



PLAIN ENGLISH STRATEGIES

When communicating with limited English proficient (LEP) consumers and clients — whether interacting directly or through an interpreter — improve your outcomes with these strategies. This content has been adapted from the “Recommended National Standards for Working with Interpreters in Courts and Tribunals” by the Australian Judicial Council on Cultural Diversity to apply to a variety of settings and encounters. A complete JCCD guide is available at: <http://jccd.org.au/publications/>.

Use active voice, avoid passives

As much as possible, try changing passive statements to active statements by supplying an “actor”, or a doer of an action. If the actor is unclear, use personal (definite) pronouns (for example, “they”) or indefinite pronouns (“somebody”, “someone”).

Instead of this:	Use this:
<i>You will be given pain medication.</i>	<i>The nurse will give you pain medication.</i>
<i>He was arrested.</i>	<i>The police arrested him.</i>
<i>Her car was stolen.</i>	<i>Someone stole her car.</i>
<i>He felt worse, so he had to be taken to the emergency room.</i>	<i>He felt worse, so they took him to the emergency room.</i>

Avoid abstract nouns

An abstract noun describes something you can't touch, like a feeling, an emotion or an idea. Many professionals use abstract nouns in their daily communication. Additionally, many of these abstract nouns are professional industry terms used by specialists. They are not common English words which ordinary people can easily understand and relate to.

When communicating with LEP consumers or clients, try replacing abstract nouns with verbs (action words) or adjectives (description words).

Instead of this:	Use this:
<i>Depending on your good behavior...</i>	<i>You are not to break the law -OR- You are to follow the instructions</i>
<i>This argument has no weight</i>	<i>It is not a strong argument (adjective)</i>
<i>They lived in poverty</i>	<i>They were poor (adjective)</i>
<i>You have my commitment to...</i>	<i>I will do all I can to... (verb)</i>

The secret to replacing English abstract nouns correctly is to discover the actions that are hidden within them. An abstract noun may often hide more than one action, and each of these actions may have one or more people or things involved in either doing the action or being affected by it. So, to properly replace abstract nouns with plain English, you should:

- discover the hidden action within the abstract noun
- identify who or what is involved in the action
- rephrase the abstract noun using simple nouns and verbs.

Avoid negative questions

A negative question is one that is worded in a way requiring a “no” response for an affirmative answer and a “yes” response for a negative answer. In other words, negative questions switch the “yes/no” response order of regular, or positive, questions to a less intuitive “no/yes” order. Negative questions can be confusing. Try to rephrase them to more logical and intuitive ones.

Instead of this:	Use this:
<i>Isn't she the patient?</i>	<i>Is she the patient?</i>
<i>You have never done this before, have you?</i>	<i>Have you ever done this before?</i>
<i>So, you didn't go see the doctor last week?</i>	<i>Did you see the doctor last week?</i>
<i>You wouldn't mind answering my questions, would you?</i>	<i>Could you please answer my questions?</i>

Define unfamiliar or ambiguous words

Professional terms and lingo make a lot of sense to the specialists, but can be a challenge to understand for common people, especially those not fluent in the language. Try to define the unfamiliar or ambiguous words and terms by providing a short descriptive statement.

Instead of this:	Use this:
<i>It was a benign tumor.</i>	<i>The growth was benign, which means it was not cancer.</i>
<i>Your test results are negative.</i>	<i>You do not have infection (or disease, etc.)</i>
<i>You have been released on bail.</i>	<i>The judge let you go on bail, which means you promise to come back to court next time and not break the law until then.</i>

Put ideas in chronological order

Chronological order, or order of time, is important when describing a sequence of events — what happened first, second, and third. To be clearly understood, make sure to arrange your ideas in the logical order.

Instead of this:	Use this:
<i>Today we need to decide whether you are going to have a surgery based on your test results from last week.</i>	<i>You came in last week and we checked your blood. Today I want to tell you about that blood test and then we can decide what to do next.</i>
<i>You are scheduled to move into your new apartment next week, but you haven't paid your deposit yet.</i>	<i>First you must pay your deposit. Then you can move into your new apartment next week.</i>

One idea = one sentence

Avoid complex statements with multiple clauses. Instead try breaking down the paragraphs into several shorter statements with one single “idea”, or piece of information, in each sentence.

Instead of this:

You will require weekly observations by your primary care physician and you will need to follow all discharge instructions, including wound care, prescription medication and physical activity.

Use this:

After you go home from the hospital you will need to see your regular doctor every week. You need to follow everything we told you to do on this form. You need to keep your wound clean and dry. You need to take your medications on time. You need to do these exercises regularly.

What if? Hypothetical events

Be careful when using words like “if” and “or” while talking about hypothetical events that have not yet happened. Use the word “maybe” to indicate multiple possibilities. Make sure your LEP consumer or client understands the conditions that must happen for the hypothetical event to take place.

Instead of this:

If your doctor approves, you can get back to work.

Use this:

You must ask the doctor about going back to work. Maybe she will say you can return to work. Maybe she will say you need to stay home for a few more days. You should do what the doctor tells you to do.

Cause before effect

Similarly to the recommendation about proper chronological order, try to structure your cause and effect ideas in a logical and clear manner: action comes before the reaction, and cause comes before the effect.

Instead of this:

You are going to need another surgery because you didn't comply with discharge instructions.

Use this:

You didn't follow doctor's instructions. Now you feel worse. That's why you will need another surgery.

You felt angered because he insulted your mother?

He insulted your mother and this made you angry. Is this true?

Changing the subject

It is important that you clearly indicate when you change the topic of the conversation as you communicate with your LEP consumers or clients.

Use this:

"I've finished asking you about your personal medical history. Now I need to ask you about your family history".

"Thanks for telling me about what happened last week. Now I want to talk to you about what we should do tomorrow".

"I am glad the medication I prescribed last month is working well for you. Now let's discuss your lab test results".

"From now on": using prepositions to talk about time

Avoid relying heavily on prepositions like "to", "from", "on", "at", "under", "over" when you talk about time.

Instead of this:

It might take us over an hour to run the test.

They will make a decision in under two weeks.

The program will run from Monday to next Thursday.

Use this:

We will need at least one hour to complete this test.

They will think about this for two weeks or less. And then they will decide what they will do.

The program will start on Monday and finish next Thursday.

Avoid speaking figuratively

Many English metaphors and figurative expressions might not have an equivalent in other languages, and can be easily misinterpreted. Try to avoid figurative language when communicating with your LEP consumers or clients.

Instead of this:

Are we on the same page?

The nurse will keep an eye on your son.

When I told her this, she just exploded.

Use this:

Do we understand each other clearly?

The nurse will watch your son closely.

After I told her this, she became very angry and started shouting at me.