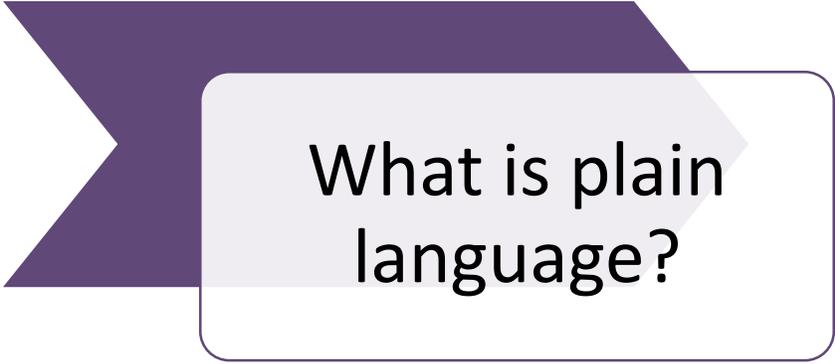


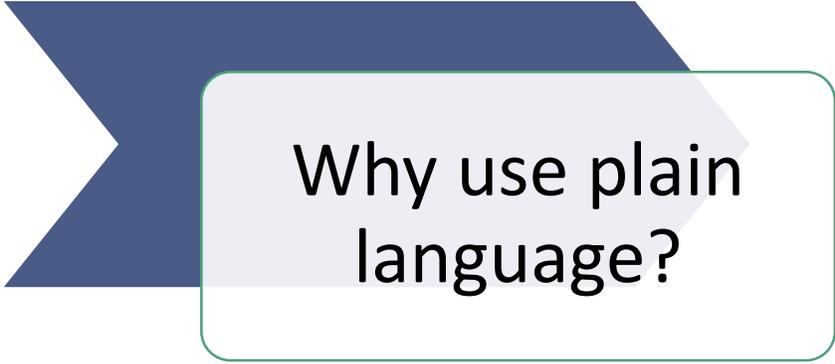
# Language Matters

**Creating web content that is accessible, usable and understood**

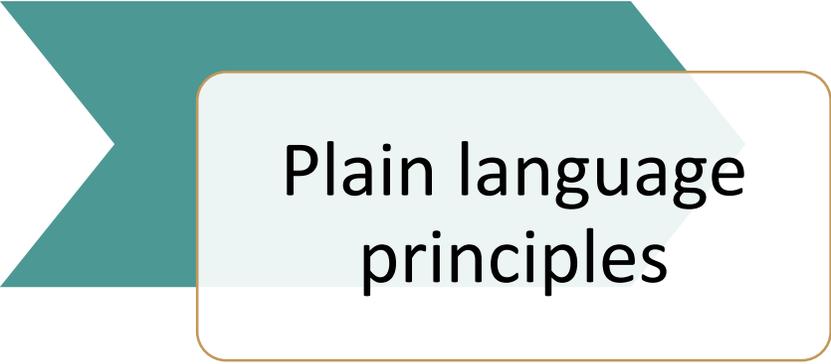
Rachell Underhill, Director of Web and Information Systems, The Graduate School  
runderhill@unc.edu



What is plain language?



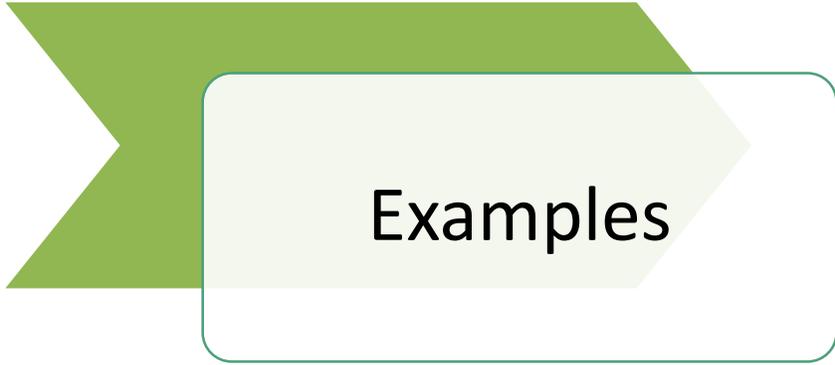
Why use plain language?



