Good Communication in health and social care: tools and examples

Communicating in plain language is vital to providing high-quality, safe, person-centred care in health and social care services. Using plain language helps health and social care staff to communicate in a way that ensures everyone has the information they need to make informed decisions about their health and social care.

Here are some tools to help health and social care staff use plain language when designing letters, forms, leaflets, and posters. You can also use the checklist below to review your written communication to see if it uses plain language and is easy to follow. Before you begin, you can download our self-assessment checklist to check how ready you are for using plain language.

For more tips, download our national guidance on good communication in health and social care or read it online.

Tool 1: Plain language checklist for documents

This checklist offers a quick way for you to review a letter, leaflet, booklet or short report to see if it uses plain language and is easy to follow. Not all questions will apply to every document, but try to answer 'yes' as much as possible to the questions that do apply.

	Yes	No
Written text		
1. Does the document use 'you' and 'we', where possible?	☐	☐
2. Does it use the active voice most of the time?	☐	☐
(For example, 'We will send you test results' not 'The results will be sent to you.')		
3. Does it keep technical terms and abbreviations to a minimum?	☐	☐
4. Does it define any necessary terms and abbreviations clearly?	☐	☐

5.   Does it avoid 'corporate jargon'?   ☐   ☐

6.   Does it avoid Latin and French phrases and Latin abbreviations?   ☐   ☐

7.   Does it use the same term for the same concept throughout?   ☐   ☐

8.   Does it have an average of 15 to 20 words in each sentence?   ☐   ☐

9.   Does it use correct punctuation?   ☐   ☐

Structure

1.   Does it use informative headings or questions to break up text?   ☐   ☐

2.   Does it include a natural flow from one point to the next?   ☐   ☐

3.   Are paragraphs relatively short?   ☐   ☐

4.   Does it use bullet point lists for detailed or complicated information?   ☐   ☐

Page design

1.   Is the font size at least 12 point or ideally 14 point?   ☐   ☐

2.   Is the font type clear?   ☐   ☐

3.   Is text aligned to the left?   ☐   ☐

4.   Is text 1.5 spaced?   ☐   ☐

5.   Does it avoid underlining, use of italics and capital letters?   ☐   ☐

6.   Are images, charts or blocks of colour, if any, clear and relevant to the text?   ☐   ☐

7.   Does the text contrast effectively with the background?   ☐   ☐

8.   Is splitting words between two lines avoided?   ☐   ☐

9.   Is the layout consistent and logical?   ☐   ☐

10.   Does the paper have a matt finish?   ☐   ☐

1.   Does the form have a clear title?   ☐   ☐

2.   Does it include clear instructions at the start?   ☐   ☐

3.   Are 'official use only' sections, if any, near the end of the form?   ☐   ☐

4.   Does it ask questions in a logical order?   ☐   ☐

5.   Does it avoid unnecessary or repeated questions?   ☐   ☐

6.   Does it group similar questions together under useful headings?   ☐   ☐

7.   Does it keep numbering as simple as possible?   ☐   ☐

8.   If necessary, is there adequate space to write in?   ☐   ☐

9.   Is it clear where to give answers?   ☐   ☐

10.   Is there enough space for answers?   ☐   ☐

11.   Does the form use tick-the-box questions where possible?   ☐   ☐

12.   If using tick boxes or tables, is the border solid and bold?   ☐   ☐

Remember to check the accessibility of documents as you work.

Tool 2: Tips for writing forms

- Give the form a clear title.
- Say who the form is for at the start and state its purpose.
- Give instructions in bullet points on the first page, particularly if the form is for a range of people and some sections do not apply to everyone.
- Divide the form into clear and logical sections, each with an informative heading and a clear number.
- Use a larger font for the name of any section headings. Keep a clear space between the end of one section and the heading of the next section.

- Align questions and answers. In other words, have questions directly across from or directly above the space for giving answers. This pattern will help the respondent move through the form more quickly. There is an example below.

Do you have any other feedback?

- Make sure people have enough space for answers and can, if they have low vision, complete the form using a thick marker.
- If possible, use boxes rather than simple lines for answers. It's often a good idea to use a 'reversed out' white box on a lightly shaded background (see below).

