PROFESSIONAL WRITING · STUDY GUIDE

# Exam 2 Study Guide

This guide covers chapters 3 and 4. First the sentence: what clarity is, how to rebuild a sentence around an actor and a verb, which words your reader already owns, and how tone lands. Then the page: chunks, headings, lists, tables, white space, type, emphasis and accessibility. Work one chapter at a time. Read the "what to know" paragraphs, copy the tables out by hand, then try each worked case with the steps covered. Finish each chapter with its ten self-test items. The cram sheet at the end puts every rule and number in one place.

WHAT THIS GUIDE COVERS

- Chapter 3 · find, understand and use, the curse of knowledge, actor and action, nominalizations and expletives, the honest account of the passive, inflated diction, jargon and terms of art, patient-facing writing and teach-back, tone, register and refusals, the five revision passes and readability formulas.
- Chapter 4 · scanning and the F-pattern, legibility and readability, proximity, alignment, contrast and repetition, chunking and informative headings, the outline test, prose versus lists versus tables, white space, measure and leading, type and the emphasis budget, accessibility and the design review.

CHAPTER 3

## Clarity, Plain Language and Tone

Read it in full: **Chapter 3 in the textbook**. Practice it in the lab: **The Sentence Engine** and **The Five-Pass Revision**.

### What to know

Clarity is not a property of prose. It is an event that happens, or fails to happen, inside the reader's head. You cannot judge it from the inside, because reading your own draft you recognize it rather than decode it. That is the **curse of knowledge**: once you know something you cannot reliably simulate not knowing it. Only an outside reader, or enough time (about twenty-four hours) to become one, corrects it.

The plain language standard, ISO 24495-1 (2023), defines **plain language** by three verbs: the intended readers can easily **find** what they need, **understand** what they find, and **use** it. Each fails differently. A deadline buried in paragraph six fails find. A sentence of familiar words with no clear meaning fails understand. "Notify the department promptly" fails use, because it names no person, method or time. Plain language is not dumbing down, and it is not informal. New York has required plain consumer contracts since 1978, and the Plain Writing Act of 2010 covers federal agencies. Revision for plainness has good evidence behind it; single readability scores do not.

The sentence engine is one move: put a person or organization in the subject slot and the real action in the verb slot. Underline the first real verb. If it is a form of be or a placeholder (occur, exist, take place, make, conduct, perform, provide, facilitate), the real verb is nearby wearing a noun costume. A **nominalization** turns a verb or adjective into a noun (decide becomes decision); watch for -tion, -ment, -ance, -ence, -ity, -ure and -al. Nominalizations earn their place when the process is the topic or when pointing back at something just said. An **expletive construction** (There is, It is important that) is a placeholder subject; deleting it pulls the real subject forward.

The **passive voice** is not an error. It is a choice about which noun is the subject. It fits when the actor is unknown, irrelevant or less important, or when it keeps a consistent subject across sentences, as in methods sections. It becomes a problem when the missing actor is the point. The **agentless passive** ("Mistakes were made") is the workhorse of institutional evasion in incident and root-cause writing. Keep one idea per sentence, average about fifteen to twenty words, and vary length. Restoring actors and verbs usually cuts twenty to thirty percent without hunting for words.

Inflated diction is usually anxiety, not vanity. Swap in the event that for if, due to the fact that for because, utilize for use, a number of for the actual number, and delete it should be noted that. Intensifiers (very, really, extremely) prop up weak words. A hedge is honest when the evidence is uncertain and a shield when it is not. **Jargon** is insider vocabulary used on an outsider; it is defined by the reader, not the word. A **term of art** has a precise meaning with no plain equivalent (sepsis, informed consent, negligence): keep it and define it once. The test: can I replace it without losing precision? Spell out abbreviations at first use and never use those on the Joint

Commission's do-not-use list (U, IU, QD, QOD, trailing zeros, abbreviated morphine and magnesium sulfate).

