CHILD-BRIGHT Network

Réseau BRILLEnfant

Writing a Plain-Language Summary
EaseLibrary Recommendations

What to do before you start writing your plain-language summary?

Plain language begins long before you put pen to paper — or keystroke to keyboard. Start by researching your topic, understanding your audience, and planning and organizing how you will present your information.

1. Who needs plain language?

We all do! From language learners to advanced readers, everyone benefits from plain language. Plain language is one element of clear communication. It means you are communicating with your audience in a way that's direct and understandable.

2. Know your subject before you start to write.

If you're confused about something, you won't be able to make it clear when explaining it to someone else. In fact, the concept may be even more confusing to your audience.

If you understand an idea and can explain it well, you will win over your audience. If you don't, the reader may feel as if he or she has missed something as they struggle to grasp the key idea.

3. Getting to know your audience

Who is the audience? To write effectively, you need to know more about your audience.

Talk to them if needed. What can you learn about your audience?

Determine if there is an intermediary (e.g., caregiver). Does your audience include people that will need help understanding the content of your summary? If so, someone may be communicating your information to your audience on your behalf. How can you help prevent transmission errors?

What to do while writing your summary?

1. Draw up a blueprint

- You should organize your content before you start to write.
- Using the summary template, organize the content around the questions your audience may have.
- What is the message? Be concrete and specific.
- What do you want your document to accomplish?
- Be sure your content has a logical flow.
- Avoid jargon, technical terms and acronyms where possible; if unavoidable: make sure to define them first!
- Write in plain English. Match your words to your audience.
- Use first person and active voice (e.g., "we agreed" rather than "it was agreed")
- Use positive sentences

2. Is your summary accessible?

Checkpoints for visual readability include:

- Font, font size and type face
- Layout
- Colour and contrast

Set Document Language:

