

Collaborative for Health & Aging | McMaster University

Sharing Information with Older Adults

A Guide for Writing and Presenting in Clear Language

Practical strategies for researchers to improve clarity, accessibility, and engagement

This guide was developed in partnership with older adults, trainees, and researchers at the McMaster Collaborative for Health and Aging. It is designed to help researchers create impactful documents and presentations for older adult audiences and reflects a shared commitment to communication that is clear, inclusive, and respectful.

Communicating clearly takes practice, and the strategies in this guide can be used at every stage of the research and knowledge mobilization process.



What you'll find in this guide

This guide offers practical tips and tools to help you communicate clearly with older adults, including:

- Why clear communication matters
- Six strategies for writing clearly
- Pointers for effective presentations
- Helpful resources to support your work
- Checklists for preparing clear written materials and presentations

Why clear communication matters

An older adult perspective

Health research has the power to improve lives, but only if people can understand and engage with it. Below, Tina, an older adult partner at the McMaster Collaborative for Health and Aging, shares why clarity is more than a communication tactic – it's a responsibility. Her perspective, and others shared throughout this guide, remind us that effective communication is essential to meaningful partnership.

> "As an older adult partner with the Collaborative, I think it is important for researchers to be great scientists as well as people who connect and communicate effectively with others. When your research information is shared and presented clearly, I understand and engage with the content in a more meaningful way. Health research should not just sit in a database. It should benefit all. If you value partnership in research, then you know that people with lived experience are essential. As you review the following guidelines and tips for writing and presenting in clear language, allow me to share a quote by Albert Einstein: "If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough." "

Tina, older adult partner and co-author of *Sharing Information with Older Adults: A Guide for Writing and Presenting in Clear Language*



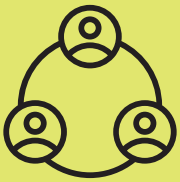
A trainee perspective

We use the word ***trainee*** throughout this guide to refer to anyone who is learning about the research process, including undergraduate students, graduate students, and post-doctoral fellows.

> “As an undergraduate student, my education and training have emphasized technical precision and discipline-specific language, so simplifying complex concepts felt counterintuitive at first. Collaborating with older adults has shown me that clear language is essential for accessibility and engagement. I’ve learned that clear communication doesn’t weaken knowledge but makes it more inclusive and actionable.”
>
> **Narmeen,** trainee

Strategies for clear writing

Our six strategies for clear writing can be explored in any order. Revisit the strategies often throughout the writing process:



Collaborate



Consider your tone



Define key terms



Simplify structure



Format for clarity



Review

Collaborate



Collaboration is at the foundation of meaningful partner-based research. Involving partners throughout the process not only strengthens your communication, it also builds trust and shared ownership.

Use the strategies below for ongoing engagement with partners to help make sure the language you use is clear and understandable:

- Co-write and review your materials with a community partner or someone with lived experience.
- Seek feedback from older adults throughout development to ensure your ideas and concepts are communicated clearly.

> “As an older adult interested in life-long learning, when I am invited to collaborate at the beginning of a research project, I am excited by the opportunity and feel proud of my contributions. I also feel more connected and likely to share and promote the work.”
>
> **Tina**, older adult partner

Consider your tone



A clearly written message can fall flat if the tone doesn't feel respectful, inclusive, or engaging.

Use the strategies below to help ensure that your words reflect how you want people to feel:

- Think about your audience when deciding on the tone of your writing. How do you want your readers to feel when reviewing your work?
- Collaborate with older adults to help strike the important balance between writing clearly and oversimplifying.
- Emphasize collaboration and strengths when framing your research problem. Consider ways to infuse hope and optimism, instead of only focusing on what is lacking.
- Use respectful and person-first language. For example, saying "a person with aphasia" vs. "aphasic", or "a person without a home" vs. "a homeless person". Take the time to learn the preferred identity and language for the population you work with.
- Use a conversational writing tone with personal pronouns to improve engagement and readability.
- Use active voice to shorten sentences and improve clarity. Formal and academic writing sometimes uses passive voice, but it makes reading harder.

Here are some examples:

Active voice	Passive voice
The researchers conducted the study.	The study was conducted by the researchers.
We collected data from 100 participants.	Data were collected from 100 participants.
We analyzed the results using statistical software.	The results were analyzed using statistical software.

