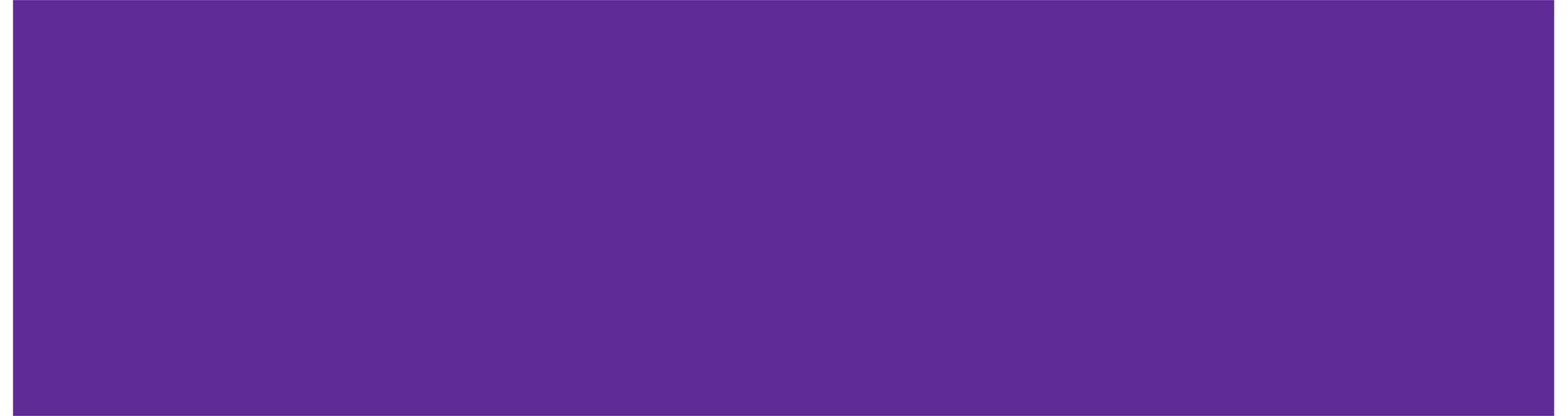# Plain Language for Non-Profits/Government

Presented by Autistic Self Advocacy Network

**SARTAC wants to thank the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind for providing interpreters for this event**

# What is Plain Language? Why is it important?

# What is Plain Language?

- Plain Language is a style of writing that uses **cognitively-accessible** language

- **Cognitive accessibility** means that your writing is easily understandable by anybody, **including** people with different intellectual and developmental disabilities

- We'll talk about the specific features of Plain Language writing in a little bit

# Why is Plain Language important?

- People with disabilities should have **equal access** to information

- You can write about any topic in plain language, even topics that are very technical or complex

- Ideally *all* writing would be cognitively accessible or have a cognitively accessible version available, but this is **especially** critical when writing on topics that **directly involve or impact** disabled people!

- Remember: nothing about us, without us!

# Plain Language writing is a skill

- It is often a skill of *un*learning

- A lot of us have learned to adapt to and incorporate cognitively-*inaccessible* ways of writing. Some examples:

  - Writing for school, where we learn to be more wordy in order to hit word counts

  - Academia, where a certain level of inaccessibility is equated with credibility

  - Professional settings, where euphemisms and roundabout ways of writing can be seen as more "professional"

- Like all skills, it's one you can work on and improve

# Features of Plain Language

# Overview: Features of Plain Language

1.  Shorter sentences & paragraphs

2.  Uses more common words

3.  Gives definitions for important, more complex terms/jargon

4.  Uses examples to help readers understand ideas in a more concrete way

5.  Avoids unnecessary information

6.  Uses clear & straightforward language

7.  Uses active voice instead of passive voice

**Overview**: **Features of Plain Language**

- **Guideline:** What's the rule?
- **Reason:** Why is that the rule?
- **Tips:** How can I follow the rule?
- **Example:** What does the rule look like in practice?
- **Activity:** Try applying the rule

# #1: Shorter sentences & paragraphs

**Guideline:**

Sentences should be 10-15 words long. Paragraphs should be 5-7 sentences or fewer.

**Reason:**

Long sentences and paragraphs can be inaccessible to some readers. Readers might lose track of the point of the sentence or paragraph by the time they get to the end.

