- damages your organizations credibility
- makes a bad first impression and reduces the likelihood of a return visit
- implies you do not respect your audience's time



Reduced frustration

“In our recent usability study with domain experts in science, technology, and medical fields, we discovered that even highly educated online readers crave succinct information that is easy to scan, *just like everyone else.*”

-Nielsen Norman Group



Reduced phone calls, mistakes

Case Study: Letter from U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs



Reduced phone calls, mistakes

BEFORE

Dear _____:

Please furnish medical evidence in support of your pension claim. The best evidence to submit would be a report of a recent examination by your personal physician, or a report from a hospital or clinic that has treated you recently. The report should include complete findings and diagnoses of the condition which renders you permanently and totally disabled. It is not necessary for you to receive an examination at this time. We only need a report from a doctor, hospital, or clinic that has treated you recently.

This evidence should be submitted as soon as possible, preferably within 60 days. If we do not receive this information within 60 days from the date of this letter, your claim will be denied. Evidence must be received in the Department of Veterans Affairs within one year from the date of this letter; otherwise, benefits, if entitlement is established, may not be paid prior to the date of its receipt. SHOW VETERAN'S FULL NAME AND VA FILE NUMBER ON ALL EVIDENCE SUBMITTED.

Privacy Act Information: The information requested by this letter is authorized by existing law (38 U.S.C. 210 (c)(1)) and is considered necessary and relevant to determine entitlement to maximum benefits applied for under the law. The information submitted may be disclosed outside the Department of Veterans Affairs only as permitted by law.

AFTER

Dear _____:

We have your claim for a pension. Our laws require us to ask you for more information. The information you give us will help us decide whether we can pay you a pension.

What We Need

Send us a medical report from a doctor or clinic that you visited in the past six months. The report should show why you can't work.

Please take this letter and the enclosed Guide to your doctor.

When We Need It

We need the doctor's report by January 28, 1992. We'll have to turn down your claim if we don't get the report by that date.

Your Right to Privacy

The information you give us is private. We might have to give out this information in a few special cases. But we will not give it out to the *general public* without your permission. We've attached a form which explains your privacy rights.

If you have any questions about this letter, you may call us at 1-800-827-1000. The call is free.



Reduced phone calls, mistakes

Case Study: Letter from U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

- Results for the old letter: 750 sent out and 1,128 calls received.
- For the new letter: 710 sent out and 192 calls received.
- The VA project coordinator estimated that the savings on this *one letter alone*, if adopted at VA offices nationwide, would be more than \$73,000 a year.



Where should I use plain language?

Anywhere you want people to understand what you have to say!

- Web
- Social Media
- Email
- Posters
- Documents



Plain language principles



Plain language principles

- Write for your audience
- Follow web standards for readability
- Check reading level



Write for your audience

- Think about who will be reading your content and what they might be experiencing at that moment?



Write for your audience

- Imagine that person is sitting in front of you right now. Write the same way you would speak to them in person. Customize it for their needs.
- Web users are task oriented. They are usually looking to answer a question, solve a problem, or find information.



Write for your audience

Instead of thinking:	Consider asking:
“What do I want to say?”	“What does my audience need to know?”
“How can I serve my goals?”	“How can I serve my readers’ interests?”
“How can I impress my readers?”	“How can I communicate what my readers need to know?”



Follow web standards for readability.

- Expect users to skim and scan.
- Include informative headlines and sub-headlines.
 - If you know your reader's questions, use them as headings.
- Use bulleted lists and tables to simplify complex content.
- Use numbered lists for steps in a processes.



Follow web standards for readability.

- Use generous white space and indentation.
- Highlight keywords and phrases.
- Write in the inverted pyramid style.
 - Place the main idea before exceptions and conditions
- For longer articles, start with an explicit overview or summary.



Check reading level

- When using any of the above tools, look for the **Readability grade level, Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level** or **Flesch reading ease score**.
- For the most important information, aim for a grade level of 7-8th grade (or a reading ease score of 60 or higher.)
- For other content you can write at a 9-12th grade level but avoid writing above a 12th grade level (or a reading ease score of 50 or lower.)
- *Note that readability grade levels do not correspond to actual grade levels, age, or intelligence.*



Top plain language tips



Top Plain Language Tips

- Choose familiar, simple words
- Write in a friendly conversational tone
- Use the active voice
- Use pronouns to speak directly to your reader
- Be succinct



Choose familiar, simple words

✗ Don't say	✓ Say
utilize, utilization	use
until such time as	until
with reference to	about
not later than 10 May	by 10 May, before 11 May
in a timely manner	on time, promptly
expeditious	fast, quick
We will endeavor to assist you.	We will try to help you.





