

# Write for Every Brain: Bring inclusivity to every page



### **Acknowledgement of Country**

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands where we work, learn and live, and we pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

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### **About the author**

Tom Wadsworth is a plain language expert and trainer at Plain English Foundation. His passion for writing started with a humble travel blog that moved his readers.

Much like his stories, Tom sees plain language as being about transplanting your ideas into the minds of your readers effectively. To do this we need clear and precise communication that instructs, educates and inspires.

Inclusion is a topic close to Tom's heart and he hopes that by the time his neurosparkly kids start work, plain language will simply be the way to write.



### **Acknowledgements**

Sensitivity read: Dr Joanna Beresford

Edits: Greg Moriarty and Emily Halloran

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Design: Calebe Pereira

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# Overview

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🕒 Estimated reading time: 1.5 minutes

## What this ebook is about

This is not a story about one group doing a commendable deed to help another. No. This ebook is about making you aware of common writing practices that actually make it harder for people, particularly those who are neurodivergent, to understand your documents.

Yes, writing better isn't only about what you should start doing – it's equally about what you should stop doing.

This ebook will help you avoid creating barriers to understanding.

## Why you should read this ebook

Neurodivergent readers will find your documents easier to read if you know:

1. how summaries bring clarity
2. why reader-friendly structures improve comprehension
3. how information-rich headings guide readers through complex text
4. how thoughtful document design improves accessibility
5. why active voice and pronouns ease the cognitive load
6. why shorter words and sentences are easier to read
7. how style guides and templates ensure consistency
8. why plain language is inclusive and boosts readers' confidence.

This will make you a more confident communicator whatever your neurotype. So, if you want to transform your writing at work into writing that works, read on.

## How to get the most out of this ebook

There's no single right way to read this ebook.

Table 1: Approaches to reading this ebook

<b>Approach 1</b>	Read it from top to bottom if you want the full story. I cover each of the 8 elements listed above. Most subsections start with a short summary, followed by the barriers that writers unintentionally place in the way of readers. Subsections then detail the paths writers can take to avoid these barriers in the first place. Each section includes the estimated reading time, using an average of 250 words a minute.
<b>Approach 2</b>	Scan the summaries and headings in sections 2 to 5 for a quick overview.
<b>Approach 3</b>	Jump to the sections that matter most to you.

However you read this ebook, I recommend you read section 1, especially if you don't know:

- how neurodiversity and neurodivergence differ
- where the social model of disability applies in practice
- how executive function relates to cognitive load.

It's really interesting. Believe me. These concepts will give you the foundation for everything that follows. Section 1 is also where I justify why I use certain terms over others. For instance, I chose ADHN (attention deficit / hyperactivity neurotype) instead of ADHD (attention deficit / hyperactivity disorder). And for any concepts you don't yet know, there's a [glossary at the end of this ebook](#).

# 1. Understand neurodivergence

## How neurodiversity and neurodivergence differ

🕒 Estimated reading time: 1 minute

Using the right language is an important part of inclusion. So let's get 'neurodiversity' and 'neurodivergence' clear. Neurodiversity is the idea that brain differences are natural and part of human diversity, not problems to fix. Neurodivergent is a common term for people whose brain functions differ from the neuromajority.

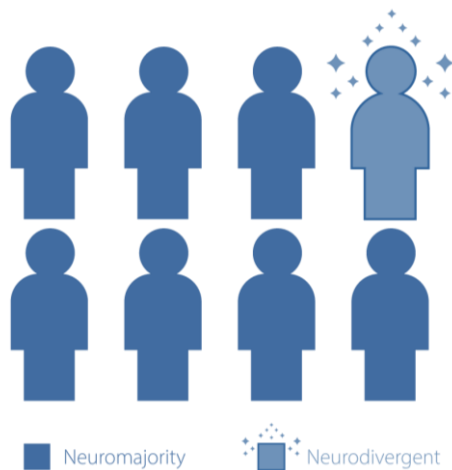
'Neurodiversity' describes natural differences in how people think, learn, process information and interact with the world.<sup>1</sup> It covers everyone. All brain types.

The more common brain types (neurotypes) that are relevant to this ebook are:

- attention deficit / hyperactivity neurotype
- autism
- dysgraphia
- dyslexia
- dyspraxia or developmental coordination disorder
- neuromajority
- sensory processing differences
- Tourette syndrome.

If you're in the 'neuromajority', your brain functions like those of most people. If you're another neurotype, commonly known as being 'neurodivergent' your brain naturally differs in some ways to that of the majority. One in 8 Australians are neurodivergent.<sup>2</sup> Some of these people are likely your clients or colleagues.

Figure 1: One in 8 Australians is neurodivergent



If you've not heard of the term neuromajority and neurodivergent before, that's fine. Some people use 'neurotypical' for the neuromajority. I don't. Neurotypical in my mind screams 'normal'. Therefore, everyone who is not neurotypical must be abnormal.

You may have thought that my definition of neurodivergent was how you understood the term neurodiversity. If you did, don't worry. Neurodiversity is a term that is used incorrectly a lot.<sup>3</sup> You may have also heard the terms 'neurominority', 'neurospicy' or my kids' favourite 'neurosparkly'. Whatever the label, know that I'll be using neurodivergent for the non-neuromajority.

When it comes to using identity-first or person-first language, for example ‘Autistic person’ or ‘person with autism’, you should always ask the individual.<sup>4</sup> Even in neurodivergent communities, preferences will vary.<sup>5</sup> In this ebook, I’ll mostly use identity-first language because it acknowledges that difference is part of a neurodivergent person’s identity and not something separate from it. This perspective aligns with the social model of disability, which shifts the focus from fixing individuals to removing disabling barriers in society.

## Where the social model of disability applies in practice

 Estimated reading time: 1.5 minutes

The social model of disability views neurodivergent people as disabled by the environments that society built without considering their needs. When it comes to workplace writing, you risk creating barriers to understanding when you write without considering how different brains process language.

Being neurodivergent isn’t a flaw. It’s a different way of thinking.<sup>6</sup> The neurodivergent bring unique strengths and face different challenges compared to those in the neuromajority. Here are some of their strengths:

- creative thinking – coming up with new ideas
- pattern recognition – spotting trends and problems
- hyperfocus – concentrating deeply on tasks of interest
- analytical skills – solving problems in unique ways
- inventiveness – imagining new possibilities
- precision – noticing small details
- persistence – sticking with challenges
- big picture thinking – understanding how things connect.

