14 rules of plain language in a specialised, professional text

What is plain language?

Plain language is a way of writing that makes information easy to understand for everyone. It ensures that your readers can quickly find what they need, understand it the first time they read it, and use the information effectively. Writing in plain language is about simplifying—not dumbing down—the text. It uses clear, concise, and direct language to deliver your message without unnecessary complexity.

Plain language is not just about the choice of words; it's about structuring your information logically and presenting it in a visually accessible format. It aims to include and empower all readers, ensuring that no one feels excluded or overwhelmed by jargon or technical terms.

Why this document?

This guide is part of the Text it Easy European project, which focuses on promoting plain language to make communication more accessible and inclusive. We are collecting best practices to help individuals and organizations write texts that are easy to read and understand, whether they're emails, reports, guidelines, or educational materials.

By using plain language, you can ensure your message reaches a broader audience, including those who may have difficulty with complex texts due to language barriers, learning disabilities, or limited literacy skills. Writing in plain language doesn't oversimplify the content; it makes it clearer and more inclusive, benefiting all readers.

How to use this guide

In this document, we outline the principles of plain language, with examples of how to simplify complex texts. It's designed for anyone who wants to communicate more effectively and ensure their writing is accessible to a diverse audience. We'll cover:

- Content tips: how to choose the right words and structure your ideas.
- Form tips: how to format your text for maximum readability.
- Examples: before-and-after comparisons to show how complex text can be simplified.

By following these guidelines, you'll learn how to write in a way that is clear, concise, and inclusive, making your message easy for everyone to understand.

Content

1. **Avoid jargon. Steer clear of specialised language unless it's essential and you define it clearly. Use simple words: choose common, everyday words over complex or technical terms. When you must use difficult words, explain them clearly at the time they are used and include a glossary if necessary. Use the same term for the same concept throughout the document to avoid confusion.**

Example: "*As BIPs need to be implemented by at least three higher education institutions, some institutions prefer to create a multilateral BIP-consortium agreement. From the Erasmus+ Programme perspective this is not needed as the only requirement is the existence of an inter-institutional agreement between the sending and the receiving institutions. As EWP does not (yet) support multilateral agreements, institutions that aim for multilateral agreement can use the editable multilateral inter-institutional agreement template.*"

How the text could be simplified: "To run a BIP (blended intensive programme), three higher education institutions must be involved. Some prefer to create a group agreement, but Erasmus+ only needs an agreement between the sending and receiving institutions. Since EWP (Erasmus Without Paper Network) doesn't support group agreements yet, institutions can use a template to create one."

Source: <u>Comprehensive User Guide for ERASMUS+ Inter-institutional Agreements</u>

2. **Identify your audience and write to meet their needs.** Consider what they already know and what they need to learn from your document. If the readers are new to a subject, provide foundational knowledge first before diving into specifics. Do not infantilise your readers - remember that presenting your information in plain language can only be beneficial for all the parties involved.

3. **Use the active voice.** For example, "The committee will review the report" instead of "The report will be reviewed by the committee".

4. **Break down complex information into smaller, manageable sections and use bullet points or lists where possible.** Write short, simple sentences. Each sentence should express one idea. You can organise your ideas by adding headings and subheadings to your text.

Example: "*Additional requirements could be used to indicate specific requirements for incoming applicants, e.g. that they need to provide a transcript of records, motivation letter, recommendation letter or other specific information for the incoming formal application to the receiving institution (if applicable).*"

How the text could be simplified: "Additional requirements can be used to specify what incoming applicants need to provide.
For example, they might need to submit:
- a transcript of records
- a motivation letter
- a recommendation letter
- other specific information

These documents are for the formal application to the receiving institution (if applicable)."

The visual presentation of the text is also a good example of headings and subheadings use:

Dealing with exceptional scenarios

Dealing with different deadlines for different departments/faculties

You can provide one nomination/application deadline for incoming students for your institution in the factsheet to be shared via the EWP network. It is not possible to provide a deadline for each faculty. If your institution does not have harmonised deadlines for nominations and application across the institution, you can add more details in the *additional information* section.

Indicating different campuses

The *additional information* section in the factsheet can also be used to indicate different campuses located in various city areas or outside of the city. Partners and students must be well informed about possible locations when planning the exchanges.

The other terms field from the cooperation conditions can be used to indicate the right campus or city for a specific agreement. For example, your institution has campuses in different cities offering studies in law. Via the other terms field, you should indicate that the agreement is only valid for campus x.

Limiting mobility to one term

Indicating a deadline for both the spring and the autumn term is required. In case exchanges are only accepted in

Each subheading presents a paragraph that has between 5 and 10 lines, making it easier for the reader to digest.
Source: Comprehensive User Guide for ERASMUS+ Inter-institutional Agreements

5.   **Present complex information in lists or tables to make it easier to digest.**

Name of the field	Mandatory (m) / Conditional (c) / Optional (o)	Type of field	Short description of the field (where relevant)
SECTION INSTITUTIONAL INFO			
Name of the institution	m	Text	
Erasmus code	m	Text	The beginning of an Erasmus code has a fixed form: one or two characters indicating the country followed by two or one blanks (apart from Ireland starting with three characters and no blanks). The format is as follows: X- -XXXX01, YY-YYYY01; IRLXXXX01.
Department	o	Text	
Contact details email	m	Valid email addresses following «[^@]+@[^.]+\..+»/> pattern	This is a general contact point relevant for exchange students. *This field is currently optional in EWP. Will be revised in the next round of EWP updates.*
Contact details phone	m	E.164 format (with the leading «+» sign)	This is a general contact point relevant for exchange students. *This field is currently optional in EWP. Will be revised in the next round of EWP updates.*
Website general	m	URL	This is a general contact point relevant for exchange students. *This field is currently optional in EWP. Will be revised in the next round of EWP updates.*
Website faculty/faculties	o	URL	
Course catalogue	m	URL	Link to the course catalogue. *This field is currently optional in EWP. Will be revised in the next round of EWP updates.*

Source: Comprehensive User Guide for ERASMUS+ Inter-institutional Agreements

6.   **Frame sentences positively.** For instance, use "Please stay until the end of the meeting" instead of "Do not leave before the end of the meeting".

