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# Writing plans everyone understands

A guide for using plain language so the people who use the behaviour support plans can understand them



The  
Right  
Direction

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Working together on positive  
behaviour support (PBS)

## Using plain language to improve engagement in behaviour support planning

Strong communication is not just about *speaking* with people, it also includes strong *written* communication. Plain language helps to foster relationships and connection with your audience (the people you expect – and need – to read your writing).

While the terms ‘plain language’ and ‘plain English’ are often used interchangeably, this document uses the term plain language. It should not be confused with the term ‘Easy English’, which is intended for people who have low reading literacy.

A behaviour support plan written in plain language is intended for people who have at least high-school level reading literacy. Plain language is communication with clear wording, structure and design. It is intended for the people who are the expected readers to easily:

- find what they need
- understand what they find, and
- use that information.

Plain language helps people understand what they need to do without needing technical or professional knowledge. Behaviour support practitioners should aim to use plain language when communicating with

anyone who is not a specialist. Unless someone needs or prefers Easy English to suit their literacy level, you should assume all people who can read English will benefit from plain language.

### Think of your audience...

Writing in plain language takes self-reflection and self-awareness. You will become a better writer and communicator through this process of thinking about your communication carefully.

Consider if your audience will:

- be familiar with behaviour-support jargon?
- have limited time to read plans and reports?
- be stressed from caring for multiple people?
- be possibly experiencing burnout or be overwhelmed due to a crisis situation?
- have English as a second language?
- have access to a computer or a printer if needed?

Most of us would prefer to read plain language documents because they get straight to the point. We are usually time-poor and clear language helps us find key information and make decisions quickly.

You need to be clear about:

- who will be reading your plan,
- what you want them to do,
- what they want or need to know, and
- what you want them to learn.

Remember: the purpose of the plan is to clearly communicate information to an identified audience. Steer clear of complex technical language – it makes you a better communicator and, therefore, a better practitioner.

## Top tips for writing plain-language behaviour support plans

**1. Write for your audience.** Who is going to read the plan that you write? What will they need to know and what language will they understand?

Who will be reading the behaviour support plan that you write? It will most likely be any of the following groups:

- the person with a disability,
- family members,
- disability support staff,
- teachers,
- support coordinators, and/or
- other allied health professionals.

Using an NDIS template can help to ensure compliance with legislation and regulations. But you may need a parallel version for family members and support staff to use; and a further version to share with the person with disability.

**2. Put important information first.** For example, at the top of the page, at start of the paragraph or the start of a sentence. Follow with supporting information.

**3. Use words others will understand.** This includes using familiar, everyday words (they are often shorter words that are commonly used by people in everyday discussion). Be consistent with the words and phrases you use, rather than using more than one term for the same thing. The Right Direction [behaviour support plain language glossary](#) offers some suggestions to help.

Be aware of language that might be only understood by people who are behaviour support specialists. Define words that are specific to the behaviour support profession.

**4. Identify jargon and avoid acronyms** wherever possible – especially if the acronym is only familiar to specialists as shorthand and is not well known or might be confusing. Always spell an acronym out in the first use and consider if it needs to be used at all:

- will the reader understand an instruction relating to ‘PRN’?
- will they know what BSP stands for? It could be ‘behaviour support plan’ or ‘behaviour support practitioner’
- will the person understand PBS as ‘positive behaviour support’ or ‘Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme’ (or something else)?

5. **Use shorter sentences**, around 15-20 words. Bullet points can be easier to read than multi-sentence paragraphs.
6. **Use active sentences**, not passive sentences. Usually, this will also shorten your sentences.

**Table 1: An example of a passive sentence and an active sentence**

<b>Passive sentence</b>	1:1 supervision needs to be provided for John when in the community.  ( <i>Why?</i> John is the object of this sentence)
<b>Active sentence</b>	Provide John with 1:1 supervision in the community.  ( <i>Why?</i> John is the subject of this sentence)

7. **Think about your reader's perspective.** This includes considering using humanising language. For example, consider whether a person with disability will understand, and how they might feel reading 'the PWD' instead of their name in a report about them, their behaviour and their life.

Avoid language that has negative connotations, such as ‘absconding’ or ‘stalking’.

Such language is not only disrespectful, but also shapes:

- how people feel about themselves,
- how they think you feel about them, and
- how others think about them (and subsequently act towards the person).

**8. Keep the plan short.** Consider if everything in the plan is needed. If not, remove it. Some parts might be important as secondary information, but not core to the plan. In this case, it may be better positioned as an appendix or a separate document.

**9. Use simple layout and design.** This helps readers quickly read or scan to find the information they need.

This includes using:

- white space between lines and to break information into sections (eg: 1.5 line spacing),
- consistent font,
- font that is easily readable (eg: Arial),
- font sized for the person (eg: opt for 14pt and avoid anything below 12pt)



- typical upper- and lower-case writing (eg: avoid using only upper case letters to emphasise a point or underlining text for digital text, as this usually means text is hyperlinked),
- bold or colour wisely to get your reader's attention,
- headings that allow scanning and help the reader quickly see what information is on the page or screen, and
- bullet points lists.

**10. Use headings to keep your structure logical.** Structure the information using headings to provide a clear structure, prevent unnecessary repetition and guide the reader through your plan.

**11. Read your plan.**

Try reading the plan aloud. If it sounds difficult or unnatural, it's likely the language includes jargon, difficult words and/or sentences that are too long. This that can usually be revised into plainer language. Re-read it and see if you notice the improved flow.

You should also try reading your plan with someone from your intended audience (the group of people you expect to read the report) to see if it is easily understood. Work together collaboratively to edit the plan.

## Testing your plain language plan

When asking others to read your plan or when using the plan, you can ask:

- who had time to read your plan?
  - were there parts of the plan they found most useful? Ask them to explain.
  - were there parts of the plan they would like you to explain further?
- Remember to create a safe space for readers where they feel they can ask questions and make open and honest comments.

A checklist or feedback form could be another way to get feedback. You could include simple questions, such as:

- was the plan too long?
- did you have enough time to read the plan?
- are you clear on what you need to do?
- were there any words that needed to be defined or better explained?

It can be difficult for people to speak up when they don't understand. You could suggest some alternatives and ask your reader to choose.

While you may not have time to do this for every plan throughout your career, your skills in using plain language will become stronger the more

your practice. This will make your writing faster and the feedback will help you see patterns in your writing that can be easily changed to plain language, which will become a good habit – both when talking about (and writing about) behaviour support.

### **Measuring the effectiveness of your plan**

Have the strategies or tasks in your plan been put into action? If not, your plan might need clarifying.

You have written an accessible plan if your reader can:

- find the information they need easily,
- understand what they read, and
- can act on the information.



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