

## **Using Plain Language to Support Individuals with Cognitive Disabilities** <sup>[1]</sup>



Effective communication is crucial for ensuring that individuals with cognitive disabilities can understand, engage with, and benefit from information and services. Plain language is a powerful tool in this regard. It involves simplifying text to make it clearer and more accessible. This approach is especially beneficial for those with cognitive disabilities, as it reduces the complexity of information and helps users navigate and comprehend content more easily.

Here is a guide on using plain language to support individuals with cognitive disabilities.

### **Understand Your Audience**

- **Know Their Needs**

Recognize that cognitive disabilities can vary widely, including conditions such as dementia, traumatic brain injury, and learning disabilities. Tailor your communication to address the specific needs of your audience, keeping in mind their varying levels of comprehension and processing.

- **Use Feedback**

Engage with individuals who have cognitive disabilities or their caregivers to understand their challenges with existing materials. Use this feedback to adjust and improve your plain language strategies.

## **Keep it Simple**

- **Use Clear and Direct Language**

Choose simple, straightforward words. Avoid jargon, technical terms, and complex vocabulary. For example, instead of “utilize,” use “use.” This makes the text more accessible to everyone.

- **Short Sentences and Paragraphs**

Break information into short, concise sentences and paragraphs. This helps readers process information in manageable chunks and reduces cognitive load.

## **Structure Information Clearly**

- **Use headings and subheadings**

Organize content with clear headings and subheadings. This helps users quickly locate relevant sections and understand the structure of the information.

- **Bullet points and lists**

Present information using bullet points or numbered lists. This format highlights key points and makes it easier for readers to scan and absorb information.

## **Prioritize Key Information**

- **Highlight Main Points**

Start with the most important information at the beginning of a document or section. Ensure that key points are emphasized, so readers can quickly grasp the essential content.

- **Use Emphasis Sparingly**

Use bold text, italics, or underlining to draw attention to crucial information, but avoid overusing these features, as too much emphasis can be distracting.

## **Be Consistent**

- **Use Consistent Terms and Definitions**

Ensure that the same terms are used consistently throughout the document. Define any necessary terms clearly and stick to these definitions to avoid confusion.

- **Maintain a Uniform Format**

Keep the format consistent, including font size, style, and layout. A uniform appearance helps readers become familiar with the structure and aids in easier navigation.

## **Include Visual Aids**

- **Use Illustrations and Icons**

Incorporate relevant images, diagrams, or icons that complement the text. Visual aids can help explain concepts and make the information more engaging and understandable.

- **Ensure Visual Clarity**

Ensure that visual aids are clear, simple, and directly related to the text. Avoid cluttered or complex images that could confuse rather than clarify.

## **Test for Readability**

- **Use Readability Tools**

Leverage readability tools and software to assess the complexity of your text. Tools like the Flesch-Kincaid readability tests can provide insights into how accessible your content is.

- **Conduct User Testing**

Test your materials with individuals who have cognitive disabilities or their caregivers. Gather feedback on clarity and understanding; then, adjust based on their input.

## **Provide Supportive Resources**

- **Offer Examples and Scenarios**

Include practical examples and real-life scenarios to illustrate how to use the information. This contextualizes the content and helps users relate it to their own experiences.

- **Provide Contact Information**

Include clear instructions on how to seek help if users need further clarification or assistance. Provide contact information for support services or help desks.

## **Be Empathetic and Respectful**

- **Use Respectful Language**

Choose words and phrases that are respectful and considerate. Avoid language that could be perceived as condescending or stigmatizing.

- **Foster a Positive Tone**

Maintain a positive and supportive tone throughout the text. Encouraging and affirming language helps build confidence and reduces anxiety about understanding the information.

## **Conclusion**

Using plain language is a crucial step in making information accessible to individuals with cognitive disabilities. By simplifying text, structuring information clearly, and incorporating visual aids, you can enhance comprehension and ensure that your communication is inclusive and effective. Regularly testing and seeking feedback will further help in refining your approach. Ultimately, the goal is to empower all individuals to access and benefit from information and services with greater ease and confidence.

For more resources on plain language, visit <https://www.plainlanguage.gov> [2].

For general document accessibility tips (headings, language use, etc.), see the Center for Innovative Design and Engineering's [Document Accessibility Tip Series](#) [3].

Please let us know your thoughts on how we can improve the language on our website to make it easier for everyone to understand. Send an email to [leslie.emery@cu.edu](mailto:leslie.emery@cu.edu) [4].

**Groups audience:**

Coleman Institute for Cognitive Disabilities

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**Source URL:**<https://www.cu.edu/coleman/using-plain-language-support-individuals-cognitive-disabilities>

**Links**

[1] <https://www.cu.edu/coleman/using-plain-language-support-individuals-cognitive-disabilities>

[2] <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/> [3] <https://www.ucdenver.edu/centers/center-for-inclusive-design-and-engineering/services/accessibility-services--test/document-accessibility-tips-series>

[4] <mailto:leslie.emery@cu.edu?subject=Plain%20language%20feedback>