

Creating Inclusive Websites with Plain Language

AxeCon 2025



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Balancing

Plain language on websites is more than simplified language.

It's about balancing multiple accessibility, business, and user goals.



Think of a time you had trouble reading something you *had* to read

Why was it hard for you?

How did it feel in your body?

What thoughts went through your head?

Did you try any coping strategies or workarounds?

Did you end up with the information you needed?

What Is Plain Language?

Plain Language

Plain language makes it easier to read, understand, and use your company's communications.

Adapted from PlainLanguage.gov

Effective Communication = Conversation

Plain language matches the needs of the reader with the needs of the writer.

Adapted from KingCounty.gov (original source may be different?)

“Words matter. Accessibility matters.
The two often work hand-in-hand.
(Reducing cognitive load, using words
that are familiar, offering off-screen
text, writing in plain language, etc.)

If your digital products aren’t
prioritizing either one, you’re doing a
huge disservice to your users.”

Source: Angie King on LinkedIn



Angie King

2mo · Edited



Last week I got this belated going away present from my former colleague at U.S. Bank and current friend [Marissa Woodbeck](#). We found a great deal in common as heads of our practice areas at the bank (me: content, her: accessibility) and are now members of a lifelong mutual appreciation fan club.

Words matter. Accessibility matters. The two often work hand-in-hand. (Reducing cognitive load, using words that are familiar, offering off-screen text, writing in plain language, etc.) If your digital products aren't prioritizing either one, you're doing a huge disservice to your users.

Image: A white mug with a blue handle that pictures a typewriter with the text "Words matter" on the bottom.



How This Benefits Accessibility

- People with reading difficulties (everyone, in some context)
- Neurodivergent people
- Screenreader and assistive technology users
- People with eye strain or vision impairments
- People with lower reading levels
- Situational or environmental accessibility
- Non-native English speakers

How This Benefits Accessibility

Remember the principle of universal design:

“Accessibility is about more than compliance with standards. It’s about developing solutions to meet the needs of all users, with and without disabilities.”

Source: <https://universaldesign.ie/about-universal-design>

Plain Language

Writing simply is important. All readers benefit from writing that is focused on information that answers their questions or provides what they need to act or complete a task.

Example: introducing a list of scholarly journals

Before: “ASM Journals’ open-access publications include the following titles:”

After: “Open-Access Journals:”

Avoid Jargon and Metaphors

Write in clear simple language. Say exactly what you mean.
Being understood is more important than sounding clever.

