

What is plain language?

Plain language is a style of writing or speaking that makes it easy to:

- **find** the information you're looking for,
- **understand** what you find, and
- **use** the information you've understood.

Plain language is critical in humanitarian work

- People need to **find, understand and use information** easily and quickly in a crisis.
- People need to **understand their rights** - especially their rights around the assistance they get.
- Humanitarian workers and the people they assist often communicate in languages which are **not their first language**. Plain language makes it easier to communicate and to avoid misunderstandings.
- It is very important to keep communication **simple and understandable**. It is less important that communications are perfectly written or spoken.
- Easy and clear communication helps international humanitarian organizations to **coordinate with local responders**. Plain language also helps organizations communicate with donors, partners, the media, and the public.

Tips for using plain language

Is your message clear?

- Put the most important information first. Keep sentences short (less than 20 words in English). Leave out information that is not critical to your main message.
- Use headings, bullet points, tables and boxes to organize the information.
- Use the active voice: "the team handed out blankets" instead of "blankets were handed out."

Are you using words that your reader or listener can easily understand?

- Use common, everyday words. Reduce the number of words that are complex or require knowledge of a specific subject or sector. Be careful not to use "devspeak" - the language of humanitarian and development workers that others do not easily understand.
- Avoid noun strings, which are nouns made up of many words. For example, instead of the noun string "critical life-saving medical services," explain what it is: "medical services that save lives."
- Avoid abbreviations or official names of laws that people may not know. If you have to use them, explain what they mean.
- If writing, use software such as [Microsoft Word](#) readability tests to see how easy it is to read your text.

Are you directly addressing your audience?

- Use "you," "us" and "we" often to help connect to the reader or listener and get their attention.
- Ask questions that show the reader or listener why the information is relevant for them, like: "Do you need emergency medical care?"