

Clear connections:

Using plain language
with Head Start staff
and community
partners



My objectives

1. Briefly review what **plain language** means
2. Seek agreement that the overriding goal is to help Head Start staff build **trusted relationships** with families
3. Why the **clarity** and **brevity** of your content matter most
4. Show how small edits can lower the **grade reading level** of your content
5. Use **likely questions** about oral health to demonstrate how staff should respond



**An overview of
what is meant by
plain language**

Plain language means avoiding jargon

- Caries
- Oral cavity
- Tooth eruption
- Anterior teeth
- Dental carve-out plan
- Medical-dental integration
- Hypertension
- Behavioral health
- Acute care
- Palliative care
- Benign
- Remission
- Evidence-based interventions



But it means much more than that



A communication is in **plain language** if it is:

- ▶ worded,
- ▶ structured, and
- ▶ designed to allow the audience to:
 - ✓ *easily find what they need,*
 - ✓ *understand what they find,*
and
 - ✓ *use that information.*

Plain language and trust are linked

“If people don’t understand what we’re trying to explain and why it’s important to them, especially the suggested action steps they should take, they can’t trust us.”

– **Crystal Duran**, Cigna Group, senior advisor

The overriding goal: Build a trusted relationship

- Like or not, we must recognize that people will sometimes encounter health misinformation.
- We should communicate to people in ways that respect their roles and lived experience.
- We should correct myths and fill knowledge gaps while showing respect.



Perceptions matter a lot



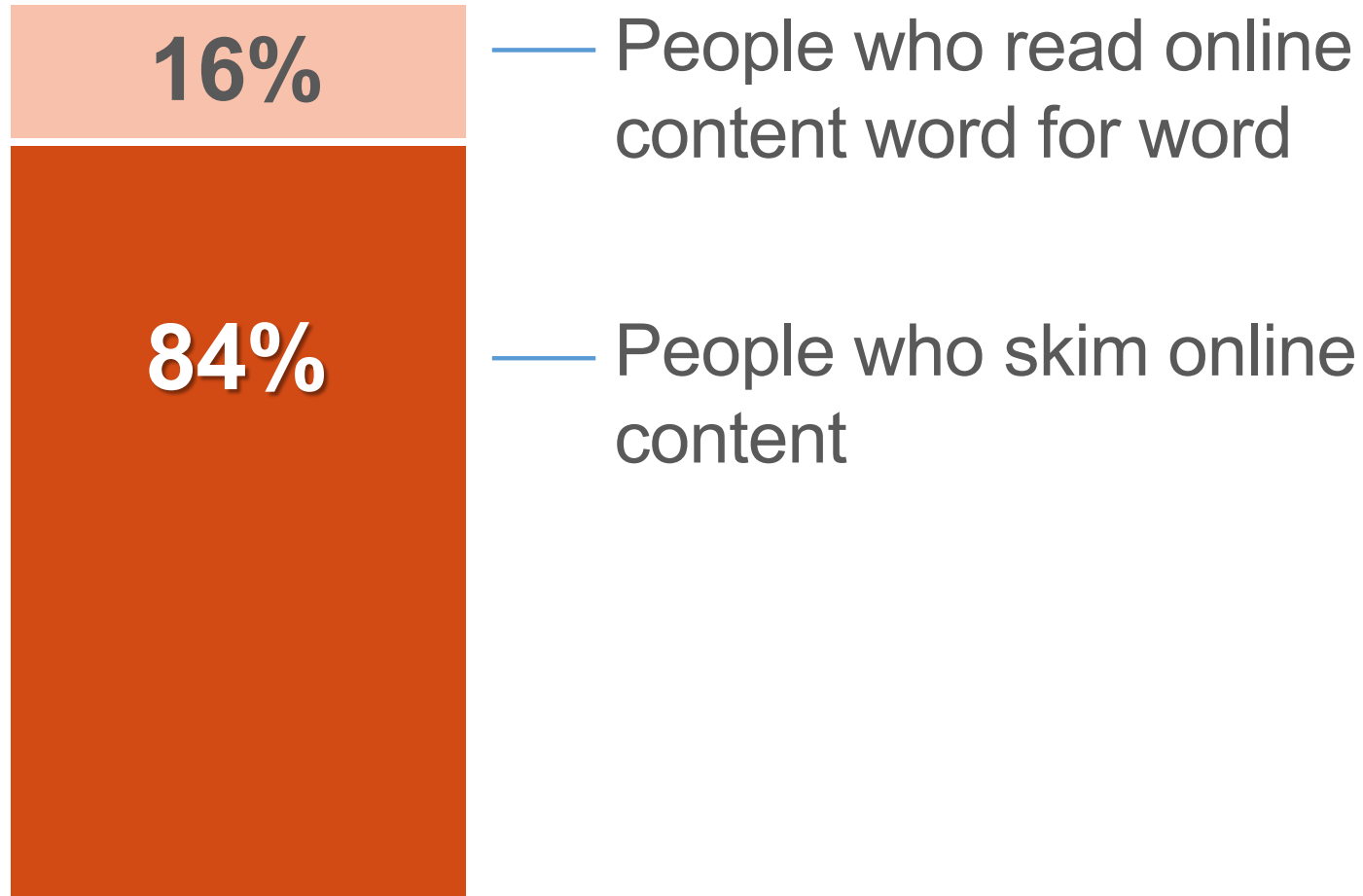
It's not always what we **say** that matters — it's what they **hear**.

One study showed “increased proportions of empathetic statements, question-asking and emotional talk, **positively influence parent satisfaction**” with their child’s doctor “despite the child’s severity of illness.”