[The Power of Simple Words - Terin Izil - YouTube](#)

Write in a friendly conversational tone

- **Write like you talk**
- Use contractions
 - Contractions make your writing more accessible to the user. Research shows that that they also enhance readability.
 - Use contractions wherever they sound natural.
- Use the present tense
 - Using the present tense makes your writing simpler, more direct, and more forceful.



~~The active voice should be used~~

- Active voice makes it clear who is supposed to do what. It eliminates ambiguity about responsibilities.
- Passive voice obscures who is responsible for what.



You should use the active voice

- Active voice makes it clear who is supposed to do what. It eliminates ambiguity about responsibilities.
- Passive voice obscures who is responsible for what.

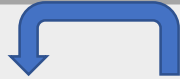
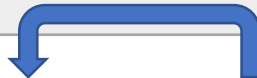
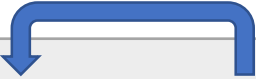



Use the active voice

✗ Passive voice	✓ Active voice
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.
The change must be approved by the student's department chair.	Your department chair must approve the change.
If you are determined to have a disability, we will provide you with the following:	If we determine that you have a disability, we will provide you with the following:



Use the active voice

✗ Passive voice	✓ Active voice
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.
The change must be approved by the student's department chair.	 Your department chair must approve the change.
If you are determined to have a disability, we will provide you with the following:	 If we determine that you have a disability, we will provide you with the following:



Use pronouns to speak directly to your reader

- Use first person (“I” and “we”) and second person pronouns (“you,” “your,” and “yours”) to speak directly to your audience.
- When you use “you” to address readers directly, they are more likely to understand what their responsibility is.



Use pronouns to speak directly to your reader

“Pronouns help the audience picture themselves in the text and relate to what you’re saying. More than any other single technique, using ‘you’ pulls users into the information and makes it relevant to them.”

-plainlanguage.gov



Use pronouns to speak directly to your reader

✗ Don't say	✓ Say
<p>Copies of the student's tax returns must be provided.</p> <p><i>Who must provide the tax returns?</i></p>	<p>You must provide copies of your tax returns.</p>
<p>Grant applications will be reviewed to ensure that procedures have been followed.</p> <p><i>Who will review the applications?</i> <i>Who needs to follow whose procedures?</i></p>	<p>We review your grant application to ensure that you followed our procedures.</p>



Use pronouns to speak directly to your reader

You can also avoid awkwardness by using “you” to address the reader directly, rather than using “he or she”, “s/he”, or “his or her.”

✗ Don't say	✓ Say
The applicant must provide his or her mailing address and his or her identification number.	You must provide your mailing address and identification number.



Be succinct

- If you can convey the same ideas in fewer words, do it — even when you write for highly educated audiences.
- One rule of thumb is that web content should have fewer than 50% of the words you would use in print.



Be succinct

Use short sentences and paragraphs.

Recommended lengths:

- Paragraphs of no more than 150 words in 3 to 8 sentences
- Cover one topic in each paragraph
- Sentences should be no more than 15–20 words.



Be succinct

Eliminate the following types of words or phrases:

- Redundancies (“therapeutic treatment”)
- Idioms (“ground-breaking”, “for all intents and purposes”)
- Pointless modifiers (“at this moment in time”, “absolutely”, “actually”, “completely”, “really”, “quite”, “totally”, and “very”)
- Meaningless generalities (“today’s world is full of challenges”)



Examples



Examples – Graduate School

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
Graduate Certificate in Business Fundamentals

Search this site... 

OverviewCurriculumCoursesElectivesWorkshopsNewsEventsFAQsApply Now

Graduate Certificate in Business Fundamentals

The Graduate Certificate in Business Fundamentals offers you the opportunity to develop the professional skills employers seek while gaining exposure to a variety of careers. You will complete [core](#) and [elective courses](#) through which you will:

- Gain skills in areas that are recognized as influences of professional success, such as communication, leadership, project management, and accounting.
- Gain skillsets useful for a broad range of careers, including tenure-track academic careers, alternative academic careers, and careers outside of academia.
- Learn about a variety of careers available with an advanced degree.
- Meet graduate students outside of your field and learn in an interdisciplinary setting.