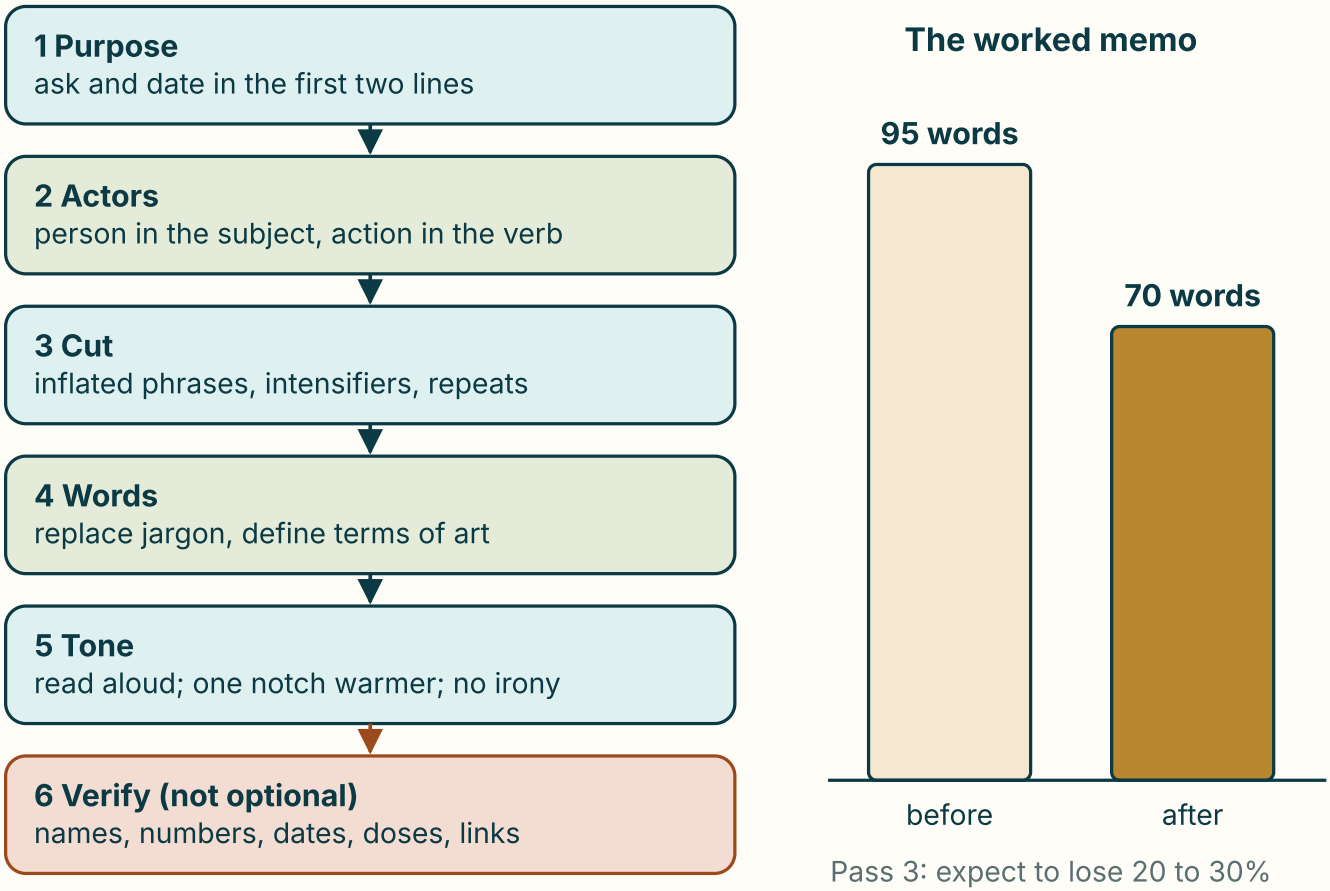
Health literacy is lower than clinicians expect. The 2003 national survey found only about one adult in eight at the highest level for health tasks and roughly a third at basic or below. A sixth to eighth grade target for patient materials is a rule of thumb, not a validated threshold. Lead with the action, use you, give numbers instead of frequency words, break compound instructions apart. Plain is not vague: "drink plenty of fluids" is plain and useless. Verify with **teach-back**, framed as a test of your explanation: "I want to make sure I explained this clearly."

**Tone** is inferred, not transmitted. In Kruger and colleagues' 2005 study, senders were confident their sarcasm would be read; recipients were near chance. So write one notch warmer than feels necessary. Register runs from too casual through collegial, calibrated and formal to obsequious; mirror the most senior person, then go one notch more formal for a record. Brown and Levinson's politeness model is debated across cultures. **You-attitude** writes from the reader's side; positive framing states the path, but never hides a no. A refusal has five moves: acknowledge, decide, explain, offer, leave the door open. Phrases like "per my last email" are aggression with a timestamp.

Revise in named passes: purpose, actors, cut, words, tone, then verify names, numbers, dates, doses and links. Readability formulas (Flesch Reading Ease, Flesch-Kincaid, SMOG, Gunning Fog) count sentence length and syllables only. "The lesion is benign" scores about grade four and still fails the patient. Treat a score as a smoke alarm, not a thermostat, and test the draft on one real reader for four minutes.

**LOCK THESE IN**

- Plain language = the intended reader can find, understand and use it (ISO 24495-1, 2023).
- Sentence engine: actor in the subject slot, real action in the verb slot.
- Nominalization suffixes: -tion, -ment, -ance, -ence, -ity, -ure, -al. Fine when the process is the topic.
- Passive is a choice, not an error; the agentless passive is a problem when the actor is the point.
- Jargon versus term of art: can I replace it without losing precision? If no, keep it and define it once.
- Tone is inferred: one notch warmer, no irony, and the word no when the answer is no.
- Refusal: acknowledge, decide, explain, offer, leave the door open.
- Five passes (purpose, actors, cut, words, tone) plus verify. Readability scores are a smoke alarm.




**Five named passes, then verify.** Each pass hunts for one thing, so it finds it. In the chapter's worked memo the routine took 95 words down to 70 while adding a policy number, a deadline and a reason.