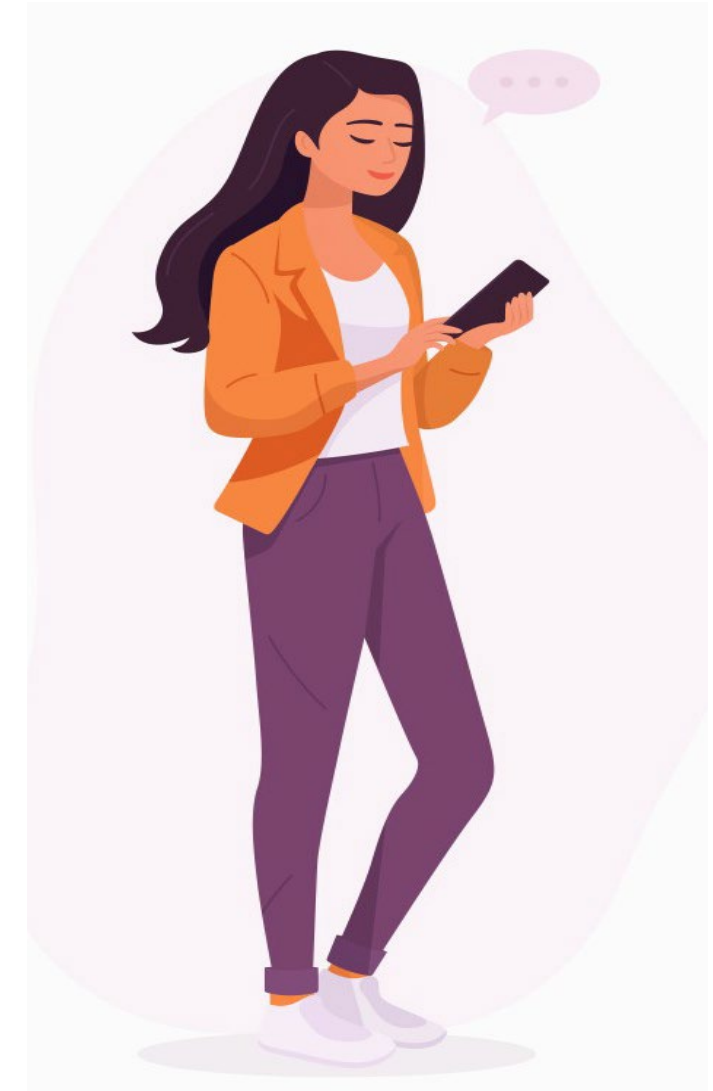
Clear Connections

A challenging landscape for communication

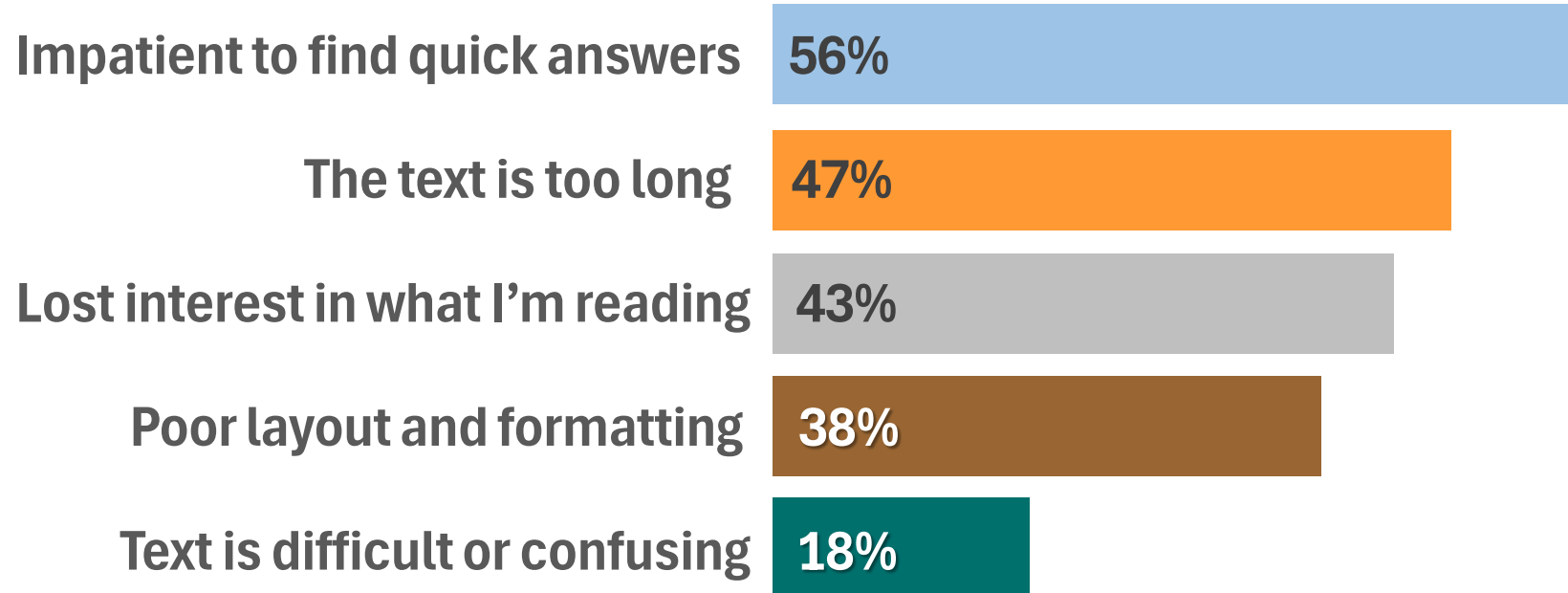
Most people are skimmers, not readers



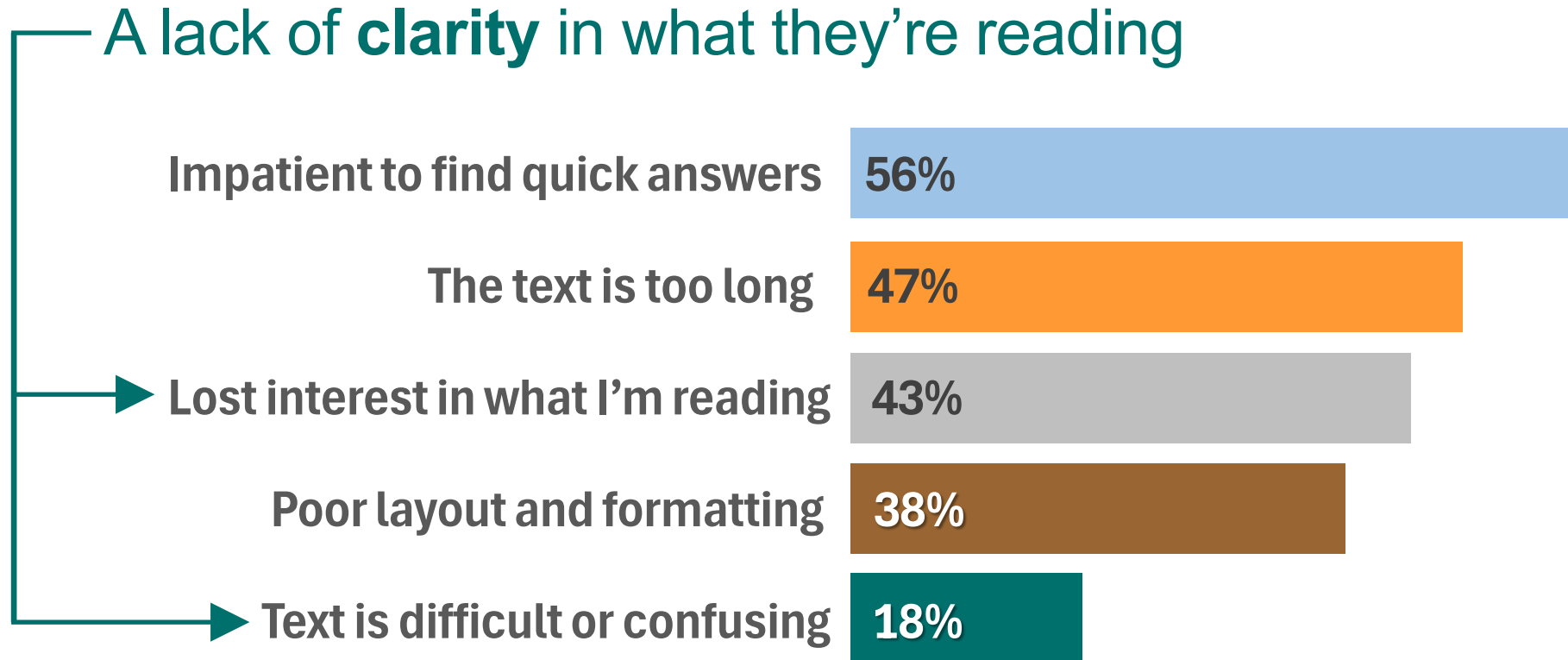
(Source: CXL, 10 Useful Findings About How People View Websites, Feb 23, 2020; Dejan Marketing, Here's why nobody reads your content, Nov 6, 2015.)