As far as the challenges go, they’re often not about the neurodivergent person’s abilities, but about the environments that society built without considering their needs.

Table 2: Comparison of the medical and social models of disability

Model	View of the neurodivergent	Outcomes
Medical	Their own flaws disable them <sup>7</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses on what’s ‘wrong’ with the person</li> <li>• Focuses on what they cannot do or be</li> <li>• Creates low expectations</li> <li>• Removes choice and control in their lives</li> </ul>
Social	Society disables them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helps identify barriers that make life harder</li> <li>• Creates more equality</li> <li>• Offers more choice and control in their lives</li> <li>• Acknowledges differences as part of human diversity</li> </ul>

Professor Mike Oliver says, ‘The problem isn’t that I can’t get into a lecture theatre, the problem is that the lecture theatre isn’t accessible to me’.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, the problem may not be the reader of your document. It might be that your document is hard to use. This ebook hangs off this idea.

Not all neurodivergent people face reading difficulties. But many do. And when you write without considering how different brains process language, you risk creating barriers to understanding.

And since most workplace communication relies on writing,<sup>9</sup> that’s a serious issue. Not only for them but for you. If members of your intended audience can’t act on your message, your communication isn’t working.

If we understand how complex or unclear writing pushes the brain's executive function to its limit, we can create documents that better support different ways of thinking.

## How executive function relates to cognitive load

🕒 Estimated reading time: 1 minute

Neurodivergent people often need to use more mental resources to understand workplace documents than the neuromajority. Traditional writing practices put up barriers and get in the way of neurodivergent readers understanding your documents. But plain language creates a path to understanding and reduces cognitive load, giving people more mental space to focus on their job.

Executive functions help us focus, hold information and shift our thinking.<sup>10</sup>

There are 3 core functions:

- Inhibition control helps us ignore distractions and focus on what matters.
- Working memory lets us hold and use information.
- Cognitive flexibility helps us adapt and rethink.

When writing is unclear or overly complex, it requires more mental resources – cognitive load – for the working memory to process it. For readers with ADHD, they might already be using a lot of their mental resources for inhibition control. This means they have fewer resources for working memory to understand the text. That's why reading can feel exhausting or even impossible for some.

As far as available mental resources for understanding workplace documents go, many neurodivergent people are not starting on an even playing field. Anything that makes reading hard for the neuromajority can make reading even harder for the neurodivergent.

So, instead of focusing on the flaws of the neurodivergent, we will look at the writing practices that put up barriers and get in the way of them understanding your documents. We'll look at how plain language creates a path to understanding and how it reduces cognitive load, giving people more mental space to focus on their job.

This is good for your readers. And for you too: you'll create more successful documents.

Figure 2: Plain language creates a path to understanding



## 2. Choose structures that put your readers first

### How summaries bring clarity

🕒 Estimated reading time: 2.5 minutes

When a document starts without a summary, readers face 3 barriers:

- Unclear purpose – they waste time trying to work out what matters.
- Reduced predictability – they can't see where the document is heading, which adds stress.
- Information redundancy – they consume mental resources reading needless text.

These barriers can lead to frustration, misinterpretation or even giving up. Starting with a clear summary removes these obstacles by showing relevance, focus and next steps up front.

#### 🚧 Barriers to reading

When readers face a document without a summary, they have to waste time working out what's important and what's peripheral. The more information they have to hold in their working memory while they decide, the more it strains their other executive functions.

Working memory has its limits. This idea is part of cognitive load theory.<sup>11</sup> Our brains can only process so much at any one time. And these limits differ between brains and situations.

Take someone with ADHD. They can be easily distracted when faced with something like disorganised information.<sup>12</sup> As I mentioned earlier, that means they'll use more mental resources on the executive function of inhibition control to maintain focus. If readers need more mental resources for inhibition control, it leaves fewer for working memory, which will affect how much information the reader can hold and process.

Figure 3: Disorganised information places unnecessary strain on your reader's executive function



If you don't add a summary, you disadvantage people with fluctuating cognitive load capacities.

Even the mere idea of a missing summary can affect readers. Many Autistic people prefer predictability and order<sup>13</sup> because it reduces anxiety and sensory overload. Without a summary, you make it harder to know what's next, what to focus on and how to process it. The document can also look chaotic and too much like hard work. This uncertainty can raise anxiety, which uses mental resources and, again, leaves fewer resources for working memory.

Something else that chews up working memory is processing too much information. You may have heard of the 'redundancy effect'.<sup>14</sup> That's where unnecessary, repetitive or redundant information distracts readers and learners from the core content. It's true that presenting information in different ways can help learners, but in this ebook, I am specifically referring to this effect in text.

Repeating yourself, not getting to the point and waffling uses up mental resources as the brain processes needless information. Sweller said, 'Most people assume that providing [...] additional information is, at worst, harmless and might be beneficial. Redundancy is anything but harmless.'<sup>15</sup>

### Paths to understanding

**Start with a summary.** Obviously. It is the easiest way to make your workplace documents clear and focused. A summary works as a cognitive anchor. It tells the reader what the document will explain, why it matters and whether the reader needs to do anything. It immediately gives the reader a sense of the whole.

Check out my summary in the blue box at the start of this section. This upfront clarity lowers the mental effort you need to understand the content. It tells you what it's about, what my conclusion is and what you should do. You, as the reader, didn't have to work all that out. I told you.

Because your cognitive load is freed up, you have more mental resources available to stay focused throughout the document and understand the content.

Figure 4: A summary makes it easier for your reader to understand your content



Summaries ease anxiety. Readers may blame themselves for not understanding the document. They may feel inadequate. But when you give them relevance immediately, they don't have to worry about missing something important or misunderstanding your meaning. The focus of the document is clear. And documents feel more achievable when there's a summary at the top. Which, of course, reduces anxiety too.

Adding a summary to your document is a no-brainer.

## Why reader-friendly structures improve comprehension

🕒 Estimated reading time: 2.5 minutes

When key information sits deep within a document, readers face 2 barriers:

- Delayed access to important information – they spend extra time looking for what matters, which slows understanding.
- Split attention – they're forced to retain many details while they find the information needed for it all to make sense.

