

PLAIN eJournal Style Guide

This guide is updated twice a year — in January and July. If you have questions or suggestions for elements to be included in the next update, please email the Managing Editor at publications@PlainLanguageNetwork.org.

General

- We use the [*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*](#) and [*The Chicago Manual of Style*](#).
- Use American English spelling, such as organization and color. For other languages, please use the appropriate national dictionary.

Formatting

Bold

- Use bold to highlight a word or phrase, not italics or underline. Do not highlight entire sentences or paragraphs.
- Make sure the punctuation after a bold word is not set as bold.

Hyperlinks

- When designating a link or reference, select 2–3 keywords or a phrase, preferably at the end of a sentence. Then embed the hyperlink to those words. Avoid putting hyperlinks in the first line of the article.
- For accessibility, do not ask readers to “click here.”

Italics

- Use italics for full publication titles (for example, [*Oxford Guide to Plain English and Writing at Work*](#)).
- If a non-English word is not found in the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, set it in italics followed by translation in parentheses the first time it is used.

References

- Please embed hyperlinks in appropriate places in your text (for example, Case studies have shown the benefits of clear language, with many captured in Kimble’s [*Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please*](#)).
- If some references do not have a corresponding electronic link, list them under the heading References at the end of your article, using the Author–Date system for in-text citations. For example, Many case studies have shown the benefits of clear language (Kimble, 2014).

- Then at the end of the article:

References

Kimble, Joe. 2014. *Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please*. Carolina Academic Press.

Riedener, Stefan, and Philipp Schwind. 2022. "The Point of Promises." *Ethics* 132 (3): 621–43. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.editors.ca:2048/10.1086/718080>.

Headings & subheadings

- Heading and subheadings should be in sentence style, that is capitalize first word in title (or first word following colon for subtitle) and any proper nouns (for example, Plain language in Germany: A complex matter).

Language

Abbreviations, acronyms, and initialisms

- Use periods after honorifics (for example, Mr. and Dr.).
- The first time an abbreviation, acronym, or initialism is used in an article, write out in full and put the abbreviation in brackets afterwards (for example, annual general meeting [AGM]).
- When giving an abbreviation for a non-English title (for example, an organization) in an English text, use the non-English title's initials, unless the English version's abbreviation is widely known (for example, International Organization for Standardization [ISO]).

Capitals

- Use sentence case for all headings and subheadings.
- Use title case for the full titles of institutions and publications (for example, Center for Plain Language, *Oxford Guide to Plain English*).
- Do not use capital letters for generic references or short titles (for example, the government, our network, the center).

Numbers

Dates

- Write dates in month-day-year style with commas (for example, July 1, 2025, not 1 July 2025).
- For spans of years, use an en dash (for example, 2020–2021).
- Apostrophes are used for possessives but not for plurals (for example, 1990s, 30s [age], the '90s [decade]).

Fractions

- Write in numerals with slash to separate numerator and denominator in text size. Avoid using at beginning of sentence (for example, In the survey, 2/3 of respondents stated they were satisfied.).

Numerals

- Use numerals for numbers in body text.
- Spell out numbers at the start of sentences (for example, Twenty people tested the document).

Ordinal numbers

- Use first and second, not 1st, 2nd.

Percentages

- Use the % symbol with numerals rather than spell out per cent (for example, More than 68% of readers).
- However, spell out words at the start of a sentence and use per cent (for example, Sixty-eight per cent of readers).

Time

- Use the 24-hour clock and UTC time for meetings, events, appointments, etc. (for example, 14:15 not 2:15 p.m.)

Punctuation

Apostrophes

- Singular possessives use an apostrophe s (for example, James's book).
- Plural possessives use only an apostrophe without the s (for example, the hockey players' uniforms).

Commas

- A comma is needed after most introductory items (for example, In 2019, PLAIN published its first journal).
- In serial lists, use the Oxford comma (for example, Consider headings, lists, and tables).
- Use a comma between independent clauses separated with conjunctions (for example, The department did not expect any problems, but readers were highly critical of the text).
- Use commas around non-restrictive elements (for example, The readers we surveyed, which included each user group, preferred the plain language alternative).

Dashes

- Use spaced em dashes for sentence punctuation, with a space before and after (for example, Plain language shortened the text — by more than 30%).

- Used unspaced en dashes for ranges of numbers (e.g., 2020–2021).

Hyphens

- Hyphenate compound adjectives, but do not hyphenate plain language as this is not likely to be misunderstood (for example, plain language writing).

Spaces after a period

- Use only one space before the start of the next sentence.

Quotations

- Use double quotation marks for quotes, but single marks for quotes within quotes.

Lists

- When a list is a sentence:
 - start each item in lowercase,
 - use punctuation at the end of each item, and
 - place a full stop at the end of the list.
- Lists with stand-alone sentences have 2 key features:
 - Each item is a complete sentence.
 - Each sentence starts with a capital letter and ends in a period.

Usage

Countries

- United States not USA, U.S., or America
- United Kingdom not U.K. or UK

Electronic communication

- Use website not Web site or Website
- Use email not E-mail or e-mail

International Plain Language Federation

- the Federation
- Not IPLF

ISO

- International Organization for Standardization (ISO)
- ISO Technical Committee 37 on language and terminology (TC 37)
- Working Group 11 on plain language (WG 11)
- [ISO 24495-1:2023 Plain language — Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines](#)
- [ISO 24495-2:2025 Plain language — Part 2: Legal communication](#)

- [ISO 24495-3 Plain language — Part 3: Science writing](#)
- [ISO/CD 24495-4 Plain language — Part 4: Requirements for implementing the plain language principles in organizations](#)
- [ISO/WD 24495-5 Plain language — Part 5: Document design](#)
- [ISO/CD 24896 Notation for business reporting](#)

PLAIN

- Write out PLAIN's full name on first instance, with the abbreviation in brackets (for example, Plain Language Association International [PLAIN]).

PLAIN eJournal

- We publish the *PLAIN eJournal* twice per year.
- Have you read the latest issue of the journal?

Plain language

- Do not capitalize plain language in general usage.
- Do not hyphenate plain language when used as an adjective.