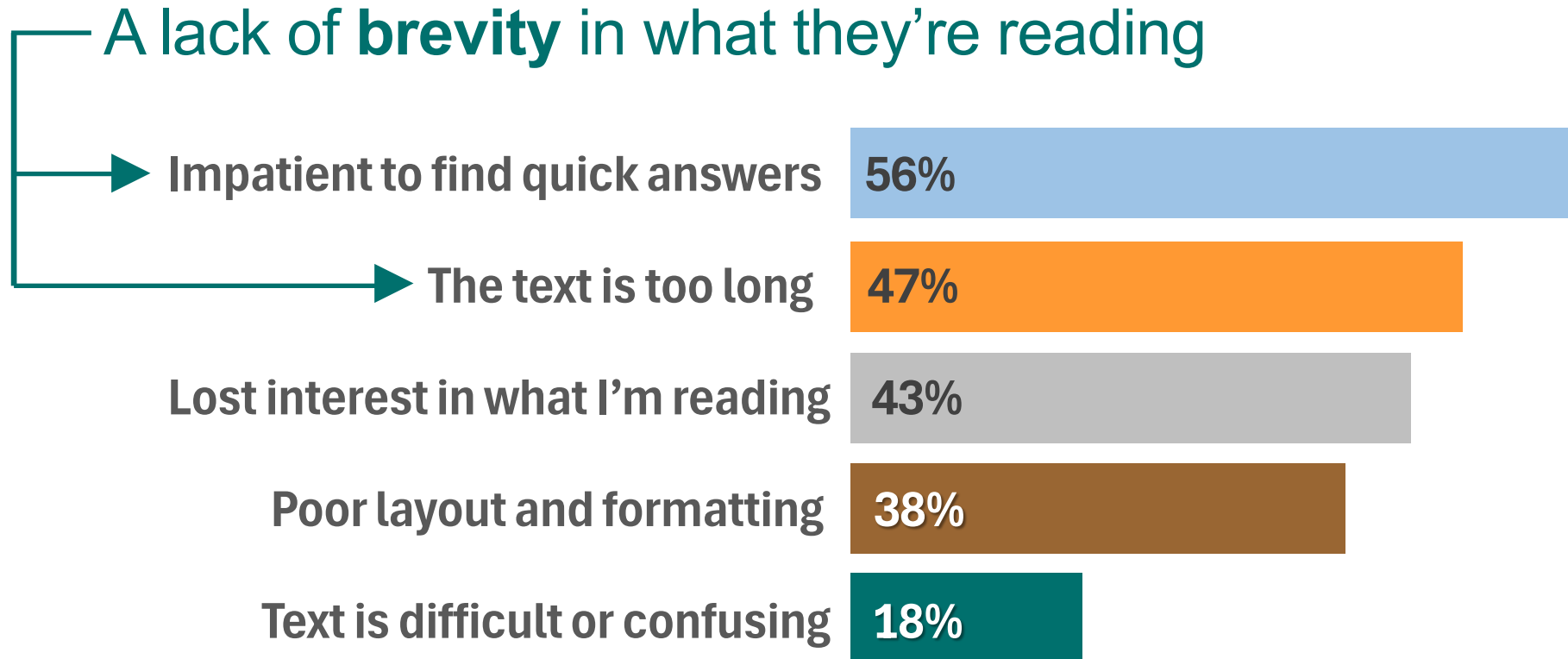
Why do they skim instead of read?



Why do they skim instead of read?



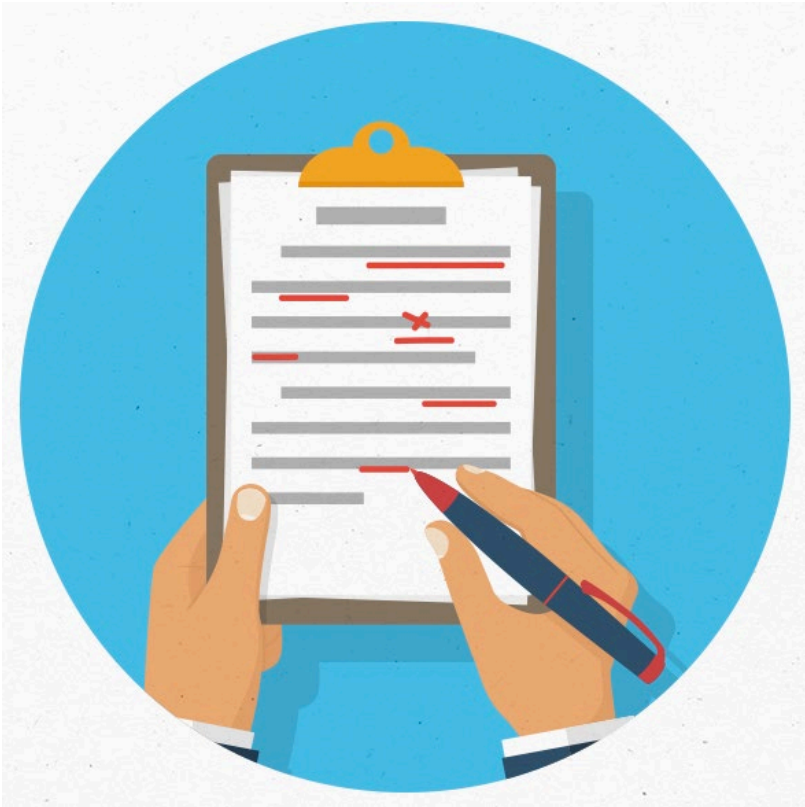
Why do they skim instead of read?