Your graduate school transcript will note that you have completed the Graduate Certificate in Business Fundamentals.

Contact:

For more information, contact the [Advisory Committee](mailto:gcbf@unc.edu) at gcbf@unc.edu

Subscribe to the [Graduate Certificate in Business Fundamentals Listserv](#) for news, events, and updates.

UPCOMING EVENTS

THU
07

Larger Than Life Science: Front and Center

November 7 @ 4:00 pm - 7:00 pm

[The Chesterfield](#)

TUE
12

NC Master's and Doctoral Career Fair

November 12 @ 12:00 pm - 4:00 pm

[William and Ida Friday Center for Continuing Education](#)

WED
13

Project Management Career Panel

November 13 @ 4:00 pm - 7:00 pm

[The Chesterfield](#)

[View More...](#)

NEWS

Examples – Graduate School

The Graduate Certificate in Business Fundamentals offers opportunities to develop the professional skills employers seek while gaining exposure to a variety of careers. Students will complete core and elective courses, and participate in 10 workshops that introduce...

The Graduate Certificate in Business Fundamentals offers you the opportunity to develop the professional skills employers seek while gaining exposure to a variety of careers. You will complete core and elective courses and participate in 10 workshops that introduce...



Examples – Graduate School

Students who earn the certificate will...

The transcripts of students who complete the certificate will note that the student completed the Graduate Certificate in Business Fundamentals.

In this certificate program, you will...

Your graduate school transcript will note that you have completed the Graduate Certificate in Business Fundamentals.



Examples – Graduate School

Applicants may apply for reimbursement within 30 days of their travel dates. Receipts will be required to demonstrate actual travel costs.


You may apply for reimbursement within 30 days of your travel dates. You must provide receipts to demonstrate actual travel costs.


Required forms and documentation may be uploaded within the 'International Applicants Only' page in your application both prior to or after your application submission.

You can upload required forms and documents within the 'International Applicants Only' page in your admissions application.




Examples – Tax software




Did you or  experience identity theft and receive an Identity Protection Pin (IP PIN) from the IRS?

[Learn more](#)


