



# 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 form
- 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



# Help people in a crisis with plain language

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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](mailto:calacademy@innovation.ca.gov). We'll be in touch to consult with you.