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](https://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

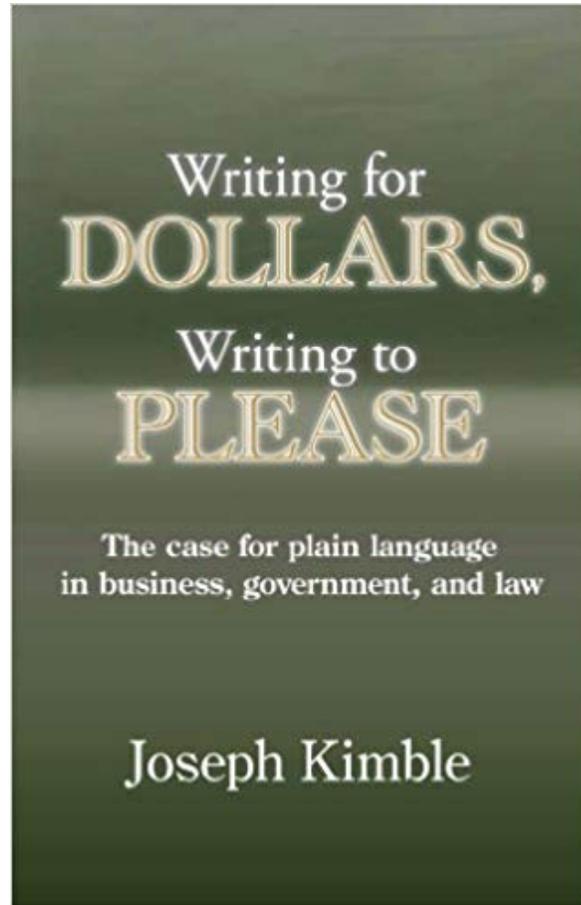


# Are there other benefits? Yes!

- 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

<b>Instead of thinking:</b>	<b>Consider asking:</b>
“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 7-8<sup>th</sup> grade (or a reading ease score of 60 or higher.)
- For other content you can write at a 9-12<sup>th</sup> grade level but avoid writing above a 12<sup>th</sup> 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

<b>✗ Don't say</b>	<b>✓ Say</b>
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.



**AMBULATE  
THIS  
DIRECTION!**



[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.

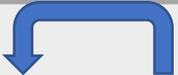


# Use the active voice

✗ <b>Passive voice</b>	✓ <b>Active voice</b>
New regulations <b>were proposed</b> .	We <b>proposed</b> new regulations.
The following information must <b>be included</b> in the application for it to be considered complete.	You must <b>include</b> the following information in your application.
The change must <b>be approved</b> by the student's department chair.	Your department chair must <b>approve</b> the change.
If you <b>are determined</b> to have a disability, we will provide you with the following:	If we <b>determine</b> that you have a disability, we will provide you with the following:



# Use the active voice

✗ Passive voice	✓ Active voice
New regulations <b>were proposed</b> .	 We <b>proposed</b> new regulations.
The following information must <b>be included</b> in the application for it to be considered complete.	 You must <b>include</b> the following information in your application.
The change must <b>be approved</b> by the student's department chair.	 Your department chair must <b>approve</b> the change.
If you <b>are determined</b> to have a disability, we will provide you with the following:	 If we <b>determine</b> 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><b>You</b> must provide copies of <b>your</b> 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><b>We</b> review <b>your</b> grant application to ensure that <b>you</b> followed <b>our</b> 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.	<b>You</b> must provide <b>your</b> 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

[Overview](#) [Curriculum](#) [Courses](#) [Electives](#) [Workshops](#) [News](#) [Events](#) [FAQs](#) [Apply 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](mailto:gcbf@unc.edu)

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

### UPCOMING EVENTS

THU 07	<b>Larger Than Life Science: Front and Center</b> November 7 @ 4:00 pm - 7:00 pm <a href="#">The Chesterfield</a>
TUE 12	<b>NC Master's and Doctoral Career Fair</b> November 12 @ 12:00 pm - 4:00 pm <a href="#">William and Ida Friday Center for Continuing Education</a>
WED 13	<b>Project Management Career Panel</b> November 13 @ 4:00 pm - 7:00 pm <a href="#">The Chesterfield</a>

[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 [redacted] 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**

The form is a vertical flow. At the top is a user icon with a lock. Below it is the question text. A teal link 'Learn more' is positioned above the 'Yes, we did' button, with an orange arrow pointing to it. The 'No, we didn't' button is highlighted in light green. Below the buttons, an orange arrow points to the confirmation text. At the bottom right is a teal 'Continue' button.