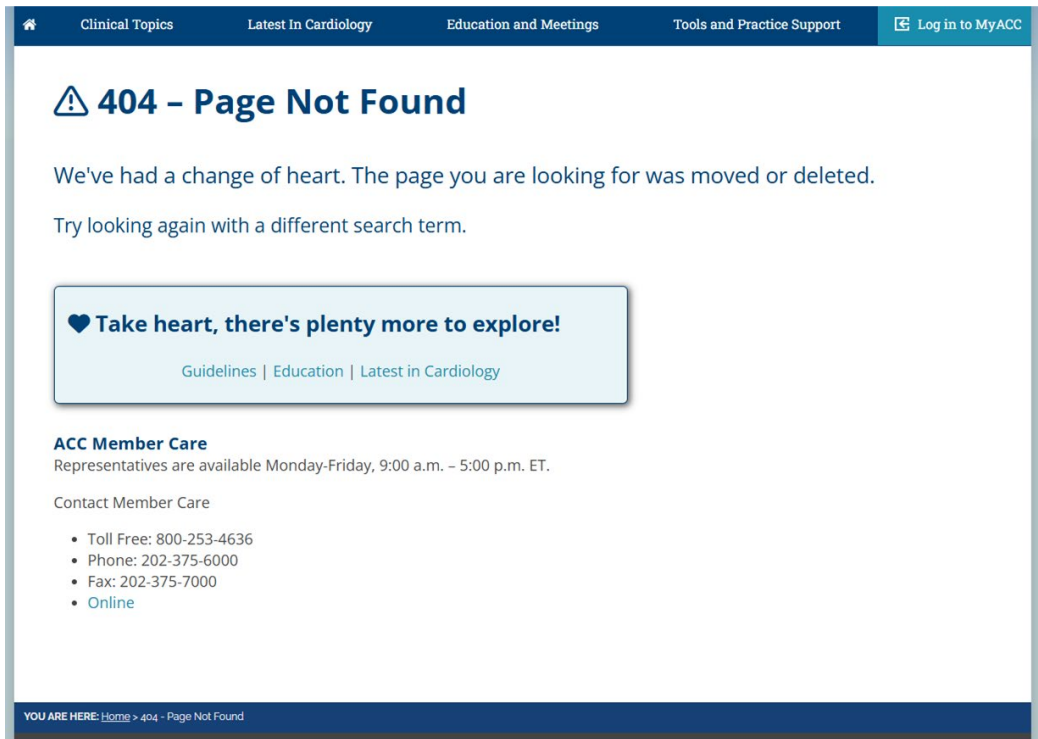
Example

Jargon: NP/PA should be spelled out as Nurse Practitioners / Physician Assistants

Metaphors / Idioms: “We’ve had a change of heart.”

Avoid Jargon and Metaphors - Exceptions

For ACC's 404, we used the idiom “change of heart” for some brand connection integrated into the messaging. We added clarifying language after.



Reading Level

Write general (non-scientific or specialized) web content for a 8th grade reading level.

8th

Before

Contributions to ACC HeartPAC are completely separate from ACC member dues. Contributions to HeartPAC will be used in connection with federal elections and are subject to the prohibitions and limitations of the Federal Election Campaign Act. HeartPAC is a Political Action Committee established and operating pursuant to the Federal Election Campaign Act. The decision to contribute is voluntary, and refusal to contribute can be made without reprisal.

Contributions to ACC Political Action Committee are not tax deductible.

After

Disclosures

- HeartPAC is a Political Action Committee that works according to the rules of the Federal Election Campaign Act. Any money given to HeartPAC must follow the limits and rules set by this act.
- Donating to HeartPAC is voluntary, and you will not be penalized for choosing not to give.
- Contributions to ACC Political Action Committee are not tax deductible.
- Contributions to ACC HeartPAC are completely separate from ACC member dues.
- HeartPAC can only accept donations from domestic U.S. ACC members.

Active Language

Get right to the point and be transparent.

Replace adverbs (look for an -ly ending) with strong verbs (e.g., “strongly encourage” vs. “urge”).

Avoid passive voice (e.g., “mistakes were made” vs. “I made a mistake”).

Avoid hidden verbs (e.g., “make an application” vs. “apply”).

Word Substitutions

Avoid formal, complex, or long words where short, simple words will do.

Instead of:	Try:
Accomplish	Carry out
Assist, assistance	Help, aid
Implement	Begin, carry out
Obtain	Get
Utilize	Use

Word Substitutions: Example

A button on a website that allows users to ask for additional information.

Before: “Obtain Assistance.”

After: “Get Help.”

Inviting Presentation

- Use white space to draw the eye and conserve cognitive load.
- Break up long paragraphs into short ones, and use bullet points or numbered lists.
- Follow best practices around font size and style, and color contrast.

Inviting Presentation: Example

Before:

“Should a question arise, the editorial associate or the production editor will contact the editor in chief (or an appropriate editor), who then decides whether the manuscript should be transferred to another ASM journal, editorially rejected owing to scope, or retained for review by the journal to which it was submitted.”

Inviting Presentation: Example

After:

“Sometimes ASM Journals staff aren’t sure whether manuscripts fit the journal’s scope. They will ask the editor in chief (or an appropriate editor) to decide on the next step:

- Transfer it to another journal
- Editorially reject it
- Keep it for review”

Conversational Tone

- Speak directly to the reader – use “you.”
- Use Q&A format.
- Use the present tense.
- Use contractions.



