

Clear Language Methods / clear and easy to understand language

Use Clear Language

Basics:

Functional Outcome

use clear and easy to understand language

This includes

- Understandable choices for vocabulary, syntax, tense, and other aspects of language.
- The meaning is clear.

Exceptions:

Technical documents that provide a clear language summary. See functional outcomes for this guideline.

Functional Category

Select from this list. See the [Functional Needs - Expanded](#) draft for details

- Speech
- Cognitive - Attention
- Cognitive - Language & Literacy
- Cognitive - Learning
- Cognitive - Memory
- Cognitive - Executive
- Cognitive - Mental Health
- Cognitive & Sensory Intersections

- Independence

Applies to:

All technologies

Detailed Description

- Use common and clear words
 - Use common and clear words in all content. Look at the most common 1500 words or phrases. These are the terms that people with severe language impairments are most likely to know.
 - Remove unnecessary or vague words (such as: “and so forth”).
 - Remove or explain uncommon acronyms, abbreviations, and jargon.
 - Do not invent new words or give words new meanings in your application. Do not expect people to learn new meanings for words just to use your content. If you must create new terms, make sure the user has access to an explanation within one click or event.
- Use the **tense and the voice** that is easiest to understand. In English, this is usually the present tense and active voice. Speak directly to the user, and use the simplest form of verbs and sentence structure. Use local [plain language](#) guidance to find the tense and the voice that is easiest to understand in different languages.
- Use a **simple sentence structure**. This includes:
 - do not use a double negative to express a positive, and
 - do not use clauses inside clauses.
- Use literal and **concrete language**. When possible, use concrete terms and examples that refer to objects or events that you can see, hear or touch. Do not use metaphors and similes unless you include an explanation.
- Use **short blocks of text**. This includes:
 - Keep paragraphs short. Have only one topic in each paragraph.
 - Try to have the aim of the paragraph or chunk at the beginning.
 - Use short sentences. Have only one point per sentence.
 - Use bulleted or numbered lists.
 - Use short descriptive headings.
-

More details

When using uncommon words, provide an explanation by:

- adding a simple language term in brackets next to it,
- providing a pop up definition, or
- using supported markup (see [easylang](#)). Note that [easylang](#) is being introduced into the new personalization specifications [[personalization-semantics-help-1.0](#)]. At the time of publication more support is needed.
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- Use other voices or tenses when they will be easier to understand or friendlier.
- In languages where present tense and active voice do not exist or are not the clearest option, use the tense and the voice that are easiest to understand.
- If you are writing about past or future events, do not use the present tense. It will be confusing
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- Make sure the meaning remains clear when you replace non-literal text with literal text. Check this when providing literal text in a popup or other alternative..
- **What is a short paragraph?** In English, if you have a paragraph of more than 50 words, try breaking it up into two paragraphs.
- **How can I avoid writing a sentence with more than one point?** Sentences that have more than one point usually have more than one linking word such as “and” or “but”.
- **Can a long sentence ever be clearer than two short sentences?** Double-check if a long sentence is clearer than two short sentences. Do usability testing to see if people with [cognitive and learning disabilities](#) find the long sentence easier to understand.
- **When should I use lists?** Lists are great when you have three or more things in a row. Think about using an unordered list (with bullet points) for items, requirements, and exceptions. A series of three or more steps is easier to follow as a numbered list.

How it helps

This benefits many people such as those with language impairments, processing difficulties, or a memory impairment.

Using uncommon words can make text and media difficult to understand. People with language impairments often have a reduced vocabulary. Learning new terms is a very slow, difficult process. For other groups, such as people living with dementia, learning new terms is not

realistic or possible. Using uncommon words, that they do not already know, will make the content incomprehensible (unable to be understood) and unusable.

For example, someone with mild dementia is trying to turn on an ICT heating and air conditioning unit. The menu item for selecting heat or air conditioning is labeled “mode”. The user cannot use the whole unit because of this one term. This type of design has caused emergencies such as hypothermia.

Using common words and terms, with their most common meanings will help avoid these problems.

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Using simple tense and voice benefits many people such as people with language impairments, dyslexia, or a memory impairment. For example, more people will understand “press the on button” (present tense and active voice) than “the on button should be pressed.” (passive voice).

Active voice makes it clear who is supposed to take action. For example, “It must be done.” is passive voice and does not say who must act. “You must do it.” is active voice and clearly states who has the action.

Putting the aim of the sentence at the beginning can also make English sentences easier to follow. Local language experts may have additional linguistic advice that helps make content easy to understand.

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Simple sentence structure benefits many people, including those with language impairments, dyslexia, or a memory impairment. Both double negatives and nested clauses can be confusing.

For example, more people will understand “You must get the agency’s approval before we can answer your claim”, rather than “No approval of any claims can be achieved without the agency’s approval.”

