Inclusive Communication Strategies

Effective communication is integral to a productive workplace. This document provides strategies and tips for creating accessible and inclusive communications that benefit all employees.

Why is accessible and inclusive communication important?

People who are on the autism spectrum or who have an intellectual disability process information and communicate differently, and they benefit from accessible and inclusive communication at work. However, all employees deserve clear communication in their workplace.

You may think creating clear, accessible communication is a lot of effort to make for just one (or a few) employees. However, accessible communication is universally beneficial. The adjustments you make support all employees; not just those who are on the autism spectrum or who have an intellectual disability. Clear communication can make your workplace productive and safe for everyone.

Consider this example …

You create a safety protocol sign to post in your workplace. You use visuals and simple language:

SOCIAL DISTANCING
Please stay 2 metres away from other people.

FACE COVERING
Please wear a mask if you are entering.

SANITIZING
Please use hand sanitizer throughout the day.

It's easy for your employee who is on the autism spectrum or who has an intellectual disability to understand.

It's easy for your employees who speak English as a second language to understand.

It's easy for your busy employees to read and grasp with a quick look as they walk by.

Strategies for enhancing the accessibility of written and verbal communication

1. Use plain language

The purpose of using plain language is to make information and ideas more accessible to everyone.

A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.

Writing in plain language means you consider:

- How you organize the information

- What you write

- How you write it

- How you present the information

Plain language isn't about writing less (fewer facts, ideas, or information); it's about explaining information in a way that more people can easily understand.
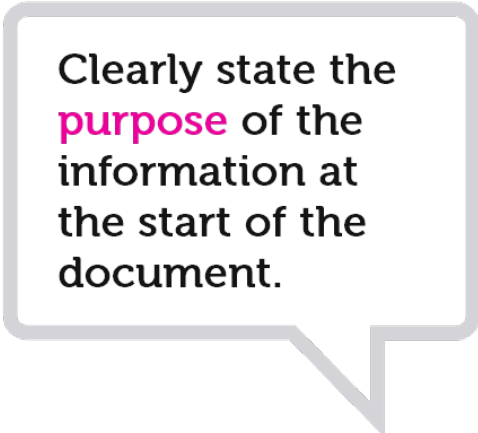
Plain language can sometimes sound blunt and direct.

Tips for using plain language

- Include only information that applies to the reader.

- Consider: What does the reader need to know? What does the reader need to do?

- If there is more than one audience, separate the content into two sections that have clear titles, clearly indicating who the intended audience is.

> Simple.
> Clear.
> Direct.
> **Plain.**

> Clearly state the **purpose** of the information at the start of the document.
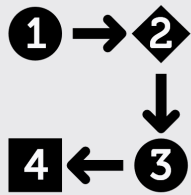
- Organize and present content in a way that is meaningful and helpful to readers.
- If it's a process, present it in numbered steps in chronological order.
- Use numbering, lists, and bullets to visually show the order of the content and how different types of content relate to each other.

Write as if you're speaking to the person the content is for.
Try to sound natural. For example:

> " The applicant must provide his or her mailing address."

Plain language →

> " You must provide your mailing address."

How to submit your hours

When you start work, insert your timecard into the card reader.

If you go on a break, insert your card again. This will tell your manager that you are on a break.

- Use meaningful headings that address your reader's needs. Keep them short.
- Use short, simple words.
- Use commonly used words.
- Use words with few syllables.
- Write short sentences (maximum 25 words).
- Try to have one idea per sentence.
- Break up a long, complicated sentence into several smaller, easier-to-understand sentences.
- Use short paragraphs (maximum 7 lines).
- Have only one topic per paragraph.

Use active voice instead of passive voice. Active voice makes it clear who does what.

❝ The sweeping must be done." → **Active voice** → ❝ You must sweep."

❝ The date and time must be included on the sheet." → **Active voice** → ❝ You must include the date and time on the sheet."

