CalAcademy
Office *of* Data and Innovation

Help people in a crisis with plain language

Plain language is text your audience can understand the first time they read it.

People in a crisis can be overwhelmed. Using plain language helps them get what they need. When people are stressed or grieving, it's important to make the information they need easy to understand. Plain language is also easier to translate.

California's plain language standard suggests providing information to the public at an 8th grade reading level or lower. The standard also suggests:

- Using smaller, more common words
- Avoiding technical jargon
- Keeping sentences short and simple

9 plain language tips you can use right now

Use small, common words
Help people understand by using words they know.

Common examples:
- Utilize: **Use**
- Provide: **Give**
- Additional: **More**
- Receive: **Get**

Use "you" and "we" with active voice – Make it clear who does what.

Example

Original:
It is recommended that the form be filled out on your phone.

Revised:
We recommend you fill out the form on your phone.

Use bullet points for a series
Readers can absorb each item separately. Use numbered lists for things that are in order, like steps in a process.

Example

Original:
To get a US passport, you'll need: completed forms, evidence of citizenship, photo ID, passport photo, fees

Revised:
To get a US passport, you'll need:

- Completed forms
- Evidence of citizenship
- Photo ID
- Passport photo
- Fees

Use transition words – They link sentences together. They can help you find places to break up long sentences.

Common transition words
- Also
- For example
- And
- But

Write good headings – Make them useful and short so readers can scan them effectively.

Example

Original:
What is considered household hazardous waste?

Revised:
Household hazardous waste

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9 plain language tips you can use right now (continued)

Use sentence case – If all of the words are capitalized, people don't know where to focus their attention.

Example

Original:
Resources for Californians Impacted by Los Angeles Fires

Revised:
Resources for Californians impacted by Los Angeles fires

Cut all the extra words – Respect people's time. Give them only what they need.

Example

Original:
There are several factors that determine when your lot will be scheduled for debris removal.

Revised:
Several factors determine when debris is cleared from your lot.

Swap in acronyms – Once explained, they are a good short name.

- Write out the full name the first time you use it, followed by the acronym
- Use an acronym for a department (Cal OES)
- Use an acronym for a law
- Use known acronyms. Don't make up your own

Example

The Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES) helps people recover from disasters. Cal OES works with local governments across California.

Have one idea per sentence People can process each sentence and move to the next easily.

Example

Original:
All applications and related documents, including medical records and information, are highly confidential.

Revised:
The information you share is strictly confidential. This includes medical records.

We're here to help

If you have questions or need help, at calacademy@innovation.ca.gov. We'll be in touch to consult with you.