# #1: Shorter sentences & paragraphs

**Tips:**

- Look for parts of the sentence that are set off by commas, parentheses, or dashes. These can often be turned into their own sentences.

- Look for joining words like "and". Can the part after the "and" be its own sentence?

- Look for phrases that can be shortened: "in order to" can just be "to", "due to the fact that" can just be "because", etc.

# #1: Shorter sentences & paragraphs

**Example:**

Bob usually ate breakfast; that morning, he chose to skip breakfast, because he knew he'd end up being late for his doctor's appointment if he took too long. (28 words)

vs.

Bob usually eats breakfast in the morning. (7) That morning, Bob chose not to have breakfast. (8) Bob skipped breakfast so he could make it to his doctor's appointment on time. (14)

# #1: Shorter sentences & paragraphs: Activity

**Activity:**

There are 77 community areas (also known as neighborhoods) in the city of Chicago, including Little Village, a predominantly Mexican area on the West side of the city; Hyde Park, the home of the University of Chicago on the south side; and Rogers Park, the furthest area to the north of the city. (53 words)

# #1: Shorter sentences & paragraphs: Activity

**Re-write example:**

There are 77 community areas in Chicago. (7) The community areas are also known as neighborhoods. (8) One of the neighborhoods is Little Village. (7) Little Village is a mostly Mexican neighborhood. (7) It's on the west side of Chicago. (7) Another neighborhood is Hyde Park. (5) Hyde Park is on the south side. (7) Hyde Park is where the University of Chicago is. (9) Another neighborhood is Rogers Park. (5) Rogers Park is the neighborhood furthest to the north of the city. (12)

———

# #2: Uses more common words

**Guideline:**

Use common words to explain ideas instead of more unusual words.

**Reason:**

Using common words makes it more likely that your reader will understand what you're saying without needing a dictionary. If your reader has to look up words in a dictionary in the middle of a sentence, their focus is interrupted. This makes reading comprehension more difficult.

# #2: Uses more common words

**Tips:**

- Use Thesaurus.com to find different words that mean the same thing
- Be on the lookout for simple ideas explained in a roundabout or complicated way. "The outside top part of a house" doesn't use any complicated *words*, but it would be much easier to understand if it just said "roof"

# #2: Uses more common words

**Examples:**

The task is **laborious** → The task is **difficult**

His glasses have **convex** lenses → His glasses have **lenses that curve outwards**

I'll **attempt** to **assist** her → I'll **try** to **help** her

# #2: Uses more common words: Activity

**Activity:**

Sam was cognizant of the fact that her place of employment necessitated that she arrive punctually. If by happenstance she experienced a belated arrival, she could get penalized.

———

# #2: Uses more common words: Activity

**Re-write example:**

Sam knew that she needed to get to work on time. If she happened to get to work late, she could get in trouble.

___

# #3: Gives definitions for important, more complex terms/jargon

**Guideline:**

When there is a more complex term that you want to keep intact for your reader, define the term and give an example if necessary.

**Reason:**

Giving the definition of a complex term when you use it lets the reader understand the term without needing a dictionary. It lets the reader get familiar with a term they might see in other contexts.

# #3: Gives definitions for important, more complex terms/jargon

**Tips:**

- The definition should come right after the first time you use a complex term.
  - You don't have to repeat the definition every time you use the term after that.
- Your definition can be multiple sentences.
- If a term has multiple meanings, you don't have to define all the ways it can be used. You just have to define the way you're using it.

# #3: Gives definitions for important, more complex terms/jargon

**Example:**

You should avoid using jargon unless it's an important specific word or phrase that the reader needs to understand. "Jargon" means complex, technical wording that only certain groups would automatically understand. An example of jargon would be lawyers using terms like *res judicata* or *a priori*.

# #3 Gives definitions for important, more complex terms: **Activity**

Some people with disabilities live in **institutions**.

___

# #3 Gives definitions for important, more complex terms: Activity

Some people with disabilities live in institutions. Institutions are places where a lot of disabled people live. People living in institutions were usually put there by someone else, and did not decide to live there. Institutions are run by the people who work there, not by the people living there. People living in institutions usually can't leave when they want to, or spend their free time ~~how~~ they want to.