❝ Masks must be worn by everyone." → **Active voice** → ❝ Everyone must wear a mask."

Use **bold** to highlight only the most important words or ideas. Don't overuse it.

Avoid using capital letters, italics, or underlining to emphasize content.

Use visually simple fonts (sans serif). Avoid using fancy fonts. Use a large font size (16 point).

Include white space in documents.

- Leave open space at the top, bottom, and sides of the page.

- Leave space between lines.

- Leave space between paragraphs.

- Use bullets and numbering for lists of information.

Click here to see an example of plain language: Coronavirus: What Am I Supposed to Do?

❌

Use white space

When you start your shift, insert your timecard into the card reader.
If you go on a break, insert your card again. This will let your manager know that you are on a break.
When you come back from your break, remember to insert your card into the reader again. When you start your shift, insert your timecard into the card reader. If you go on a break, insert your card again. This will let your manager know that you are on a break. This is how not to use white space. You can see that it is very hard to read.

✅

Use white space

Leave space at the sides, bottom and top of the page.

This helps readers to understand your message better.

2. Use literal language

Individuals on the autism spectrum or with an intellectual disability benefit from clear, literal communication. For this reason, avoid using words or phrases that have a different meaning from the words used. For example:

Avoid using idioms

An idiom is a phrase whose meaning isn't clearly connected to the actual words.

> He needs to pull his weight."

> Okay, let's rally the troops."

> We all need to step up to the plate."

> Next month, we have to stay ahead of the curve."

> Let's put that idea on the back burner."

> Let's talk about that in a minute."

Avoid using jargon

Jargon consists of words or expressions that are used by particular industries or professions. Jargon is difficult for people outside those industries or professions to understand.

> Due diligence"

> Crowdsource"

> Change agent"

> Build capacity"

> Forward planning"

> Growth hacking"

> Synergize"

> Revolutionize"

Avoid using acronyms

An acronym is an abbreviation formed from the first letter of each word in a proper name or phrase.

> " FTE" (full-time equivalent)

> " EOD" (end of day)

> " MoM" (month over month)

> " SME" (subject matter expert)

> " YTD" (year to date)

Avoid using sarcasm

Sarcasm consists of using words that mean the opposite of what you really mean. Sarcasm is often used to show irritation, to insult someone, or to be funny.

> " You can't be serious."

> " I just love doing month end."

> " Sure ... I'd love to work the weekend."

Avoid using rhetorical questions

A rhetorical question is a question you ask without expecting an answer.

> " Sure, why not?"

> " Can't you do anything right?"

> " Are you taking long enough to do that?"

Avoid using hypotheticals

A hypothetical statement is based on possible situations or ideas (not actual ones).

> " How do you think you'll cope with short timelines?"

> " How do you think you could change a co-worker's opinion on how to get the work done quickly?"

3. Check the readability of your writing
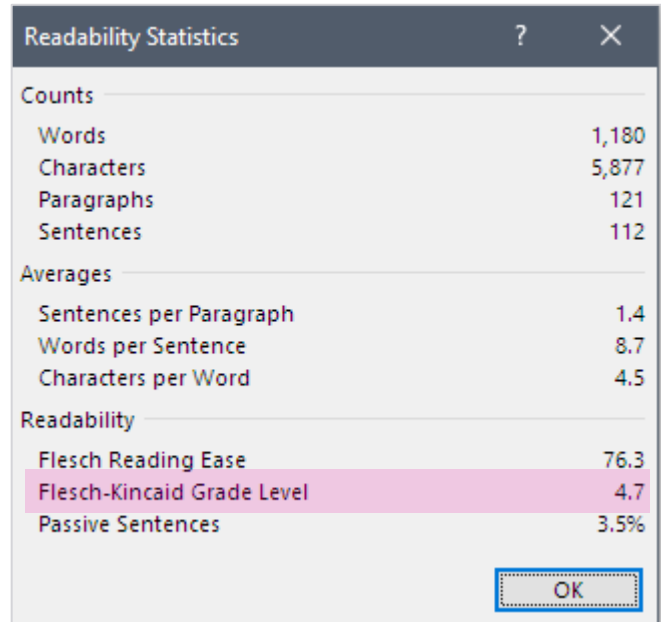
There are tools you can use to measure the readability of your writing (how easily your writing can be understood), such as:

- Microsoft Word
- Readability Formulas
- WebFX Readability

These tools will calculate the readability of your content. Look for the Flesch-Kincaid grade level result.

