

[A Strategic Guide To Technical Communication](#)

# Plain or Low Style

Roger Graves

Professor, English and Film Studies/Writing Studies

Associate Director, Centre for Teaching and Learning

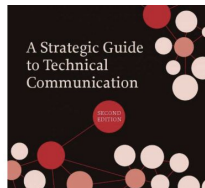
Director, Writing Across the Curriculum

University of Alberta

# Style: technical and cultural considerations

## Technical analysis:

- Word counts
- Sentence lengths
- Vocabulary choices
- Linguistic structures



## Cultural analysis:

- Low culture: swearing, counter-culture, resistance
- Middle class: proper, standard language usage
- High brow: sophisticated, esoteric, mannered, dominant

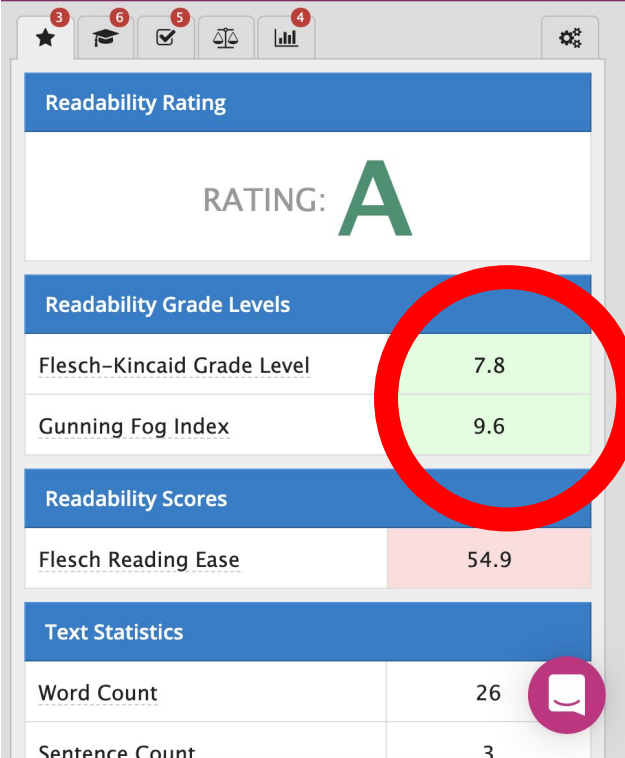


Welcome to Thug Kitchen, bitches. We're here to help. We started our website to inspire motherfuckers to eat some goddam vegetables and adopt a healthier lifestyle.

- 25 words; 3 sentences
- Readable by a wide range of audiences
- Culturally, high brow masquerading as low brow perhaps



Welcome to Thug Kitchen, bitches.  
We're here to help. We started our  
website to inspire motherfuckers to eat  
some goddam vegetables and adopt a  
healthier lifestyle. (25 words; 3  
sentences)



The screenshot shows the Readable app interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with icons for favorites (3), education (6), checklist (5), legal (1), and analytics (4). The main content area is divided into sections: 'Readability Rating' showing a large green 'A' rating; 'Readability Grade Levels' with a table showing Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (7.8) and Gunning Fog Index (9.6); 'Readability Scores' with a table showing Flesch Reading Ease (54.9); and 'Text Statistics' with a table showing Word Count (26) and Sentence Count (3). A red circle highlights the 'Readability Grade Levels' section. A purple chat bubble icon is visible in the bottom right corner.

Readability Rating	
RATING: A	

Readability Grade Levels	
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	7.8
Gunning Fog Index	9.6

Readability Scores	
Flesch Reading Ease	54.9

Text Statistics	
Word Count	26
Sentence Count	3

<https://app.readable.com/text/?demo>

# A more academic example

In this paper, **we contribute** to the thought and dialogue needed to create change in the value system of engineering by exploring an ethical framework that has received little attention in the engineering-related literature to date.

*36 words, 1 sentence ≠ plain language*

*Subject + verb at start of simple sentence = plain language*

*Vocabulary ≠ plain language (polysyllabic, abstract)*

FAVES	GRADE	ISSUES	REACH	WORDS
☆	E	1	25%	37
Readability Grade Levels				
☹	Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level		19.9	★
☹	Gunning Fog Index		25.6	★
Readability Scores				
☹	Flesch Reading Ease		18.4	★

Campbell, R. C., & Wilson, D. (2017). Engineers' Responsibilities for Global Electronic Waste: Exploring Engineering Student Writing Through a Care Ethics Lens. *Science and engineering ethics*, 23(2), 591–622. doi:10.1007/s11948-016-9781-2

Each of these phases then map to an ethical element:

Attentiveness, Responsibility, Competence, and Responsiveness, respectively. (16 words)