Clear Connections

**Improving
brevity in our
communication**

Brevity matters

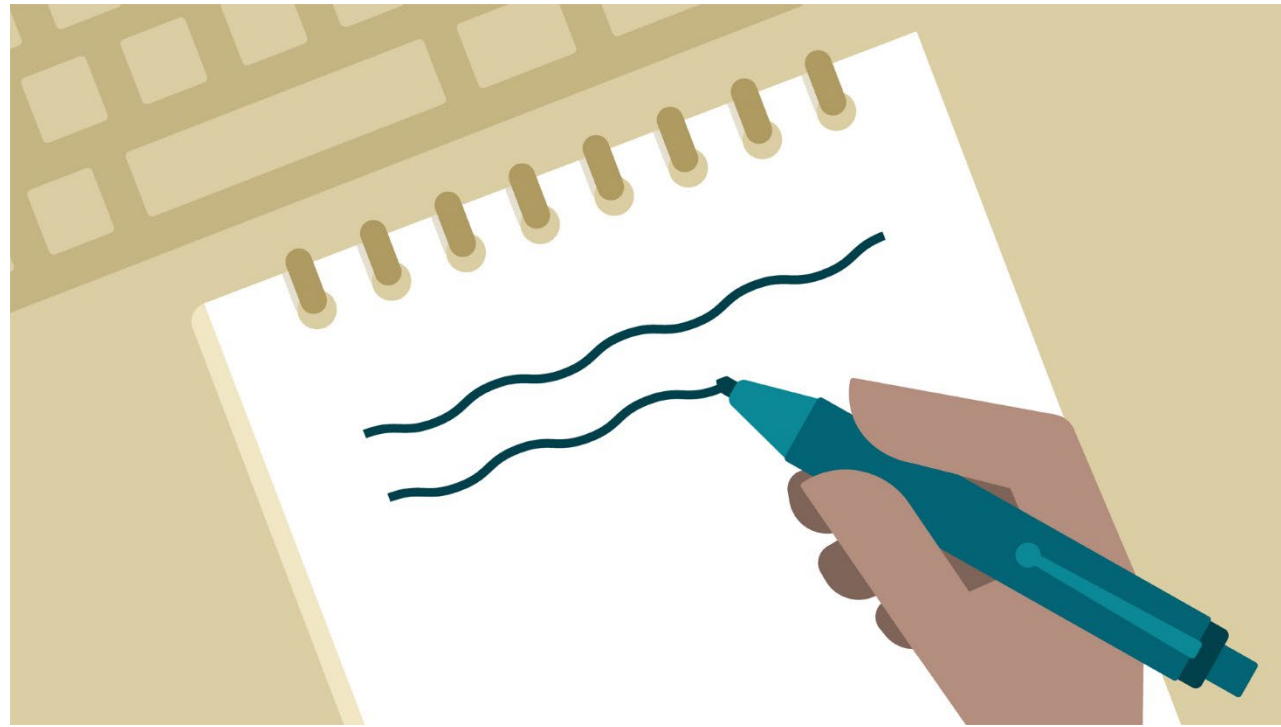


“A sentence should contain no unnecessary words for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts!”

Christopher Dant, PhD
Faculty/consultant to medical schools

Brevity matters

A School of Public Health's writing guide:
“In your writing, every word should have a purpose.”



(Source: The Boston University School of Public Health produced the Public Health Writing Guide. It is accessible at <https://bit.ly/35KdFE8>.)

Avoid redundant words

- COVID-19 created a crisis situation in our nation.
- Social determinants matter in a variety of different ways.
- Our ultimate goal is to contain the coronavirus.
- We must plan in advance what our outreach strategies will be.
- The end result was that the committee tabled the proposal.
- This approach could potentially save money.
- The available dental workforce in our state is insufficient.



Avoid redundant words

- COVID-19 created a crisis situation in our nation.
- Social determinants matter in a variety of different ways.
- Our ultimate goal is to contain the coronavirus.
- We must plan in advance what our outreach strategies will be.
- The end result was that the committee tabled the proposal.
- This approach could potentially save money.
- The available dental workforce in our state is insufficient.



Sometimes, more words are appropriate

Good

“Fluoride protects teeth from tooth decay. It makes the enamel coating on teeth stronger.”

Better

“Fluoride **is a mineral** that protects teeth from tooth decay. It makes the enamel coating on teeth stronger.”



If one word works, stop there

Coalitions **are able to** achieve more than individuals.

Coalitions can achieve more than individuals.

If one word works, stop there

Coalitions **are able to** achieve more than individuals.

Coalitions can achieve more than individuals.

This topic is covered **during the course of** the training.

This topic is covered during the training.

If one word works, stop there

Coalitions **are able to** achieve more than individuals.

Coalitions can achieve more than individuals.

This topic is covered **during the course of** the training.

This topic is covered during the training.

We must begin planning **in order to** open a new regional office.

We must begin planning to open a new regional office.

If one word works, stop there

Coalitions **are able to** achieve more than individuals.

Coalitions can achieve more than individuals.

This topic is covered **during the course of** the training.

This topic is covered during the training.

We must begin planning **in order to** open a new regional office.

We must begin planning to open a new regional office.

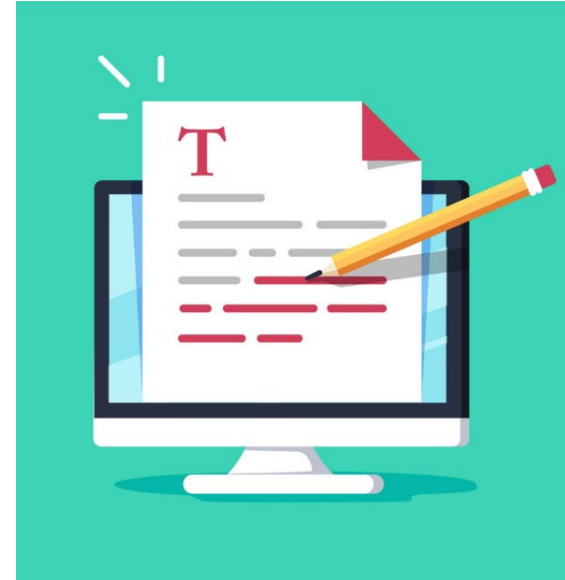
Legislators must **gain an understanding** of the barriers to dental care.

Legislators must understand the barriers to dental care.

**Why sentence
length is very
important**

The problem with long sentences

- Ann Wylie, writing guru and trainer:
“Long sentences decrease understanding.”
- Sentence length is one of the primary factors used by the **Flesch-Kincaid readability test**, which scores the grade level of writing content.



The problem with long sentences

A study by the American Press Institute:

- When the average sentence length is **14 words**, readers understand $\geq 90\%$ of what they've read.
- When a sentence hits **43 words**, readers' comprehension falls below 10%.

