

The CLEAR Framework – Easy to Read

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WHAT IS "EASY TO READ" AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

"Easy to Read" design ensures that content is accessible to the widest possible audience by using high-contrast colors, readable fonts, and clear, simple language. When text is difficult to read—due to poor contrast, complex wording, or cluttered layouts—it creates barriers for many people. Accessible design removes these barriers by prioritizing clarity, structure, and readability, making content easier to understand for diverse audiences. This includes people with dyslexia, aging populations, language learners, and individuals who experience cognitive fatigue.

Applying "Easy to Read" principles is especially crucial for digital accessibility, where screen readers and assistive technologies depend on well-structured, clear content.

SPECIFIC AREAS IN WHICH EASY TO READ TEXT BENEFITS YOUR AUDIENCE.

1. ENHANCING ACCESSIBILITY

- Making text easy to read aligns with accessibility standards, including WCAG 2.2, which emphasizes:
- **Perceivability** - Text should be clear and distinguishable from the background to accommodate users with low vision or color blindness.
 - **Operability** - Readable text ensures easier navigation and usability, especially for individuals who rely on screen readers or other assistive technologies.
 - **Understandability** - Simple language and predictable structure improve comprehension, reducing frustration and improving learning outcomes.

People with disabilities, including those with visual impairments, cognitive challenges, or learning disabilities, face significant barriers when content is cluttered, dense, or visually overwhelming. High contrast, well-spaced text, and clear headings ensure that all individuals, regardless of ability, can effectively engage with the material.

2. REDUCING COGNITIVE OVERLOAD

Cognitive overload occurs when individuals are presented with too much information at once, making it difficult to process and retain key details. Content should be structured in a way that minimizes unnecessary complexity. By using:

- **Short sentences and paragraphs** – Large blocks of text can be overwhelming, whereas short, digestible sections allow for easier scanning and comprehension.
- **Common, everyday language** – Avoiding jargon and overly complex terminology ensures that content is accessible to a broader audience, including language learners.
- **Clear headings and bullet points** – Organizing information in a structured manner helps guide the reader's attention and improves retention.

Reducing cognitive overload not only benefits those with cognitive disabilities but also supports individuals in high-stress situations, such as students managing a heavy workload, professionals skimming reports, or customers trying to find essential information quickly. Simplified, structured content creates a more efficient and enjoyable user experience.

3. SUPPORTING INCLUSION AND ENGAGEMENT

Individuals with low literacy, cognitive disabilities, or language learners' proficiency benefit significantly from easy-to-read materials. This ensures that:

- **More people can access and understand content** – Simple, structured text allows diverse audiences to engage with the information confidently.
- **Readers feel more confident and engaged with the material** – When content is clear, users are more likely to interact, participate, and comprehend the intended message.
- **Organizations meet legal and ethical accessibility standards** – Many regulatory guidelines, including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), require content to be accessible to all users. Prioritizing readability ensures compliance and demonstrates a commitment to equity.

An inclusive approach to readability fosters a sense of belonging, making it easier for individuals from diverse backgrounds to feel valued and included. Whether designing educational resources, workplace policies, or digital content, ensuring ease of readability benefits everyone and strengthens engagement across all audiences.

To make content truly easy to read, focus on three main areas:

1. Typography
2. Color Contrast
3. Language Clarity

TYPOGRAPHY AND FONT CHOICES

Typography plays a fundamental role in readability. Choosing the right font and text size can determine whether content is accessible or difficult to interpret. Consider the following best practices:

- **Use sans-serif fonts such as Arial, Verdana, or Open Sans.** These fonts are clean and simple, making them easier to read than decorative or script fonts.
- **Font size should be at least 12pt for print and 16px for digital content.** This ensures that text is legible across different screen sizes and reading environments.
- **Consider increasing line spacing.** Proper spacing reduces visual clutter and helps guide the reader's eyes smoothly through the content.
- **Avoid ALL CAPS except for emphasis.** Capital letters take longer to read and can appear visually aggressive or overwhelming.
- **Use left-aligned text rather than justified text.** Justified text can create uneven spacing between words, making it harder to read.

HIGH-CONTRAST COLOR COMBINATIONS

Color contrast affects how easily text can be distinguished from the background. Low contrast can make reading difficult, especially for individuals with visual impairments.

Follow these guidelines:

BEST PRACTICES:

Use a contrast ratio of at least 4.5:1 for standard text and 3:1 for large text (18px and above) as per WCAG guidelines. For example:

- Black text on a white or light background
- White text on a dark background
- Dark blue on pale yellow

Ensure links are visually distinguishable from surrounding text with color and an additional indicator like underlining.

Avoid:

- Light gray text on white background, as it can be difficult to see.