1. Select all of the text for which you want to set the correct language.
2. On the status bar at the bottom of the screen, to the right of the **Word count**, you should see the currently selected language. Left click on that text (If you are using an Apple computer, click on that text).
3. In the **Language** dialog box which appears, select the correct language and click OK.
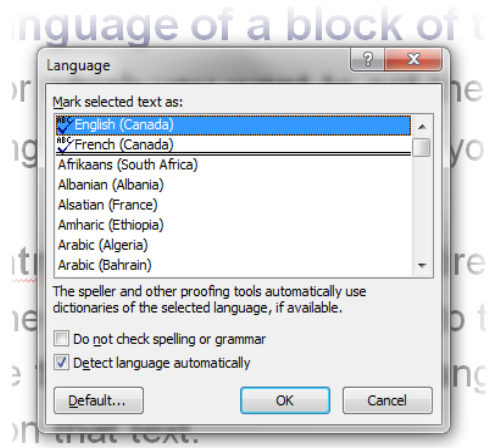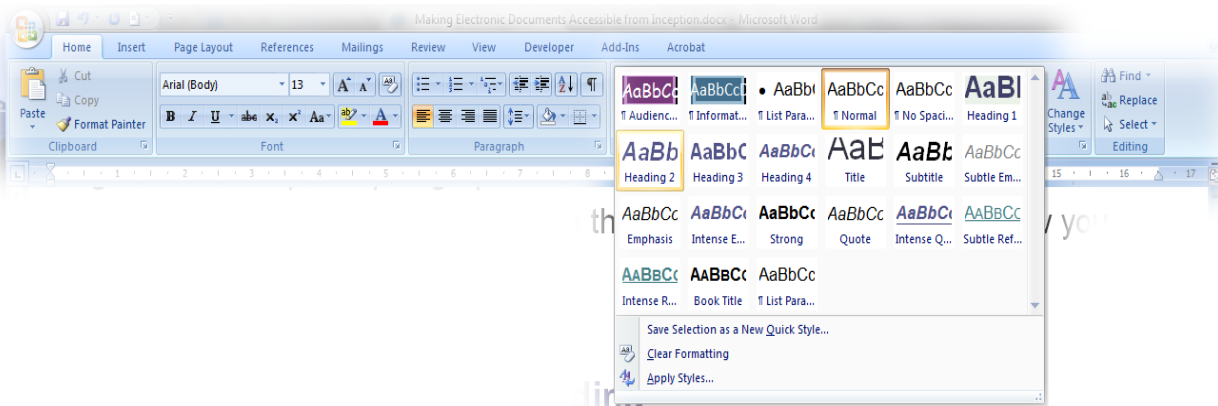
If you are using an Apple computer:
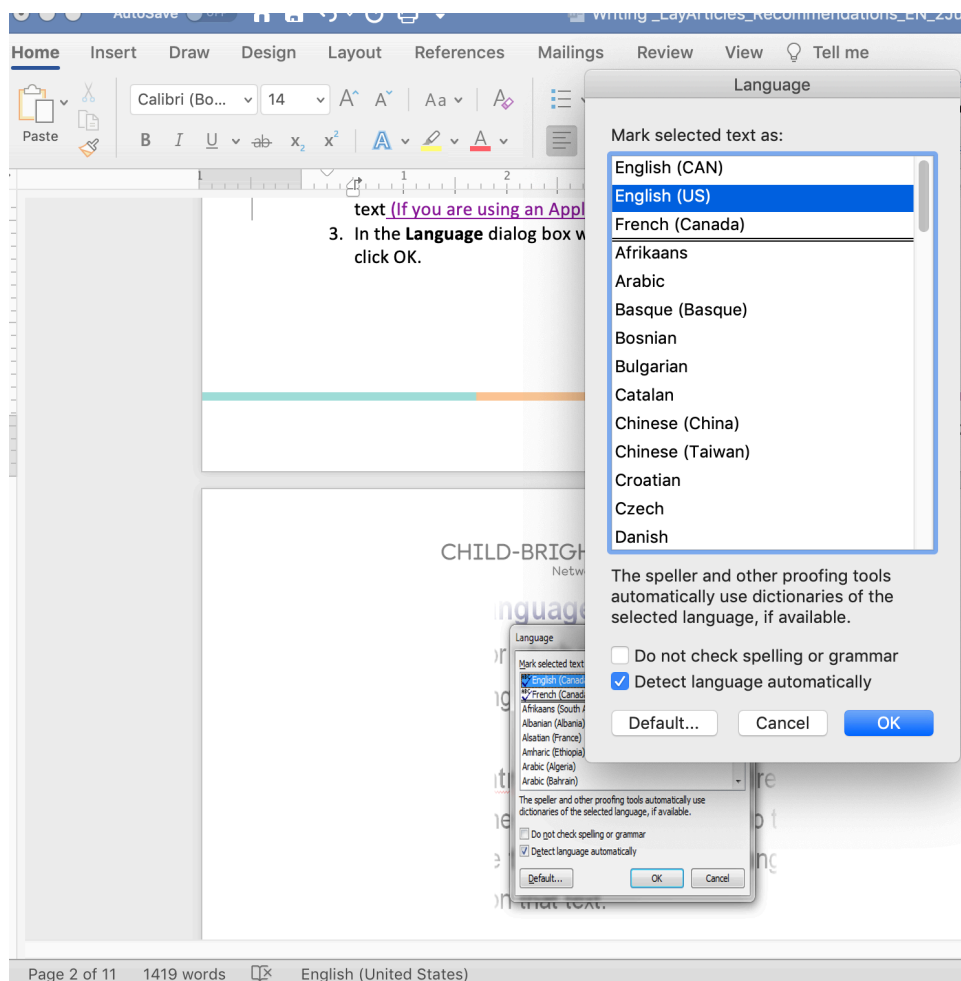
<u>Use Headings to Structure Text:</u>

1. Select the text that should be turned into a heading. This should only be a few words.
2. On the ribbon bar at the top of the screen, select the Home group.
3. In the Styles section on the right half side of the screen, select the heading you wish to apply (Heading 1, Heading 2, Heading 3, etc.).

<u>Understanding Heading Structure:</u>

a) Headings are organized in a hierarchy:
  a. **Heading 1**: used for your largest "division": e.g. book chapters
  b. **Heading 2**: used for each major section within those divisions: e.g. chapter sections
  c. **Heading 3**: used for sub-divisions within those major sections
b) Do not skip heading levels
c) Do not simply format text manually to *look* like a heading – **make it is a true heading!**

Heading Practice: An Atlas

- Canada
- Montreal
- Saskatchewan
- Quebec
- Ontario
- United States
- California
- San Francisco
- Ottawa
- Mexico
- Toronto
- Sherbrooke
- Saint-Leonard
- Cotes-des-Neiges

Heading Practice: An Atlas

1. Canada
   1. Quebec
      1. Montreal
         1. Saint-Leonard
         2. Cotes-des-Neiges
      2. Sherbrooke
   2. Saskatchewan
   3. Ontario
      1. Ottawa
      2. Toronto
2. United States
   1. California
      1. San Francisco
3. Mexico

Why use headings?

