



AUBURN

LIBERAL ARTS

Plain Language Guidelines

For College of Liberal Arts web content

What is plain language?

According to plainlanguage.gov, written material is plain language if your audience can:

- Find what they need
- Understand what they find
- Use what they find to meet their needs, the first time around

“ Plain [language] is typically quite interesting to read. It’s robust and direct—the opposite of gaudy, pretentious language. You achieve plain [language] when you use the simplest, most straightforward way of expressing an idea. You can still choose interesting words. But you’ll avoid fancy ones that have everyday replacements meaning precisely the same thing.”

-Bryan Garner, from *Legal Writing in Plain English*

Why does it matter?

Our departmental webpages are often the first thing prospective students see when considering enrollment. With this in mind, it’s important to make the best first impression possible.

To reach the most users effectively, we must consider the range of site visitors’ educational and cultural backgrounds and any potential learning or reading disabilities. The use of plain language ensures that text is readable for a broader audience; the more people that are able to understand our web content, the more potential applicants and enrollments.

How should this guide be used?

This guide will help you approach a piece of text comprehensively (from broad elements like layout to specific elements like voice) and is intended for use when reworking current content or for developing new content on all College of Liberal Arts webpages.

Each plain language criterion includes an *explanation*, an *example*, and *tips* on how to incorporate the element into your own writing. To best utilize these guidelines, evaluate your written content against all criteria in this document or the accompanying checklist.

Design and Layout

White space has been maximized on the page

White space is just what it sounds like: the empty space left around words on a page.

While we tend to think of the writing itself when discussing plain language, it's important to remember that a text's appearance plays a major part in how readers approach and understand writing.

White space:

- allows readers to more easily scan a piece of text
- helps prevent readers from losing their place
- makes divisions between information clearer
- is refreshing to look at

Take, for example, the following two pieces of text:

Example 1 (Original Text):

In a recent study, more than 75% of employers would recommend a liberal arts education as the best way to prepare for success in today's world, and 95% say they would give hiring preference to college graduates with skills that enable them to innovate in the workplace. Auburn University College of Liberal Arts is one of the largest colleges on Auburn's campus with thirteen departments, one school and 4,500 students. Our curriculum offers a diverse range of subjects encompassing four areas: social sciences, communications, humanities and fine arts. Our graduates hold a strong record of industry employment and/or acceptance into graduate schools and training programs, both here and abroad.

Example 2 (Improved Text):

In a recent study, more than 75% of employers would recommend a liberal arts education as the best way to prepare for success in today's world, and 95% say they would give hiring preference to college graduates with skills that enable them to innovate in the workplace.

Auburn University College of Liberal Arts is one of the largest colleges on Auburn's campus with thirteen departments, one school and 4,500 students. Our curriculum offers a diverse range of subjects encompassing four areas: social sciences, communications, humanities and fine arts.

Our graduates hold a strong record of industry employment and/or acceptance into graduate schools and training programs, both here and abroad.

Even though the words are exactly the same in both examples, most readers would likely give preference to Example 2. This is because the text is more scannable, seemingly easier to digest, and is less intimidating than that seen in Example 1.

Additionally, the use of paragraph breaks gives the text in Example 2 a more narrative flow, (a general opening, followed by specific information about Auburn, and then information about future prospects) something that readers tend to enjoy!

Tips:

- ⇒ Don't be afraid to make paragraphs short – there are no set rules about length
- ⇒ Think of paragraph breaks as pit stops for your reader
- ⇒ Remember that your readers are scanning for the most relevant information
- ⇒ Always put yourself in your reader's shoes – would *you* want to read it?

Headings have been used frequently and effectively

In writing, headings are like lighthouses. They make text more navigable by signaling where readers should look to find the information they need.

Headings:

- create clear organization
- show relationships between ideas (headings, sub-headings)
- allow readers to read selectively
- help create natural white space

Since our site visitors often have specific questions in mind, predicting what those questions might be and using them as headings can be an effective way of relaying information quickly and efficiently.

Let's take another look at some examples:

Example 1 (Original Text):

In a recent study, more than 75% of employers would recommend a liberal arts education as the best way to prepare for success in today's world, and 95% say they would give hiring preference to college graduates with skills that enable them to innovate in the workplace.

Auburn University College of Liberal Arts is one of the largest colleges on Auburn's campus with thirteen departments, one school, and 4,500 students. Our curriculum offers a diverse range of subjects encompassing four areas: social sciences, communications, humanities and fine arts.