A fifth meta-level element, Integrity, then integrates the four elements into a cohesive whole. (14 words)

Tronto's framework for care ethics can be described as an interconnected and sometimes overlapping sequence of these five elements, as approximated by [Fig. 1](#). (24 words)

- ✓ Short sentences
- ✓ Simple sentence structures
- ✓ Use of list (first sentence)

FAVES	GRADE	ISSUES	REACH	WORDS
☆	D	12	62%	54
Readability Grade Levels				
☹	Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level		13.1	★
☹	Gunning Fog Index		12.8	★
Readability Scores				
☹	Flesch Reading Ease		25.5	★

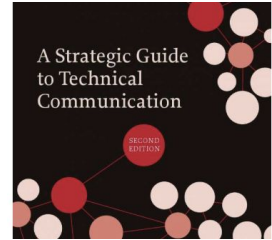
# Readability factors

Readability studies of printed materials about cancer have shown them to be written at a Grade 10 level or higher, which leads to the following problems for seniors:

- information overload
- unclear messages
- difficult vocabulary
- incomprehensible technical language
- uninviting tones
- content that does not specifically target their cohort
- little organization

Friedman, D. B., & Hoffman-Goetz, L. (2003). Cancer coverage in North American publications targeting seniors. *Journal of Cancer Education*, 18(1), 43-47.

# What is plain language?

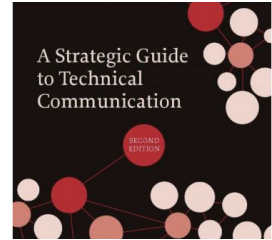


- A worldwide effort to improve the clarity and accessibility of how legal contracts, government documents, and other important information is written
- Write short sentences, using specific, uncomplicated terms that most readers can understand
- A good basis for writing to both academic and non-academic audiences



# Plain language guidelines

- Plain language involves an ethical relationship between reader and writer
- Writers want to communicate clearly with readers
- Take your readers' point of view
- Organize ideas around what your reader needs to know



# Know your readers

- What level of knowledge do they have?
- What is their cultural background?
- What is their income level?
- What do they want to know?
- What information will they use most frequently?
- What questions are they asking about the topic you are writing about?

**THE CONVERSATION**

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

<https://theconversation.com/ca>

# Ways to organize information

## 1.3. Care-Ethical Responsibility

In Tronto's view of care ethics, Responsibility is a "central moral category" ([1993](#), p. 131). When a need is identified, one must decide if one feels responsible for it and if so, how to respond (p. 106). Responsibility in care ethics differs from other, more traditional notions of responsibility in five major ways.

First, it is not universal, but dependent on context: the best ethical response is a function of the situation and actors involved. Responsibility in care ethics considers both what should be done and what those involved are capable of doing. For example, in engineering, one might wish to claim universally that

# Word-level plain language

- Use words that are accurate, appropriate, and familiar.
- Use technical jargon sparingly; do not use business jargon at all.
- Use active verbs most of the time.
- Use strong verbs (not nouns) to carry the weight of your sentences.

Furthermore, adopting a care ethics perspective also helps spotlight stakeholders who might otherwise be missed. A conventional ethical perspective might focus on causal responsibility, looking across the lifecycle from the design engineers and the companies for whom they work, to the consumers and eventual disposers of a designed artifact or system. These are stakeholders who actively influence a given situation. In addition to these stakeholders, responsibility in care ethics reminds us to consider stakeholders who are affected by the situation and to even prioritize the needs of disadvantaged (e.g., vulnerable, powerless, or underprivileged) stakeholders. These affected stakeholders could also have a role to play in addressing or preventing problems.

# Sentence-level plain language

- Be concise
- Vary sentence length and sentence structure
- Use parallel structure (especially in lists)
- Put your readers in your sentences
- Begin most paragraphs with topic sentences
- Use transitions to link ideas

# Keep sentences short

- Working memory can only process about 25 words in a chunk.
- Use 25 words as your limit for sentences.
- Aim for 15 to 22 words (or 2 ½ to 3 lines of type in a document).
- Keep paragraphs short.
  - What is short? 6 to 8 lines of text.

We're not starting from scratch. Qualitative research studies, performed by our team and others, provide information about what people care about when it comes to health data. For example, it's important that privacy is protected, that there is a public benefit and that the findings from health data research don't disadvantage any groups. (5/22/26)

"Plain language about health data is essential for transparency and trust"

<http://theconversation.com/plain-language-about-health-data-is-essential-for-transparency-and-trust-123319>

# What's wrong with long?

- Readers miss important points due to overextending memory
- They may not reread long sentences
- They may stop reading your document altogether.