Yes, we did

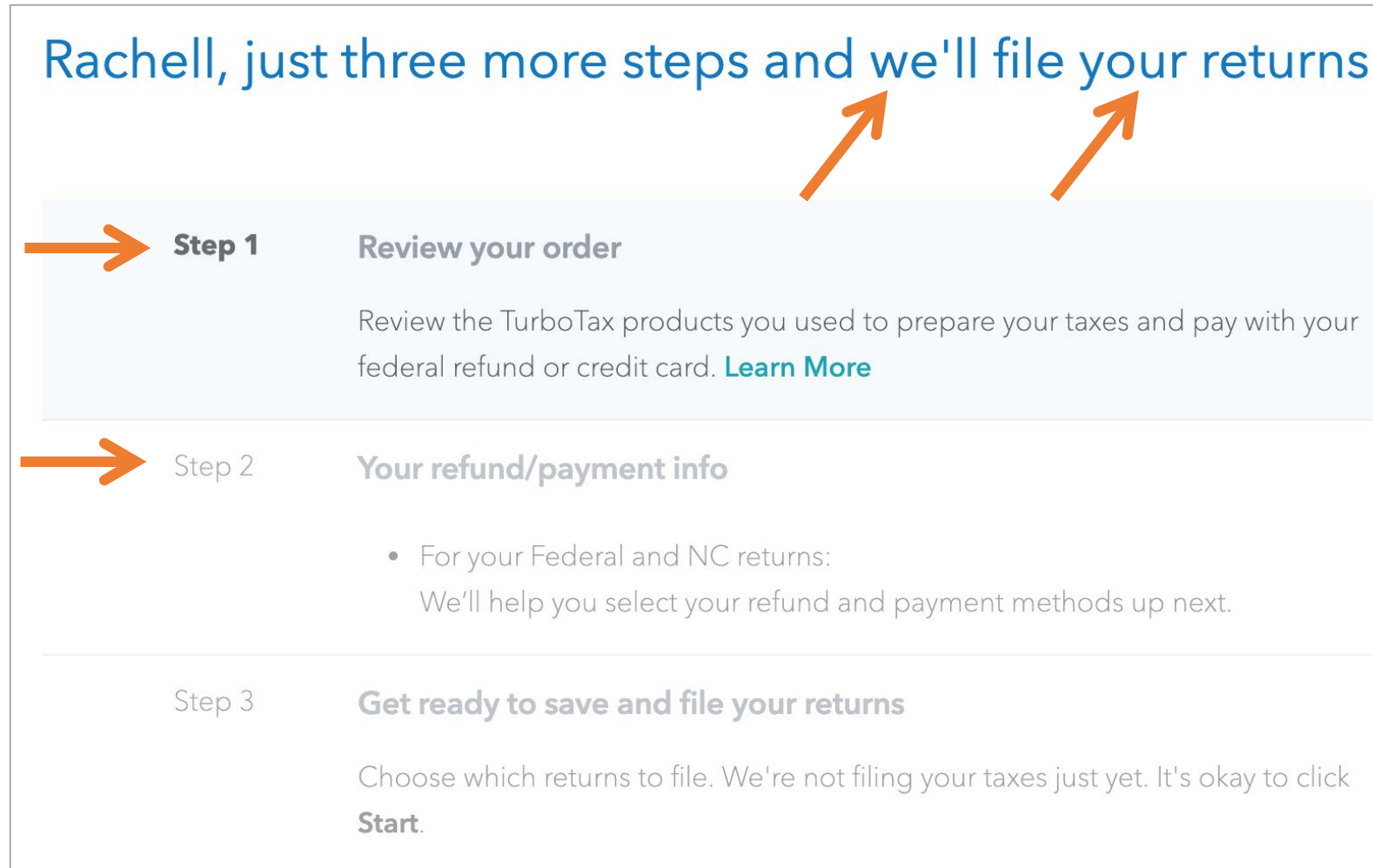
No, we didn't


Got it. Next, we'll get more details on what you told us about.

[Continue](#)



Examples – Tax software



Examples – NC Vehicle registration

NC Vehicle Registration

Sure thing.

Before we begin, let's make sure you have everything you need to renew.

Renewal Checklist

- ✓ Safety Inspection
In the last 90 days, when applicable
- ✓ Emissions Test
In the last 90 days, when applicable
- ✓ Vehicle Information
License plate number and last 5 digits of the title
- ✓ Insurance Card
Your current company and policy number

Do you have this information handy?

Yes, let's renew

Choose a response

Yes, that's right No, it's changed

Do you have this information handy?

Yes, let's renew

NC Vehicle Registration

Okay, great.

I'll need some info to help me look up your vehicle.

NC Vehicle Registration

This registration is past due, so there are some late fees. But don't worry, you're good to renew!

Is it yours?

Vehicle Registration

Choose a response

Yes, that's right No, it's changed

NC Vehicle Registration

Awesome.

Let's get this paid.

Pay \$

NC Vehicle Registration

Success!

Your registration card and receipt will arrive in the mail in 7-10 business days. Should you have ordered new plates, they will arrive in 6-8 weeks.

Your receipt is available in your Profile and you'll get an email copy as well.

Choose a response

Okay, thanks

Strategies & Resources



Strategies - Writing

- Start with your most important or most visited content and work your way down.
- Because web use is task-oriented, you should rethink print documents before putting them online.
- Have the content specialist summarize the info to you in person.
- Avoid PDFs wherever possible
- Check your assumptions
- Try paraphrase testing



Strategies- Getting buy-in

- Just like introducing accessibility requirements to leadership, this can be a culture shift. *It is not easy.*
- Make sure your leaders are plain language supporters and practitioners
- Include plain language goal reminders in all-staff meetings so everyone is on the same page
- Hire a copywriter or students
- Share examples of rewritten content, support and recognize those who are making improvements



Resources

- [Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works](#), Ginny Redish, 2012
- [UNC Writing Center](#) – Many helpful articles and videos
- [Writing in Plain English](#) – Lynda.com Course