Our graduates hold a strong record of industry employment and/or acceptance into graduate schools and training programs, both here and abroad.

Example 2 (Improved Text):

What's the value of a Liberal Arts education?

In a recent study, more than 75% of employers would recommend a liberal arts education as the best way to prepare for success in today's world, and 95% say they would give hiring preference to college graduates with skills that enable them to innovate in the workplace.

Why Auburn?

Auburn University College of Liberal Arts is one of the largest colleges on Auburn's campus with thirteen departments, one school, and 4,500 students. Our curriculum offers a diverse range of subjects encompassing four areas: social sciences, communications, humanities and fine arts.

How will I benefit?

Our graduates hold a strong record of industry employment and/or acceptance into graduate schools and training programs, both here and abroad.

The use of headings in Example 2 makes it easier for readers to determine what the information is about and decide if it's worth reading.

While this example makes use of *question headings*, it may sometimes be appropriate to use *statement headings* (a simple statement with a noun and verb) or *topic headings* (usually a single word) instead.

No matter the type used, you should always ask yourself if the heading is clear, informative, and concise. Remember, headings are meant to add structure to what you've written and to provide readers with a roadmap of where information is located.

Tips:

- ⇒ It's often easier to write headings *after* body text has been written
- ⇒ Remember that body text should still be able to stand on its own
- ⇒ Ensure that headings are consistently worded and formatted
- ⇒ When using question headings, make sure the answer is easy to find

❑ **Bulleted and numbered lists have been used for lists greater than four**

Bulleted and numbered lists highlight and summarize key pieces of information from a larger body of text. While numbered lists are generally used to relay a series of steps or suggest levels of importance, bulleted lists are used to show relation.

Bulleted and numbered lists:

- help break up large blocks of text
- give more prominence / importance to information
- allow readers to more easily scan
- make it easier for readers to digest information

Lists of three items or less are okay to leave embedded within a block of text, because readers are unlikely to lose track of the information or become overwhelmed.

Here's an example of how a bulleted list might be used:

Example 1 (Original Text):

What's the value of a Liberal Arts education?

In a recent study, more than 75% of employers would recommend a liberal arts education as the best way to prepare for success in today's world, and 95% say they would give hiring preference to college graduates with skills that enable them to innovate in the workplace.

Why Auburn?

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Our graduates hold a strong record of industry employment and/or acceptance into graduate schools and training programs, both here and abroad.

Example 2 (Improved Text):

What's the value of a Liberal Arts education?

In a recent study, more than 75% of employers would recommend a liberal arts education as the best way to prepare for success in today's world, and 95% say they would give hiring preference to college graduates with skills that enable them to innovate in the workplace.

Why Auburn?

Auburn University College of Liberal Arts is one of the largest colleges on Auburn's campus with thirteen departments, one school, and 4,500 students. Our curriculum offers a diverse range of subjects encompassing four areas:

- social sciences
- communications
- humanities
- fine arts

How will I benefit?

Our graduates hold a strong record of industry employment and/or acceptance into graduate schools and training programs, both here and abroad.

The use of bullets in Example 2 is effective for several reasons. For one, it adds visual interest to the body of text and increases the amount of white space. Additionally, it ensures that readers can walk away with key information about the College of Liberal Arts after just a glance.

Tips:

- ⇒ Always include a lead-in sentence to introduce a list
- ⇒ Ensure that each list item is similarly constructed (same tense, same general length)
- ⇒ Be mindful of size – if a list is too long, it's more likely to be ignored
- ⇒ Don't overuse lists – your readers are looking for important information

Writing

No sentence exceeds 25 words

Being concise doesn't mean cramming a bunch of ideas into one sentence. In fact, the more ideas in a sentence, the harder it is for your reader to digest the information.

Shorter sentences:

- break ideas into smaller units that are easier to process
- are generally less intimidating
- are often more direct
- require less work from readers

Studies have shown that after 25 words, sentences become substantially more difficult to process. If you come across a sentence of this length in your own writing, try breaking it into smaller chunks.

Let's look at an example of how this might be done:

Example 1 (Original Text):

With an undergraduate degree in Anthropology, students can continue their academic work in a number of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences at the graduate level, or prepare for a profession in government, the non-profit and educational sectors, or industry.

