

Whenever you create or edit educational and marketing materials, follow these guidelines to help people of all ages read and act on your message.

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## GENERAL GUIDANCE

(See Graphic Guidance on page 2)

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### Consider Your Reader

- Who is the reader you are trying to reach?
- What does the reader want to know, find, understand or do?
- Will some readers need accommodations (e.g., for low vision or limited English skills)?

### Choose Words Carefully

- Use active voice and a positive, conversational tone.
- Avoid technical terms and jargon.
- When writing about older adults, use age groups (e.g., 50+) or “older adults/older people” rather than using terms that suggest stereotypes, such as “elderly,” “mature” or “seniors.”  
Don’t use “they” or “them” when referring to specific groups or subgroups, such as older adults.

### Be Precise

- Keep sentences short and direct. Discuss one concept in two or three sentences per paragraph. Focus on the reader’s needs.
- Delete fluff, especially promotional, redundant or trivial words. Readers tend to skip dense or overdone text.
- Bullets and itemized lists can make concepts easier to understand.

### Help Readers Scan

- Headings and subheads help readers know what a document is about and get to the information they need.
- Bold text can help readers scan for important concepts. However, bold text isn’t identified on a screen reader.
- Avoid underlining, especially on the web, where only web links should be underlined.

### Ask Questions... and Answer Them!

- Questions make useful headers.
- Use FAQs with caution. Answer questions within your content.

### Use Examples and Stories

- Examples and stories can help readers connect to the content.
- Using humor is not recommended because it easily can be misinterpreted.

### Use Effective Graphics

- Simple charts and tables can help make detailed information easier to understand.
- Graphics or pictures can draw in the reader.
- Graphics should convey information, not merely decorate.

### Font Types

- Choose a typeface for your body copy that will be easy to read for those who may have vision issues. (Arial, Times New Roman and Adobe Caslon Pro are good choices.)
- Avoid use of novelty fonts, even for large headers.
- On websites, use solid black type. Thin and light gray fonts are much more difficult to read.

### Font Sizes

- Emphasize size of text over amount.
- In general, don't use anything less than 12-point type for body text. A 14-point space is recommended between lines. Use whatever size is clearest for the medium you are using.
- With websites, don't assume that all individuals know how to make a screen larger.

### Type Styles

- **WRITING IN ALL CAPS CAN MAKE READING DIFFICULT.** Reserve capital letters for headers.
- In general, avoid the use of italics, except for large headers.

#### *To Learn More:*

**Understand ageism and help combat it:**  
<https://bit.ly/CombatAgeism>

**Federal plain language guidelines and examples:**  
[www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines](http://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines) and [www.plainlanguage.gov/examples](http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples)

**National Institutes of Health Plain Language Training:**  
<https://bit.ly/NIHPlainLanguage>

**Guidelines for writing about people with disabilities:**  
<https://adata.org/factsheet/ADANN-writing>

**University of Maryland Consumer Health Information Hub:**  
<https://sph.umd.edu/research-impact/research-centers/horowitz-center-health-literacy/consumer-health-information-hub>

### Color/Reverse Type

- High contrast improves readability. Therefore, black text on a white background is the most reader friendly.
- Reverse type, with white letters on black or colored backgrounds, is often difficult to read unless very large in size (such as in headlines).
- Avoid using colors for text, especially light colors, and particularly for body text. If you want to use color for emphasis, place a light-colored background behind black text that won't interfere with readability.

### Width of Text

- Avoid wide blocks of text and long or run-on paragraphs.
- Use indentations or break content up into two columns. Double space between paragraphs.
- Don't right justify text. Keep all text "ragged right" (as on this page).

### Design for the Final Product

- When designing publications or advertisements on your computer, think about the medium on which the final product will appear.
- Note that newsprint has a gray or brown tint, while your computer screen is back lit in bright white. Aim for as much contrast as possible to improve readability of text in both media.