These barriers stress working memory and make understanding harder. Reader-friendly structures fix this by elevating the most important points. This reduces mental load and makes it more likely the reader will act on what they've read.

### 🚧 Barriers to reading

Workplace documents are meant to be understood. But poor structure can get in the way. In the same way that summary-less documents give the reader more work to do, documents structured without the reader in mind add to the cognitive load and strain the executive functions.

A document that presents information in a chronological format might feel logical to the writer because it mirrors the process they went through. But most of the time, it's not how a reader wants to read. They want you to get to the good stuff fast. In a chronological document, the good stuff is usually at the back.

For someone with ADHN, this chronological structure can be challenging. Their working memory may be near its limit, so don't add to that load. In a chronological document the reader must hold all the neutral information from the start and middle of the document in their working memory. They must do this until they get to the end, where they can connect all the ideas meaningfully. When working memory is already strained, it's less likely the reader can do this successfully.

Figure 5: Unclear structures bury the good stuff



This challenge is closely related to what cognitive scientists call the split-attention effect.<sup>16</sup> It happens when readers must connect related pieces of information that are separated across space or time. This is hard to do. The reader must hold onto any one piece of information until they find another piece that brings relevance and understanding to the whole, all the while filtering out unnecessary details. In workplace documents, when related pieces of information are not packaged together the reader must work harder to process them.

Dyslexic readers may find it mentally taxing to understand a document that buries key information. They'll use up valuable mental resources decoding unnecessary words.

By the way, decoding is what you do when you read. Your brain translates letters into sounds to identify words and links these words to their meaning.<sup>17</sup> For most people without dyslexia, decoding is automatic. For those with dyslexia, this process is not automatic and chews up the mental resources they need to process the meaning in poorly structured documents. This can lead to overwhelm and fatigue.<sup>18</sup>

When a document is poorly structured, the reader's brain has to do too much at once. This leads to cognitive overload and the reader will likely:

- miss key information
- misinterpret the meaning
- give up out of exhaustion.

Bear in mind that it doesn't matter how good a writer you are. If you use the wrong structure for your content, you will challenge and frustrate your readers.

### Paths to understanding

**Put key information first.** People don't read workplace documents for fun. People want you to get to the point immediately. Prioritise what the reader needs to know first, not what the writer did first. Workplace documents are not records of your thought process. They are communication tools.

Figure 6: Prioritising the key points gives your reader what they want to know



When you pick a structure that puts the key information for the reader at the start of the document (or at the start of a section in longer documents), you:

- remove their need to hold multiple ideas in mind while waiting for the point
- provide predictability
- make scanning easier
- make your key points clearer.

Structuring your documents with the reader in mind is common sense.

## 3. Use document design to boost accessibility

### How information-rich headings guide readers through complex text

🕒 Estimated reading time: 2 minutes

When a document lacks information-rich headings or a clear heading hierarchy, readers face 3 barriers:

- Mental mapping overload – they work harder to understand structure, slowing comprehension.
- Decision fatigue – they spend energy making too many decisions about the document.
- Loss of orientation – they can't easily find their place, which disrupts focus and recall.

These barriers make navigation and understanding harder. Information-rich headings fix this by signalling main ideas, improving navigation, helping memory and speeding up information processing.

#### 🚧 Barriers to reading

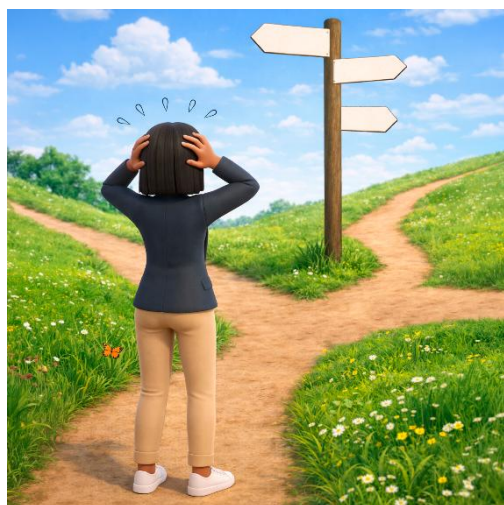
When documents lack clear, information-rich headings and, for longer documents, a heading hierarchy, they can look like a wall of text. Imagine it yourself now. You've received a document and it's just paragraph after paragraph after paragraph. Ugh. It's boring, or you feel it's too much like hard work. And this is because, whether you realise it or not, the writer is forcing you to mentally map the structure. This involves:

- identifying topics and the shifts between them
- understanding how concepts connect and where they appear
- navigating the document line by line
- finding the key information
- maintaining attention.

That's a lot of work. It would be exhausting for any reader, never mind those who have differences in their visuospatial working memory,<sup>19</sup> such as those with the dyspraxia neurotype. Visuospatial working memory helps us make sense of visual information: how things are placed, grouped and arranged, even when we can't see them anymore.

So, if readers have a lower capacity to hold and process visual and spatial information, a document with no visual structure will be challenging. The document will be harder to follow, and it will be harder to find and understand key information.

Figure 7: A document without headings is like a blank street sign



Mentally mapping a document forces the reader to make many decisions about the text. They must decide where to start, what each section is about, choose what to read and what to skip and, of course, mentally organise the structure. All these choices can lead to rapid decision fatigue.<sup>20</sup> This is the mental exhaustion and reduced ability to choose caused by making many decisions.

Neuroimaging shows that adults with ADHN use certain regions of the brain in a dysregulated, more diffuse way during decision-making.<sup>21</sup> This suggests they'd use more mental resources to complete the same tasks as the neuromajority and could reach decision fatigue sooner.

Also, returning to a document that lacks clear headings means the reader wastes time re-reading text and finding their place. This, of course, uses up mental resources. Even more so if your reader is dyslexic. This extra mental effort leads to frustration and increases the chance the reader may give up.