Speak to Your
Audience

Audience

The term plain language is also about speaking to your audience.

Your audience is whoever is on your site – know who uses each section and what their goals are.

Know what your audience knows – and doesn't know.

Audience - Striking a Balance

“Speaking peoples’ language” versus “knowing the lingo.” In some cases, it may be more straightforward or necessary for tone to use your audience’s jargon.

In some cases, a specific term may be necessary for legal or political reasons. In that case, optimizing the content around that term may be the way to go.

Myocardial Infarction vs. Heart Attack

AMERICAN COLLEGE of CARDIOLOGY

75th Gala | Guidelines

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Fourth Universal Definition of Myocardial Infarction

Jan 22, 2019 | Salim Hayek, MD, FACC


Font Size A A

Authors: Thygesen K, Alpert JS, Jaffe AS, et al.

Citation: Fourth Universal Definition of Myocardial Infarction (2018). *Eur Heart J* 2019;40:237-269.

The following are key points to remember from the 2018 Fourth Universal Definition of Myocardial Infarction Consensus Document:

1. Major changes include the differentiation of myocardial infarction from injury, and delineation of roles for cardiac magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and computed tomography (CT) angiography in the evaluation of acute coronary syndromes.
2. Cardiac troponin levels should be drawn on initial assessment and 3-6 hours later, possibly earlier (1-3 hours) with high-sensitivity assays. Defining a universal interval for serial sampling is challenging given the impact of the variation in time of symptom onset on the rise and fall of troponin measured by both conventional and high-sensitivity assays. Incorporation of a sound clinical assessment is essential in guiding sampling frequency and interpretation.
3. Myocardial injury is defined by only one criterion: the elevation of cardiac troponin, with at least one value above the 99th percentile upper reference limit, and thus represents an all-encompassing term for elevated troponins of ischemic and nonischemic etiologies.

CardioSmart
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Heart Attack

Topics / Heart Attack


Your heart muscle needs oxygen and nutrients to work as it should. These are provided by the blood that flows through the blood vessels that go to the heart (coronary arteries). A heart attack (your doctor may call it a myocardial infarction, or MI) usually occurs when blood flow to the heart is suddenly cut off.

When this happens, the heart muscle is starved of oxygen-rich blood. In just a short period of time, part of the heart can be damaged or die. That's why immediate care is critical — it can spare your heart and save your life. If you think you are having a heart attack, dial 911 immediately.

If you've had a heart attack, you know how scary it can be. And you're not alone: More than 800,000 Americans have a heart attack each year.

Unfortunately, once you've had a heart attack, your chance of having another one is higher. But there are steps you can take to protect your heart. Taking prescribed medications, following an exercise program tailored to you, maintaining a healthy weight and being careful about what you eat can all help keep your heart healthy. Controlling your blood pressure and lowering cholesterol are also important steps to help prevent another heart attack.

No two heart attacks are the same. If you've already had a heart attack, listen to your body. A repeat attack may feel very different. Both men and women can feel the classic crushing chest pain or tightness (called unstable angina), but women often report additional accompanying symptoms. Some people might know it's a heart attack, but others might not have these symptoms.



Jan 21, 2025 | Expert Analysis
Multimodality Imaging in Pericardial Diseases and the Role of Imaging-Guided Therapies

Jan 14, 2025 | Feature Analysis

Related Topics

- Coronary Artery Disease
- Diabetes and Your Heart
- Healthy Living
- High Blood Pressure
- High Cholesterol

Featured Tools

- COVID: Don't Ignore Heart Symptoms
- My Plan for Heart Healthier Living
- Healthy Habits Protect Your Heart

[show more tools](#)

News

- 2021 Guideline for Coronary Artery Revascularization

Audience - Guiding them

Consider what your audience wants to know or do. Then walk through each step they will take.