> "As researchers, clinicians, and scholars, we must start from a place of humility as we recognize the wealth of knowledge and expertise that older adults bring to the research community."
>
> **Bridget**, trainee

Define key terms



Even familiar words can be interpreted differently across generations or backgrounds. Avoid confusion by defining key terms, limiting acronyms, and using plain language.

The following strategies can help ensure your audience doesn't get lost in translation:

- Avoid jargon and clearly define terms specific to your discipline.
- Define important terms and use them consistently throughout your documents. Some terms that should be defined include, ***participant, research partner, co-design***, and ***people with lived experience***.
- Limit acronyms. If you choose to use acronyms, clearly explain what they stand for. This helps readers stay focused on your ideas rather than getting distracted trying to guess or remember meanings.
- Use plain language that reads at a Grade 8 level or lower to ensure your writing is accessible. Use online tools, like generative artificial intelligence, to check the reading level of your work.
- Use footnotes, or a glossary of terms at the end of your document, for important terms and concepts to increase clarity for readers.

> "When confronted with a jumble of acronyms and jargon, I get confused. I have no idea what they mean, and I feel like quitting the team."
>
> **Kim**, older adult partner

Define key terms



Language and concepts change over time. Older adults might understand terms and concepts in different ways.

Here are a few examples of how ideas and language have evolved in Canada:

- **Family:** Once seen mainly as the "nuclear family," the meaning of family is now broader and includes many different kinds of relationships (for example, blended families, chosen families, and multigenerational households).
- **Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and Intersex (2SLGBTQI+) rights:** There is more awareness and inclusivity of 2SLGBTQI+ people, and our language has evolved to reflect that (for example, adding "2S" to acknowledge Two-Spirit people and using "queer" in affirming ways).
- **Gender identity:** Gender is increasingly understood as fluid rather than binary, and pronoun use is shifting to reflect this (for example, more people now use they/them pronouns).
- **Health and disability:** Inclusive language highlights people first, such as "persons with disabilities" or "people with lived experience of disability," with a focus on accessibility and inclusion (for example, emphasizing barrier-free spaces and equitable participation).

Consider these questions:

- How has the way we talk about these concepts changed?
- What does that mean for how we communicate with older adults?

> "When we share information with older adults, we must clarify the meaning of language, terms, and concepts that have evolved in recent years to encourage a bridge between intergenerational communication and understanding. As we value the need for inclusive language, we must also ensure that we make it accessible for older adults by providing definitions and context, or we risk losing genuine communication and meaning."
>
> **Bridget**, trainee

Simplify structure



When ideas are complex, structure is your best ally. Well-organized writing can help older adult readers stay focused and retain information.

The following strategies will help you create well-structured documents that are easy for readers to navigate:

- Use subheadings to organize content.
- Aim for one broad idea per paragraph.
- Short sentences work best and reduce reading difficulty:
    - Aim for one idea per sentence.
    - Aim for 20 words or less.
- Break up longer sentences into multiple shorter sentences. If you are using a semi colon, break it into two sentences instead.
- Reduce the use of words with more than three syllables. Multisyllabic words increase the reading difficulty. Use online tools to check how many multisyllabic words are in your document.
- Include “key takeaways” or “research highlights” in your document so readers know where to direct their focus.

> “Subheadings help me follow along and stay organized.”
>
> **Mark**, older adult partner

Format for clarity



How something looks is just as important as what it says. Thoughtful formatting can support accessibility and make your message easier to absorb.

The suggestions below will help you format your work to improve usability and reduce visual barriers:

- Use a minimum of 14-point font.
- Use sans-serif fonts, because they are easier to read (i.e., Calibri, Avenir, or Aptos instead of Times New Roman).
- Use white space and bullet points to make documents easier to read. Avoid large blocks of text.
- Use simple charts or visuals to illustrate your point and break up text.
- Make sure charts and graphs are clear. Use labels and legends to explain the visual representations.
- Ensure consistent use of formatting throughout the document, including colours, text font, and text size.
- Always include alt text for images so that everyone can access the content.
- Some people will view your document or presentation on a phone. Design with small screens in mind to increase readability and accessibility.

> “I appreciate it when text is large enough so that I don’t need to fiddle with my bifocals and squint to find the ‘sweet spot’ for reading your document or presentation on my iPad or iPhone screen.”
>
> **Tina**, older adult partner



Review

Clear communication is rarely achieved in a first draft. Through careful review and collaboration, you can refine your message to be more accurate and accessible.