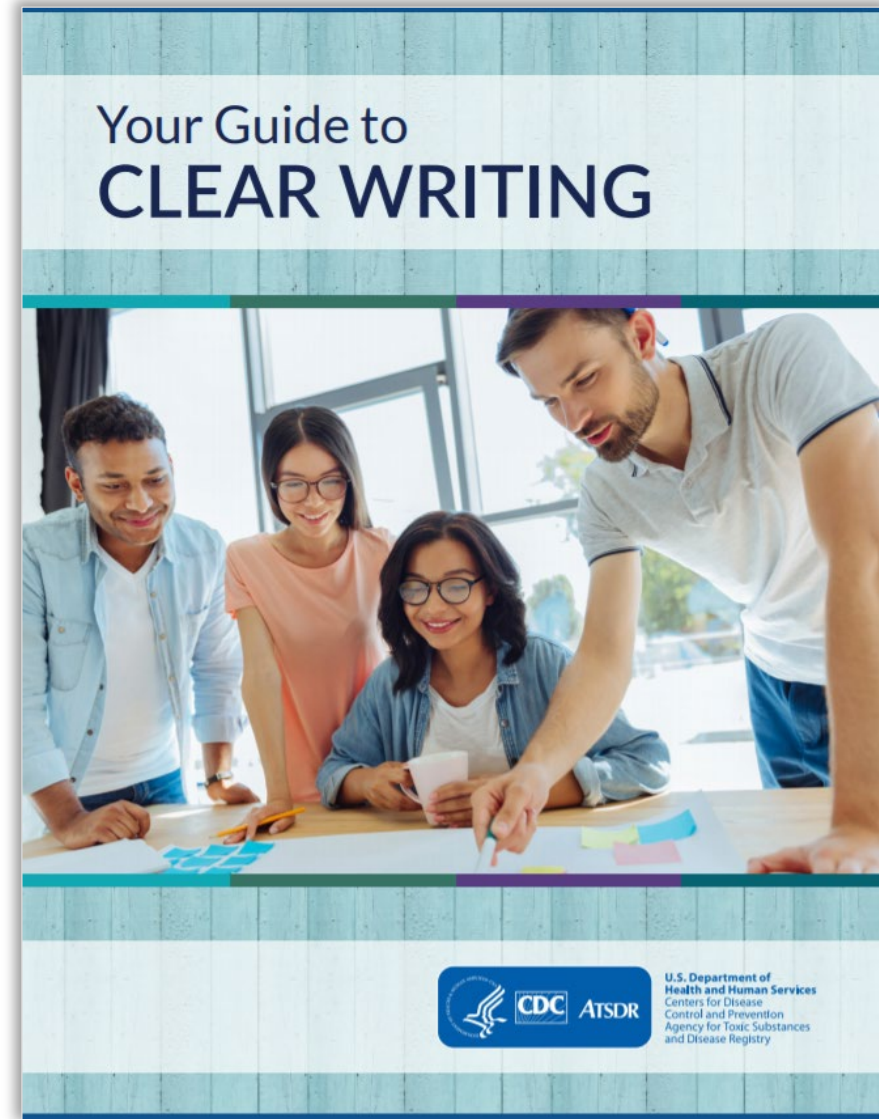


(Source: Ann Wylie, *How to Make Your Copy More Readable: Make Sentences Shorter*, "Public Relations Society of America, 2009; the study was based on readers of more 410 newspapers.)

What the CDC says about sentence length

For fact sheets, web pages and other forms of messaging, the CDC recommends **short sentences** — 20 words or less.

(Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Your Guide to Clear Writing*, 2018; CDC, *Health Communication Playbook*, 2018.)

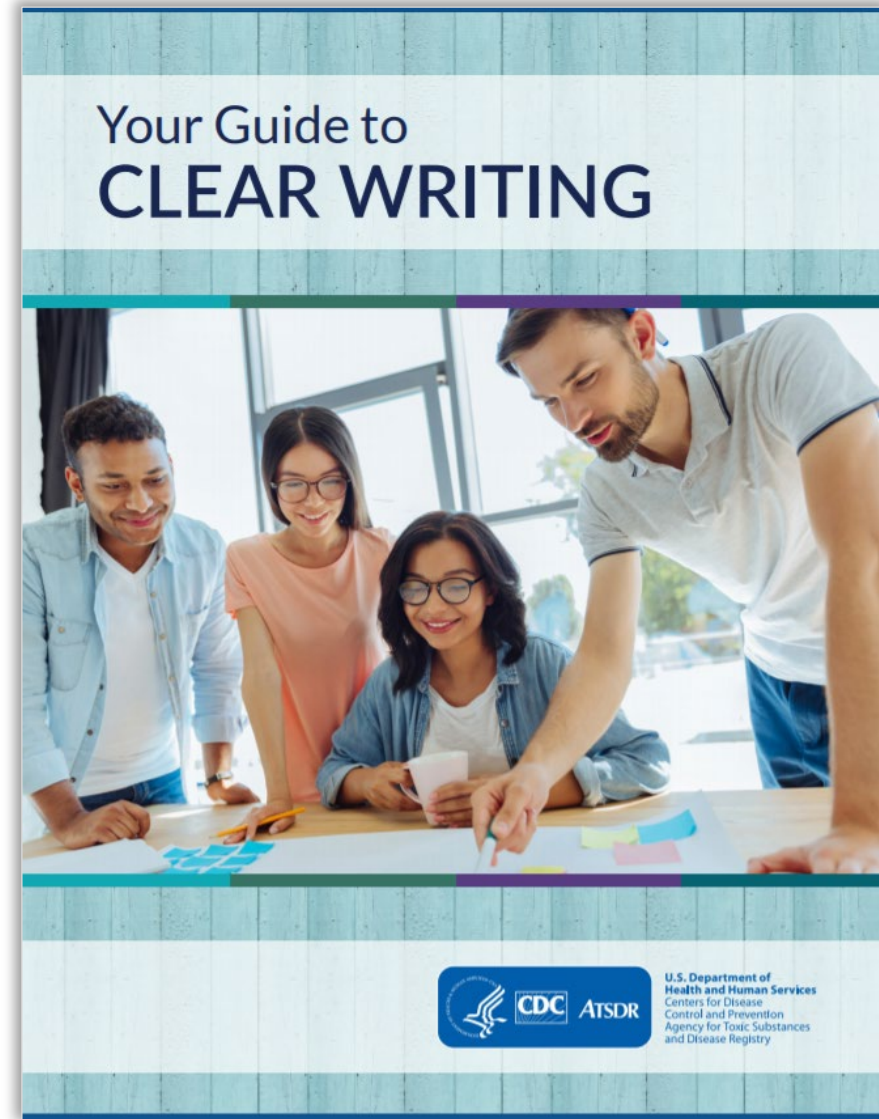


What the CDC says about sentence length

For fact sheets, web pages and other forms of messaging, the CDC recommends **short sentences** — 20 words or less.