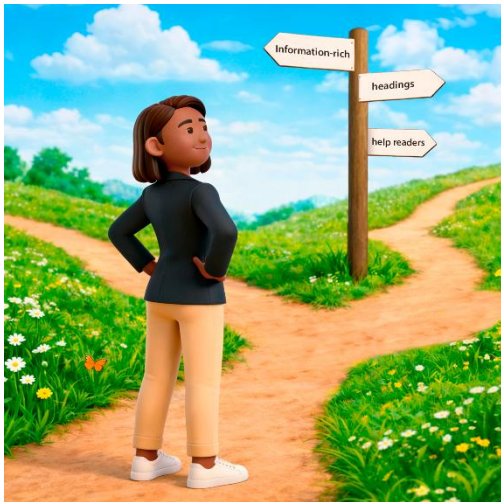
### Paths to understanding

**Use information-rich headings.** It's a simple yet powerful fix. Consistent, information-rich headings help readers figure out what is important. This reduces cognitive load and speeds up information processing.

Readers seeking predictability and order will benefit in particular from consistent headings. Consistency reduces anxiety, makes them feel more in control and helps readers focus on your meaning.

I've used information-rich headings in this document, so you don't have to think about how the sections connect or what the main ideas are. And if you take a break, you know exactly where to come back to.

Figure 8: Information-rich headings tell your reader what's important



What matters most is that readers can navigate your document easily, find the information they need quickly and use the headings to understand the content more efficiently.

## How thoughtful document design improves accessibility

 Estimated reading time: 4.5 minutes

Poor document design creates 3 barriers for readers:

- Lack of visual cues – they struggle to see structure and hierarchy, which slows navigation.
- Visual clutter and distraction – competing elements make it harder to focus on the content.
- Poor formatting choices – inconsistent or awkward layouts increase cognitive load.

These barriers give a negative impression and make processing the content hard. Good design reduces mental fatigue, makes the document feel achievable and increases the chance of positive engagement. Use simple design techniques that highlight the content and the structure.

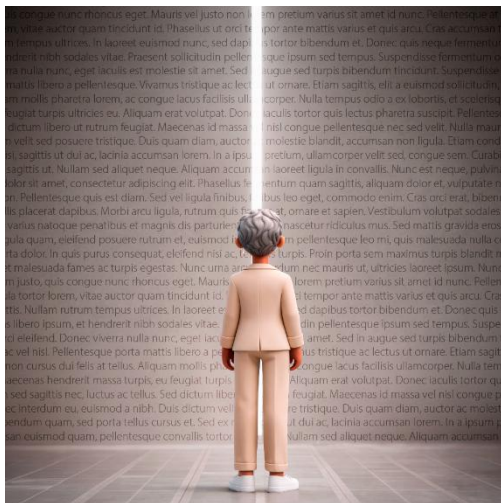
### Barriers to reading

You can under-design a document, where it's visually flat and boring, or you can over-design a document, where it's cluttered and chaotic. Neither design strategy helps readers because both make it harder to find and understand the information readers need.

If you under-design a document, you're missing the opportunity to help the reader process information more easily. This is where it helps to know about schemas.

Schemas are long-term memory frameworks that help us understand new information by linking it to what we already know.<sup>22</sup> A flat document – walls of text with no headings, lists or visual cues – lacks easy triggers to activate these schemas. This increases cognitive load and slows understanding because the brain must work harder to organise and interpret the content. Instead of getting a helping hand, the reader's brain is on its own.

Figure 9: A wall of text slows down your reader



For readers with ADHD, sensory processing differences or Tourette syndrome,<sup>23</sup> this is particularly challenging. Whether it's from suppressing external stimuli or tics or dealing with visual overwhelm, they already start out with impacted mental resources. Without those cues that make it easier to link new information to prior knowledge, these readers are doubly disadvantaged.

On top of this, flat documents can trigger discomfort and anxiety because they look boring or too much like hard work. The reader may struggle to engage or even start reading.

At the opposite end of the scale, you should avoid over-designing your document. Using too many typefaces, colours or layouts, or too much text emphasis can overwhelm readers.<sup>24</sup> I mentioned people with sensory processing differences can find under-designed documents challenging. But they can find over-designed documents challenging too. They can be visually hypersensitive, so excessive visual complexity can trigger discomfort or a reluctance to read.

Figure 10: An over-designed document can be overwhelming



Dyslexic people may find decoding harder when faced with excessive visual crowding.<sup>25</sup> This is where letters or words become harder to read when they are too close together. You can cause crowding with tightly packed paragraphs, especially when letters are narrow or spacing is minimal. For example: `thisishardertoread`. The words 'this is harder to read' have reduced letter spacing.

But reading is more than just decoding. For sighted readers, their eyes must:

- track smoothly across the page
- block out distractions from peripheral stimuli
- jump accurately from 1 line to the next.

Tight line spacing and dense paragraphs present 2 issues:

1. antisaccade errors<sup>26</sup> – where the eyes involuntarily jump to irrelevant stimuli
2. visual tracking difficulties<sup>27</sup> – where the eyes struggle to move from 1 line to the next without skipping lines or reading the same line twice.

These challenges are common among sighted readers who process visual information differently, such as those with the dyspraxic, dyslexic or Autistic neurotype or who have ADHD or sensory processing differences. Sometimes their eyes might jump to the line above or below. That's really frustrating for them. And it will use up valuable mental resources on inhibition control. As we have learned, this leaves fewer mental resources for working memory.

### Paths to understanding

Thoughtful document design is about accessibility, not only aesthetics.

When you avoid under- and over-designing your documents and choose simple and clear design elements instead, you make content easier for everyone to access. Good design:

- reduces mental strain
- supports visual tracking
- lets the brain focus on meaning instead of formatting.

Figure 11: Design should be just right: not too flat or too busy



**Give your text room to breathe.** Line spacing and paragraph density matter. Don't cram words onto a page to reduce the page count. It's counterproductive. Generous spacing reduces tracking errors and avoids frustrating the reader. For sighted readers, this makes it easier for the eyes to move from word to word and to jump to the next line.

Books Without Barriers recommends an average line length of 45 to 80 characters.<sup>28</sup> Shorter lines interrupt readability. Longer lines make tracking harder. Aim for the sweet spot.