- What questions will they have?
- Where do they have to click on links or interact with your page?
- How will they know when they are finished?

Audience - Guiding them

Pricing

U.S. Resident

\$860 /Annual Dues

\$150 Application Fee

Join Now

USD

Canadian Resident

\$480 /Annual Dues

\$150 Application Fee

Join Now

USD

Test Content

When possible, test whether your content is understandable with a representative of your audience.

When not possible to test with your audience, show it to someone in your organization who is not familiar with your content – for example, an intern, or someone in another department.

You want to see if there is any information missing, anything that is confusing, an unclear workflow, etc.

Pick Your Battles

Content Type Considerations

Things that you have to put on the website as they are:

- Press Releases
- Letters to Congress
- Medical Guidelines
- Meeting Minutes (can't change what it said, but use HTML vs. PDF)

Content Type Considerations

Things you can optimize:

- Derivatives
- Marketing
- Analysis
- Technical/medical writing
- Information

Example from ACC

Multimodality Imaging in Pericardial Diseases and the Role of Imaging-Guided Therapies

Jan 21, 2025 | [Joseph El Roumi, MD](#); [Tom Kai Ming Wang, MB ChB, FACC](#); [Allan L. Klein, MD, CM, FACC](#)

Expert Analysis

[f](#) [x](#) [in](#) [e](#) [+](#) [Print](#)

Font Size [A](#)[A](#)[A](#)

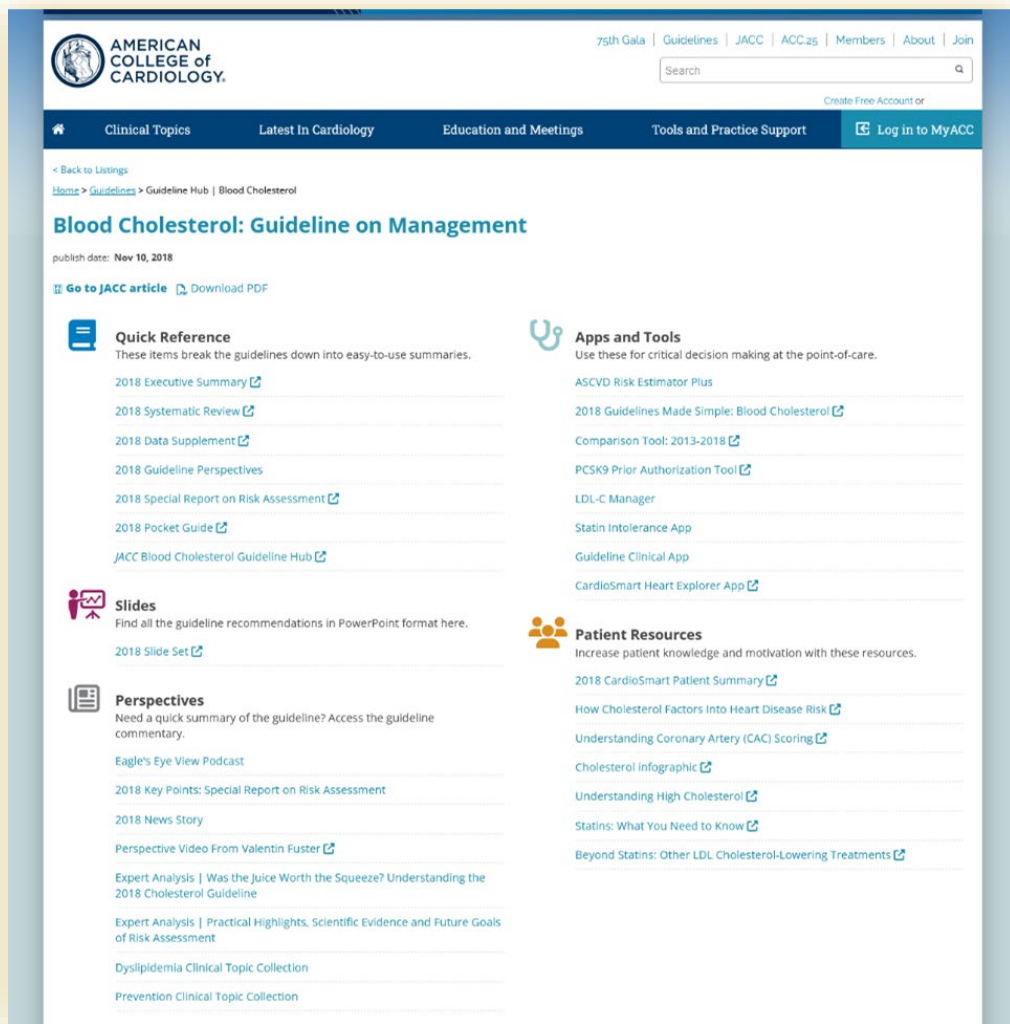
On this page: [📎 Resources](#)