- Quickly change visual layout of all headings in your document
- Users of Assistive Technologies (AT) will use headings to navigate efficiently
- If you generate PDF files from these documents, the heading structure will be used to generate a clickable bookmark tree
- On the View ribbon, you can use the Outline View to get an overview of your document, reorganize sections, etc.
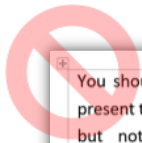- You can automatically generate a Table of Contents based on the headings in your document

Tables in Microsoft Word

- Use tables for presenting truly tabular data – and nothing else!

Do **NOT** use tables for…

- Page layout purposes
- Adding decorative borders around paragraphs

- Creating multiple columns of text

DO use tables for…
- Presenting data, column data, or tabular information

User	Age	Sex	Eye Colour	Hair Colour	Reading Speed	Favourite Food
A.J.	47	M	Blue	Brown	228	Pizza
C.S.	28	F	Hazel	Blonde	117	Grapes
W.E.	66	M	Brown	Black	193	Pasta

1. Keep Tables Simple
- Avoid "merged cells" and rows with different numbers of columns
- Consider smaller "chunks" and table descriptions

Species / Location Counts	In the Sky			In the Water		Underground	
	Birds	Flies	Wasps	Beavers	Muskrats	Groundhogs	Gophers
Montreal	472	183	227	418	173		
Laval	1128	3382	1123	447		229	112
Longueil						337	
Ottawa	237	447	2728			122	338
Rockland							128
Carp			4719			137	228

Use Bullets and Numbered Lists
- Use 'true' bulleted or numbered lists where appropriate, rather than creating your own lists using hyphens or manually numbered statements.
- Otherwise, AT may simply see the list as a series of very short paragraphs (rather than part of a coherent grouping of thoughts).
- Click on the Home ribbon

- On the top line of the Paragraph section (in about the center of the ribbon), click on either Bullets (to create an unordered list) or Numbering (to create an ordered list)
- Select the style of bullet or numbering that you prefer
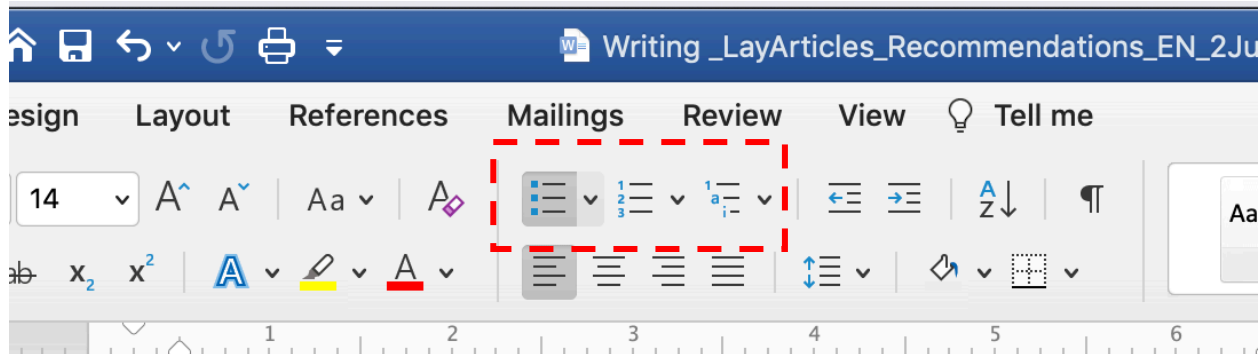

Use Page Breaks

1. If you need to start on a new page, press Control+Enter to insert a page break (If you are using an Apple computer, press Command+Enter).
2. Do not simply hit Enter two dozen times to create a new page break, as a screen reader user will have to arrow down through dozens of blank lines, without any real explanation.

Styles Simplify Life

If you need to change the font and font size throughout your document, right click on the Normal style button and select 'Modify' to change the parameters. Everything in your document will follow that change by default.