## Key terms and comparisons

| Term | What it means | The working rule |
|---|---|---|
| **Find / understand / use** | Three parts of the plain language test | Each fails differently and needs its own repair |
| **Nominalization** | Verb or adjective frozen into a noun | Unfreeze it unless the process is the topic |
| **Expletive construction** | There is, It is important that | Delete the opener; the real subject comes forward |
| **Agentless passive** | Passive with the by phrase deleted | Name the actor when the actor is the point |
| **Jargon** | Insider word used on an outsider | Defined by the reader; replace it |
| **Term of art** | Precise term with no plain equivalent | Keep it; define it once |
| **Intensifier** | very, really, extremely | Usually props up a weak word |
| **You-attitude** | Writing from the reader's side of the desk | Say what they can do, not what you require |
| **Teach-back** | Patient explains the plan in their own words | Frame it as a test of your explanation |
| **Readability formula** | Sentence length plus syllables | Smoke alarm, not proof |

## Swaps that free a sentence

| Inflated or buried | Plain | Note |
|---|---|---|
| **in the event that** | if | Highest-yield swap in policy writing |
| **due to the fact that** | because | If because feels blunt, check the reasoning |
| **utilize** | use | Utilize has a narrow real sense |
| **in a timely manner** | by Friday at 3 p.m. | An elastic phrase posing as a standard |
| **a number of** | three | If you know the number, give it |
| **it should be noted that** | (delete) | Everything you wrote should be noted |
| **make a determination** | decide | The helper verb leaves with the noun |
| **conducted an evaluation of** | evaluated | Collapse to one verb |

## The register dial

| Register | Where it fits | What goes wrong |
|---|---|---|
| **Too casual** | Nowhere that is retained | Low effort; no reason, no alternative, no date |
| **Collegial** | Peers, familiar managers, low stakes | Fine if the relationship is truly this warm |
| **Calibrated (default)** | Most workplace writing | Almost nothing: it gives a reason and an alternative |
| **Formal** | External parties, HR and legal, first contact | Distant between daily colleagues |
| **Obsequious** | Nowhere | The anxiety becomes the message |

## Worked cases

### WORKED CASE 1 · RUNNING THE SENTENCE ENGINE

Rebuild: "A determination regarding the eligibility of the applicant will be made by the committee following completion of the review process."

#### STEP 1 · WHO DOES SOMETHING?

The committee.

#### STEP 2 · WHAT DO THEY DO?

They decide. "Determination" is the verb in a noun costume.

#### STEP 3 · REBUILD

"The committee decides whether you are eligible after it finishes the review."

#### CHECK IT A SECOND WAY

Count: the original is 20 words, the rebuild 12. The rebuild also gained something: the reader is "you", a person, not "the applicant", a category.

### WORKED CASE 2 · PASSIVE: KEEP OR FIX?

Sort three sentences: "Samples were incubated at 37 degrees Celsius for 24 hours." "It was determined that the dose was administered incorrectly." "The specimen was mislabeled" (nobody yet knows who labeled it).

#### STEP 1 · THE METHOD SENTENCE

Keep. Any competent technician is the actor; the procedure is properly the subject.

#### STEP 2 · THE DOSE SENTENCE

Fix. Two agentless passives hide two people. "The pharmacist reviewing the chart found that the night nurse gave 10 mg instead of 1 mg."

#### STEP 3 · THE SPECIMEN SENTENCE

Keep for now. If the actor is truly unknown, the passive states exactly what is known. Add the actor the moment you learn it.

#### THE RULE

The passive becomes a fault only when the missing actor is the point.

### WORKED CASE 3 · TRANSLATING FOR A PATIENT

Rewrite three unit phrases for a discharge sheet: "NPO after midnight", "One tablet PRN pain", "Follow up with PCP in 1 to 2 weeks".

**STEP 1 · NPO**

"Do not eat or drink anything after midnight tonight: that includes water." The exception people get wrong is stated.

**STEP 2 · PRN**

"Take one tablet when you have pain. Wait at least six hours between tablets. Do not take more than four in one day." One abbreviation hid three rules: dose, interval and daily limit.

**STEP 3 · PCP**

"See your regular doctor within two weeks. Call the number on this page today to book it." The action makes it achievable.

**STEP 4 · VERIFY**

Use teach-back: "I want to make sure I explained this clearly: can you tell me how you will take this medicine at home?"

**WORKED CASE 4 · A REFUSAL THAT KEEPS THE RELATIONSHIP**

Ana must turn down a request to fund a second scanner this quarter. Build the refusal.

**STEP 1 · ACKNOWLEDGE**

"Thanks for putting this together: the case for the second scanner is solid."

**STEP 2 · DECIDE**

"I cannot fund it this quarter." The no is stated plainly.

**STEP 3 · EXPLAIN**

"The capital budget is committed through September."

**STEP 4 · OFFER AND LEAVE THE DOOR OPEN**

"Resubmit it in the October cycle and I will back it. If the wait creates a safety problem, tell me this week and I will escalate it separately."