Simple language allows more people to understand. For example, a person with [early stage dementia](#) can manage their own affairs when the language is clear and understandable.

--Many people do not understand non-literal content. For example, an [autistic](#) person may not understand jokes and similes. Sometimes instructions have jokes and similes to make the content friendlier. However, this confuses the user who now cannot do her job as needed.

You can explain any non-literal language by:

- adding a simple language term in brackets next to any non-literal text such as metaphors and similes,
- providing a pop up definition, or
- using supported markup (such as personalization semantics [[personalization-semantics-help-1.0](#)]).

In non-text media, explain non-literal content as part of the media or include it in a separate file or track. See best practices

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Chunking text content makes it easier to read and understand. This helps people with learning or cognitive disabilities related to processing speed or language. People with a memory impairment or anyone who is easily distracted will also benefit. Chunking is also helpful to anyone who is multitasking. Try to put the aim or purpose at the beginning of each chunk or paragraph.

For example, a graduate student with [AD\(H\)D](#) may need to teach themselves a new software skill. The software documentation is broken up into short paragraphs and lists by topic. The student finds the documentation easy to read and understand.

old

Clear and common words: Use words or phrases that are most-frequently used for the current context, unless it will result in a loss of meaning or clarity. This includes not using abbreviations, words, or phrases, unless they are the common form to refer to concepts for beginners. Where word frequencies are known for the context, they can be used. An example would be the Merriam Webster [3000 Core English Vocabulary Words](#).

Even languages with a small number of users have published lists of most-frequent words (such as Hebrew). If there is a natural language that does not have such a list, algorithms exist that calculate these lists for languages, or for specific contexts. Testing content against these word lists can be done manually.

Define unusual words: It is best to define technical or jargon words in context so that the user does not have to navigate away from the text to a glossary in a different location. There are a

variety of possible solutions for defining words in context, including the use of a pop-up definition.

Provide a glossary: A glossary is typically an alphabetical list of terms related to a given set of content.

Code Samples (or Examples)

Example:

Before: The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends a half hour or more of moderate physical activity on most days, preferably every day. The activity can include brisk walking, calisthenics, home care, gardening, moderate sports exercise, and dancing.

After: Do at least 30 minutes of exercise, like brisk walking, most days of the week.

1.

before

1. Long chunks of text. For example:

- DOTD Issues Winter Weather Travel Advisory for Calgary. With the possibility of snow and rain in the forecast throughout the holiday weekend, the Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD) announced that department staff is prepared to deal with winter weather. Maintenance forces will be on standby to apply sand and salt over any affected bridges and roadways, to remove fallen trees from the roadway, and to close any roads as needed. Interim Secretary Jane Doe urges motorists to take the threat of winter weather seriously. “In the event of adverse weather conditions, the department will strive to maintain access to highways and interstates; however, we encourage the motoring public to avoid traveling during snow and ice, if at all possible,” said Doe.

After

2. Short chunks of text. For example:

- Calgary will have a lot of snow and hail this weekend. Try not to drive. If you must drive:
 - Use the rules for driving in winter to keep safe.

- Before you leave, check what roads are safe at the Traveler's Information web site.

Before (clear words, short chunks)

3. A Landlord's Right to Deduct. When a tenant moves into a rental property, he or she will pay the landlord a security deposit. Depending on the jurisdiction, this deposit will be returned to the tenant within a specific time period at the cessation of the lease term, as long as the tenant follows all the terms and tenants of the lease agreement or contract. Select links below to read the laws that pertain to your situation.

After (clear words, short sentences)

4. Your landlord must follow the law.
 - Your landlord can only use your security deposit (promise money), for certain things, such as unpaid rent (rent that you owe) and to fix things that you damage.
 - Your landlord must return your security deposit (promise money) to you by a clear date. This is usually 30 days after you leave the apartment.

Tests

Confirm the the following are used:

1. Common, clear, and easy to understand words and definitions of terms. Words that are outside the most common used XXX for this context, are defined or explained at least the first time they are used in a page.
2. Abbreviations that are explained the first time they are used, unless the abbreviation is more common than the full term. Abbreviations are in an abbreviation tag with a title after the first use.
2. Acronyms that are not in common use, are explained the first time they are used, and are in an acronym tag with a title after that.
3. Jargon that is avoided or explained.
4. Simple tense and language. For example: "Your stocks went up this month."
5. Short text without avoidable double negatives. For example: "Write clearly".
6. Literal text and concrete language. For example:

- a. If you are experiencing anxiety disorders before starting take a deep breath, tell yourself you can do it and get started. Anxiety can include nervousness, fear, dizziness, or shortness of breath.
 - b.
7. Short chunks of text. For example:
 - a. Calgary will have a lot of snow and hail this weekend. Try not to drive. If you must drive:
 - i. Use the rules for driving in winter to keep safe.
 - ii. Before you leave, check what roads are safe at the Traveler's Information web site.
- 8.

