Plain Language Tips for ATE Evaluators

Writing Clear and Understandable Evaluation Reports

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Clear, accessible writing ensures that evaluation findings reach, and can be used by, the people they are meant to serve. These tips are for ATE evaluators or anyone communicating data-rich information when developing evaluation products, such as reports, summaries, data displays, and presentations. Plain language respects readers' time and expertise and broadens the range of readers who can understand and act on evaluation findings.

Before You Write

Planning your audience, purpose, and main message helps keep your report focused and relevant.

- ☐ **Name one specific audience.**
  Make it specific. For example, "administrators at my community college". Not "interest holders."
- ☐ **Write one purpose statement.**
  What should readers do, think, or feel afterward?
- ☐ **Write your main message in 1 to 3 sentences.**
  This keeps your thinking focused and reduces unnecessary writing.

Organize to Serve the Audience

Organizing information around readers' needs makes key findings and recommendations easier to find and use.

- ☐ **Place the main message at or near the top.**
  Make it stand out. Bold it, enlarge it, or shade it.
- ☐ **Lead with findings and recommendations.**
  Put methods and background later or in an appendix. The project team and their NSF program officer already know this information.
- ☐ **Order remaining content by importance to the reader.**
  You don't need to organize by the order of your evaluation work.
- ☐ **Keep titles to 8 words or fewer.**
  Subtitles come in handy for long ATE project titles.
- ☐ **Add a heading for every 1 to 3 paragraphs.**
  Keep headings to 8 words or fewer.
- ☐ **Write headings that state the message.**
  For example, "Most Participants Finished the Program," not "Findings."

Paragraphs and Lists

Breaking information into manageable chunks helps readers scan, process, and understand your content.

- ☐ **Cover 1 topic per paragraph.**
  Open with a topic sentence.

- ☐ **Limit paragraphs to 5 sentences.**
  This is about 100 words.

- ☐ **Introduce each list with a lead-in sentence.**
  Give the reader clear context for the list's content and purpose.

- ☐ **Limit lists to 7 bullets.**
  Avoid sub-bullets.

Sentences

Clear, concise sentences make your writing easier to follow and reduce the effort required to understand your message.

- ☐ **Keep sentences to 20 words or fewer.**
  This could be an average rather than a strict rule.

- ☐ **Give each sentence 1 idea.**
  Split long compound sentences.

- ☐ **Write in active voice.**
  Name who acted: "We interviewed 12 faculty," not "Twelve faculty were interviewed."

- ☐ **Keep the subject, verb, and object close together.**
  Avoid long phrases between them. Write "The team revised the survey after the pilot," not "The team, after the pilot ended, revised the survey."

- ☐ **Replace hidden verbs.**
  Write "we analyzed the data," not "we conducted an analysis."

- ☐ **Delete slashes.**
  Write "and" or "or," not "and/or."

Word Choices

Using familiar, consistent language helps readers understand your message without unnecessary confusion or extra effort.

- ☐ **Replace jargon with everyday words.**
  If you must keep a term, define it in plain language at first use.
- ☐ **Choose short words.**
  Write “use,” not “utilize.”
- ☐ **Use one term for one concept throughout.**
  If you write “participants,” don’t switch to “students” or “trainees” later.
- ☐ **Use 5 or fewer acronyms.**
  Spell out each at first use or write “the project” instead.

Example evaluation jargon swaps:
Would your readers use this word in conversation? If not, swap it or define it.

Instead of	Try
Formative evaluation	Evaluation that helps improve the program as it runs
Summative evaluation	Evaluation that judges how well the program worked
Disaggregated data	Results broken out by group
PII (personally identifiable information)	Information that could identify a person, such as name or email
Instrument	Survey or interview guide
Outcomes	Changes for participants
Triangulate	Compare results across sources
Rigor	Careful, well-documented methods
Validity	Whether a survey or test measures what it claims to measure
Reliability	Whether a survey or test gives consistent results over time
Correlation	Two things tend to change together
Statistically significant	Unlikely to be due to chance

Resources

The following resources influenced the content of this resource, and we recommend them for individuals who would like additional information about plain language or clear writing.

Plain Language Guide Series https://bit.ly/plain-language-gov

Adapted from PlainLanguage.gov, these guides are designed to help writers and designers understand why and how to create content that readers can understand.

Guide to Clear Writing https://bit.ly/cdc-clear

Created by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, this comprehensive guide offers practical suggestions for improving writing clarity.

Plain Language Checklist https://bit.ly/plain-language-cdc

Another resource from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, this checklist provides grounded strategies for making materials easier to understand.

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