



Plain Language
Association
International

E-journal contributor guide

This guide is for contributors and editors of PLAIN's e-journal.

- If you would like to contribute to the journal, please read the guide to see what is involved.
- If you have already agreed to contribute, this guide is a useful reference on how to prepare your content.

1. Purpose & audience

The e-journal promotes best practices, cases studies, and discussion about plain language with PLAIN members around the world.

2. Style & length

Articles are generally around 800-1,000 words rather than extended or academic pieces. All content should follow our guidelines for structure, headings, design, expression and style.

3. Submitting your work

We will call for contributions around 5-6 months before publication, with articles due 3 months before we publish. We also need a short biography and picture of you. There is a standard MS Word template you can use to submit your work in.

4. How we edit

We edit all contributions in a 3-step process, with a substantive edit, copy edit, and proofread.

5. Distribution & copyright

We publish our e-journal in our member portal. Authors retain copyright for their text. As a member-only benefit, there are restrictions on where and how content can be distributed.

6. Style guide

We will regularly update our style guide to promote consistent formatting, language, punctuation, numbers and usage. We will copy edit each article in line with this guide.

Follow the links or keep reading for details.

1. Purpose & audience

Purpose

The journal keeps our members up to date with international developments in plain language. We do this by sharing best practices, cases studies, reflections and discussions about plain language.

Examples of article topics that we welcome include:

- discussion about changes in plain language
- case studies of particular projects
- updates in developments in particular countries
- interviews with plain language leaders
- book reviews.

This list is not definite. If you feel inspired to write about something that is not mentioned above, feel free to propose your idea.

Audience

The audience comprises PLAIN members around the world. We have a growing membership in more than 35 countries.

PLAIN's journal is published digitally. This means contributors should write for reading on the screen rather than on the page.

All articles will be reviewed and published in English. However, we welcome parallel translations and can publish these alongside the English version.

2. Style & length

Article length

Articles should be around 800 to 1,000 words, rather than longer academic pieces.

We may be flexible with some feature pieces. In this case the maximum length will be 1,200 to 1,500 words. Be sure to discuss this with the editor when you propose your topic.

Structure

Articles should be organized into sections that are clearly signposted with headings.

The article should begin with an introduction paragraph that:

- summarizes its contents
- indicates the structure that is to follow.

Headings

There should only be one level of headings to help break up the text. Each section should have around 150 words and a maximum of 200 words under a heading. Keep most of these sections of roughly the same size.

Use sentence case for all headings, where only the first letter and proper nouns are capitalised.

Also use the same heading genres throughout, such as topic heading, question heading or analytical heading:

Topic heading	The new plain language network
Question heading	What is the new network?
Statement heading	How the network will operate

Do not mix genres by using a question heading then switching to a statement or topic heading.

Paragraphs

As part of our onscreen style, we want to keep paragraphs short, generally with one to 3 sentences per paragraph. One-sentence paragraphs are fine.

Most paragraphs will therefore be between 15 and 50 words, with a maximum length of around 60 words.

Lists, tables and graphics

We also encourage the use of lists to break up the text and add passive space within the screen page. These can be run-on sentences or stand-alone sentence lists, but generally there should only be 3 to 6 items on each list.

Where useful, format content using a simple table. Also consider where graphic elements such as diagrams or images will reinforce the text.

Expression

All contributions should use plain language expression, such as:

- a conversational style
- use of pronouns and contractions
- active voice in preference to the passive voice
- average sentence length of 15 words, and individual sentences up to 25–30 words
- everyday words unless technical words are essential
- explanation of technical terms where they are used
- no redundancy.

Style guide

See the [full style guide](#) at the end of this guide. We will copy edit contributions against this guide but would appreciate all contributions following its conventions.

3. Submitting your work

Deadline

Once your proposal is accepted, we will give you the deadline. It is generally 3 months before the publication date.

If you expect a delay in sending us your final work, send a message to publications@plainlanguagenetwork.org as soon as possible.

Before you send us your article

We only accept text in MS Word documents. We supply a standard template with built-in styles that you can use to write or format your content. Using this will help to streamline the editing process and minimize formatting corrections.

Take a look at our style guide at the end of this guide, especially the section about how to include [references](#).

Also make sure:

- all hyperlinks you have included are active and accurate
- all graphics you have included are a good quality.

Translations

If you would like to include a translation alongside your English version, be sure that it has been proofread. In most cases, the publications team will not be able to proofread the non-English version.

During our [editing process](#), we will keep in mind that any significant changes will need to be made in the non-English version as well. We will do our best to work with you (or your translator) to make this a manageable process.

When you're ready to submit your article

Include in your document:

- your full name, title, and institution/company name
- a biography of 100 words at maximum
- your translator's credit (if relevant) including name, company, biography.

Also attach to your email:

- a photo of yourself that focuses on your head and shoulders. A background that is a single plain light color works best.

4. How we edit

Once we receive your contribution, we will ensure that you have included everything that we need to start our review.

Three rounds of review

Then there are generally 3 rounds of editing.

1. Substantive edit

The first round of editing will review the overall structure and plain language expression. During this stage, we may get in touch with you if we think:

- something is unclear
- links/references are missing or broken
- significant changes need to be made (such as rewriting or reducing text).

If we do not contact you at this stage, it means that there are no major changes that need your attention.