If you decide that you need a different size (e.g. to make a 'large print' version), you need only change the Normal style again and everything will change automatically.
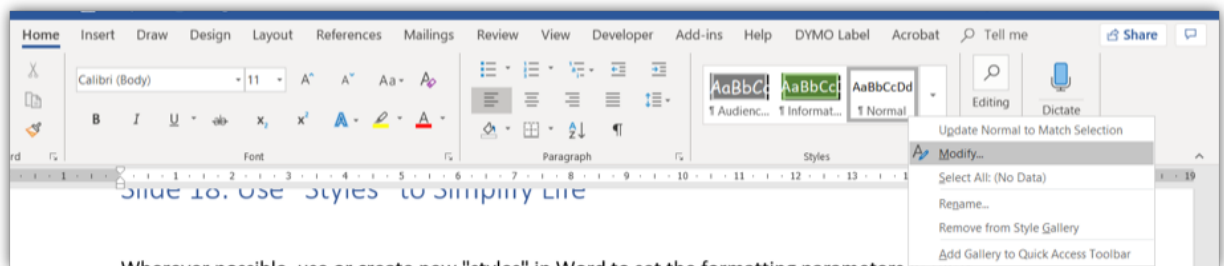
Use Hyperlinks for External Sources

1. Select the text in your document that you want to make into a link
2. Right click and select Hyperlink... (or simply press Control+K. If you are using an Apple computer, press Command+K)
3. On the left hand side of this dialog box, make sure that 'Existing file or Web Page' is selected