# Plain style: Methods section

**This work explores** samples of student writing on the topic of electronic waste recycling in industrializing countries. **These samples were written** in 2011 by undergraduate students at a large public research institution<sup>3</sup> in the western United States. **Students** from a variety of engineering majors in a large, entry-level electrical engineering course **were provided with** an article on the health and environmental impacts of waste electronics in China and India. **They were also given** three questions pertaining to the article and asked to write a short (one to two page) essay as guided by the provided questions (see below). **The assignment was optional** and students were incentivized with extra credit to be applied to their course grades. **The students had** 1 week to complete the assignment.

(17/20/32/29/18/9)

simple/simple/simple/simple/compound/simple

FAVES	GRADE	ISSUES	REACH	WORDS
☆	D	12	62%	124
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☹	Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level		13.1	★
☹	Gunning Fog Index		15.4	★
Readability Scores				
☹	Flesch Reading Ease		37.8	★

Campbell, R. C., & Wilson, D. (2017). Engineers' Responsibilities for Global Electronic Waste: Exploring Engineering Student Writing Through a Care Ethics Lens. *Science and engineering ethics*, 23(2), 591–622. doi:10.1007/s11948-016-9781-2



# What's wrong with long?

## Exceptions?

When an idea makes more sense in one long sentence than in several short sentences, use a longer sentence.

In our publication [“Notches on the dial: a call to action to develop plain language communication with the public about users and uses of health data”](#) in the *International Journal of Population Data Science*, we present a plan to work with the public on simple communications about health data. (49 words)

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<http://theconversation.com/plain-language-about-health-data-is-essential-for-transparency-and-trust-123319>

# How do I shorten sentences?

- Include only one or two ideas in a sentence.
- Explain qualifiers or modifiers to an idea in separate sentences.
- Explain any conditions attached to the main idea in separate sentences.
- Avoid using “and” to connect ideas that can be rewritten in separate sentences

In a recent article we present a plan to work with the public on simple communications about health data.<sup>1</sup> (19 words)

"Plain language about health data is essential for transparency and trust"

<http://theconversation.com/plain-language-about-health-data-is-essential-for-transparency-and-trust-123319>

# How to shorten sentences

- Don't sacrifice clarity to keep a sentence short.
- Don't shorten sentences by leaving transitions out.
- Do link related ideas by using *that*, *which*, or *who*.

For example, it's important **that** privacy is protected, **that** there is a public benefit and **that** the findings from health data research don't disadvantage any groups.

# Use simple sentence structures

- Simple sentence structures ensure that your writing is direct, positive, and active
- Use simple, declarative sentences (subject + verb + object)
- Example

“Your refund arrived today.”

We want to work with the public to create some standardized text that helps people understand what is happening with their health data.

"Plain language about health data is essential for transparency and trust"  
<http://theconversation.com/plain-language-about-health-data-is-essential-for-transparency-and-trust-123319>

# Three strategies

1. Connect modifiers to the words they modify:

**Not** “Please let me know whether you can meet the newest deadline as soon as possible.”

**Instead** “Please let me know as soon as possible whether you can meet the newest deadline.”

## Strategy #2

If the paragraph exceeds 6 to 8 lines of text, change the format or use bullets to list information.

**Not** “The manual is divided into three section that are tailored to the background knowledge of various users such as the first time user who doesn’t know how to turn the program on to the novice user who is ready to learn more advanced functions to the expert user who want to adapt the source code of the program.”

**Instead** “The manual is divided into three sections tailored to the user’s background knowledge:

- First-time users who can’t turn on the program
- Novice users ready to learn more advanced functions
- Expert users who want to adapt the source code of the program.”

# Strategy #3

If you use bullet points, use parallel structure for parallel ideas

**Not** “To access the font formatting instructions follow these steps: 1) click on the help icon on the main toolbar, 2) next you need to scroll through the options until you find formatting, 3) next users would want to click on the “font” choice.”

**Instead** “To access the font formatting instructions follow these steps:

- a. Click on the help icon on the main toolbar
- b. Find the formatting option
- c. Click on the “font” choice”

# Caveat

Because lists take up more space on a page, academic research articles traditionally avoided them. For listing research questions or items they are still used:

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The following are the questions to which the students were asked to respond in their essays:

1. What part of Waste Electronics Recycling in the figure concerns you most? Why?
2. From the part of the Waste Electronics Recycling process you chose in Question 1, what is the impact on humans? On ecosystems? (address air, water, or food quality as needed/desired).
3. What do you think modern engineers producing these electronic technologies should do as an “ethical” response to the waste electronics recycling dilemma? Comment specifically on how far in scope engineers should go to limit this impact.



# When to be plain

- When clarity is of paramount importance
- When writing to non-academic audiences
- In Methods sections
- In Results sections
- When describing processes and procedures