**CHECK**

Compare the weak version: 35 words that never say no. The strong version refuses more clearly and is warmer.

**TRAPS PEOPLE FALL INTO**

- **Judging your own clarity.** You recognize your draft; you do not decode it. Get an outside reader or wait a day.
- **Treating every complaint as vocabulary.** Find, understand and use fail differently. Short words do not fix a buried deadline.
- **Banning all nominalizations.** "The investigation lasted six weeks" is fine; the process is the topic.

- **Calling every flat sentence passive.** Passive is a structure: the thing acted upon is the subject. Learn it, then decide.
- **Plain meaning vague.** "Drink plenty of fluids" is plain and useless. Give the number.
- **Asking "Do you understand?"** Nearly everyone says yes. Ask the person to explain the plan back.
- **Positive framing that hides a no.** Framing controls emphasis, not truth. If the answer is no, the word no appears.
- **Trusting a grade level.** Formulas count syllables. "The lesion is benign" scores about grade four and still fails.

## Chapter 3 self-test · ten items

### 1. Which three verbs make up the plain language standard's definition?

A. Read, remember and repeat
B. Find, understand and use
C. Scan, summarize and store
D. Write, revise and publish

**B. Find, understand and use** ISO 24495-1 says the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.

### 2. "Staff shall notify the department promptly." Which part of the plain language test does it fail first?

A. Find: the sentence is buried in the text
B. Understand: every word in it is unfamiliar
C. None, because the meaning is fully clear
D. Use: it names no person, method or time

**D. Use: it names no person, method or time** Readers understand every word and still cannot act. "Promptly" is an elastic word wearing the costume of a standard.

### 3. Which sentence has the actor in the subject slot and the action in the verb?

A. Notification of the family was performed at 21:40
B. There was a call made to the family at 21:40
C. The charge nurse called the family at 21:40
D. A family notification occurred around 21:40

**C. The charge nurse called the family at 21:40** Only the first names who acted and uses a real verb. The others use a nominalization, an expletive or a placeholder verb.

### 4. When does a nominalization earn its place?

A. When the process itself is the topic of the sentence
B. Whenever the sentence needs to sound much more official
C. When the writer wants to avoid naming any actor
D. Whenever a verb would make the sentence shorter

**A. When the process itself is the topic of the sentence** "The investigation lasted six weeks" is better than any unfrozen version. Nominalizations also work as bridges that point back.

### 5. Which passive sentence should be kept as written?

A. It was determined that the dose was administered wrongly
B. Mistakes were made during the weekend staffing changes
C. Your request for training funds has now been denied
D. Samples were incubated at 37 degrees Celsius for 24 hours

**D. Samples were incubated at 37 degrees Celsius for 24 hours** In a method description the actor is any competent technician. The others hide a person the reader needs.

### 6. What is the one-question test that separates jargon from a term of art?

A. Is the word longer than three syllables?
B. Can I replace it without losing precision?
C. Would a dictionary list this as formal?
D. Has my manager used this word before?

**B. Can I replace it without losing precision?** If you can replace it with no loss, it was jargon. If not, keep it and define it once in ordinary words.

### 7. Which is on the Joint Commission's do-not-use list?

A. mg
B. mL
C. QD
D. PRN

**C. QD** U, IU, QD, QOD, trailing zeros and abbreviated morphine and magnesium sulfate are on the list because they have caused dosing errors.

### 8. Why does the chapter advise writing one notch warmer than feels necessary?

A. Readers tend to hear neutral text as slightly negative
B. Warm messages are always shorter and much easier to scan
C. Formal register is never acceptable at work anymore
D. Senders can reliably signal sarcasm by adding warmth

**A. Readers tend to hear neutral text as slightly negative** Tone is inferred, not transmitted. Research on email suggests a drift where neutral lands as slightly negative.

### 9. Which revision uses positive framing without changing the facts?

A. We are unable to process anything without the completed form
B. Send the completed form and we can process this the same day
C. Your request has been processed, pending some missing paperwork
D. Processing may be possible later if the form happens to arrive

**B. Send the completed form and we can process this the same day** The constraint is identical, but the sentence now holds the path forward. The third option misstates the facts.

### 10. A patient handout scores at a fifth-grade reading level. What does that prove?

A. That most patients will understand and then follow the instructions
B. That the handout meets every federal plain writing requirement
C. That the handout no longer needs testing with a real reader
D. Only that the sentences are short and the words have few syllables

**D. Only that the sentences are short and the words have few syllables** Formulas count sentence and word length. They cannot see familiarity, order, design or truth.

CHAPTER 4

# Document Design and Readability

Read it in full: **Chapter 4 in the textbook**. Practice it in the lab: **Shape Shifter** and **The Squint Test Studio**.

## What to know

A document begins to be read at the first glance, not the first word. Readers arrive with a question (do I have to do something, by when, is this about me?) and hunt for the answer. If the page gives the hunt no handholds, the eye falls back on a default sweep, the F-shaped pattern. Good design interrupts it on purpose. The top-left of every block is expensive real estate, so put the load-bearing word there: "Deadline: Friday, March 14." Anything visually uniform is invisible. Design is the deliberate creation of useful difference.