# #4: Uses examples

**Guideline:**

When explaining an idea that readers might not have experience with, you can write an example about a fictional person to help illustrate the idea. Your example should be in the third-person point of view, rather than second-person.

**Reason:**

Examples help readers to better understand the content by "walking in someone else's shoes". It makes ideas more concrete instead of abstract.

# #4: Uses examples

**Tips:**

- Make sure your examples clearly illustrate the situation you're describing.
  - "You could order food for delivery" → "Janet calls a local restaurant. She orders a pizza for delivery. The restaurant will bring the pizza to Janet's house."

# #4: Uses examples

**Example:**

Topic: Homelessness

**Second-person:** If you were homeless, you might try and call the local shelter, but they might not have a bed for you.

vs.

**Third-person:** Jim is homeless. He does not know where he can sleep tonight. He tried calling the local shelter. Jim asked the shelter if they had a bed he could sleep in. But the shelter did not have a bed for him.

# #4: Uses examples: Activity

**Second-person:** You might want to contact your elected officials about an important issue. You could call the office of your elected official and tell them how you feel about the issue.

# #4: Uses examples: Activity

**Third-person:** Congress is going to vote on a bill about getting rid of all the sidewalks. Kristen thinks it is a bad idea to get rid of all the sidewalks. Kristen decides to call her member of Congress to tell them what she thinks. Kristen calls the office and tells them that she uses the sidewalk to get around every day. She tells them that getting rid of the sidewalks would mean she has to walk in the street, which would be dangerous. Kristen asks her member of Congress to vote "no" on the bill.

# #5: Avoids unnecessary information

**Guideline:**

Leave out any information that isn't needed to explain your main points. This applies to both sentences and paragraphs.

**Reason:**

Unnecessary information distracts the reader from the main points of your writing. Including unnecessary information can be confusing and make it hard for the reader to keep track of what they're reading.

# #5: Avoids unnecessary information

**Tips:**

- First, figure out what the main point of the sentence or paragraph is

- Make a list of the different pieces of information in the sentence or paragraph. For each one, ask: "so what?"Does the information make the main point clearer?

# #5: Avoids unnecessary information

**Example:**

The people of Chicago are used to wearing many layers because temperatures during the winter months can drop extremely low.

vs.

It gets very cold in Chicago during the winter.

# #5: Avoids unnecessary information: Activity

There are lots of good things about having a pet dog. Dogs can make you happier. Dogs can help you be more active. Dogs can alert you to danger. Some people prefer cats to dogs. There are also good things about cats.

___

# #5: Avoids unnecessary information: Activity

There are lots of good things about having a pet dog. Dogs can make you happier. Dogs can help you be more active. Dogs can alert you to danger. ~~Some people prefer cats to dogs. There are also good things about cats.~~

___

# #6: Uses clear language

**Guideline:**

Watch out for using words like "this," "they," or "it" when it might not be clear what or who you're talking about. In these instances, it is better to say the subject again, or divide the sentence into two sentences.

**Reason:**

If the reader isn't sure what "this", "they", or "it" is referring to, it can be difficult to keep track of what's going on in the text.

# #6: Uses clear language

**Tips:**

- For every pronoun, check how many subjects the pronoun could be referring to.

- Make sure you always clearly mention the subject before using a pronoun to refer to it later

# #6: Uses clear language

**Example:**

Sarah works at a grocery store, and this is how she makes money.

vs.

Sarah works at a grocery store. Sarah makes money by working at the grocery store.

# #6: Uses clear language: Activity

**Activity:**

Charlie is interviewing for a job at Big Company, Inc. The interview is with Bob and Alice. They ask them if they have any questions about their mission statement.

———

# #6: Uses clear language: Activity

**Re-write example:**

Charlie is interviewing for a job at Big Company, Inc. The interview is with Bob and Alice. Bob and Alice ask Charlie if Charlie has any questions about Big Company Inc.'s mission statement.

———

# #7: Uses straightforward language

**Guideline:**

Avoid using metaphors, sarcasm, and figures of speech like idioms.

**Reason:**

People with IDD may not always understand metaphor, sarcasm, or other figures of speech. Avoiding these ways of writing can make any document more accessible.