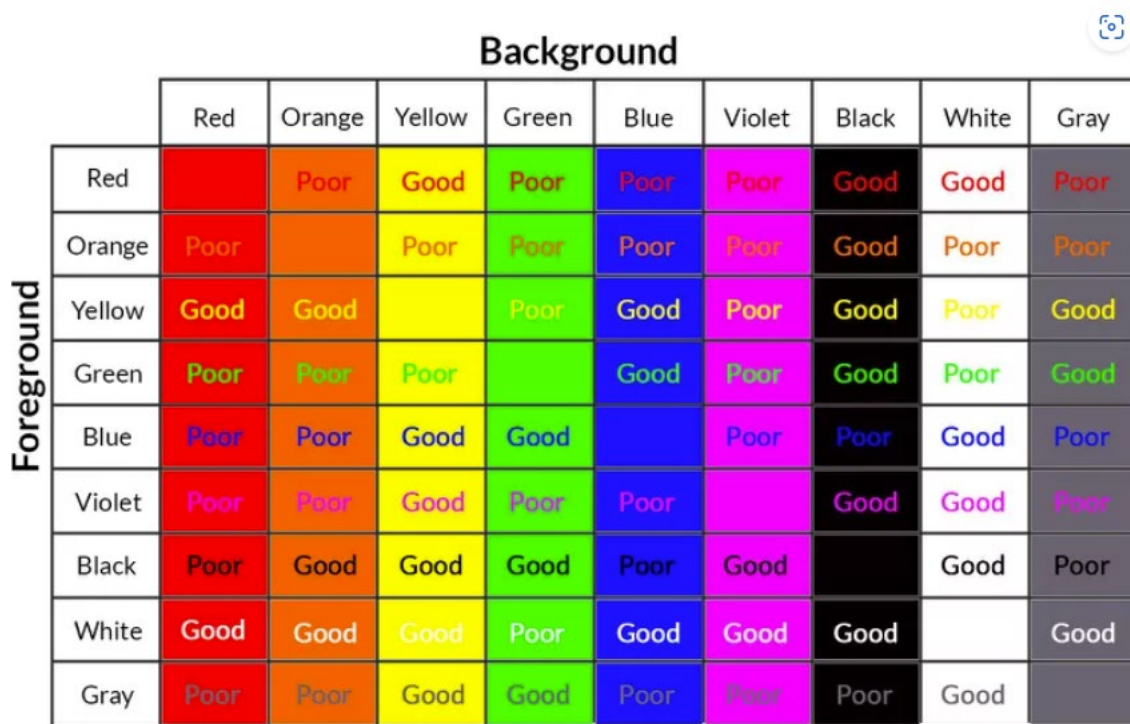
- Red and green combinations, since colorblind users may struggle to differentiate these colors.
- Busy background images behind text, which can obscure readability.

Test your color contrast. Use online tools such as the [WebAIM Contrast Checker](#) to ensure sufficient contrast levels. These tools help ensure that your designs meet accessibility standards and are perceivable by a broader audience.

Use alternative visual cues. Approximately 8% of men and 0.5% of women worldwide experience color vision deficiency. Ensure that important information isn't conveyed by color alone—use bolding, underlining, or icons to reinforce meaning.

EXAMPLE OF POOR VS. GOOD CONTRAST

The following image illustrates good and poor color contrast combinations:



		Background								
Foreground		Red	Orange	Yellow	Green	Blue	Violet	Black	White	Gray
	Red		Poor	Good	Poor	Poor	Poor	Good	Good	Poor
	Orange	Poor		Poor	Poor	Poor	Poor	Good	Poor	Poor
	Yellow	Good	Good		Poor	Good	Poor	Good	Poor	Good
	Green	Poor	Poor	Poor		Good	Poor	Good	Poor	Good
	Blue	Poor	Poor	Good	Good		Poor	Poor	Good	Poor
	Violet	Poor	Poor	Good	Poor	Poor		Good	Good	Poor
	Black	Poor	Good	Good	Good	Poor	Good		Good	Poor
	White	Good	Good	Good	Poor	Good	Good	Good		Good
	Gray	Poor	Poor	Good	Good	Poor	Poor	Poor	Good	

Picture Reference: Girard, Jeremy. "How to Contrast Background and Foreground Colors in Web Design." *ThoughtCo*, Apr. 5, 2023, [thoughtco.com/contrasting-foreground-background-colors-4061363](https://www.thoughtco.com/contrasting-foreground-background-colors-4061363).

ENABLING ADAPTIVE FORMATTING FOR ACCESSIBILITY

Many users benefit from customizable contrast modes. Consider offering or highlighting:

- **Dark Mode:** Allows white text on a black background for lower eye strain. Here are instructions for how to turn on [dark mode in Microsoft Word](#), for example.
- **High-Contrast Mode:** Helps users with vision impairments differentiate elements. Windows, for example, offers the option of [high contrast themes under accessibility options](#).