**Legibility** is whether characters can be told apart (size, contrast, print quality). **Readability** is whether meaning comes without undue effort (sentences, structure and layout together). A document can be legible and unreadable, which is the normal condition of workplace policy.

Four principles do most of the work. **Proximity**: close things read as a group, so the space above a heading should be larger than the space below it. **Alignment**: every element lines up with something; pick a left edge and defend it. **Contrast**: if things differ, make them clearly different; timid contrast looks like a mistake. **Repetition**: do the same thing the same way every time. The squint test: blur the page and see what stands out. Rebuilding a 95-word policy sentence into labeled chunks changes no requirement; it makes the same content findable.

**Chunking** gives each block one idea with a topic-first **lead sentence**. About three to six sentences on paper and two or three on a phone is a workable convention, not a law; steps get one action each. One-sentence confetti is as hard to use as concrete. **Informative headings** state content ("Recommendation: adopt Option B beginning July 1") rather than genre ("Conclusion"). Keep them three to eight words, front-load the distinctive word, keep them honest. Never skip a level, never leave a lone subheading, keep same-level headings parallel, and run the **outline test**: read the heading stack alone.

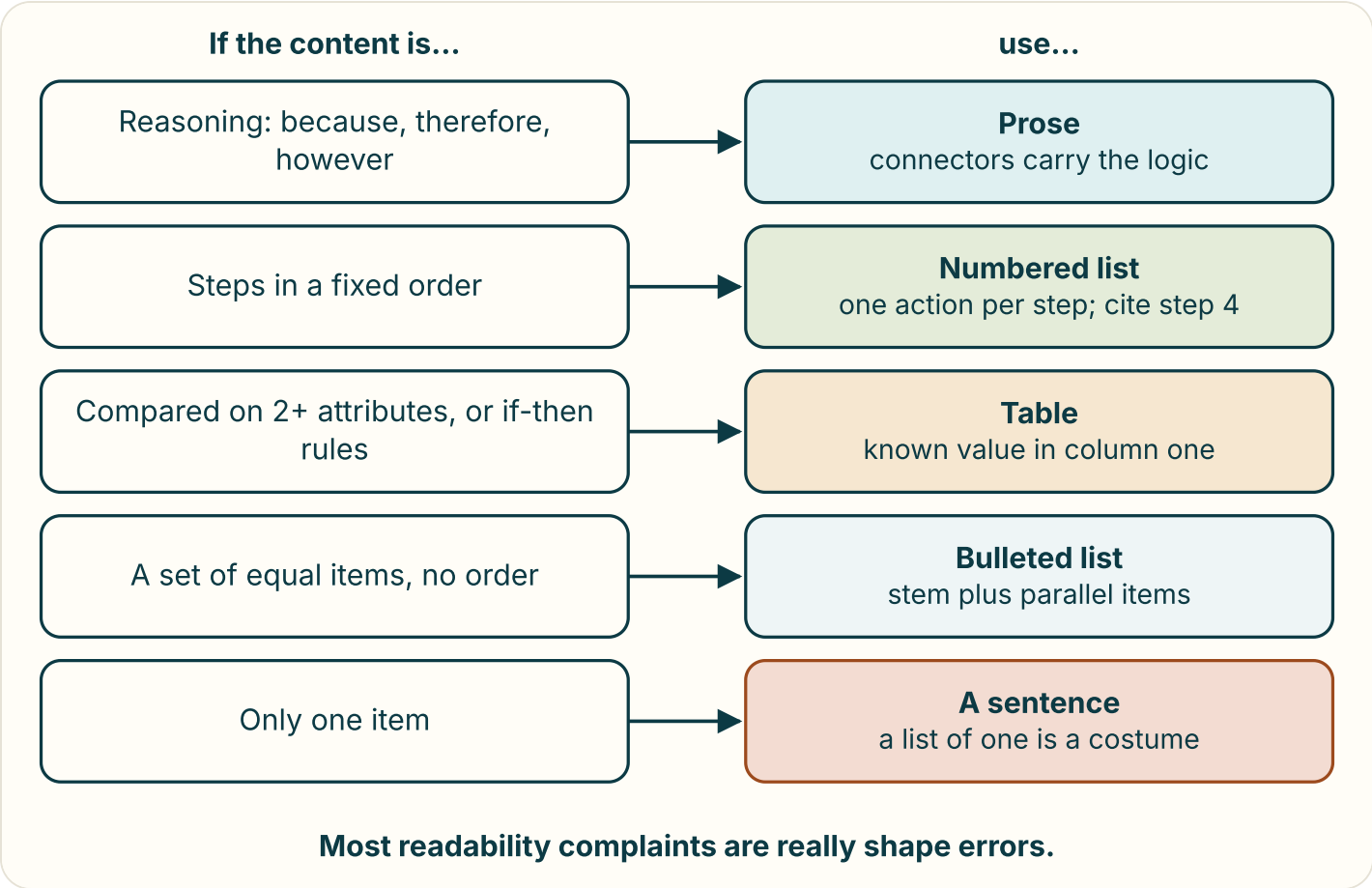
Match form to content. Prose carries reasoning; numbered lists carry fixed sequence; bulleted lists carry equal items with no order; tables carry comparisons on two or more attributes and if-then conditions. A list of one is a sentence. Lists need a **stem** that says what they contain and whether items are all-of, any-of or one-of, parallel items, about seven items at most, one sublevel, and consistent punctuation. In tables, put what the reader knows in column one, carry units in headers, align text left and numbers right, and never leave a cell blank when you mean zero or not applicable. Keep tables to about five or six columns.