**Break up walls of text.** Visuals are not just decorative. They have a job to do. Not only do they create white space by breaking up walls of text, but they make the document look more appealing and achievable. These 2 elements mean that visuals enhance the document's readability.<sup>29</sup>

Visuals also shift the cognitive load from word-based decoding to other types. This can be very helpful for neurodivergent readers who find it easier to interpret patterns, relationships or data visually rather than through text. Visuals can also help some dyslexic readers decode and reprocess text-based information they read earlier in the document.

I've used a variety of techniques to add white space to this ebook – can you identify any of them?

Figure 12: Walls of text are a barrier



**Choose the right typefaces.** There's a typeface called Dyslexie. It's designed specifically for ... you guessed it, readers with dyslexia. Books Without Barriers covers it,<sup>30</sup> but notes, as do other sources,<sup>31</sup> there's little evidence that the typeface actually helps people with dyslexia. The British Dyslexia Association<sup>32</sup> and the Australian Dyslexia Association<sup>33</sup> recommend typefaces such as Arial, Calibri or Tahoma for their legibility and clarity.

You should choose common typefaces like the ones I mentioned that make decoding as easy as possible for everyone. There should be ample spacing between letters,<sup>34</sup> but not too much, and no imposter shapes.<sup>35</sup> Imposter shapes are when letters or numbers from a typeface may be hard to tell apart, for example, 'h' and 'n' or '1' and 'l' and 'i'.<sup>36</sup> Typefaces with imposter shapes are harder to decode. The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines set out some parameters if you're interested.<sup>37</sup>

Figure 13: Typefaces with imposter shapes are harder to decode



**Keep text emphasis simple.** Bold is the best way to add emphasis because it's the least disruptive for readers. Add it to your headings to make them stand out and easily distinguish them from body text. Use it too, for general text emphasis.<sup>38</sup> But don't bold entire sentences or paragraphs.

Other emphasis methods slow down readers. For example, all caps.<sup>39</sup> We're used to reading lower-case letters and identifying the shapes of the words. BUT ALL CAPS TURNS THOSE WORDS INTO A SERIES OF RECTANGLES, impeding our pattern recognition so we read and process the information slower.

There are thousands of design techniques you could use. But don't overdo it. The key is to keep your design simple, consistent and predictable.

## 4. Support readers at the word and sentence level

### Why active voice and pronouns ease the cognitive load

🕒 Estimated reading time: 2 minutes

Complex, abstract or passive writing creates 2 major barriers for readers:

- Too much passive voice – these sentences are harder to process, slowing down understanding.
- Too few pronouns – the text feels impersonal and disconnected, making engagement harder.

These barriers increase cognitive load and reduce clarity. Using active voice and personal pronouns makes writing clearer, more engaging and easier to process. This frees up mental resources for understanding meaning. Write mostly in the active voice and use pronouns such as 'you' to create a direct, human connection with your reader.

#### 🚧 Barriers to reading

To read well, you must decode words and extract their meaning. While you decode, your working memory links parts of a sentence together. It holds the subject, verb and object long enough to make sense of the whole. When sentences become more complex, this process increases the cognitive load, leaving fewer mental resources for grasping the meaning.<sup>40</sup>

Writing in the passive voice is an easy and easily avoidable way to add complexity to this process.

For example, 'The form must be completed' doesn't tell the reader who should complete the form. The brain has to pause, infer the missing subject and mentally reassemble the sentence. For Autistic people or those with hyperlexia, who can decode well but struggle with understanding,<sup>41</sup> such complex sentences are no help at all.

Figure 14: Passive voice can lead to sentences with a missing subject



And if you don't use pronouns, you can inadvertently make your text less engaging.<sup>42</sup> For those who struggle with focus and attention, if they can't engage with a document or easily extract the meaning from it, they are more likely to:

- be confused or misinterpret your writing
- feel stress
- give up on your document entirely.

### Paths to understanding

**Write mostly in the active voice.** This structure makes it easier for readers to understand texts because it aligns with how most English speakers naturally communicate.<sup>43</sup>

Studies using functional MRI scans show that reading a document written in the passive voice activates more regions of the brain.<sup>44</sup> Reading passive voice literally takes more brain power. That's why the following authorities recommend using the active voice as much as possible:

- Nature (multidisciplinary journal)
- Web Content Accessibility Guidelines
- the Australian Government Style Manual
- our very own [Australian Style Guide](#)<sup>TM</sup>.<sup>45</sup>

Figure 15: Active voice brings the subject back



Want to know when it is ok to use the passive voice? Come to [one of our workshops](#). We'll happily explain it to you.

**Use personal pronouns.** They help the reader picture the text from their own perspective. This is part of dual coding theory, a term Allan Paivio coined in the 1970s. More on this shortly. But know that you can process information quicker when you can also picture it. This means less strain on your cognitive load.

Figure 16: Personal pronouns bring your reader into the picture



For example:

- ✘ This gardening guide is copyright. Attribution must be given to **Lily Gardens Pty Ltd** if **the guide** is quoted.
- ✓ This gardening guide is copyright. **You** must attribute **us** if you quote from **it**.

Mayer and Moreno found that students learn better when writers present text in a conversational style (pronouns and direct address) instead of an overly formal tone.<sup>46</sup>

Fields and Kuperberg studied the brain during reading and found increased emotional responses when the writer used personal pronouns, which in turn increased comprehension.<sup>47</sup>

Watch out for gendered personal pronouns, such as he, she, him, her. Not everyone identifies as he or she. If you use gendered pronouns, your text will be less engaging for those individuals. Be more inclusive by using pronouns such as they or them and, of course, you.

## Why shorter words and sentences are easier to read

 Estimated reading time: 2 minutes

Complex language creates 2 major barriers for readers:

- Long or unfamiliar words – they overload working memory and slow comprehension.
- Long sentences – they make key information hard to process, increasing cognitive strain.

These barriers can overwhelm and reduce engagement. Shorter words and sentences ease cognitive load and help readers regulate their emotions. Use short, familiar words and keep sentences concise.

