

# Massachusetts Trial Court

## Readability Guidelines for Printed Self-Help Materials and Forms

### Content

1. Assume fifth grade or lower literacy in English. Use spell check in Word or another tool to determine reading level.
2. Use the active voice. "Submit the form vs. The form should be submitted"
3. Use a question and answer format to introduce information in directions and in self-help materials.
4. Write questions as if the court user is asking them. For example, "How do I lower my child support?"
5. Write answers as if you are speaking directly with the court user: "You may file a Complaint for Modification."
6. Define difficult legal terms; do not eliminate them.
7. Define legal information and legal advice in self-help materials. You may use the question and answer format: "What should I do?"  
"This question asks for legal advice. Ask a lawyer for legal advice about your situation."
8. Discuss only one topic per question, paragraph, section or directions.
9. Use gender-neutral language, such as "she/he" or "the person" or use the plural "they."
10. Date all documents.
11. Locate, remove and replace outdated documents.
12. Announce new or revised documents to internal and external court users.
13. Create a glossary of legal terms.

### Appearance and Format

14. Use simple, easy-to-read headings.
15. Use two columns for self-help materials.
16. Use easy-to-read, simple fonts like Arial, Verdana or Helvetica.

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17. Use a 16-or-18-point font for headings, titles and questions. Use 12-or-14-point font for other text.
18. Spacing is important. Use 1” margins and space between questions and answers.
19. Use graphics as much as possible.
20. Use *italics* only for emphasis or foreign words.
21. Avoid using all CAPITAL LETTERS.
22. Avoid adding information in parentheses.
23. **Bold** the legal terms in the documents that you have included in the glossary.
24. Keep document to 1-2 pages with 300 words per page. If a document is longer than 2 pages, consider if it would be easier to understand as two or more shorter documents.
25. If the document is longer than 2 pages, then insert page numbers on all pages, except for page 1.
26. If the document is longer than 2 pages, then include the name of the document on each page.
27. Print double-sided.
28. Put a header on page 1 with the name of the document.
29. For self-help materials put a footer on every page with the following information:
  - “This brochure gives information not legal advice. Ask a lawyer for legal advice about your situation.”
  - The name of the person or committee who wrote the document;
  - the date; and
  - the URL, if applicable.
30. For online materials consult these standards and implement these measures where possible.

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31. If the document is written in any language other than English, write the above footer information in English, including the name of the document and the language of the translation.
32. Add a disclaimer at the end of the document to advise readers that some court departments or divisions have different local rules or procedures. For example, “Be sure to ask what forms you need to submit and what procedures you need to follow in (specific) court.”

### Input and Field Test

33. Get input and field test the draft forms and self-help materials before finalizing them. Include court staff and members of the public who are likely to use them.
34. Seek advice from language and culture experts before finalizing forms and self-help materials to ensure that both the legal concepts and choice of words will translate accurately.