Quick Takes

- Multimodality imaging is critical for the diagnosis, prognostication, and monitoring of treatment response in the setting of different pericardial pathologies and offers the ability to predict future risk of recurrences.
- Improved understanding of the pathogenesis of pericardial injury/inflammation, inflammasome polymerization, and interleukin-1 (IL-1) secretion have paved the way to specialized treatment strategies.
- Imaging-guided therapies allow for prompt and correct application of personalized treatment plans using nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs/aspirin, corticosteroids, colchicine, and the novel IL-1 blockers according to each patient phenotype and their respective imaging findings.

Example from ACC

Each piece of content on this page is a different way of explaining parts of the Managing Blood Cholesterol Guideline.



AMERICAN COLLEGE of CARDIOLOGY.

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[Home](#) > [Guidelines](#) > Guideline Hub | Blood Cholesterol

Blood Cholesterol: Guideline on Management

publish date: Nov 10, 2018

[Go to JACC article](#) [Download PDF](#)

Quick Reference

These items break the guidelines down into easy-to-use summaries.

- [2018 Executive Summary](#)
- [2018 Systematic Review](#)
- [2018 Data Supplement](#)
- [2018 Guideline Perspectives](#)
- [2018 Special Report on Risk Assessment](#)
- [2018 Pocket Guide](#)
- [JACC Blood Cholesterol Guideline Hub](#)

Slides

Find all the guideline recommendations in PowerPoint format here.

- [2018 Slide Set](#)

Perspectives

Need a quick summary of the guideline? Access the guideline commentary.

- [Eagle's Eye View Podcast](#)
- [2018 Key Points: Special Report on Risk Assessment](#)
- [2018 News Story](#)
- [Perspective Video From Valentin Fuster](#)
- [Expert Analysis | Was the Juice Worth the Squeeze? Understanding the 2018 Cholesterol Guideline](#)
- [Expert Analysis | Practical Highlights, Scientific Evidence and Future Goals of Risk Assessment](#)
- [Dyslipidemia Clinical Topic Collection](#)
- [Prevention Clinical Topic Collection](#)

Apps and Tools

Use these for critical decision making at the point-of-care.

- [ASCVD Risk Estimator Plus](#)
- [2018 Guidelines Made Simple: Blood Cholesterol](#)
- [Comparison Tool: 2013-2018](#)
- [PCSK9 Prior Authorization Tool](#)
- [LDL-C Manager](#)
- [Statin Intolerance App](#)
- [Guideline Clinical App](#)
- [CardioSmart Heart Explorer App](#)

Patient Resources

Increase patient knowledge and motivation with these resources.