“... clear writing is important for everyone — not just audiences that are likely to have limited literacy skills.”

(Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Your Guide to Clear Writing*, 2018; CDC, *Health Communication Playbook*, 2018.)



How small edits affect the grade reading level

Even minor edits can reduce the reading level

We want children to grow up with healthy teeth. Fluoride is a good way to prevent decay in your teeth. Fluoride is found in drinking water and in toothpaste. Both kinds of fluoride are important. The fluoride in water and the fluoride in toothpaste work together. The leading organizations for doctors and dentists say water fluoridation is beneficial.

We know it's important to drink fluoridated water because it has been studied. Some cities in Canada and the United States have stopped adding fluoride to their water. Years later, experts looked at how oral health changed in those cities. They learned that the number of cavities rose a lot after water fluoridation ended. In fact, cavities rose much higher than the number of cavities in other cities that still had fluoridated water.

Reading level:
8th/9th grades

(Source: The grade reading level of this text was tested by using the online tools at ReadabilityFormulas.com. Specifically, we used both the Flesch Reading Ease Test and the Gunning Fog Index.)

Even minor edits can reduce the reading level

We want children to grow up with healthy teeth. Fluoride is a good way to prevent decay in your teeth. Fluoride is found in drinking water and in toothpaste. Both kinds of fluoride are important. The fluoride in water and the fluoride in toothpaste work together. The leading organizations for doctors and dentists say water fluoridation is beneficial.

We know it's important to drink fluoridated water because it has been studied. Some cities in Canada and the United States have stopped adding fluoride to their water. Years later, experts looked at how oral health changed in those cities. They learned that the number of cavities rose a lot after water fluoridation ended. In fact, cavities rose much higher than the number of cavities in other cities that still had fluoridated water.

► What if we combine these two sentences?

Even minor edits can reduce the reading level

We want children to grow up with healthy teeth. Fluoride is a good way to prevent decay in your teeth. Fluoride is found in drinking water and in toothpaste. Both kinds of fluoride work together to protect teeth. The leading organizations for doctors and dentists say water fluoridation is beneficial.

We know it's important to drink fluoridated water because it has been studied. Some cities in Canada and the United States have stopped adding fluoride to their water. Years later, experts looked at how oral health changed in those cities. They learned that the number of cavities rose a lot after water fluoridation ended. In fact, cavities rose much higher than the number of cavities in other cities that still had fluoridated water.

► Let's replace long, multi-syllable words with shorter options

Even minor edits can reduce the reading level

We want children to grow up with healthy teeth. Fluoride is a good way to prevent decay in your teeth. Fluoride is found in drinking water and in toothpaste. Both kinds of fluoride work together to protect teeth. The leading **groups** of doctors and dentists say water fluoridation is **a good thing**.

We know fluoridated water is important because it has been studied. Some cities in Canada and the United States have stopped adding fluoride to their water. Years later, experts looked at how oral health changed in those cities. They learned that the number of cavities rose a lot after water fluoridation ended. In fact, cavities rose much higher than the number of cavities in other cities that still had fluoridated water.

► Let's replace long, multi-syllable words with shorter options

Even minor edits can reduce the reading level

We want children to grow up with healthy teeth. Fluoride is a good way to prevent decay in your teeth. Fluoride is found in drinking water and in toothpaste. Both kinds of fluoride work together to protect teeth. The leading groups of doctors and dentists say water fluoridation is a good thing.

We know fluoridated water is important because it has been studied. Some cities in Canada and the United States have stopped adding fluoride to their water. Years later, experts looked at how oral health changed in those cities. They learned that the number of cavities rose a lot after water fluoridation ended. In fact, cavities rose much higher than the number of cavities in other cities that still had fluoridated water.

► It isn't necessary to name the countries where these cities are.

Even minor edits can reduce the reading level

We want children to grow up with healthy teeth. Fluoride is a good way to prevent decay in your teeth. Fluoride is found in drinking water and in toothpaste. Both kinds of fluoride work together to protect teeth. The leading groups of doctors and dentists say water fluoridation is a good thing.

We know fluoridated water is important because it has been studied. **Some cities** have stopped adding fluoride to their water. Years later, experts looked at how oral health changed in those cities. They learned that the number of cavities rose a lot after water fluoridation ended. In fact, children's teeth were less healthy than the teeth of children in other cities that still had fluoridated water.

► It isn't necessary to name the countries where these cities are.

Even minor edits can reduce the reading level

We want children to grow up with healthy teeth. Fluoride is a good way to prevent decay in your teeth. Fluoride is found in drinking water and in toothpaste. Both kinds of fluoride work together to protect teeth. The leading groups of doctors and dentists say water fluoridation is a good thing.

We know fluoridated water is important because it has been studied. Some cities have stopped adding fluoride to their water. Years later, experts looked at how oral health changed in those cities. They learned that the number of cavities rose a lot after water fluoridation ended. In fact, children's teeth were less healthy than the teeth of children in other cities that still had fluoridated water.

Reading level:

These three edits dropped it from the 8th/9th grades to the 7th grade

Fewer syllables are better

Water is the only **beverage** your child should drink after brushing their teeth before bed.

Water is the only **drink** your child should have after brushing their teeth before bed.

Fewer syllables are better

Water is the only **beverage** your child should drink after brushing their teeth before bed.

Water is the only **drink** your child should have after brushing their teeth before bed.

The largest **organization** of pediatricians supports water fluoridation.

The largest **group** of pediatricians supports water fluoridation.

Fewer syllables are better

Water is the only **beverage** your child should drink after brushing their teeth before bed.

The largest **organization** of pediatricians supports water fluoridation.

A new study **demonstrates** that diet has a big impact on a child's risk of cavities.

Water is the only **drink** your child should have after brushing their teeth before bed.

The largest **group** of pediatricians supports water fluoridation.

A new study **shows** that diet has a big impact on a child's risk of cavities.

Replying to key questions about oral health

Using fluoride toothpaste

Q-1: “Do we really need to drink fluoridated water if our family brushes with fluoride toothpaste?”



Using fluoride toothpaste

Q-1: “Do we really need to drink fluoridated water if our family brushes with fluoride toothpaste?”

Start here:

The fluoride in water and the fluoride in toothpaste are both important. They work together — much like seatbelts and air bags work together in a car.

Using fluoride toothpaste

Q-1: “Do we really need to drink fluoridated water if our family brushes with fluoride toothpaste?”

Start here:

The fluoride in water and the fluoride in toothpaste are both important. They work together — much like seatbelts and air bags work together in a car.

Analogies can make it easier for people with moderate-to-low health literacy to understand complicated concepts.

