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Make your compliance forms accessible

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As we consider inclusion in the workplace and ways to ensure that those around us feel welcome, respected, and valued, let's not forget about compliance documents. After all, inclusion requires thoughtful communication, including written communication. Compliance forms shouldn't be left out of this equation just because they tend to have a more formal legal vibe.

If you design and write reader-centered compliance forms—forms that empower readers—you'll serve readers' needs while also serving your own. Studies show that plain, clear business documents create a win for everybody.

Here are some thoughts on creating compliance forms that enhance accessibility and reader comprehension and, thus, improve your desired outcomes.

Rethink design and typography

Looks matter. A document's design affects how readers react to it and how carefully they read it. If a document presents a dense wall of text, readers may skim it or skip it altogether. Since your goal is to ensure compliance through these documents, those are bad outcomes.

Use informative headings and subheadings to break up and organize dense text. Consider question-style headings when appropriate. (**What if a family member's illness forces me to miss work?**) Rethink the ALL CAPS style, which is harder to read. That BLOCKED style lacks the ascenders (d) and descenders (p) that our brains use to process familiar letter/word patterns. Consider initial capitalization instead.

Think carefully about your font choices. If your documents are intended for online readers, research which fonts are easier to read on computers or tablets. Studies show that sans-serif fonts like Verdana, for example, increase readability on computer screens.[1] And use a slightly larger size—12 point at least—than you would in paper documents.

Leave eye-friendly white space between headings and text—and between sections and subsections. Use vertical lists (including bulleted lists) strategically. Consider adding some color or making other design choices that we don't typically associate with compliance documents. Checklists, complete with box graphics, can be effective.

Good design invites readers in rather than shutting them out. A quick Google search reveals many positive examples of reader-centered compliance documents, especially from government agencies that hired design/plain-language consultants.