Avoid:

1. Uncommon words without explanations.
2. Abbreviations, acronyms, and jargon that the user may not know and are not explained.
2. Complex language and tense. For example: "Over the last month, we saw your stocks increasing."
3. Double negatives that can be replaced by a positive. For example:
 - Do not write unclearly.
 - Time is not unlimited.
4. Literal text and concrete language. For example:
 - a. If you are experiencing anxiety disorders before starting take a deep breath, tell yourself you can do it and get started. Anxiety can include nervousness, fear, dizziness, or shortness of breath.
 - b.
5. Long chunks of text.

Traditional Testing

Applicable tests (and WCAG 2 Techniques) <h3>

- 3.1.3 Unusual Words

- G101: Providing the definition of a word or phrase used in an unusual or restricted way
- G55: Linking to definitions
- H40: Using description lists
- H60: Using the link element to link to a glossary
- G112: Using inline definitions
- H54: Using the dfn element to identify the defining instance of a word
- G101: Providing the definition of a word or phrase used in an unusual or restricted way
- G62: Providing a glossary
- G70: Providing a function to search an online dictionary
- 3.1.4 Abbreviations
- 3.1.5 Reading Level
- 3.1.6 Pronunciation

Test

Test for common words

- **Unit tested:** By paragraph of text or other media. Use a common word list for your language. The list should be at least 3000 words long. Use a tool like <https://xkcd.com/simplewriter>
- **How the individual units will be scored**
 - Rating: 0-2
 - 0 (uses undefined technical or jargon words),
 - 1 (uses common words and includes a glossary (at the end of a document that the person has to navigate to and back from.)
 - 2 (uses common words and defines unusual words in one click and one click return)

Procedure

1. For each section of text (paragraph or greater) look for technical words or jargon.
2. Are technical or jargon words defined...
 - a. In a glossary that needs to be searched
 - b. As a single click to display the definition and a single click to return to the word in context

Expected Results [for each unit]

1. There are no undefined technical or jargon words (Rating 2)
2. Uses common words and defines unusual words in one click and one click return (Rating 2)

3. Uses common words and includes a glossary (at the end of a document that the person has to navigate to and back from.) (Rating 1)
4. Uses undefined technical or jargon words (Rating 0)

Scoring

- Critical failures for the method or specific tests
 - Documents with undefined jargon or technical language scoring an average below 1.
- Specify how to assign an adjectival rating
 - What should the tester look for when scoring?
 - Uses technical or jargon words that are not linked to a definition. Use a common word list for your language. The list should be at least 3000 words long.
 - If definitions are available, a person can get to a definition in one click and return in one click. Give less points if a person who wants a definition has to search a glossary and then navigate back to where they were reading.
 - What a 0,1, 2, 3, and 4 look like (% cutoff points or additional rules on how to assign a scale rating)
 - 4 would be an average of 1.7 or above
 - 2 would be an average of 1 or above
 - 0 would be an average below 1
- Exceptions:
 - Technical documents that provide a clear language summary. See functional outcomes for this guidelines

See also

For reference: [Document of relevant excerpts from Content Usable \(COGA\)](#)

For reference: Meeting notes from joint COGA and Silver subgroups

Based on user story: **Clear Language (Written or Audio) from content useable**

Patterns:

1. [Use Clear Words \(Pattern\)](#)
2. [4.4.2 Use a Simple Tense and Voice \(Pattern\)](#)
3. [4.4.3 Avoid Double Negatives or Nested Clauses \(Pattern\)](#)
4. [4.4.4 Use Literal Language \(Pattern\)](#)
5. [4.4.5 Keep Text Succinct \(Pattern\)](#)
6. [4.4.6 Use Clear, Unambiguous Formatting and Punctuation \(Pattern\) \(pending\)](#)

7. 4.4.7 **Include Symbols and Letters Necessary to Decipher the Words (Pattern)(pending)**
8. 4.4.8 **Provide Summary of Long Documents and Media (Pattern)(pending)**
9. 4.4.9 **Separate Each Instruction (Pattern)(pending)**
10. 4.4.12 **Explain Implied Content (Pattern)(pending)**
- 11.

related:

12. 4.4.10 **Use White Spacing (Pattern)**
13. 4.4.11 **Ensure Foreground Content is not Obscured by Background (Pattern)**
14. 4.4.13 **Provide Alternatives for Numerical Concepts (Pattern)**

TODO

- Integrate more patterns (marked as pending)
- Merge and integrate text
- Look at the old wcag versions for improved testable statements
- Improve testability
- Use tests