Using fluoride toothpaste

Q-1: “Do we really need to drink fluoridated water if our family brushes with fluoride toothpaste?”

Start here:

The fluoride in water and the fluoride in toothpaste are both important. They work together — much like seatbelts and air bags work together in a car.



Add more details:

Here’s one way we know that water fluoridation protects teeth. Some cities stopped adding fluoride to their water. Years later, experts looked at oral health in those cities and saw that children got a lot more cavities. Using fluoride toothpaste by itself wasn’t enough to prevent cavities.

The NTP report

Q-2: “My cousin wrote on Facebook that toxicology experts say fluoridation lowers IQ scores. Is that true?”



The NTP report

Q-2: “My cousin wrote on Facebook that toxicology experts say fluoridation lowers IQ scores. Is that true?”

Start here:

The report by the Toxicology Program has created a lot of confusion. It found a link between fluoride and lower IQs. But the report was about areas of the world where the fluoride level is *more than double* the amount that's in our tap water.

The NTP report

Q-2: “My cousin wrote on Facebook that toxicology experts say fluoridation lowers IQ scores. Is that true?”

Start here:

The report by the Toxicology Program has created a lot of confusion. It found a link between fluoride and lower IQs. But the report was about areas of the world where the fluoride level is *more than double* the amount that's in our tap water.

This is better than starting off by directly challenging or disagreeing.

It shows respect by noting that many people have struggled to understand the report's takeaways.

The NTP report

Q-2: “My cousin wrote on Facebook that toxicology experts say fluoridation lowers IQ scores. Is that true?”

Start here:

The report by the Toxicology Program has created a lot of confusion. It found a link between fluoride and lower IQs. But the report was about areas of the world where the fluoride level is *more than double* the amount that’s in our tap water.

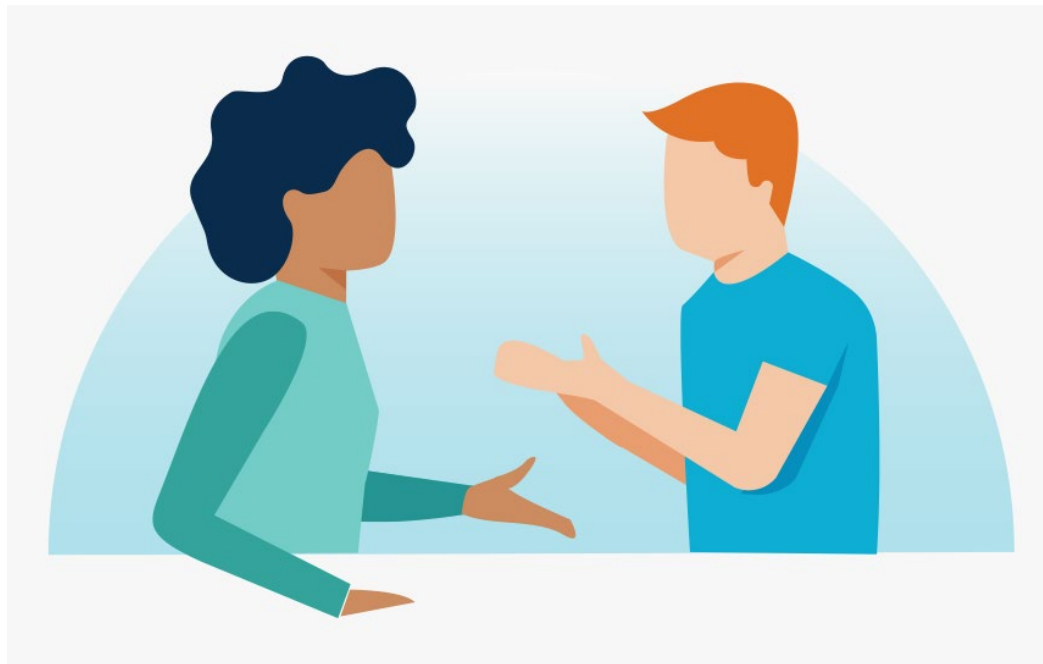


Add more details:

Most of the studies in that report came from China and India. Those countries have some areas where the natural amount of fluoride in water is very high — way higher than we ever see in our community.

Topical versus systemic benefits

Q-3: “I understand how the fluoride in toothpaste helps my child’s teeth. But what’s the benefit of swallowing it?”



Topical versus systemic benefits

Q-3: “I understand how the fluoride in toothpaste helps my child’s teeth. But what’s the benefit of swallowing it?”

Start here:

Great question! The fluoride that is swallowed creates stronger teeth even as they start forming below the gums. That means that once they appear in your child’s mouth, they are less likely to get tooth decay.

Topical versus systemic benefits

Q-3: “I understand how the fluoride in toothpaste helps my child’s teeth. But what’s the benefit of swallowing it?”

Start here:

Great question! The fluoride that is swallowed creates stronger teeth even as they start forming below the gums. That means that once they appear in your child’s mouth, they are less likely to get tooth decay.

This is a simple way to let them know you welcome their questions and appreciate their interest.

Topical versus systemic benefits

Q-3: “I understand how the fluoride in toothpaste helps my child’s teeth. But what’s the benefit of swallowing it?”

Start here:

Great question! The fluoride that is swallowed creates stronger teeth even as they start forming below the gums. That means that once they appear in your child’s mouth, they are less likely to get tooth decay.



Offer more details:

Many new teeth will form and enter your child’s mouth in the coming years. That makes fluoride in water really important for your child.

Responding to more intense concerns

Q-4: “I’m too scared to allow my child to get fluoride from water or toothpaste. Why should I take any chance?”



Responding to more intense concerns

Q-4: “I’m too scared to allow my child to get fluoride from water or toothpaste. Why should I take any chance?”

Start here:

Don’t feel scared. Lots of research shows that the amount of fluoride in water is safe for people to drink.

Responding to more intense concerns

Q-4: “I’m too scared to allow my child to get fluoride from water or toothpaste. Why should I take any chance?”

Start here:

Don't feel scared. Lots of research shows that the amount of fluoride in water is safe for people to drink.

Don't trivialize their feelings or make them feel they need your permission to feel scared.

This language would make it harder to build a trusted relationship with Head Start staff and families.

Responding to more intense concerns

Q-4: “I’m too scared to allow my child to get fluoride from water or toothpaste. Why should I take any chance?”

Start here:

I understand. Some of the recent news about fluoride has raised a lot of questions. Let me share what I know and also suggest a website where you can find good information. That should help you make a good decision for your family.

Responding to more intense concerns

Q-4: “I’m too scared to allow my child to get fluoride from water or toothpaste. Why should I take any chance?”

Start here:

I understand. Some of the recent news about fluoride has raised a lot of questions. Let me share what I know and also suggest a website where you can find good information. That should help you make a good decision for your family.