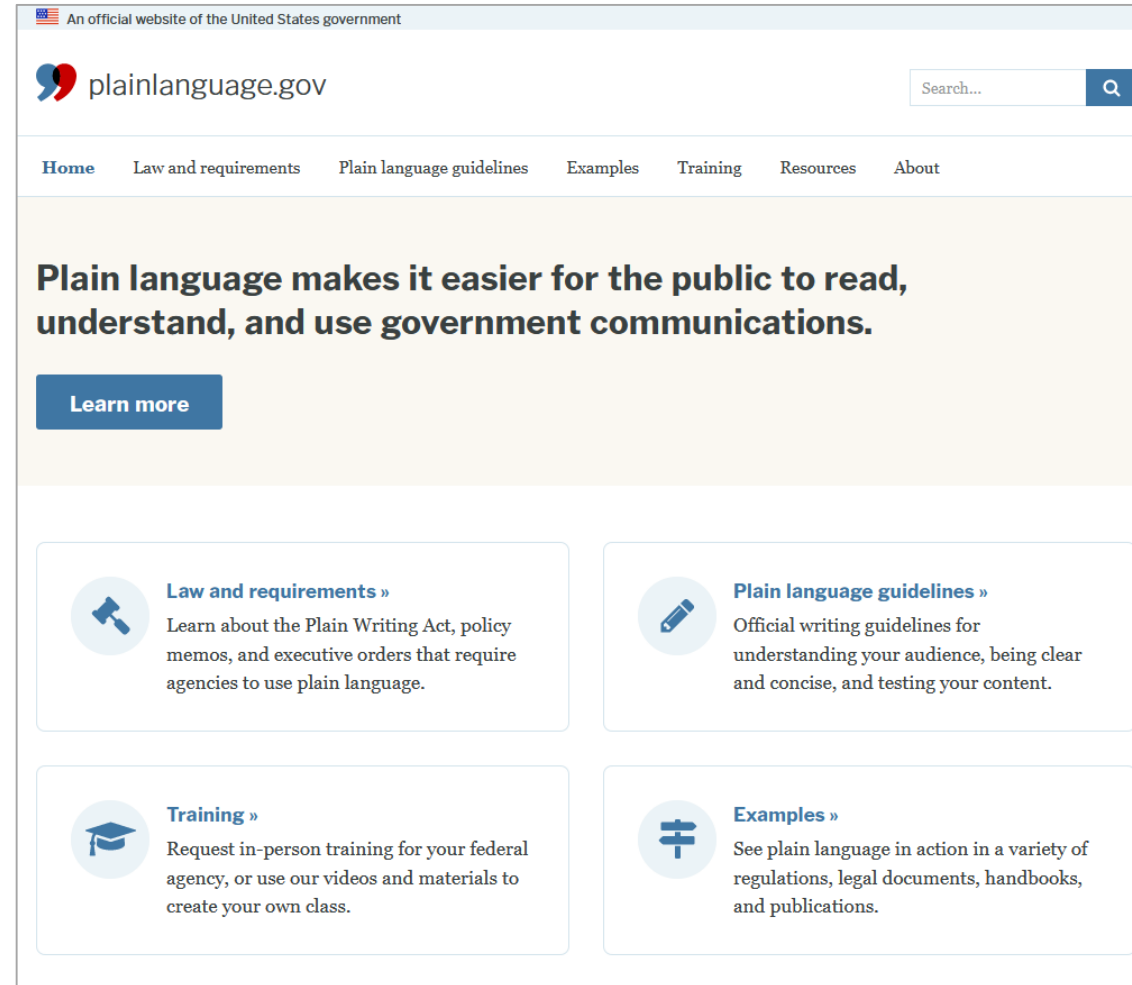


Resources - Tools

- [Plainlanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov/) – The best resource for plain language information
- [Hemingway App](#) – Tests for clear writing, style, complexity, and passive voice (recommended)
- [Microsoft Office Tools](#) – Built-in readability tools
- [Yoast SEO tool](#) – Optional “readability analysis” of WordPress content
- [Readable](#) – Readability tests
- [Grammarly](#) – Grammar and style checker that you can add to Word, Outlook or Google Chrome



Resources – plainlanguage.gov



Resources – Hemingway

Hemingway Editor

Readability
Grade 14
Poor. Aim for 9.

Words: **2212**
Show More ▼

14 adverbs, meeting the goal of 17 or fewer.

31 uses of passive voice. Cut to 22 or fewer.

48 phrases have simpler alternatives.

16 of 109 sentences are hard to read.

58 of 109 sentences are very hard to read.