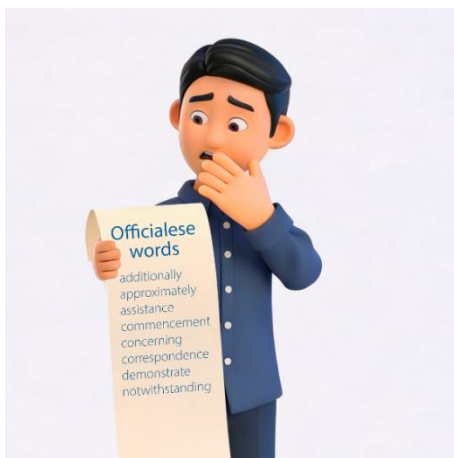
### Barriers to reading

Reading should be a stroll along the beach of understanding, not a trudge through a boggy paddock. Many readers find long words and sentences turn simple documents into exhausting tasks. Even people with auditory processing differences may struggle with written language when sentences are long, passive or complex.<sup>48</sup> The effort used to understand these structures exhausts resources they need to effectively organise the sounds of the words and decode your meaning.

As I've previously mentioned, working memory holds onto the words in sentences to process the meaning. As you now know, working memory is limited. When sentences are long or filled with unfamiliar words, you can see how it can get overloaded, which reduces the energy available to understand the message.

How many times have you read a long sentence full of overly long words, got to the end and thought, 'What did I just read?' Your brain was maxed out decoding the words and wondering what was important in the sentence, so you read it again. The more you have to re-read sentences, the more frustrating that document becomes.

Figure 17: Long or unfamiliar words take more power to decode



Dyslexic readers struggle to recognise printed words and match them with the right sounds. I covered this in the section on document design. If you use long and unfamiliar words, you slow down the reader's ability to decode quickly or at all.

This is a problem for readers with hyperlexia and autism too. Especially if you use idioms or jargon, or imply meanings. Those words are more likely to confuse than to clarify,<sup>49</sup> and this confusion can turn into frustration, especially when reading under time pressure.

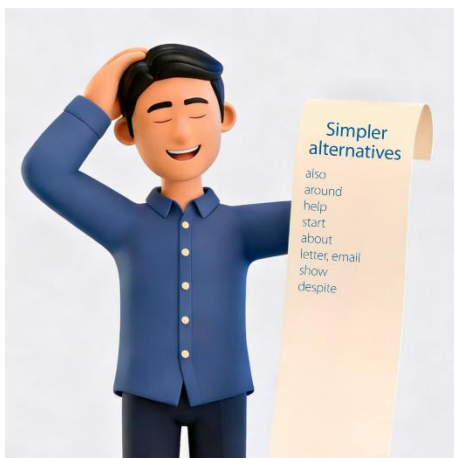
Slow reading doesn't only affect understanding. It affects emotional balance. When reading feels like hard work, anxiety and feelings of inadequacy can rise. And this, too, uses up mental resources, making reading harder.

### **Paths to understanding**

To make your writing more accessible, write so your reader only has to read a sentence once to understand its meaning. This approach reduces cognitive load and allows the reader to focus on the message instead of the mechanics of decoding.

**Choose your words carefully.** Shorter words are easier to decode than long words. Familiar words are easier to decode than unfamiliar words. They simply take less brain power.

Figure 18: Simpler alternatives reduce how much work your reader has to do



**Keep sentences short** (between 15 and 20 words on average).<sup>50</sup> But you can vary sentence length to add variety and rhythm and avoid a monotonous sounding text.

Shorter words and sentences make the text more approachable and manageable. They reduce the risk of mental fatigue or shutdown. This clarity can be the difference between engagement and avoidance. But take it too far and it goes against you and creates choppy sentences and paragraphs. Aim for a variety of sentence lengths to engage your reader.

## 5. Put it all together

### How templates and style guides ensure consistency

🕒 Estimated reading time: 2.5 minutes

Inconsistent layouts and style errors create 3 major barriers for readers:

- Unpredictable structures – they can't anticipate where information is, which slows navigation.
- Disrupted pattern recognition – broken visual patterns make text feel chaotic and hard to process.
- Extra effort from inconsistencies – readers must adjust to irregular formatting, which increases cognitive load.

These barriers overwhelm readers and make documents harder to understand. Templates and style guides promote consistency, clarity and familiarity. Use them to help readers anticipate structure, find key information quickly and avoid jarring errors.

#### 🚧 Barriers to reading

In section 2, I covered the barriers to understanding that arise when you use structures that obscure key information and make relevant content hard to find. It's even worse for readers when you use different structures for the same types of documents.

For ADHDers and Autistic people, this unpredictability can be distracting or overwhelming. Similarly, people with Tourette syndrome, dyspraxia or sensory processing differences may experience heightened sensitivity to visual or structural inconsistencies.

When you change the layout, formatting or sequence of information without a clear reason, the reader must relearn how to engage with the document each time. This forces them to spend mental energy on navigating unfamiliar structures and adjusting to unexpected design choices. It increases the chance of losing focus or struggling to plan, prioritise or complete tasks.

Figure 19: Inconsistent structures force your reader to work harder to navigate the document



Inconsistent document structure and design also disrupt pattern recognition. I briefly mentioned this back in the section on document design. This is a key strategy the brain uses to process information efficiently.<sup>51</sup> The brain expects headings, spacing, styles and layout to follow a pattern. When they don't, or they do but something disrupts the pattern, the reader must repeatedly recalibrate and reorientate.

Errors in grammar, punctuation or formatting also disrupt the reading experience. These inconsistencies conflict with readers' expectations, forcing them to pause, re-read or mentally correct the content. For those already managing mental fatigue, this extra effort can be frustrating.

Writers should never shift the burden of clarity onto the reader.

### Paths to understanding

To support accessibility and reduce mental strain, use templates and style guides. These tools provide a familiar framework that helps readers predict structure, find key information and focus on content rather than formatting.

**Use templates.** Templates provide structural consistency. A well-designed template helps the reader know what to expect and where to find it. Familiar layouts simply reduce the need to reorientate with each new document. When readers come across familiar structures and language, they can process and retain information more easily, leaving more mental resources for understanding.

Consistency also builds confidence. When documents look and feel familiar, readers feel more in control of their workflow. They can scan for relevant sections, jump to what matters and trust that you have presented the information in a logical, accessible way. This reduces anxiety and makes workplace materials feel more manageable.

Figure 20: Consistent documents are easier to navigate through



**Contact us for templates.** If your organisation doesn't currently use templates, consider creating them. Consistency is a team effort. We have a [webinar recording](#) on the topic if you're interested.