# Examples – Tax software

Rachell, just three more steps and we'll file your returns



	<b>Step 1</b>	<b>Review your order</b>  Review the TurboTax products you used to prepare your taxes and pay with your federal refund or credit card. <a href="#">Learn More</a>
	Step 2	<b>Your refund/payment info</b>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>For your Federal and NC returns: We'll help you select your refund and payment methods up next.</li></ul>
	Step 3	<b>Get ready to save and file your returns</b>  Choose which returns to file. We're not filing your taxes just yet. It's okay to click <b>Start</b> .



# 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

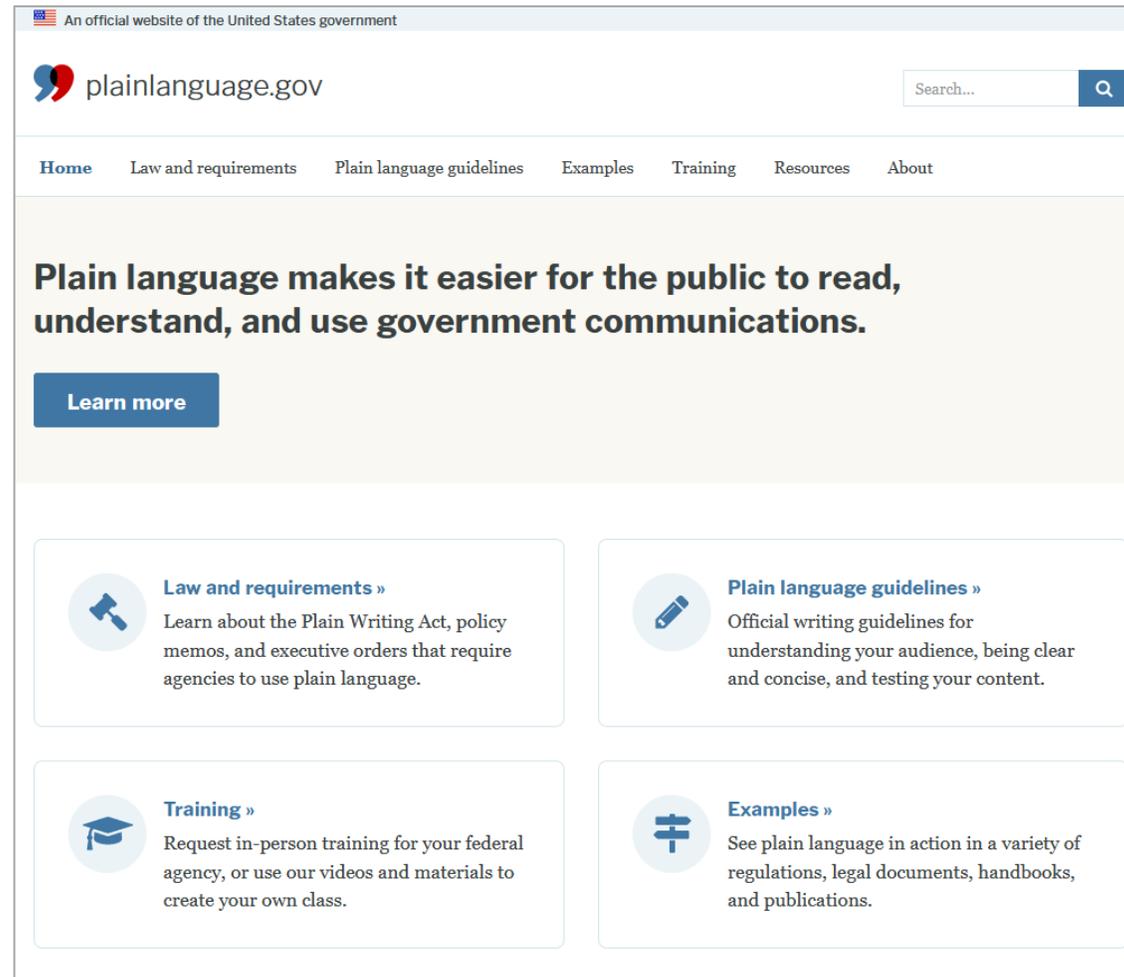


# Resources - Tools

- [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



The screenshot shows the homepage of plainlanguage.gov. At the top, it identifies itself as an official website of the United States government. The main header includes the site logo and a search bar. A navigation menu lists: Home, Law and requirements, Plain language guidelines, Examples, Training, Resources, and About. The main content area features a large heading: "Plain language makes it easier for the public to read, understand, and use government communications." Below this is a "Learn more" button. The page is divided into four sections, each with an icon and a brief description:

- Law and requirements »**: Learn about the Plain Writing Act, policy memos, and executive orders that require agencies to use plain language.
- Plain language guidelines »**: Official writing guidelines for understanding your audience, being clear and concise, and testing your content.
- Training »**: Request in-person training for your federal agency, or use our videos and materials to create your own class.
- Examples »**: See plain language in action in a variety of regulations, legal documents, handbooks, and publications.

# 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. Residency status is required to request a residency [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.

*Passive Voice: Use active voice.*



# 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	<b>E</b>
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	<b>14.0</b>
Gunning Fog Index	<b>16.1</b>

