

www.cdc.gov/nceh/ClearWriting  
Become a better writer:



The more there is to read,  
the less your audience  
will want to read it.

Make sure your  
**writing is short.**

**20** Keep sentences to  
**20 words or fewer**

**5** Keep paragraphs to  
**5 sentences or fewer**

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**No one wants to read  
a wall of words.**

Most readers skim documents instead  
of reading every word. Help your  
readers get your main points.

**1** Include a **short, clear main  
message** at the top of your document

**7** Use short paragraphs and bulleted lists.  
Keep lists to **fewer than 7 items**, and  
don't use sub-bullets

**1-3** Use a **relevant and specific  
heading** for every **1-3 paragraphs**

**For example:** "ATSDR Study Looks at Lead Contamination"  
**Instead of:** "Overview"

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Passive voice is wordy,  
but active voice is concise  
and direct. Passive voice  
is formal, but active voice  
sounds more like speech  
(*making it easier to understand*).

**Passive:** "About 500 homes were left without water as a result  
of the chemical spill."

**Active:** "The chemical spill left 500 homes without water."

Use passive voice only when  
the **subject is unknown** or of  
**less importance**

Strengthen your sentences further  
by **keeping the subject and  
verb close together**