**Use style guides.** Style guides promote clarity by standardising language choices, sentence structure and formatting. This is great for your readers because it means that different writers will make the same style choices. Predictability reduces cognitive load. Therefore, more working memory remains to process the information they read.

If you have a style guide, be across it. Make sure your whole team is across it too. If you don't have a style guide, adopt a trusted one such as the [Australian Style Guide](#)<sup>TM 52</sup>.

**Proofread carefully.** Even with the best style guides and templates, errors can slip through. Proofreading is your final quality check.

Take the time to review your document before you share it. If possible, ask a colleague to review it. This attention to detail and accuracy shows respect for your readers and will increase the chance of your message coming through clearly.

## Why plain language is inclusive and boosts readers' confidence

🕒 Estimated reading time: 2.5 minutes

Unclear or overly complex workplace documents create 4 major barriers for readers:

- Uncertainty about what to do – they feel unsure about next steps and themselves, delaying action.
- Emotional strain – struggling to understand heightens stress and frustration and lowers confidence.
- Loss of belonging – readers may feel excluded or inadequate, reducing engagement.
- Burnout risk – repeated effort to decode unclear content drains mental energy.

These barriers can lower confidence and make it harder for people to do their jobs. Plain language removes these obstacles by making information easy to find, understand and use. Use it to boost confidence, reduce anxiety and ensure everyone can access and contribute to your message.

### 📖 Barriers to reading

For many people struggling with reading workplace documents, unclear writing is a major barrier. If your message is unclear, readers might not know what you want them to do and they might:

- miss deadlines
- not finish tasks
- feel like a failure.

Unclear writing also makes it harder to manage emotions. ADHNers and Autistic people, for example, may already have heightened stress or anxiety.<sup>53</sup> Many neurodivergent people work hard to mask their traits<sup>54</sup> and 'fit in' with the environments built for the neuromajority.<sup>55</sup> This uses up a lot of mental resources. And it's why if reading takes too much effort, readers can get exhausted and find it harder to stay focused and feel capable.

Readers may feel excluded by traditional communication practices, which can reinforce a sense that the content wasn't designed with them in mind.

Figure 21: Unclear documents can exclude your reader



When people lose confidence, it affects everything. Your colleagues may feel like they're letting others down, especially if their work is late or misunderstood. They might withdraw or feel like they don't belong.

Take someone with dysgraphia. They use more mental effort to turn ideas into written words. Much of their working memory goes into lower-level tasks, such as forming letters and spelling.<sup>56</sup> For example, if a reader with dysgraphia is reading and responding to an email full of barriers to understanding, this will put more strain on their cognitive load. Even the idea of reading and responding to your email may raise anxiety and feelings of inadequacy.

Some of your colleagues may also work harder because they don't feel as productive,<sup>57</sup> which can lead to burnout.<sup>58</sup> This is when someone is in a state of physical, mental or emotional exhaustion caused by long-term stress. It's more common in people who face constant cognitive or emotional demands.

I've covered many barriers for readers in this ebook. And all of them kill a reader's confidence:

- structures that don't put readers first
- document design that ignores accessibility
- words and sentences that are hard to read
- inconsistency that jars.

And what really kills confidence is when a reader fails at a task they should be able to manage, given their knowledge and experience.

### Paths to understanding

Plain language is inclusive. It helps all your readers engage with workplace documents more easily, making them feel more confident.

**Use the tools I've covered in this ebook.** Avoid common writing practices that get in the way of the reader understanding your text and make sure you use:

- orientating summaries
- reader-friendly structures
- information-rich headings
- thoughtful document design
- mostly active voice and personal pronouns
- shorter sentences and short, familiar words
- style guides and templates.

When your writing is clear, direct and easy to understand, readers feel confident. And because the document hasn't hindered them, their strengths can stand out. Remember that neurodivergent people face different challenges and have unique strengths, such as:

- creative thinking – coming up with new ideas
- pattern recognition – spotting trends and problems
- hyperfocus – concentrating deeply on tasks of interest
- analytical skills – solving problems in unique ways
- inventiveness – imagining new possibilities
- precision – noticing small details
- persistence – sticking with challenges
- big picture thinking – understanding how things connect.

These are valuable skills for any workplace. But they only shine when we remove as many barriers to understanding as possible.

## What inclusive communication delivers

 Estimated reading time: 1 minute

All readers benefit when you write with consistent structures, accessible design and simple wording. Clear and inclusive communication helps more people understand and use your writing, which helps create a workplace where people feel seen and supported.

We are all part of the broader landscape of neurodiversity. The neuromajority and the neurodivergent. Everyone. Neurodivergences are natural variations of human cognition that happen across all intelligence levels.

Using the social model of disability, we realise that many of the barriers people face come from workplaces not understanding,<sup>59</sup> or even knowing about or supporting, different ways of thinking.

Traditional writing practices put up these barriers for people with thinking differences. Plain language shows us how we can avoid them.

And there are more benefits of unlocking everyone's potential. Inclusive communication:

- encourages new ideas by including different points of view
- shows your organisation cares about people and accessibility
- helps more people use your content
- lowers legal risk by following accessibility rules.

Most of all, it helps build a workplace where people feel seen, supported and ready to contribute.

### Paths to understanding

**Accept a challenge.** Try reading this ebook again. This time, ask yourself:

- Would these tips also help people who are in the neuromajority?
- Would clearer writing, better structure and accessible design help **everyone** understand and use my documents?

The answer, almost certainly, is yes.

**Take the next step.** At Plain English Foundation, we work with, know and care about people with different neurotypes. The tips in this ebook are the things we do to avoid making their lives harder. If you want to write for every brain, [contact us](#).

# Appendix

## What all those terms mean (glossary)

🕒 Estimated reading time: 5 minutes

These glossary entries draw on the academic sources listed in the next subsection.