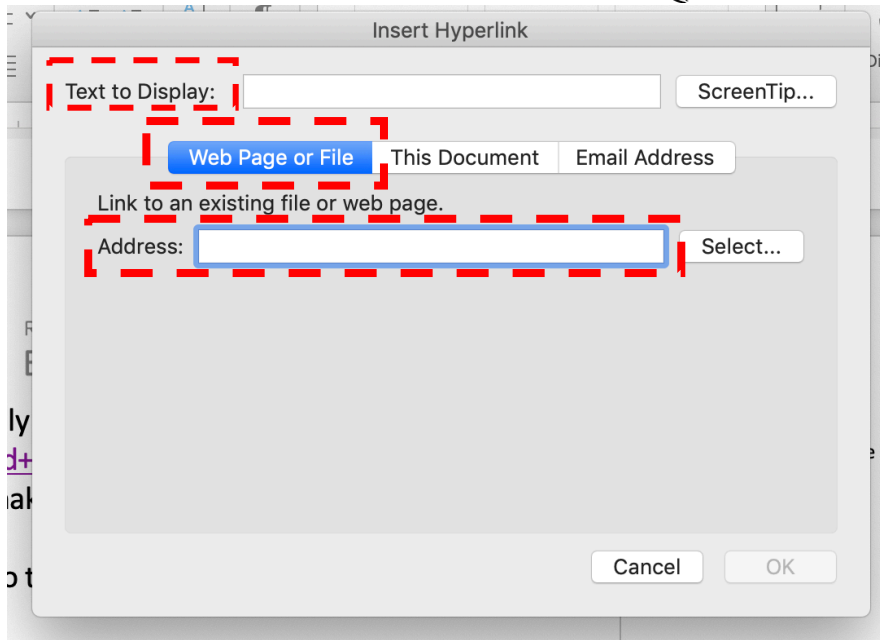   If you are using an Apple computer, make sure that 'Web Page or File' is selected and the 'Text to Display' is the text you have selected.
4. Enter the URL that you want to link to into the Address field
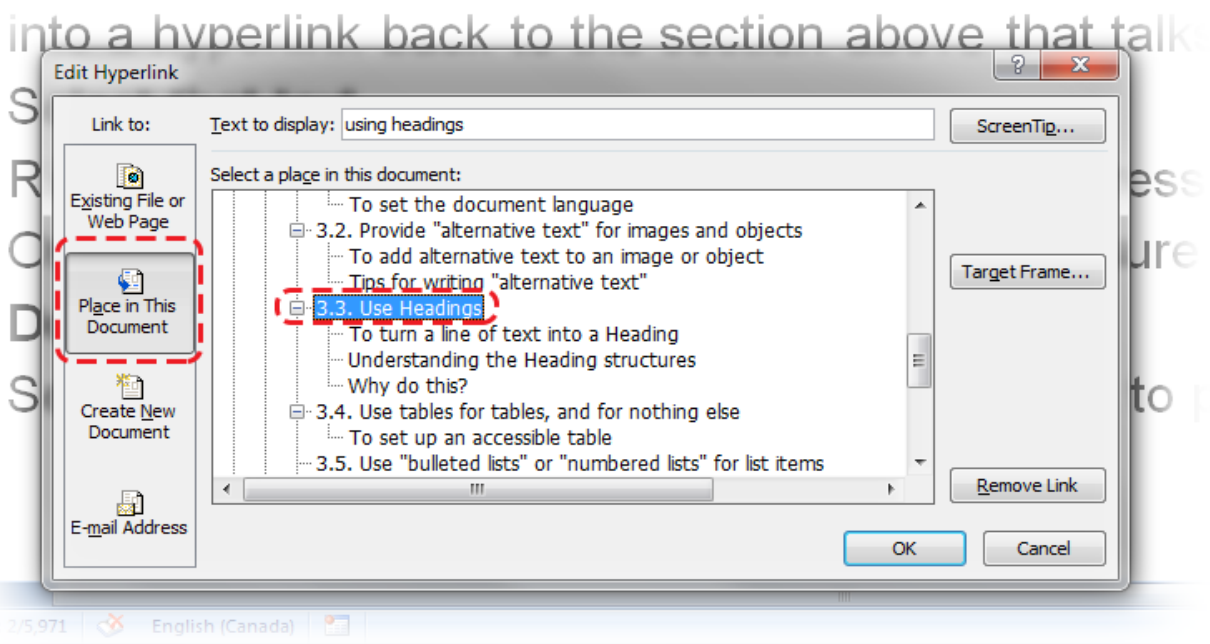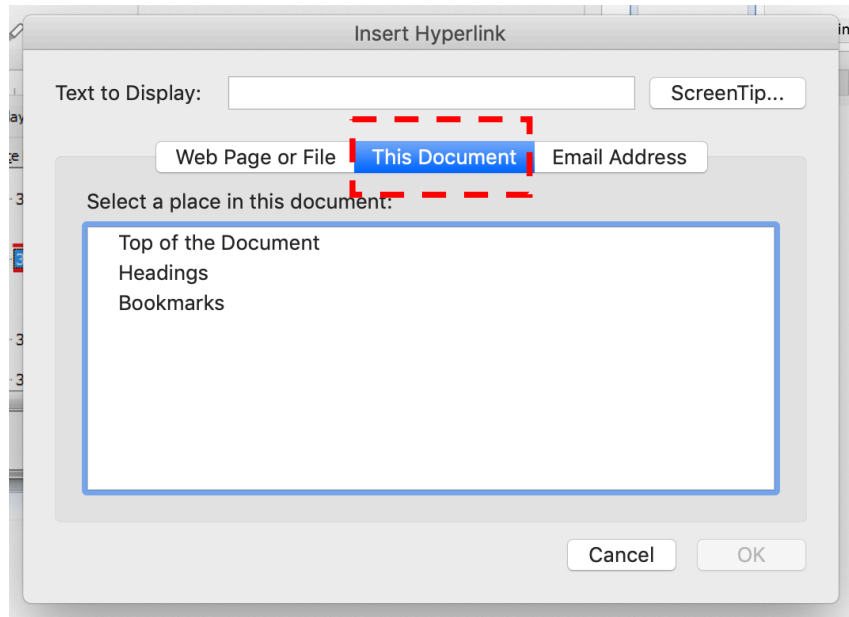5. Click OK.
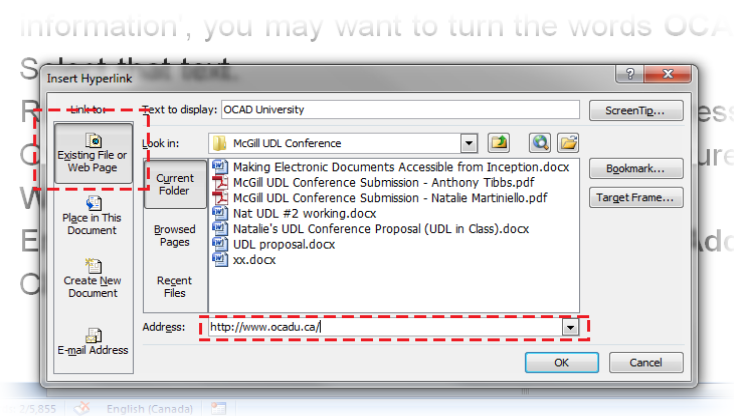
Apple computer:

Use Hyperlinks Within a Document

1. Follow the same steps as for linking to a web site, but on the left hand side of the dialog box, make sure that 'Place in This Document' is selected
    If you are using an Apple computer, make sure 'This Document' is selected.