White space shows structure. **Measure** (line length) is conventionally 45 to 75 characters, about 66 as a target; the evidence is mixed. **Leading** of about 1.15 to 1.5 times the type size suits business documents. Print body text at 11 or 12 points (below about 10 is hard); screen defaults are commonly about 16 pixels. Use three or four sizes in a type scale and at most two typefaces. Serif versus sans-serif evidence is inconsistent; size, contrast, spacing and telling I, l and 1 apart matter more. Dyslexia fonts have not consistently shown an advantage.

Emphasis is a fixed budget: one or two items per page. Bold the item a reader would be harmed by missing (often the date, not the noun). Underline means a link. ALL CAPS is for short signal words only. Never let color carry meaning alone. Captions should state the point. For accessibility: use real heading styles, write alt text that says what an image shows and why, write link text that names the destination, and meet WCAG contrast of 4.5 to 1 for ordinary text and 3 to 1 for large text (18 point, or 14 point bold); the enhanced level is 7 to 1 and 4.5 to 1. Content should work at 200% text size and reflow on a phone. Readability formulas cannot see any of this.

**LOCK THESE IN**

- Readers scan before they read; the top-left of every block carries the load-bearing word.
- Proximity, alignment, contrast, repetition. Space above a heading is larger than space below.
- One idea per chunk, lead sentence first; headings state content, not genre.
- Never skip a heading level; no lone subheading; same-level headings parallel; run the outline test.
- Prose for reasoning, numbered list for sequence, bullets for sets, tables for comparisons and conditions.
- Table: known value in column one, units in headers, no blank cells meaning zero, about six columns at most.
- Emphasis budget: one or two items a page; never color alone.
- WCAG contrast: 4.5 to 1 for body text, 3 to 1 for large text (18 pt or 14 pt bold).




**Match the form to the content.** Most readability complaints are shape errors: reasoning forced into bullets, or a comparison forced into prose.

## Key terms and comparisons

| Term | What it means | Note |
|---|---|---|
| **Legibility** | Characters can be told apart | Size, contrast, print quality |
| **Readability** | Meaning comes without undue effort | Language and layout together |
| **Proximity** | Close things read as one group | More space above a heading than below |
| **Alignment** | Each element lines up with something | Pick a left edge |
| **Contrast** | Different things look clearly different | Two full steps, not one point |
| **Repetition** | Same thing done the same way | Lets readers learn the document once |
| **Stem** | Line above a list saying what it holds | All-of, any-of or one-of |
| **Measure** | Line length | 45 to 75 characters; about 66 |
| **Leading** | Space between lines | 1.15 to 1.5 times type size |
| **Semantic heading** | Built-in heading style or tag | Screen readers can jump between sections |

## Numbers and thresholds

| Item | Value | Note |
|---|---|---|
| **Heading length** | 3 to 8 words | Front-load the distinctive word |
| **List length** | About 7 items at most | Then group or make a table |
| **Table width** | About 5 or 6 columns | Wider breaks on phones and portrait pages |
| **Print body text** | 11 or 12 points | Below about 10 is hard for many adults |
| **Screen body text** | About 16 pixels | Common browser default |
| **Type scale** | 3 or 4 sizes; 2 typefaces at most | Steps obvious at a glance |
| **WCAG minimum contrast** | 4.5 : 1 text; 3 : 1 large text | Large = 18 pt, or 14 pt bold |
| **WCAG enhanced contrast** | 7 : 1 text; 4.5 : 1 large text | Icons and input borders 3 : 1 |
| **Resize and reflow** | Usable at 200% text; one column on a phone | Line height up to 1.5 without breaking |

## Emphasis devices

| Device | Good use | Failure mode |
|---|---|---|
| **Bold** | The one item a scanner must not miss | Bolding every key term |
| **Italic** | Titles, defined terms, light stress | Long passages |
| **Underline** | Hyperlinks | Anything else: readers try to click it |
| **ALL CAPS** | Short signal words: WARNING, STOP | Whole sentences read as shouting |
| **Color** | A second signal beside a word or icon | Carrying meaning alone |
| **Callout box** | A warning, definition or example | Three per page |

## Worked cases

### WORKED CASE 1 · REBUILDING A POLICY SENTENCE

A 95-word sentence says absences must be reported two hours before shift (three for nights), documentation for more than two consecutive shifts goes to Employee Health within 72 hours of return, and missing either may mark the absence unexcused. Rebuild it.