7.   **Be careful with pronouns to ensure it is clear who or what they refer to.** Use proper names when necessary to avoid confusion. If necessary, repeat the name from sentence to sentence.

Example: "*The manager spoke to the team leader about their performance review. They decided to implement new strategies.*"

In this case, "they" could refer to either the manager and the team leader or to the entire team, making it unclear who decided to implement the new strategies.

Instead, say "The manager spoke to the team leader about the team's performance review. The manager and the team leader decided to implement new strategies".

8. **When giving instructions, be specific and straightforward.**
Use step-by-step guidance where applicable to ensure clarity.
Use the inverted pyramid style in presenting your information: begin with the shortest and clearest statement you can make about your topic. Put the most important information at the top and less important one at the bottom. Omit the information that is not essential to convey the message, do not use the words that are not necessary (like adverbs, descriptive adjectives).

Form

9. **Use fonts like Arial or Tahoma which are easy to read.** Avoid serif fonts like Times New Roman.

10. **Use a large enough font size, at least Arial 12, to ensure readability, and 1,5 line spacing.** Provide enough white space in between paragraphs.

11. **Do not write whole words in capitals or use italics as they are harder to read.** Do not underline them. Instead, use bold to stress the importance of information.

12. **Avoid using slashes like "and/or" as they create ambiguity.**
Use precise words instead.

13. **Footnotes can distract and confuse readers.** Include necessary explanations within the main text.

Example:
With footnote:
"The project must follow GDPR.*

*GDPR is the General Data Protection Regulation, which governs data privacy in the EU."

Simplified:
"The project must follow GDPR, the General Data Protection Regulation that governs data privacy in the EU."

14. **Avoid complex layouts and backgrounds that make the text hard to read.** Use high contrast between text and background colours to ensure legibility for all readers. To check if the contrast is high enough, you can use the <u>contrast checker</u>.

As the project implies the use of artificial intelligence in popularising the solutions that privilege plain language, we asked ChatGPT to propose a complicated text, and then propose a simplified one based on the rules we proposed.

Complex text:
In the intricate realm of construction project management, time overruns are a prevalent and perturbing phenomenon, significantly impacting both the financial viability and completion timelines of projects. Such delays emanate from a plethora of sources, encompassing manpower deficiencies, material procurement inefficiencies, and unforeseen environmental conditions. The exigency of addressing these delays necessitates a methodical and comprehensive approach, leveraging advanced statistical methodologies to predict and mitigate potential time overruns. The development of a Delay Index model, predicated on empirical data and regression analysis, facilitates the anticipatory identification of risk factors, thereby enabling project

managers to implement preemptive measures. This model, rooted in a robust analysis of historical project data, provides a quantifiable metric for evaluating potential delays, thereby fostering enhanced decision-making and strategic planning in the construction domain.

Simplified text:

Delays are common in construction projects. They can hurt both timelines and budgets.
These delays often come from issues like:

- labour shortages,
- late material deliveries,
- and bad weather.

To handle these delays, we need a careful and thorough approach. We can predict and reduce potential delays by using advanced statistics.

The Delay Index model, based on real data and analysis, helps identify risks early. This allows project managers to take action before problems occur. By looking at past project data, this model gives a clear measure of possible delays, helping managers plan better and make smarter decisions.

In the example presented above, the rules of simplification used were the following: the text was simplified using the inverted pyramid style - the most essential information was presented first, the background information was presented later in the text. Many descriptive adjectives were omitted, and complicated words were replaced with more obvious ones. Long sentences were divided into two to make the information presented easier to digest.

Use this checklist to ensure your text aligns with plain language principles:

Content

- [ ] Have you avoided jargon and complex language?

- [ ] Are technical terms defined clearly when first introduced?

- [ ] Have you used consistent terminology for the same concepts throughout?

Structure

- [ ] Is the text organized logically with headings and subheadings?

- [ ] Are long paragraphs broken into shorter, digestible sections?

- [ ] Have you used bullet points or lists for clarity?

Clarity

- [ ] Are sentences short and simple, expressing one idea at a time?

- [ ] Have you used the active voice instead of passive?

- [ ] Are instructions clear and step-by-step, where necessary?

Tone

- [ ] Is the tone professional yet conversational?

- [ ] Have you framed sentences positively?

Formatting

☐ Is the font readable (e.g., Arial, size 12)?

☐ Is there enough white space for readability?

☐ Have you avoided italics, underlining, and all caps, using bold sparingly for emphasis?

Inclusivity

☐ Have you considered your audience's knowledge and needs?

☐ Have you avoided unnecessary footnotes, integrating explanations directly into the text?

By following these steps, you can ensure your text is accessible, engaging, and effective across all contexts.