The strategies below support a review process designed to actively engage your intended audiences and ensure your final product is clear and easy to understand:

- Plan for lots of time to review and revise your materials before finalizing them. Ask colleagues, community members, or older adult partners to read your draft and share their feedback.
- Include reviewers with different perspectives to help identify unclear or technical language.
- Ask reviewers to summarize key points in their own words. Revise your document for clarity if their summary doesn't match your intended message.

Check the Helpful Resources section at the end of this document for more tips.

Pointers for effective presentations

Whether writing or presenting, your goal is to help your audience understand. How you deliver your information matters as much as what you say.

These strategies focus on simple design, accessible content, and engaging delivery to help your presentations connect to your audience:

Slide design

- Use a font size of 24 or larger.
- Limit text to half the slide.
- Include one idea per slide.
- Start bullet points with action words.
- Use visuals that reinforce key messages.
- Use high contrast colours between text and background to improve visual accessibility.
- Always include alt text for images, charts, and visuals to support accessibility.

Presentation delivery

- Use a slow, conversational pace when presenting. While there is no perfect speed, aim for 100 to 120 words per minute. Use online tools to check your speed.
- Emphasize key points by changing the volume, pitch, or speed of your speech and voice. These changes can make your presentation more engaging and highlight important information for your audience.
- Reinforce key points through repetition. Remember that while the content is very familiar to you, it may be new for your audience.

> “It’s often said that you don’t truly understand a topic until you can teach it to someone else. As an undergraduate student, this means using plain, straightforward language to ensure clarity and understanding. Communicating in this way not only helps others grasp new information but also deepens my own learning by encouraging me to think critically about how I explain complex ideas.”
>
> **Karina**, trainee

Helpful resources

Here are some helpful resources that expand on the strategies described in this guide:

Resources for checking the reading level of your writing:

- Hemingway Editor
- Flesch-Kincaid Level (built into Microsoft Word)
- ChatGPT
- Simplified Measure of Gobbledygook (SMOG) Readability Formula, Harvard Center for Health Communication

Resources for making documents accessible and inclusive for a broader audience:

- Writing and Storytelling Guidelines, McMaster University
- Accessible Design Principles, Toronto Metropolitan University
- Accessible Word and PowerPoint, Queen's University

Other resources:

- Candian Institutes of Health Research Jargon Buster – helps identify terms that may need to be defined
- Checklist for Plain Language on the Web, U.S. General Services Administration
- Grammarly – grammar, spelling, and tone support
- Plain Language Guide, BC SUPPORT Unit
- Using Plain Language in Participant Materials, University of Waterloo – examples of active vs. passive voice and simplified terminology

Tip: Check out the Clear writing and Presentation checklists on the next page to help guide your preparation for written documents and presentations.

Checklists

Clear writing

My writing is tailored to my audience.	☐
I defined all important terms and acronyms.	☐
My writing is at a Grade 8 reading level or lower.	☐
My writing has a conversational tone and uses active voice.	☐
I used subheadings and paragraphs to organize my writing.	☐
My writing uses sentences under 20 words.	☐
My writing uses consistent (sans-serif) fonts, white space, and visuals.	☐
An older adult reviewed and edited my document.	☐

Presentation

My presentation is designed for my audience.	☐
My presentation slides have large text, white space, and clear visuals.	☐
My presentation avoids the use of jargon and defines all key terms.	☐
I practiced my presentation speaking at a conversational pace (100-120 words per minute).	☐
I practiced making my presentation engaging by varying my pitch, volume, and speed.	☐
I practiced my presentation in front of an audience.	☐

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all members of the McMaster Collaborative for Health and Aging who contributed to the idea, writing, and production of this guide.

Funding is provided by the Ontario SPOR SUPPORT Unit, which is supported by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Province of Ontario and partner Ontario hospital foundations and institutes.

Suggested citation:

Sophia Werden Abrams*, A. Tina Falbo* (*co-leads), Bridget Marsdin, Subhash Dighe, Lance A. Dingman, Michael Kirk, Mark A. McNeil, Kim Nolan, Penelope Petrie, Donna Weldon, Karina Tavernese, Alison Finney, Rebecca Ganann, Brenda Vrkljan, Soo Chan Carusone (2025). *Sharing Information with Older Adults: A Guide for Writing and Presenting in Clear Language.* McMaster Collaborative for Health and Aging.

Stay connected

collabor@mcmaster.ca

collaborative-aging.mcmaster.ca

mcmaster-collaborative-for-health-and-aging

@MacCollabAging

Subscribe to our mailing list