- **Font Sizes:** When choosing digital materials for students, make sure your platform supports text resizing up to 200% without breaking layout (WCAG 2.2).

Use the [WAVE Accessibility Tool](#) to check if your site supports adaptive formatting options.

USING ALTERNATIVE TEXT FOR IMAGES

Many people rely on screen readers to understand images and graphics. To make visuals accessible, it is important to add descriptive “alt text” that can be read by screen readers. In Word and PowerPoint, alt text can be added to images by right clicking and selecting “Edit alt text.” Here are some tips for what to write

- **Be Descriptive but Concise** – Clearly convey the image’s purpose in 125 characters or less.
- **Include Key Details** – If the image contains important data, mention it in the alt text.
- **For Complex Images, Use Long Descriptions** – Charts, graphs, and infographics require additional explanation.
 - Example:
 - Bad Alt Text: "Picture of a chart."
 - Good Alt Text: "A bar graph comparing web accessibility scores across different websites, showing an increase from 50% to 85% compliance over time."
- **Decorative Images** - If an image is decorative (purely for design), mark it as decorative in your content management system so screen readers ignore it. If you have added a picture though, consider carefully what context or examples sighted readers gain from seeing it before selecting this option.

CLEAR AND SIMPLE LANGUAGE

Clarity in language ensures that content is understandable by a wide range of readers. To achieve this:

- **Use plain language and avoid jargon.** Technical terms and complex phrasing can alienate readers unfamiliar with the topic.
 - Example of Simplified Language
 - Too Complex: "Utilizing interdisciplinary methodologies, we endeavor to facilitate a seamless integration of digital frameworks into contemporary educational paradigms."
 - Easy to Read: "We use different methods to make digital tools easier for schools to use."
- **Keep sentences under 15-25 words when possible.** Shorter sentences are easier to process and reduce cognitive load.
- **Use bullet points and numbered lists for clarity.** Breaking down information into small, digestible pieces enhances readability.
- **Explain abbreviations and acronyms the first time they appear.** Unfamiliar terms should always be defined to ensure comprehension.
- **Provide examples and visuals to reinforce key points.** Diagrams, infographics, and real-world examples can enhance understanding.
- **Test readability.** Use readability assessment tools such as the [Flesch-Kincaid](#) score to ensure your content is easy to understand. A good readability score depends on the target audience:

- **Flesch-Kincaid Reading Ease Score:**
 - **60-70:** Easily understood by 13- to 15-year-olds (ideal for general audiences).
 - **70-80:** Fairly easy to read, suitable for middle school students.
 - **80-90:** Easy to read, suitable for younger audiences and those with lower literacy levels.
- **Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Score:**
 - **6-8:** Ideal for most public-facing content (accessible for a broad audience).
 - **8-10:** Suitable for high school students and general readership.
 - **10-12+:** More complex but may be necessary for academic or specialized content.

For maximum accessibility, aim for:

- Flesch-Kincaid Reading Ease Score of 70+
- Grade Level Score of 8 or below

This ensures that the content is understandable by a broad audience, including individuals with cognitive disabilities, low literacy, or language learners of English.

Note for MC employees: For more on plain language and how to use it, visit our self-paced training, [Building Belonging Through Plain Language](#).

By incorporating these best practices, content creators can ensure their materials are accessible, inclusive, and user-friendly. The goal is not just to present information but to do so in a way that invites engagement and comprehension from all readers.

CLEAR FRAMEWORK COMPONENT	MECHANICAL LEVEL	ROUTINE LEVEL	REFINED LEVEL
Easy to Read	<p>Basic Readability: Fonts and colors may lack contrast; text not fully adjustable.</p> <p>WCAG 2.2 Alignment: 1.4.3 (Contrast Minimum), 1.4.4 (Resize Text), 1.4.5 (Images of Text).</p> <p>Instructor Tip: Use readable fonts, high-contrast colors.</p> <p>Checklist:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fonts are sans-serif and a minimum of 12pt in size. - High contrast between text and background (4.5:1 minimum). - Content avoids jargon and uses plain language. 	<p>Readable and Consistent: High-contrast text with resizable fonts; no images of text.</p> <p>WCAG 2.2 Alignment: 1.4.12 (Text Spacing), 3.1.1 (Language of Page).</p> <p>Instructor Tip: Maintain high contrast; enable text resizing.</p> <p>Checklist:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Text can be resized without losing content/function. - Language of page is programmatically declared. - Content avoids images of text unless necessary. 	<p>Optimized Readability: Customizable text, plain language, no images of text.</p> <p>WCAG 2.2 Alignment: 1.4.13 (Content on Hover or Focus), 3.3.8 (Accessible Authentication).</p> <p>Instructor Tip: Use plain language, optimize readability, provide alternatives.</p> <p>Checklist:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adjustable spacing options for text (line height, letter spacing). - Hover content can be dismissed. - Authentication does not rely on memory/cognitive load.