

Easy to Read Communications are Crucial – 5 Tips

Plain language means ensuring that communications you send are understandable to your intended audience in one reading. Before you begin, think about what you know about your intended audience and what you want them *to do* with the information you are providing. Communications, especially in times of crisis, are learning events! Readers are getting information from you and applying it to their own life. The more you plan to write for your readers, the better they will be able to make meaningful decisions right away.



Here are 5 tips on how to make your writing easy to understand in one reading!

- 1. Identify the purpose or action required right up front.** Use active voice and strong verbs to make clear what the reader is supposed to do with the information. Because active voice emphasizes the doer of an action, it is usually briefer, clearer, and more emphatic than the passive voice. The 5 tips in this post are written in active voice with strong verbs.

Passive voice: Our schools are participating in a survey process that is part of our overall plan.

Active voice: Your student will be completing a survey next week; here is what you need to know.

- 2. Use bullet lists and other graphic elements to chop up your blocks of text into readable chunks.** Graphs, tables, descriptive headings and white space can break up heavy text and make it easier for the reader to take in.

Paragraph:

In keeping with district policy, families have options regarding the survey. You may preview the survey prior to implementation by grade level: Kindergarten-2nd grade, 3rd-4th grade, 5th grade, 6th-8th grade, and 9th-12th grades. Students may skip any question they prefer not to answer or if they are unsure about how to respond. In addition, families may opt-out their students from participating in the survey. If you wish that your student not participate in the resilience survey, simply contact your school administrator and let them know.

List:

You have choices:

- You can preview the survey questions by grade level.
- Your student may skip any question
- You can choose not to participate. Let your school administrator know.
- Your student's answers will be kept private.

- 3. Use “You” and other personal pronouns.** See the example above. Instead of referring to “families” and “students,” using the “you” is much simpler and more direct. Remember to define in the beginning of the communication who the audience or “you” is.

4. **Write short sentences.** It is easier to skim and read sentences that are 20 words or less. Think about your purpose, does your reader really need to know all that you know about the subject right now in order to take action or make a decision?

Before

The survey is called the Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM); it is a research validated survey that assesses the resilience promoting factors present among our school communities, such as a belief in one's self, positive relationships, belonging, etc.

After

Your student will be taking a survey called the Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM). This survey asks about how you believe in yourself, positive relationships, sense of belonging, etc.

5. **Use fewer and more common, everyday words.** Excess or elaborate words make your writing weaker. The reader must struggle and re-read to really understand what you are trying to say. Keep an eye out for unnecessary legalese, grant proposal phrasing, and your own organization's lingo and acronyms.

Excess words

Plain Alternatives

at a later date	later
at the present time	now, currently
commence	begin, start
for the purpose of	to, for
in the event that	if
on a monthly basis	monthly
pertaining to	of, about
related to	of
with regard to	about

If you have time to test your communication on a typical reader, you will immediately learn if your document is user-friendly or easily comprehended.

For more information on plain language communications:

- [Plain language.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov)
- <http://www.usability.gov>