Example 2 (Improved Text):

Our students are highly qualified after earning an undergraduate degree in Anthropology. Some continue their academic pursuits in graduate school. Others prepare for a profession in government, the non-profit and education sectors, or industry.

Example 1, which consists of 41 words, conveys several different ideas – earning an undergraduate degree, going to graduate school, and entering the workforce. This sentence asks the reader to do a lot of mental work in a short amount of time.

To help spread the information out, Example 2 splits this long sentence into three smaller ones so that each main idea has space to breathe.

Sometimes you may need to be creative when breaking sentences into smaller parts. For instance, in Example 2 the use of “some” and “others” makes the split between the second and third sentences feel more natural.

Tips:

- ⇒ Try to express one main idea per sentence
- ⇒ A lot of commas may indicate that a sentence is too complex
- ⇒ Be on the lookout for words you can cut without changing the meaning of a sentence
- ⇒ Average sentence length on each page should be somewhere around 15–20 words

Sentence lengths are varied

Just shortening sentences isn’t enough. In fact, too many short sentences in a row will bore your reader. When marketing to prospective students, it’s especially important to keep your audience engaged with dynamic web content.

Varied sentence lengths:

- bring your writing to life
- help prevent reader fatigue
- can be used to give emphasis to certain information
- make reading more enjoyable

Take, for example, the following two pieces of text:

Example 1 (Original Text):

Our department’s goal is to prepare you for the global workforce. We value practical knowledge and will prepare you with the tools to succeed in any culture. Our students walk away as better communicators and critical thinkers.

Example 2 (Improved Text):

Our department values practical knowledge. Through each of our programs, we focus on preparing you for the global workforce by pushing you to be a better communicator and critical thinker. Ultimately, our goal is to set you up for success in any culture.

Between these two examples, hardly any of the content actually changes. Both describe the goal and values of the department, and what students can expect to get out of their classes.

But in Example 1, the similar sentence lengths (11 words, 16 words, 10 words) give the words an almost monotonous feel. Imagine a full page of information written like this!

Example 2 takes the same information, but creates a more interesting pace. It starts with a short sentence (5 words), moves on to a long sentence (25 words), and ends with a medium-length sentence (13 words).

As with shortening sentences, you'll sometimes have to get a little creative. In this instance, the order of information was changed a bit to create a better flow.

Tips:

- ⇒ Think of your web content as a story – what does your audience want to read?
- ⇒ Read your writing out loud
- ⇒ If you need to highlight a piece of information, put it in a very short sentence
- ⇒ Try to strike a balance between short-, long-, and medium-length sentences

The reader is addressed directly (“you”) wherever possible

Somewhere along the way in school, you were probably taught to avoid addressing the reader directly. In academic papers, for example, the standard is to write as objectively as possible. But with website writing, especially from a marketing perspective, addressing the reader directly can be very effective.

Direct reader address:

- adds a sense of immediacy to your writing
- helps the reader feel more engaged
- helps you, as the writer, keep your audience in mind
- sounds more conversational and natural

Even though thousands of readers might encounter your writing, direct address helps each individual feel special, as if the message is written just for them.

The following examples show what direct user address looks like in practice:

Example 1 (Original Text):

One of the most important decisions that college students make is their major field of study. That major will take up many of the total number of academic hours required for graduation and represents a significant aspect of every student's time in higher education. It can also have an important effect on students' future outlooks on life as well as their prospects for employment.

Example 2 (Improved Text):

One of the most important decisions you'll make as a student is your major field of study. That's because the major you choose will take up many of the total number of academic hours required for graduation. It will also have an important effect on your future outlooks on life and your employment prospects.

Example 1 is informative, but has a coldness about it; there's a clear distance between the writer and reader, which makes the content less inviting.

Example 2, on the other hand, reads much more conversationally. Even though it's not necessarily the case, there seems to be an actual connection between the writer and reader. Additionally, Example 2 puts the reader in the shoes of a new college student, something that's usually very exciting for prospectives.

Tips:

- ⇒ Be on the lookout for the word “students” – if you see it, try and replace it
- ⇒ Think of your writing as a two-way conversation
- ⇒ The use of “we” and “us” can make your department sound more inviting
- ⇒ If writing to multiple audiences, always define who “you” is

❑ Content is written in the active voice

Active voice occurs when a sentence’s subject performs the action. For example, “the student ate the apple.” Passive voice, on the other hand, occurs when the subject receives the action. For example, “the apple was eaten by the student.”