Name	
Address	

- Use as many tick-the-box answers to questions as possible. For those with low vision, make sure tick boxes are large enough to see and tick.
- Make sure tick boxes are clearly linked to the answer.
- Make sure tick box borders and answer lines are solid and at least 1 point width.

Forms that can be scanned are becoming more common – these typically only allow one letter per square. While they are not ideal from a plain language point of view, using large enough boxes and adequate space between them can help to keep problems to a minimum. The Communications Toolkit for Services to the Public also has tips on written and online forms.

Tool 3: Plain language: before and after example

Before

5 June 2025

Joe Bloggs,
Main Street,
Any Town,
Any County.

<u>CONTRACT OF CARE FOR ROSE NURSING HOME</u>

Dear Mr Bloggs,
Please find enclosed your contract of care with Rose Nursing Home. I would be grateful if you could sign the appropriate sections of the contract and provide us with your GP's referral letter and relevant identification. I would be grateful if you would return the completed contract and accompanying document to us by **23rd June 2025 and unless your signed contract is received before this date it will be deemed to be invalid.**

Yours sincerely,

_____
M. O Connor
Rose Nursing Home

After

5 June 2025

Joe Bloggs

Main Street

Any Town

Any County

Contract of Care

Dear Mr Bloggs,

I am writing to you about your contract of care for Rose Nursing Home.

To finalise your contract of care, we would be grateful if you could:

- sign the enclosed contract in the highlighted sections
- provide us with a letter from your GP, and
- provide us with your identification (copy of passport or driver's licence).

For your contract to be valid you must:

1. Sign it.
2. Send it back to us **before Monday 23 June 2025** along with a letter from your GP and photocopy of your identification.

When we get a valid contract, we can then process it.

If you have any questions about this letter, please phone me on 0XX XXX XXX or email me at moc@xxxx.ie.

Yours sincerely,

M. O'Connor, Rose Nursing Home

Tool 4: Good practice examples

Here are some good examples of using plain language and clear layouts in leaflets and posters. The best way to create a resource is to follow plain language guidelines and to consult with the people who will use it. Make sure to use accessible design and to make information available in different formats.

Leaflets

Example 1: [Practical tips for living well with dementia](#) (Alzheimer Society of Ireland)

Key features:

- Developed with and for people with dementia
- Uses plain language guidelines from NALA
- Information is easy to find: tips are structured in a user-friendly way
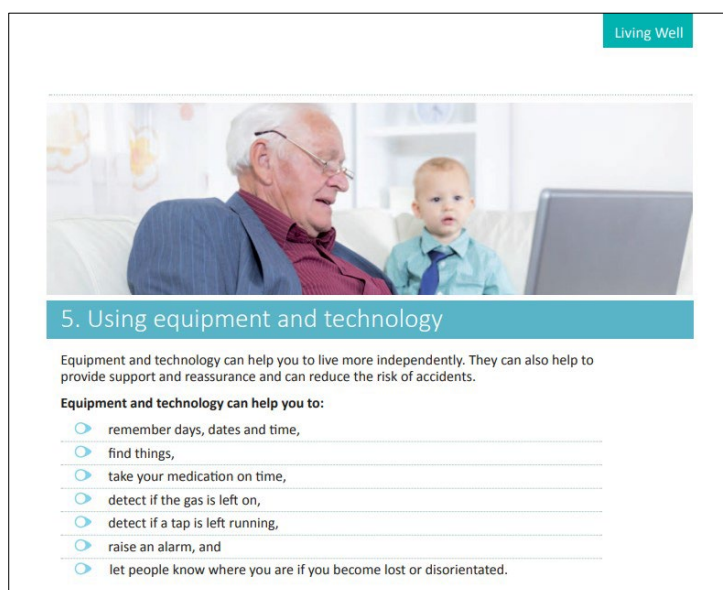
Example 2: [Your Service, Your Say](#) (HSE)

Key features:

- Colourful visuals tailored to children and young people
- Clear messaging and call to action
- Available in multiple languages using a QR code

Poster

Example: [Plain Language – Medical Terms](#) (HSE)

Key features:

- Clear, uncluttered design with good colour contrast
- Simple message with a call to action
- Follows plain language guidelines

**Medical words or terms
can be difficult.**
If you don't understand them,
please ask me to explain.

hse.ie/plainlanguage

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