Much better. It is empathetic, and it recognizes how they could feel that way — without saying you too are scared.

Responding to more intense concerns

Q-4: “I’m too scared to allow my child to get fluoride from water or toothpaste. Why should I take any chance?”

Start here:

I understand. Some of the recent news about fluoride has raised a lot of questions. Let me share what I know and also suggest a website where you can find good information. That should help you make a good decision for your family.

Much better. It is empathetic, and it recognizes how they could feel that way — without saying you too are scared.

Present yourself as a resource: 1) without giving “instructions” and 2) acknowledging that the decision is theirs.

Responding to more intense concerns

Q-4: “I’m too scared to allow my child to get fluoride from water or toothpaste. Why should I take any chance?”

Start here:

I understand. Some of the recent news about fluoride has raised a lot of questions. Let me share what I know and also suggest a website where you can find good information. That should help you make a good decision for your family.



Then mention this:

Almost anything can be harmful if someone consumes too much of it in a short time. For example, iron and fluoride are both minerals. They can be toxic at very high levels, but they keep our bodies healthy at normal levels.

Responding to more intense concerns

Q-4: “I’m too scared to allow my child to get fluoride from water or toothpaste. Why should I take any chance?”

Start here:

I understand. Some of the recent news about fluoride has raised a lot of questions. Let me share what I know and also suggest a website where you can find good information. That should help you make a good decision for your family.



Consider adding:

The largest group of pediatricians in America has looked into the recent news about fluoride. That group says it still sees fluoridated water as an important and safe way to prevent cavities.

I welcome your questions or comments

Matt Jacob

My LinkedIn profile:

[LinkedIn.com/in/mattjacobpublichealth/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/mattjacobpublichealth/)



Links to CE Certificates

Live: <https://survey.alchemer.com/s3/8131842/f6bfc7c2ded5>

Recorded: <https://survey.alchemer.com/s3/8131842/4df533c907e3>

Check out CE Smart from ADHA!

https://mymembership.adha.org/ce_smart#

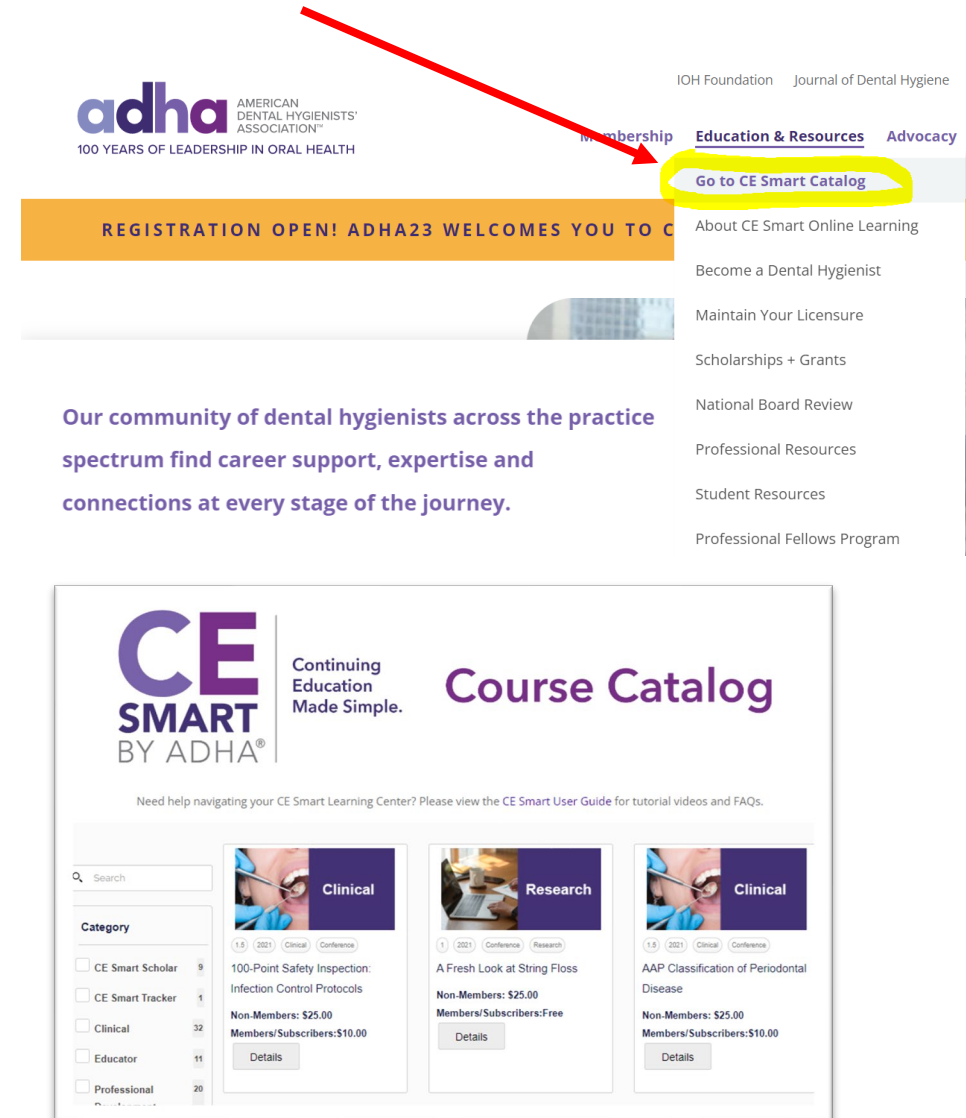
All ADHA members have access to:

- Unlimited access to FREE and highly discounted CE
- FREE CE Smart Tracker (\$30 value) to track all the credits you earn from all sources
- Expert-led courses and webinars on trending topics, with an always-growing course catalog
- On-demand access with high-level content ready when you want it.

Non-ADHA members have access to all the same content and the CE Smart Tracker!

- Courses are priced individually based on the number of CEs provided.

Questions?
Email education@adha.net



The screenshot shows the ADHA website header with the logo and navigation menu. The 'Education & Resources' menu item is highlighted, and the 'Go to CE Smart Catalog' link is circled in yellow. A red arrow points from the top of the page to this link. Below the header, there is a banner for 'REGISTRATION OPEN! ADHA23 WELCOMES YOU TO C' and a section titled 'Our community of dental hygienists across the practice spectrum find career support, expertise and connections at every stage of the journey.' The main content area features the 'CE SMART BY ADHA' logo and the text 'Continuing Education Made Simple. Course Catalog'. Below this, there is a search bar and a category filter. The course catalog displays three course cards: '100-Point Safety Inspection: Infection Control Protocols' (Clinical), 'A Fresh Look at String Floss' (Research), and 'AAP Classification of Periodontal Disease' (Clinical). Each card shows the course title, category, and pricing for non-members and members/subscribers.