Because active voice is the most straightforward way of presenting ideas, you should always strive to construct your sentences in this way.

Active voice:

- helps prevent wordiness
- is more impactful
- reduces confusion
- usually sounds more confident and, thus, more credible

When writing for higher-ed, passive voice tends to come up the most on pages with instructions (e.g. graduation or application requirements pages). You should be especially mindful when writing about student requirements because the stakes are higher if students make mistakes.

Let’s look at some examples:

Example 1 (Original Text):

A satisfactory academic portfolio, a presentation of the portfolio, and an oral exam are required for graduation from the program. The portfolio, the presentation of the portfolio, and the oral exam are reviewed by your advisory committee.

Example 2 (Improved Text):

To graduate, you must submit a satisfactory academic portfolio, present the portfolio, and complete an oral exam. Your advisory committee will be responsible for reviewing each of these components.

In Example 1, the construction of both sentences obscures their meaning. For instance, in the first sentence we don’t learn what the portfolio, the presentation, and the exam are for until the very end. Likewise, it takes until the end of the second sentence to find out who will be evaluating those materials.

Example 2 eliminates a lot of this confusion by making the subject clear (“you,” the student) and placing that information at the start.

As with shortening the length of sentences, you may need to get a bit creative when changing text from passive to active voice. In this instance the order of information was simply reversed, but this may not always be the case.

Tips:

- ⇒ Be on the lookout for “to be,” “are,” “was,” “were,” “could be,” and “have been”
- ⇒ Addressing the reader directly will help prevent passive voice
- ⇒ Pay close attention to text on instruction pages
- ⇒ When you strive to be direct, you’ll likely write in active voice without even realizing

Contractions have been used frequently and naturally

Like addressing the reader directly, your English teachers might’ve also discouraged the use of contractions in formal writing. But web writing isn’t formal (or at least it shouldn’t be!). The use of contractions helps make your writing more approachable, because it’s more familiar to readers.

Contractions:

- give your writing a more conversational tone
- help make your department sound friendlier
- are generally easier to read
- reduce the total number of words on a page

To use contractions effectively, the general rule of thumb is to “write like you talk.”

Let's look at how contractions make writing more approachable:

Example 1 (Original Text):

If you are interested in pursuing a career as a pilot, the professional flight degree is for you. Through an in-depth study of aeronautical knowledge and piloting skills, we will ensure you leave with the know-how to succeed in the aviation industry.

Example 2 (Improved Text):

If you're interested in pursuing a career as a pilot, the professional flight degree is for you. Through an in-depth study of aeronautical knowledge and piloting skills, we'll ensure you leave with the know-how to succeed in the aviation industry.

While you should aim to use contractions in most cases, there are instances where you're better off without them. For example, when giving instruction, contractions might obscure meaning—"late applications aren't considered" isn't as clear as "late applications are **not** considered."

You should also be careful not to force contractions. If you're more likely to say "who will" in person, don't feel obligated to write "who'll."

Tips:

- ⇒ Read what you've written out loud to assess whether it sounds too formal
- ⇒ Check and make sure your contractions don't obscure the intended meaning
- ⇒ Don't go too wild – too many contractions (especially unnatural ones) can be distracting
- ⇒ Write like you talk

Unnecessary or redundant words have been eliminated

A Nielsen study found that people read an average of 20% of what's on a page. Additionally, as the number of words on a page goes up, the percentage read goes down.

Our tendency in higher education is to fill our pages with information. We want our readers to leave well-informed, right? But by writing too much, we're actually burying what we really want to say under a bunch of extra words.

Eliminating unnecessary or redundant words:

- ensures that your text is more focused
- helps readers extract the main ideas
- gives other webpage elements (think pictures) space to shine
- makes what you've written more likely to be read

While this is one of the most important elements of plain language, it's also one of the hardest to actually achieve. It requires scrutiny of every word and a willingness to sometimes let go of a great thing you've written.

Take a look at the following examples:

Example 1 (Original Text):

Welcome to Auburn University and the College of Liberal Arts (CLA). We are the heart and core of Auburn University, and we combine our love of knowledge and expertise to enrich your intellectual and social development and to help you meet your professional and personal goals. Our student-centered approach will enhance your capacity to communicate with others, improve your critical thinking skills, and expand your horizons to think globally. We are proud to teach more Auburn University students than any other college and to be the academic home of professors who have won every major award for teaching and scholarship that Auburn has to offer.