The readability of communications that target the general public is at a Flesch-Kincaid grade 7–8 reading level.

Communications that target people who are on the autism spectrum or who have an intellectual disability should be at a Flesch-Kincaid grade 6 or below reading level.

| Readability Statistics	? ✕
Counts	
Words	1,180
Characters	5,877
Paragraphs	121
Sentences	112
Averages	
Sentences per Paragraph	1.4
Words per Sentence	8.7
Characters per Word	4.5
Readability	
Flesch Reading Ease	76.3
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	4.7
Passive Sentences	3.5%
	OK

Techniques

In addition to using plain, literal language that is at an accessible reading level, there are other techniques you can use to convey important workplace information. You may already use many of these in your day-to-day communication. Remember, these techniques may work well for some employees and not for others. Get to know your employees and what works best for them.

Break a work task into smaller steps (task analysis)

The process of breaking down a work task into its smaller component parts or steps (task analysis) can be very helpful for communicating information, establishing routines, and learning new skills. Using this technique, each small step is shown and/or written out in order. Job coaches may work with the employee they are supporting to develop and use task analyses when learning the job.

A common example of a task analysis is a handwashing poster seen in most restaurants and public washrooms. This example is adapted from the CDC's Wash Your Hands infographic.
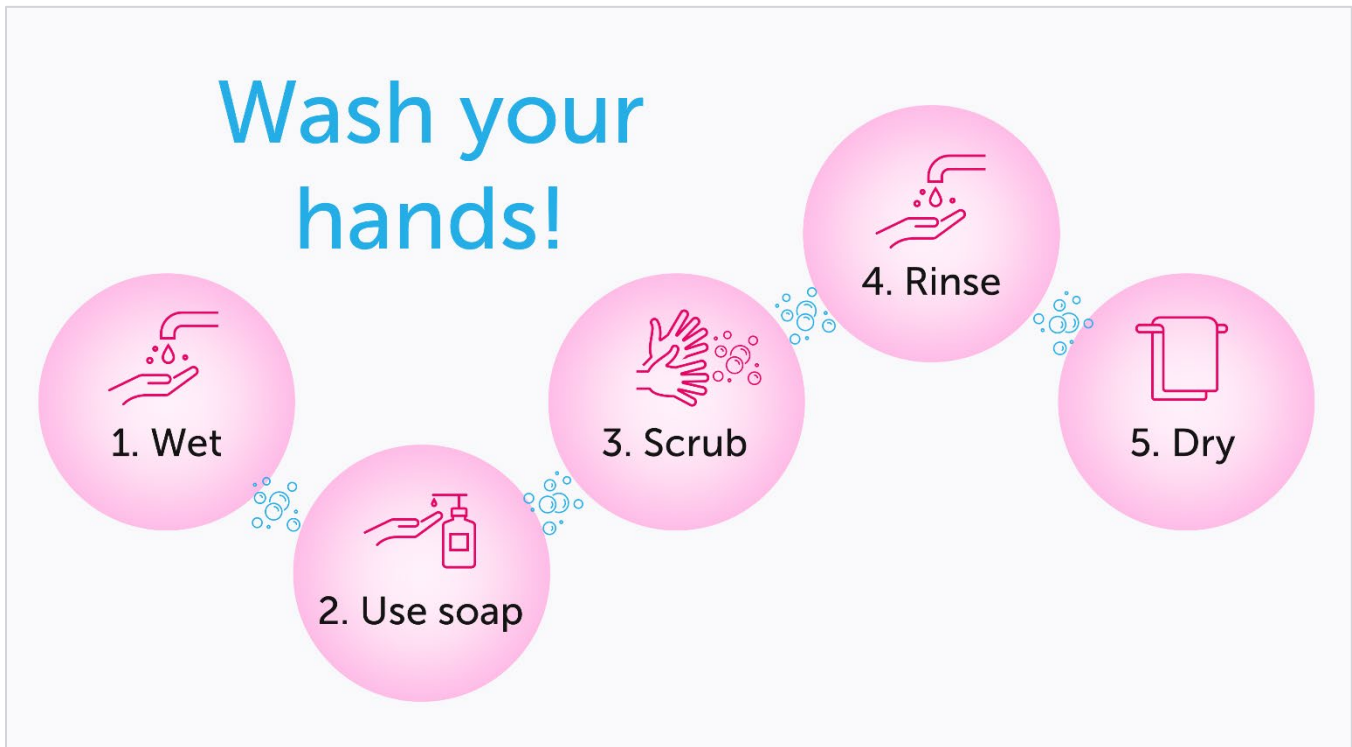
Checklists