- [2018 CardioSmart Patient Summary](#)
- [How Cholesterol Factors Into Heart Disease Risk](#)
- [Understanding Coronary Artery \(CAC\) Scoring](#)
- [Cholesterol Infographic](#)
- [Understanding High Cholesterol](#)
- [Statins: What You Need to Know](#)
- [Beyond Statins: Other LDL Cholesterol-Lowering Treatments](#)

Example from ACC

MEMBER

\$1500 / 5 year purchase plan

or

\$300 / 1 year purchase plan

+ Annual ABIM MOC fee*

NONMEMBER

\$1500 / 5 year purchase plan

or

\$300 / 1 year purchase plan

+ Annual ABIM MOC fee*

FELLOWS IN TRAINING or EMERITUS MEMBERS

\$1500 / 5 year purchase plan

or

\$300 / 1 year purchase plan

+ Annual ABIM MOC fee*

Usage/Traffic

- Focus on the 20% of your content that gets 80% of the use.
- Optimize the highest-traffic areas of your website first.
- Answer the actual FAQs.
- Plan ahead for traffic – for example, is a page being promoted soon that should get updated beforehand?
- If content has to live on the site for political reasons, but is not getting used, it is not a priority to optimize.

Hands-On

Keep in Mind

This is about improvement, not perfection.



There are no right and wrong answers – everyone will have a different approach and that's okay!

Example Sentences to Rewrite

Ask yourself:

- Is it active or passive voice?
- Are there extra words that could get cut out?
- Are there simpler words you could substitute?
- Can you speak directly to the reader?

Example Sentences to Rewrite

“Requests must be made with at least two business days’ advance notice given.”

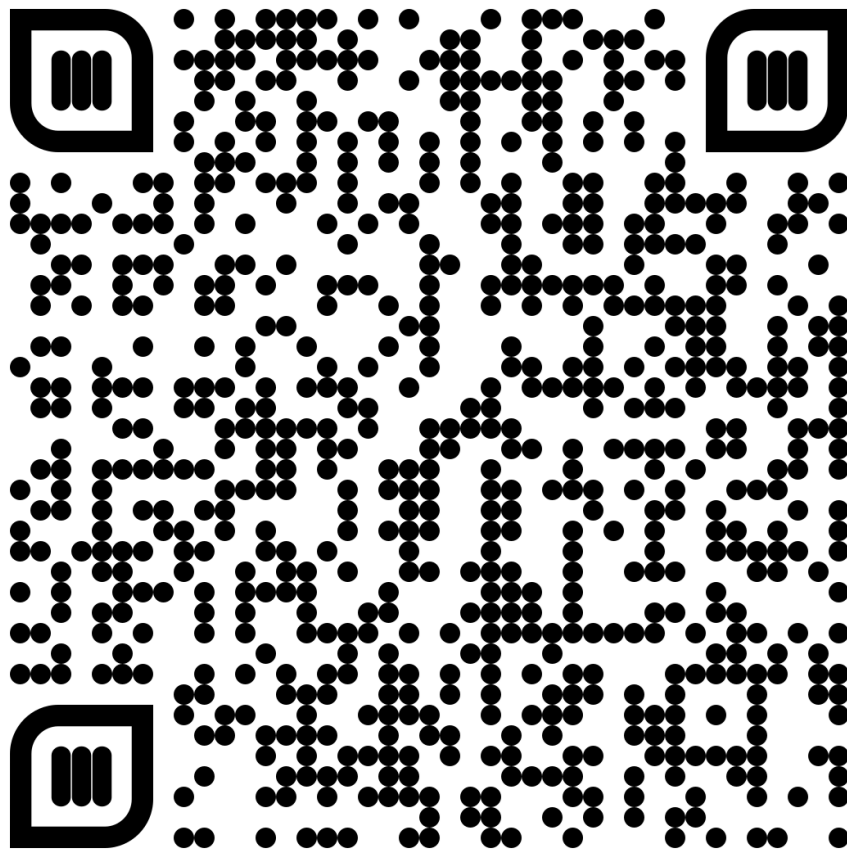
Example Sentences to Rewrite

“Please inquire via email to commence communication with one of our customer service representatives.”

Resources

Resources

We have a living list of articles/books/resources on Plain Language that helped create this presentation and have informed our work.





Q&A