We encourage you to explore every one of our bachelor degrees, all of which offer you a wide variety of career choices for employment in the 21st century. We also invite you to add value to your major by choosing to minor in one of our exciting programs.

Example 2 (Improved Text):

Welcome to Auburn University and the College of Liberal Arts (CLA), where students always come first. Our goal is to enhance your ability to communicate with others, improve your critical thinking skills, and encourage you to think globally.

We invite you to explore our diverse bachelor degree programs, all of which prepare you for a variety of careers. In addition, you can add value to your major by choosing to minor in one of our exciting programs.

Example 1 is well-written and informative. In fact, some may find it more enjoyable to read than Example 2. But when we consider the attention span of readers on the web, Example 1 is just too long.

Example 2, while maybe not as eloquent, gets the same points across in 100 fewer words. This is very important because readers aren't coming to your pages to read, they're coming for the facts.

Tips:

- ⇒ When shortening text, find the main idea of each paragraph and focus on that
- ⇒ Remember that, sadly, people aren't reading our pages for fun
- ⇒ Look for wordy phrases – “at this point in time” can just be “now”
- ⇒ Set yourself a character or word limit – this will force you to be highly selective

Readability Formulas

Content doesn't exceed a 9th grade level, according to readability formulas

Readability formulas, or tests, are used to evaluate a piece of text's difficulty. They generally measure syllable count, word count, and sentence length, then spit out a rating. These ratings are often presented as a grade level, but this can differ depending on the formula used.

Readability formulas are hotly debated in the world of plain language. Most agree that they have value, but many point out how they fail to truly assess the usability of a piece of text. After all, most of the criteria in this guide cannot be detected by a readability formula.

For our purposes, readability formulas should be thought of as good indicators of a general illness, but not necessarily good indicators of specific symptoms.

When using readability formulas, it's very important to "prepare" the text. To properly do this, you'll need to:

1. Remove all department- and program-specific titles (e.g. "sociology" and "sociological" shouldn't factor into a readability rating, because they're necessary when talking about the sociology program)
2. Remove all embed punctuation (e.g. the period in Dr. will be misidentified as terminal punctuation)
3. Remove all headings, titles, and bulleted lists

Here's an example of text before and after it's prepared for a readability formula:

Example 1 (Original Text):

The Anthropology program at Auburn University takes a four-field approach to the study of the human condition, offering courses in archaeology, biological anthropology, cultural anthropology, and linguistic anthropology. Students majoring in anthropology will sample the variety of topics within the discipline while gaining specialized knowledge in each of the four fields.

Example 2 (Improved Text):

The program at Auburn University takes a four-field approach to the study of the human condition, offering courses in archaeology, biological, cultural, and linguistic. Students majoring in will sample the variety of topics within the discipline while gaining specialized knowledge in each of the four fields.

In this case, each instance of the word “anthropology” in Example 1 was removed in Example 2.

A quick Google search will yield a vast assortment of readability formulas that you can use when assessing the difficulty of your writing. While most of these will do the trick, this guide recommends <https://www.readabilityformulas.com>, because it makes use of eight different formulas at once.

For a quicker (though less comprehensive) readability check, this guide also recommends <https://www.hemingwayapp.com>, as it can detect passive voice and reading difficulty on a sentence level.

Although universal readability sits around the 7th grade reading level, this guide asks you to ensure that your text does not exceed a 9th grade level. A piece of writing’s grade level is definitely important, but at the end of the day it’s all about ensuring that your readers leave with the answers they came for.

Tips:

- ⇒ Use readability formulas to check your work
- ⇒ Always prepare the text first
- ⇒ Understand that formulas can’t catch everything
- ⇒ Consult this guide to fill in any gaps

Before publishing any written content on your CLA webpage, please ensure that all ten of the following criteria have been met:

- White space has been maximized on the page
- Headings have been used frequently and effectively
- Bulleted and numbered lists have been used for lists greater than four
- No sentence exceeds 25 words
- Sentence lengths are varied
- The reader is addressed directly (“you”) wherever possible
- Content is written in the active voice
- Contractions have been used frequently and naturally
- Unnecessary or redundant words have been eliminated
- Content doesn’t exceed a 9th grade level, according to readability formulas