

Plain language carries complexity: it does not remove it

Plain language helps readers find, understand, and use information. It reduces the work of reading, not the depth of the content. Use progressive disclosure: an immediate answer, why it matters, questions to consider, a practical tool, evidence and sources, and deeper theory for those who want it.

Why it matters

Staff are educated adults doing hard work. Talking down to them costs trust. Burying them costs time. Plain language done well respects both.

Content

Start with the answer. Put the main point in the first sentence and the action in the first paragraph.

One idea per sentence. About twenty words. Prefer the common word unless the precise term matters, and then define it once.

Layer the depth. Short answer, why it matters, questions to consider, a tool to use, the sources, and the deeper material. Readers choose how far to go.

Keep intellectual depth. A plain sentence can carry a sophisticated idea. Cutting nuance is not plain language; it is a different message.

Test it. Read it aloud. Ask a colleague what they would do after reading it. If they are unsure, the writing is not finished.

Federal plain-language guidance and DHS plain-language practice are the sources for style decisions. Check DHS examples when they are supplied to you.

Next steps

- **Plain language and accessible documents checklist** — program page </library/ja-plain-language>
- **Change a form, notice, or policy (Practice path)** — program page </practice/gp-2>

Practice paths this supports

- Policy, form, or notice change