In order to be considered for in-state residency status for tuition purposes any student admitted to and enrolled in a graduate degree program administered by The Graduate School must have in-state residency status is required to request a residency *Passive Voice: Use active voice.* [Residency Determination Service](#) in order to be considered for in-state tuition benefits.

Once granted in-state status for tuition purposes, this status will remain in effect unless the student fails to enroll for longer than a 12-month period. Should the student's residency status change to nonresident, they will need to request reconsideration in order to be considered for in-state tuition benefits.

The instructions for the online residency application described here are only for those [graduate programs administered by The Graduate School](#).

Students seeking one of the degrees listed above must [contact their admissions office](#) directly.



Resources – Yoast SEO

Yoast SEO

SEO

Readability

Social

Analysis results ?

^ Problems (2)

Flesch Reading Ease:

The copy scores 22.8 in the test, which is considered very difficult to read. [Try to make shorter sentences, using less difficult words to improve readability.](#)

Transition words:

None of the sentences contain transition words. [Use some.](#)

^ Good results (5)

Passive voice:

You're using enough active voice. That's great!

Consecutive sentences:

There is enough variety in your sentences. That's great!

Subheading distribution:

You are not using any subheadings, but your text is short enough and probably doesn't need them.

Paragraph length:

None of the paragraphs are too long. Great job!

Sentence length:

Great!

Resources – Readable

domicile in North Carolina. This list represents examples of acts that can be taken and does not represent a comprehensive set of actions nor does it serve as a checklist for a residency decision. No one action by itself guarantees or denies NC residency status for tuition purposes.

Application Process

Who Should Apply:

Any student admitted to and enrolled in a graduate degree program administered through The Graduate School with nonresident residency status who wishes to be considered for in-state residency status for tuition purposes.

All students in programs administered by other schools or departments should contact their academic program for additional information. This includes all undergraduate and continuing studies students and students earning degrees not administered by The Graduate School. Please contact your specific program directly with any questions.

Results

Score Text

ReadablePro Rating	E
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	14.0
Gunning Fog Index	16.1