**STEP 1 · COUNT THE RULES**
Four rules, one exception and three deadlines in one sentence.

**STEP 2 · WRITE AN INFORMATIVE HEADING**
"Reporting an absence: effective March 1."

**STEP 3 · CHUNK WITH BOLD RUN-IN LABELS**
Call in by; Send documentation when; If you miss the window.

**STEP 4 · CHECK NOTHING WAS LOST**
Same words, same policy, same consequence. A ten-second read instead of ninety. Design is not saying less; it is making the same content findable.

### WORKED CASE 2 · PROSE TO TABLE

Convert: "If you are on days, call two hours ahead; nights, three hours; per diem, contact staffing directly."

**STEP 1 · SPOT THE TELL**
Stacked conditions are a table described in sentences.

**STEP 2 · PICK COLUMN ONE**
Readers arrive knowing their shift, not the deadline. So column one is "If you are...".

**STEP 3 · PUT UNITS IN THE HEADER**
"Call in by (hours before shift)" lets the cells read simply 2 and 3.

**STEP 4 · FILL EVERY CELL**
Where nothing applies, write "not applicable" or "No documentation needed" so the gap is clearly deliberate.

### WORKED CASE 3 · FIXING A HEADING STACK

A report's headings read: Introduction / Background / Discussion / 3.1 Costs (the only subsection) / Conclusion. Fix them.

**STEP 1 · MAKE THEM INFORMATIVE**

"Why the discharge packet is changing in July" / "What kept failing with the 2019 form" / "Three options, and what each one costs".

#### STEP 2 · FIX THE LONE SUBHEADING

3.1 has no sibling, so merge it into its parent or add a sibling such as 3.2 Risks.

#### STEP 3 · COMMIT IN THE LAST HEADING

"Recommendation: adopt Option B beginning July 1".

#### STEP 4 · RUN THE OUTLINE TEST

Read the stack alone. It now tells the story: problem, options, recommendation.

### WORKED CASE 4 · CHECKING A CONTRAST RATIO

A note uses 14-point regular gray text with a measured contrast ratio of 3.8 to 1 against white. A heading uses 18-point text at the same ratio. Which pass WCAG's minimum?

#### STEP 1 · CLASSIFY THE TEXT

Large text is at least 18 point, or 14 point bold. The note (14 point regular) is ordinary text. The heading (18 point) is large text.

#### STEP 2 · APPLY THE THRESHOLDS

Ordinary text needs 4.5 to 1; 3.8 is below it, so the note fails. Large text needs 3 to 1; 3.8 is above it, so the heading passes.

#### STEP 3 · FIX THE NOTE

Darken the gray until a contrast checker reports at least 4.5 to 1, or make it 14 point bold, which counts as large.

#### CHECK

For the enhanced level, the heading would need 4.5 to 1 and the note 7 to 1, so neither passes that stricter level.

### TRAPS PEOPLE FALL INTO

- **"Formatting is cosmetic."** A requirement nobody can locate is a requirement nobody follows.
- **Genre headings.** "Background" and "Discussion" tell the reader nothing they can use.
- **A lone subheading.** A division into one part is not a division.
- **Bulleting an argument.** Bullets strip because, therefore and however, and the logic goes with them.
- **Bullets four lines long.** That is prose with dots. Shorten, or use subsections.
- **Bolding the noun.** Bold what the reader would be harmed by missing, usually the date.
- **Red alone for overdue.** Color fails in greyscale and for color-blind readers. Add the word Overdue.

- **Big bold text as a heading.** Software sees a bold paragraph. Use real heading styles.

## Chapter 4 self-test · ten items

### 1. According to the chapter, what does the F-shaped scan tell a writer?

A. The fixed route every reader takes on every page
B. What the eye does when a page offers nothing better
C. That readers always finish the first full paragraph
D. That the right side of a page is read most closely

**B. What the eye does when a page offers nothing better** The F-shape is a default sweep. Good design interrupts it with handholds on purpose.

### 2. Which pair is correctly defined?

A. Legibility: getting meaning easily; readability: telling characters apart
B. Legibility: the grade level score; readability: the font family
C. Legibility: line length; readability: line spacing in points
D. Legibility: telling characters apart; readability: getting meaning easily

**D. Legibility: telling characters apart; readability: getting meaning easily** A document can be perfectly legible and still unreadable.

### 3. Why should the space above a heading be larger than the space below it?

A. Repetition requires every single gap on the page to be different
B. Alignment only works when headings float between blocks
C. Proximity makes the heading group with the text it introduces
D. Contrast is created by spacing rather than by type size

**C. Proximity makes the heading group with the text it introduces** Readers group whatever is close together, so the heading should sit closer to its own section.

### 4. Which heading is the most informative?

A. Recommendation: move to Option B on July 1
B. Conclusion and final thoughts on the options
C. Section 5: Summary of the report and the outcome
D. Other information about the options considered

**A. Recommendation: move to Option B on July 1** An informative heading states the content, so a reader who reads only headings still leaves with the message.