Create and use checklists to communicate daily tasks, lists of items to be included, and the order in which tasks are to be completed. Checklists can include visuals.

Flowcharts

Create flowcharts to visually show the sequencing of steps. Flowcharts can include visuals.

Colour coding

Consider including colour coding in calendars, schedules, or lists to indicate who performs certain activities, when certain activities should be done, and the priority of activities.

Videos

Create videos to visually demonstrate how tasks should be completed.

Other tips

There are many different modes of communication in the workplace. Use these tips to improve the accessibility of your communications. Don't forget to use the strategies outlined above as well!

Remember, these tips may work well for some employees and not for others. Get to know your employees and what works best for them.

Emails	**Tips** • Write a short, concise, meaningful subject line. • Keep the email brief. • Use bullets and/or numbering if applicable. • Instead of a long block of content, try to break it up by using headings (using bold) with smaller chunks of content under each heading.
Video calls and meetings	**Tips** • Send out the meeting agenda before the meeting to ensure all attendees know the meeting goal in advance. • Provide all relevant information, such as a slide deck, before the meeting. • Encourage use of the closed captioning feature. • Ensure introductions are made. • For videoconferences, ensure attendees identify themselves and their roles in their display names. • Encourage attendees to use the mute feature when they aren't speaking. • Consider using the chat function. • Record meetings and make the recording available.

Conversations	**Tips**
	• Use your natural facial expressions and hand gestures.
	• Use your normal pace, tone, and volume of speaking, unless the employee requests otherwise.
	• Be prepared to summarize, paraphrase, clarify and rephrase.
Print communication	**Tips**
	• Use visuals and images to make content easier to understand and convey your meaning.
	• Use a large-size sans serif font.
	• Keep white or open space.
	• Present information in logical order.
Policies and procedures	**Tips**
	Information that is vital to health, safety, legal rights, and other workplace opportunities should be accessible to all employees.
	• Use the strategies outlined above, such as using plain language and checking the readability of your writing.
	• Use a conversational tone.
	• Include images that convey the meaning of your message.

Remember: As a best practice, include the employee in the conversation.

- What method of communication do they prefer?
- How do they like to receive information?
- Get feedback.
    - Are the strategies you're using working well for them?
    - What can be done differently?
    - Did they understand the communication?
    - Do they have questions about the information that was shared?

Next steps

Opportunity #1

Assess the readability of one of your current documents.

- What is the Flesch-Kincaid grade level?

- Rewrite it using plain language, then reassess it. Did the Flesch-Kincaid grade level drop?

Opportunity #2

Create a visual task analysis of an important on-the-job task.

- Break down the task into its individual steps.

- Try to write those steps with simple, direct, plain language.

- Add visuals.

Sources

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