Syllable Count

1712

Word Count

930

Sentence Count

45

Paragraph Count

33

Spelling Errors

6

Grammar Errors

68

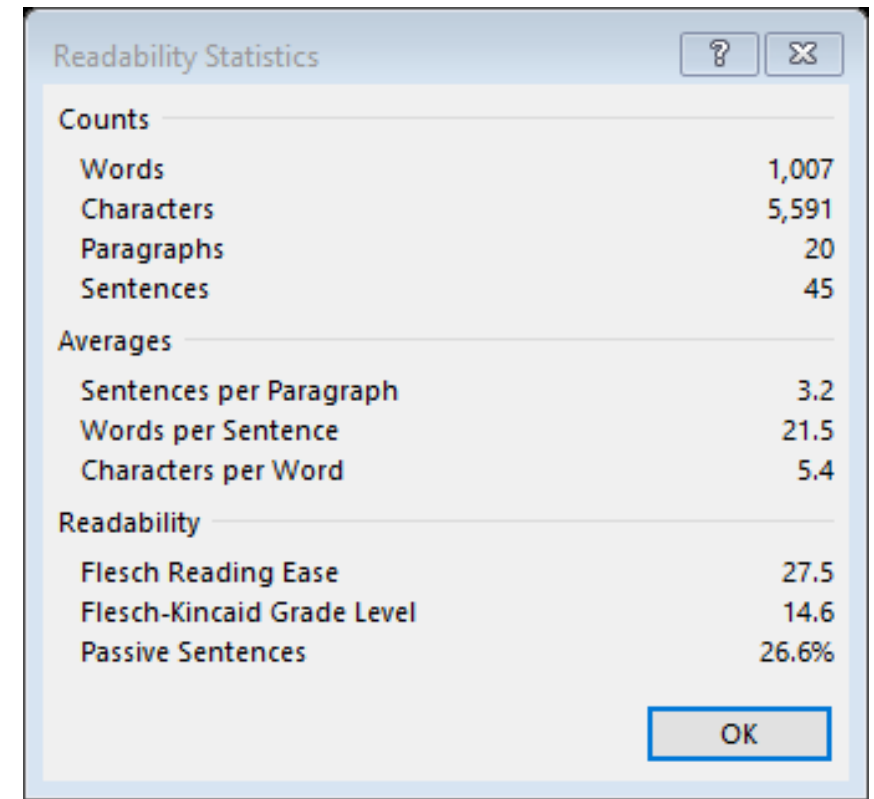
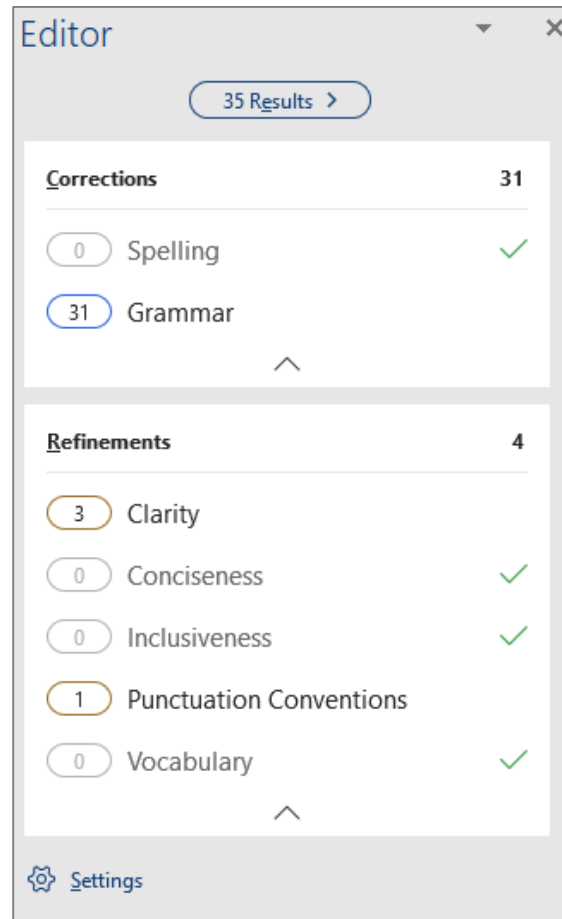
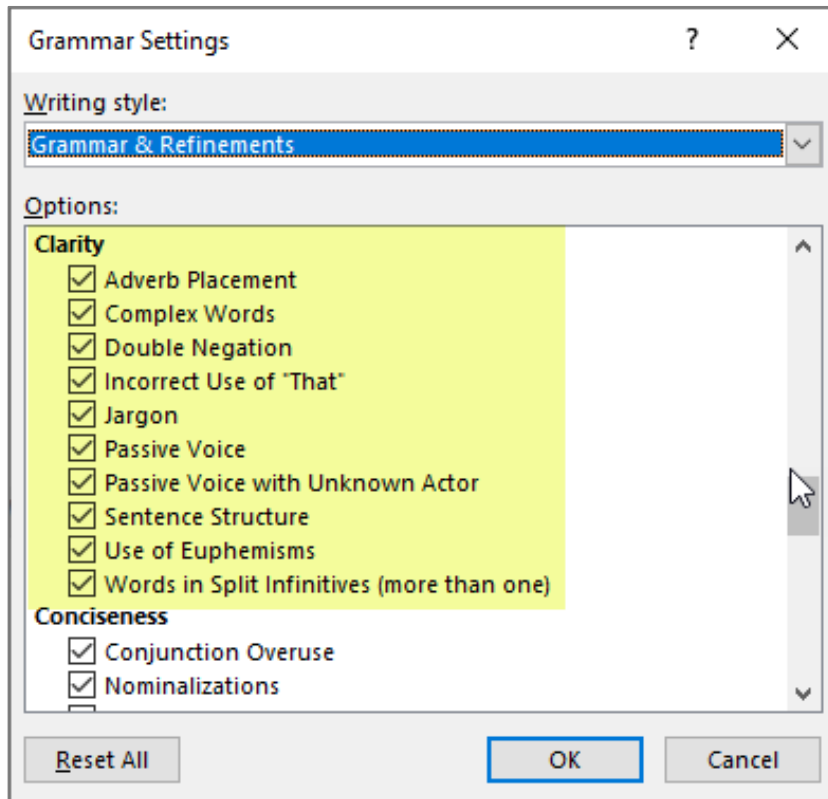
Readability and Quality Issues

147

Click To Correct Issues



Resources – Microsoft Office



Thank you!

Rachell Underhill, runderhill@unc.edu

Slides will be posted on webmasters.unc.edu