### 5. A section has exactly one subsection. What should the writer do?

A. Promote it two levels so it stands out on its own
B. Merge it into the parent or add a sibling subsection
C. Keep it, because one subsection is always acceptable
D. Turn it into a callout box with a bold label instead

**B. Merge it into the parent or add a sibling subsection** A lone subheading promises a set and delivers a single item.

### 6. Content compares four shifts on deadline and documentation. Which form fits?

A. A bulleted list with one shift per bullet
B. A paragraph with each of the shifts joined by and
C. A numbered list ordered by shift length
D. A table with the shift in the first column

**D. A table with the shift in the first column** Items compared on two or more attributes belong in a table, entered by the value the reader already knows.

### 7. What should a list's stem tell the reader?

A. What it holds and whether items are all-of, any-of or one-of
B. How many items follow and which one of them matters most
C. The page number where the full list continues later on
D. Which of the items are optional, with bold on each one

**A. What it holds and whether items are all-of, any-of or one-of** Bullets alone cannot say all-of, any-of or one-of. The stem can.

### 8. Under WCAG, what minimum contrast ratio does ordinary body text need?

A. 3.0 to 1
B. 7.0 to 1
C. 4.5 to 1
D. 2.5 to 1

**C. 4.5 to 1** 4.5 to 1 is the minimum for ordinary text, 3 to 1 for large text. 7 to 1 is the enhanced level.

### 9. Which is the best alt text for an informative chart?

A. Chart showing some data about falls on the hospital units over a full year
B. Line chart: falls per 1,000 patient-days fell from 4.1 to 3.3 after July
C. Image of a line chart, saved as chart_final_v2.png in the shared folder
D. Decorative picture; screen readers should skip over this image

**B. Line chart: falls per 1,000 patient-days fell from 4.1 to 3.3 after July** Alt text says what the image shows and why it is there. Decorative marking is only for images that carry no information.

**10. A policy paragraph is chopped into short sentences of the same jargon. What happens to its readability score?**

A. It worsens because more sentences are counted
B. It stays the same because the words are the same
C. It improves while comprehension gets worse
D. It improves and comprehension improves with it

---

**C. It improves while comprehension gets worse** Formulas measure where the punctuation falls, so chopping games the score without making anything clearer.

ONE PAGE

# Cram sheet

Everything from chapters 3 and 4 in one place. Cover the right column and see if you can rebuild each row.

## Numbers and dates to know

| Item | Value | Note |
|---|---|---|
| **Plain language standard** | ISO 24495-1, 2023 | Find, understand, use |
| **New York plain contracts** | Since 1978 | Consumer contracts below a dollar threshold |
| **Plain Writing Act** | 2010 | Federal agencies; Federal Plain Language Guidelines |
| **Health literacy survey** | 2003 | About 1 in 8 proficient; about a third basic or below |
| **Sarcasm study** | Kruger and colleagues, 2005 | Senders confident, recipients near chance |
| **Sentence length** | Average about 15 to 20 words, varied | Cutting pass loses 20 to 30% |
| **Patient materials** | Grade 6 to 8, a rule of thumb | Not a validated threshold |
| **Measure and leading** | 45 to 75 characters; 1.15 to 1.5 | About 66 characters as a target |
| **Type** | 11 or 12 pt print; about 16 px screen | 3 or 4 sizes, 2 typefaces at most |
| **WCAG contrast** | 4.5 : 1 text; 3 : 1 large | Enhanced 7 : 1 and 4.5 : 1 |

## Lists to know

| List | Items |
|---|---|
| **Placeholder verbs** | occur, exist, take place, make, conduct, perform, provide, facilitate |
| **Nominalization suffixes** | -tion, -ment, -ance, -ence, -ity, -ure, -al |
| **Do-not-use abbreviations** | U, IU, QD, QOD, trailing zeros, abbreviated morphine and magnesium sulfate |
| **Refusal moves** | Acknowledge, decide, explain, offer, leave the door open |
| **Five passes** | Purpose, actors, cut, words, tone (then verify) |
| **Design principles** | Proximity, alignment, contrast, repetition |
| **Accessibility habits** | Real headings, alt text, meaningful link text, real table headers |
| **Readability formulas** | Flesch Reading Ease, Flesch-Kincaid, SMOG, Gunning Fog |

## Rules that are not formulas

| Topic | The rule |
|---|---|
| **Sentence engine** | Actor in the subject slot, action in the verb slot. |
| **Passive** | Fine when the actor is unknown or irrelevant; fix when the actor is the point. |
| **Jargon test** | Replace it if you can without losing precision; otherwise define once. |
| **Tone** | One notch warmer; no irony; say no with the word no. |
| **Form fit** | Prose reasons, numbers sequence, bullets sets, tables compare. |
| **Headings** | Informative, parallel, no skipped level, no lone child. |
| **Emphasis** | One or two items a page; bold the risk; never color alone. |
| **Scores** | A smoke alarm, not a thermostat; test with a real reader. |

Dr. Garg Learning · CC BY-SA 4.0