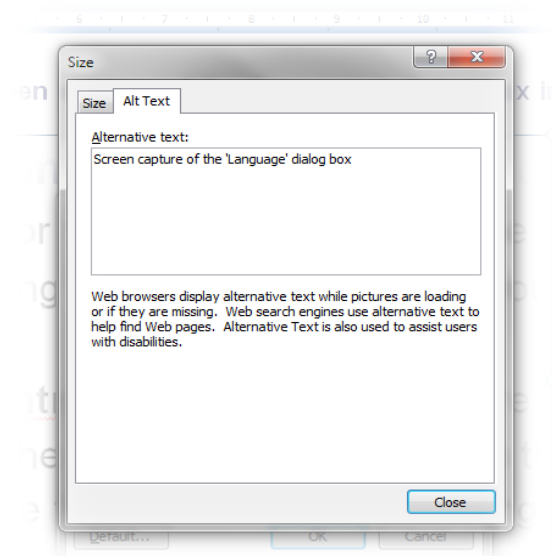This will allow you to pick a heading from your document to link to

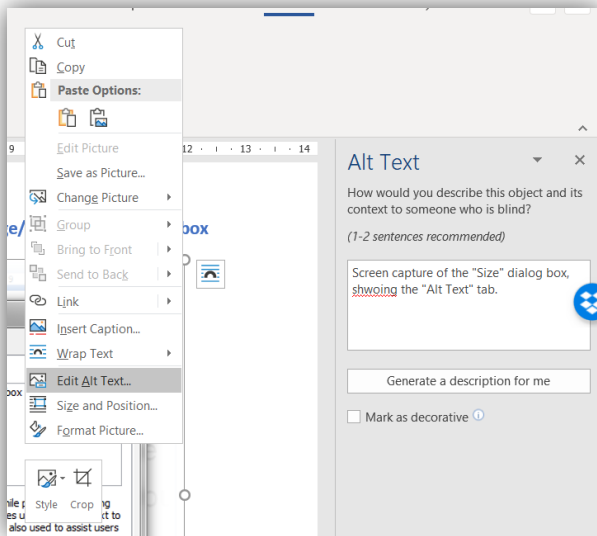![Child-Bright Network Réseau BRILLEnfant logo]

Apple computer:

Creating Accessible Images

- Word 2007-2010
1. Right click on the image
2. Select Size...
3. Select the Alt Text tab in the Size dialog box
4. Fill in the Alternative Text box

- Word 2016+
1. Right click on the image

2. Select Edit Alt Text...
3. Fill in the Alternative Text box on the right hand side of your screen

Tips for Describing Images
1. Keep it short, otherwise describe it in the body of the document
2. Highlight the "take away" and important message to be conveyed
3. If the image is simply decorative (meaningless), set alt tag to blank (newer versions of Office include a "mark as decorative" option as well)
4. If image contains text, ensure that text is duplicated in the Alt tag
5. Give the document to a reviewer with images replaced by Alt text
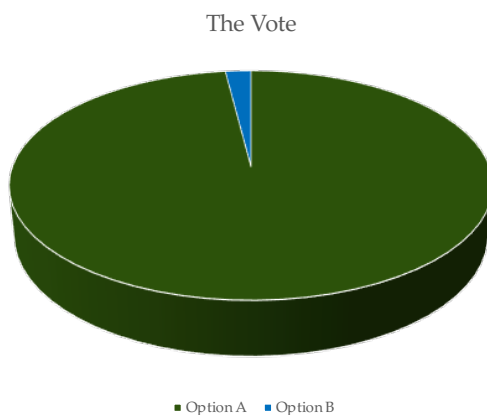
3. Put your document to the test
- After you've drafted your document, test it. This might mean:
1. Asking members from the target audience to read it.
2. Stepping away for a while and re-reading it carefully.

3. After you test your document and receive input, revise it based on what you learned.
4. Ask a non-specialist to read your summary once it is done and check their understanding!

4. Accessibility Resources

1. In recent versions of Microsoft Office (Word, PowerPoint, Excel, etc.), you can find a "Check Accessibility" button on the Review ribbon.
2. Tancock, C. In a nutshell: how to write a lay summary. Elsevier Connect https://www.elsevier.com/connect/authors-update/in-a-nutshell-how-to-write-a-lay-summary.
3. Centre for Plain Language - Five Steps to Plain Language
4. Canadian government - Plain Language
5. While accessibility checkers are **helpful**, they have their limits and **do not replace** actual user testing by people with disabilities.