Term	Our definition
Anxiety	is a feeling of worry, nervousness or fear that can be mild or intense. It often happens when someone feels overwhelmed, unsure or threatened, even if there's no clear danger.
Auditory processing differences	are neurological differences that affect how someone understands sounds, even if they don't have a hearing impairment. It can make it harder to understand speech in noisy places, follow instructions or tell similar sounds apart. Many people with auditory processing differences do well with visual learning, problem-solving and pattern recognition. It is often referred to using the clinical initialisms APD (auditory processing disorder) or APC (auditory processing condition).
Attention deficit / hyperactivity neurotype (ADHN or ADHD)	affects attention, energy and self-control. There are 3 types: inattentive, hyperactive–impulsive and combined. People with ADHN can have strong hyperfocus, creative thinking and communication skills. This neurotype is most often called ADHD. I have replaced 'disorder' with the more identity-first 'neurotype'. Edward Hallowell and John Ratey suggest replacing ADHD / ADHN with 'variable attention stimulus trait'. <sup>60</sup> It highlights that attention is not lacking, but hard to manage. I like this term, but I chose to use ADHN because it's more familiar.
Autistic neurotype (autism)	is a type of neurodivergence that affects how people see the world, communicate and connect with others. Traits vary, but can include differences in social connection, sensory processing and focused interests. People with autism often have deep knowledge, empathy and attention to detail. It is often referred to using the clinical initialisms ASD (autism spectrum disorder) or ASC (autism spectrum condition).
Cognitive flexibility	is one of our core executive functions. It is the ability to shift thinking, adapt to change and see things from different points of view. It helps with learning, solving problems and getting along with others.
Cognitive load	is the amount of mental effort needed to understand information and complete tasks. John Sweller's cognitive load theory explains that our working memory has limited capacity. Information is best presented in a way that will avoid mental overload.
Decision fatigue	is the mental tiredness caused by making too many decisions. It can lead to poor focus, avoiding choices or rushing through them.
Decoding	is the skill of turning written symbols into speech by matching letter–sound patterns and blending them together.
Disorder	is a derogatory word that appears a lot because it's part of the clinical term for some neurotypes. For example, 'attention deficit / hyperactivity disorder'. I prefer 'neurotype' to 'disorder', which is why you'll notice 'attention deficit / hyperactivity neurotype' throughout this ebook.

Term	Our definition
Dysgraphia	<p>Primarily affects writing. People with dysgraphia may find it hard to form letters, remember correct letter sequences or simply get their thoughts onto paper clearly. This is due to fine motor skill challenges and language processing difficulties.</p> <p>Though it doesn't tend to affect a person's ability to read and understand text, dysgraphia often happens alongside other neurotypes, such as ADHN and dyslexia.</p>
Dyslexia	<p>affects reading, spelling and following written instructions. Readers with dyslexia must decode each letter or syllable of a word before they can put it all together to understand the word as a whole. This process uses up a lot of mental resources.</p> <p>People with dyslexia often have strong problem-solving skills, creativity and insight.</p>
Dyspraxia	<p>affects how the brain plans and coordinates movement. Parts of the brain that control motor skills and connect sensory information work less efficiently together. It can make new physical tasks or staying organised harder.</p> <p>People with dyspraxia often have strong creativity, empathy and strategic thinking skills.</p> <p>It's also known as developmental coordination disorder.</p>
Executive function	<p>is the set of mental skills that help with focus, planning, memory and self-management. The pre-frontal cortex is the region of the brain responsible for these functions. These skills help people reach goals and adapt to change.</p>
Heading hierarchy	<p>is a way of organising content using headings and sub-headings. It helps readers find, understand and act on information more easily.</p>
Hyperlexia	<p>is an early and advanced reading ability, that often comes with strong decoding skills but also challenges in understanding meaning or social language.</p> <p>People with hyperlexia often have strong memory and pattern recognition, and deep interests.</p>
Identity-first language	<p>puts the identity or 'condition' before the person. People use it to show they accept that their neurodivergence is an integral and valued part of who they are, and not something to be separated or fixed.</p> <p>For example, 'Autistic person' instead of 'Person with autism'. It is always best to ask someone their personal preference.</p> <p>Also read Person-first language.</p>
Inhibition control	<p>is one of our core executive functions. It is the ability to suppress automatic, impulsive or dominant responses in favour of a more desired response.</p>
Language processing differences	<p>are learning differences that affect how a person understands and uses spoken or written language. A brief delay before comprehension is common. It can affect reading, writing, speaking and listening.</p>
Medical model of disability	<p>sees disability as a problem with the person. It focuses on diagnosis and treatment instead of changing the environment.</p>
Neurodivergent	<p>is a common term for people whose brain functions differ from the neuromajority. You could also use the term neurominority which emphasises the marginalised aspect of this group.</p>
Neurodiversity	<p>is the idea that brain differences – such as how we think, learn and behave – are natural and part of human diversity, not problems to fix.</p>

Term	Our definition
Neuromajority	describes people whose thinking and learning match what society expects and supports. Often used as the opposite of neurodivergent. You could also use the term neurotypical.
Person-first language	puts the individual before the 'condition' or identity. People use it when they don't want a characteristic to define them. For example, 'Person with autism' instead of 'Autistic person'. It is always best to ask someone their personal preference. Also read Identity-first language.
Pronouns	are words that replace nouns or noun phrases. Nouns are people, places and things. Examples of pronouns are: he, she, it, you, we and I.
Sensory overload	is when one or more of the body's senses receives more input than the brain can handle effectively. It can lead to overwhelm, discomfort and an urge to withdraw.
Sensory processing differences	are where the brain handles sensory information differently. This can lead to being very sensitive or not sensitive enough to things such as sound, touch or light.
Social model of disability	sees disability as caused by barriers in society – such as inaccessible spaces or negative attitudes – rather than by a person's cognitive or physical difference.
Spatial awareness	is the ability to understand where your body or objects are in space and how they relate to each other. Low spatial awareness creates proprioception challenges that can affect reading, writing and navigating environments.
Tourette syndrome	is a neurological difference that causes involuntary sounds or movements called tics. People with Tourette syndrome often have co-occurring traits, such as attention differences and heightened sensory sensitivity. People with Tourette syndrome often have strong empathy, communication skills and deep focus on interests.
Visual organisation	is the ability to make sense of visual information by arranging and understanding how things are placed or grouped. It helps with tasks such as reading, finding items on a page and following instructions. Poor visual organisation can make it harder to focus, find key information or understand layouts.
Working memory	is one of our core executive functions. It is the ability to hold and use information for a short time. It helps with learning, reasoning and completing tasks.

## Which resources we used to write this ebook

 Estimated reading time: 5 minutes

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