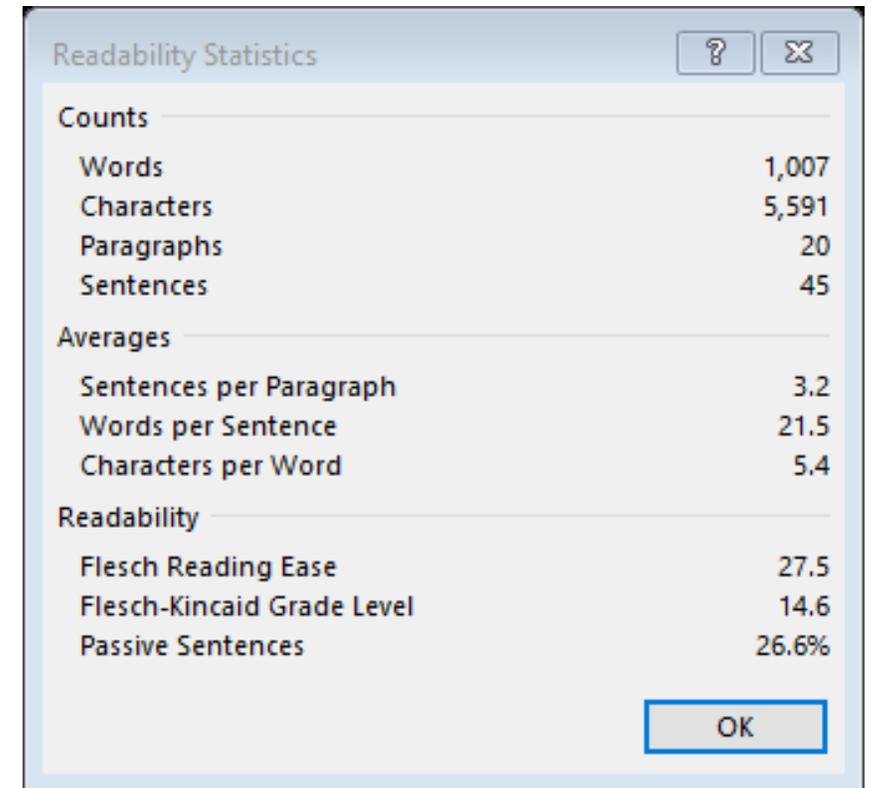
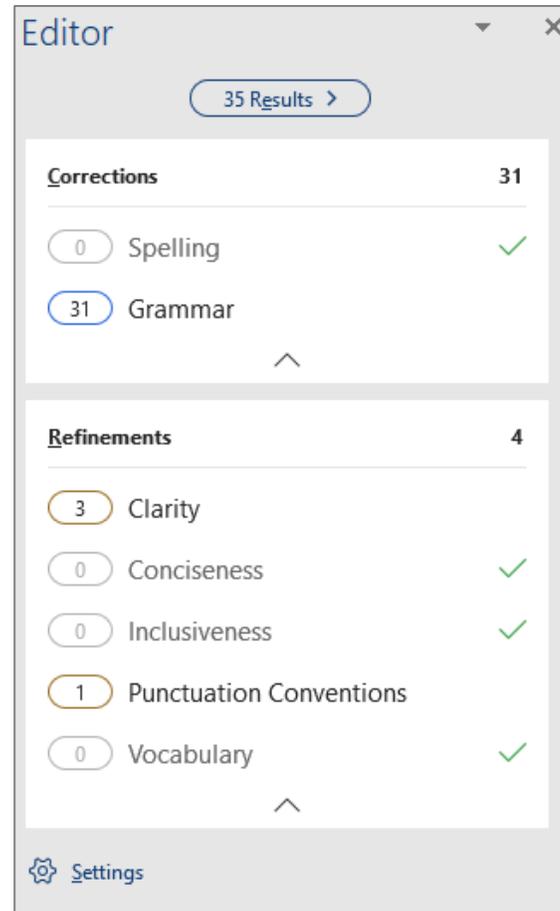
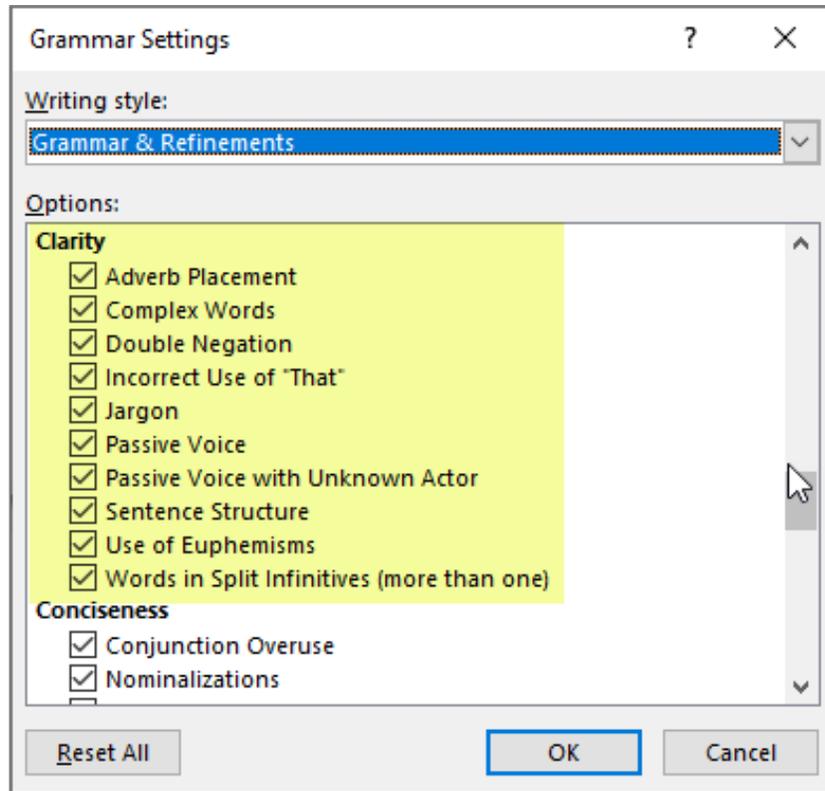
Syllable Count	<b>1712</b>
Word Count	<b>930</b>
Sentence Count	<b>45</b>
Paragraph Count	<b>33</b>

Spelling Errors	<b>6</b>
Grammar Errors	<b>68</b>
Readability and Quality Issues	<b>147</b>

[Click To Correct Issues](#)



# Resources – Microsoft Office



# Thank you!

Rachell Underhill, [runderhill@unc.edu](mailto:runderhill@unc.edu)

Slides will be posted on [webmasters.unc.edu](http://webmasters.unc.edu)