Please let us know if you definitely want to see the revised text before publication, even if the changes are small. This is the stage where we can do so.

2. Copy edit

The second round of editing will copy edit for grammar, spelling, formatting, and style. We usually will not check these edits with you, unless we feel it might change meaning or we need to confirm information.

3. Proofread

The final round of editing is proofreading in the final layout. We will not check anything with you at this point.

5. Distribution & copyright

The journal is shared in a digital format.

Because the journal is a membership benefit, we ask you to follow some guidelines for sharing and promoting it. This will allow us to protect the value of our membership and continue to produce this resource for all members.

Please do:

- Share a link to our website where we promote the journal.
- Encourage others to join PLAIN so that they can also read the journal.
- Share a **printed copy only** with your colleagues who might be interested.

Please do not:

- Circulate digital copies.
- Post images of articles that are not written by you.

Copyright

All authors retain the copyright to their own text.

If you would like a PDF file of your article with the cover and index to include in your profile, please [send us a message](#).

6. Style guide

This is the style guide we use to copy edit all contributions. Please reference these guidelines while writing and reviewing your work.

General

Style guide	We mostly follow American style, so for areas not covered in this guide, refer to The Chicago Manual of Style .
Dictionary	Use Webster's Dictionary as standard reference. Use American spelling, such as organization, not organisation color, not colour. For languages other than English, please use the appropriate national dictionary.

Formatting

Bold	Use bold to highlight a word or phrase, not italics or underlining. Do not highlight entire sentences or paragraphs. Make sure the punctuation after a bold word isn't set as bold.
Hyperlinks	When designating a link or reference, select 2–3 keywords or a phrase, preferably at the end of a sentence. Then embed the hyperlink to those words. Avoid putting hyperlinks in the first line of the article.
Italics	Use italics for full publication titles. <i>Oxford Guide to Plain English</i> <i>Writing at Work</i>
References	Please embed hyperlinks in appropriate places in your text. Like this: Case studies have shown the benefits of clear language, with many captured in Kimble's Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please . If some sources do not have a corresponding electronic link, list them under the heading Sources at the end of your article, using the Author–Date system. For example: Many case studies have shown the benefits of clear language (Kimble, 2014).

Then at the end of the article:

Sources

Kimble, Joe (2014) Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please, Carolina Academic Press.

Spaces after a period	Use only one space before the start of the next sentence.
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Titles, subheadings	Write out in sentence style – capitalize first word in title (or first word following colon for subtitle) and any proper nouns.
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Plain language in Germany: A complex matter

Language

Abbreviations	Use periods after salutations. Mr. Dr.
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Acronyms and initialisms	The first time they appear, write out in full and put the abbreviation in brackets afterwards. Annual General Meeting (AGM). But there may be no need to spell out if an abbreviation is well understood by readers. NATO When giving an abbreviation for a non-English title (e.g. an organization) in a translated text, use the non-English title's initials, unless the English version's abbreviation is widely known. Colombian Department of Planning (DNP)
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Capitals	Use title case for the full titles of institutions, positions and publications: Center for Plain Language Managing Director <i>Oxford Guide to Plain English</i> Don't use capitals for generic references or short titles: the government our network the center
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Numbers

Dates	Write dates in month-day-year style with comma: July 1, 2016 not 1 July 2016 For years and spans, use: 1969, 1960s, 1959–60 (with en dash) 60s (age) but sixties (decade)
Numerals	Use numerals for numbers even in body text, with the exception of “one” rather than “1”: We conducted 3 surveys. There was one major issue. Spell out numbers at the start of sentences: Twenty people tested the document. Forty-two years later, ...
Ordinal numbers	Use “first” and “second” not “1 st ”, “2 nd ”
Percentages	Use % symbol with numerals rather than spell out “per cent”. More than 68% of users ... Reader satisfaction improved by 40% But when spelling out words at the start of a sentence, use “per cent” as 2 words: Sixty-eight per cent of users... Forty per cent were more satisfied.
Time	Use the 24-hour clock. 14:15 not 2:15 pm.

Punctuation

Apostrophes	Use double ‘s’ on singular names: James’s book
Commas	Place after most introductory items. In 2019, we published PLAIN’s first journal. In serial lists, use the Oxford comma Consider headings, lists, and tables. Use between independent clauses separated with conjunctions.

The department did not expect any problems, but readers were highly critical of the text.

Use around non-restrictive elements.

The readers we surveyed, which included each user group, preferred the plain language alternative.

Dashes	Use spaced en dashes for sentence punctuation, with a space before and after. Plain language shortened the text – by more than 30%. Do not use the em dash.
Hyphens	Hyphenate compound adjectives, but don't hyphenate “plain language” as this is not likely to be misunderstood. plain language writing not plain-language writing
Quotations	Use double rather than single quotation marks, but single marks for quotes within quotes.

Lists

Run-on sentence lists	In run-on lists: • start each item in lowercase • don't use punctuation at the end of each item • place a full stop at the end of the list.
Stand-alone lists	Stand-alone sentence lists have 2 key features: • Each item is a complete sentence. • Each sentence starts with a capital and ends in a period.

Usage

Countries	United States not USA or America United Kingdom not UK
Electronic communication	Use website not Web site or Website Use email not E-mail or e-mail
Plain language	Do not capitalize “plain language” in general usage.
PLAIN	Write out PLAIN's full name on first instance as: Plain Language Association International (PLAIN)