# #7: Uses straightforward language

**Tips:**

- Read each sentence literally. Figure out if there are ways your language could be misunderstood if the words were taken at face value.
    - "The building was like a mountain towering over the city." → The building was… snowy? Shaped like a mountain?  Prone to avalanches? Made of rocks?

# #7: Uses straightforward language

**Example:**

It was the last thing he wanted.

vs.

He really didn't want it.

**Example:**

Some people with ADHD say their brains are like wild horses.

vs.

Some people with ADHD say their brains are tough to control.

# #7: Uses straightforward language: Activity

Rashida was as stressed as a snowman in the Sahara. She was inches away from a work deadline and realized she'd been barking up the wrong tree about a problem in one of her projects. Rashida already felt adrift in a sea of work, and now she'd have to go back to the drawing board.

———

# #7: Uses straightforward language: Activity

Rashida was extremely stressed. She had a work deadline coming up and realized she'd been looking in the wrong place for solutions to a problem she had. Rashida already felt overwhelmed by the work she had to do. Now, she'd have to start all over trying to solve the problem she'd been having.

# #8: Uses active voice instead of passive voice

"Passive voice" means that instead of there being a subject **doing** an action in the sentence, the subject is just **receiving** the action being done by someone or something else.

**Guideline:**

Use active voice instead of passive voice.

**Reason:**

Sentences written in the passive voice are longer and have a more complex structure. Sentences written in the active voice are more direct and easier to understand.

# #8: Uses active voice instead of passive voice

**Example:**

Passive: The bill will be read by Congress.

Active: Congress will read the bill.

# Identifying passive voice with the Zombie Test

The bill will be read by Congress. → The bill will be **read**

- The bill will be **read** BY ZOMBIES!
- Still makes sense - it's passive.

Congress will read the bill. → Congress will **read**

- Congress will **read** BY ZOMBIES!
- Doesn't make sense - it's active!

# #8: Uses active voice instead of passive voice: Activity

My first trip out of the country will always be remembered. Many memories were made. Next summer, a trip will be taken again. I hope that interesting sights will be seen.
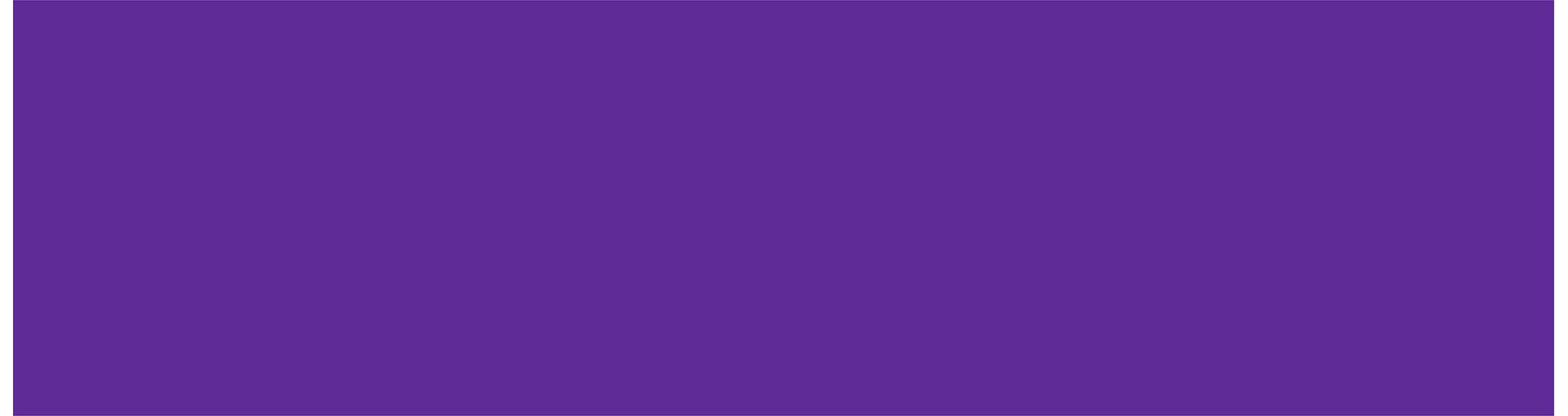
___

# #8: Uses active voice instead of passive voice: **Activity**

I will always remember my first trip out of the country. I made many memories. Next summer, I will take a trip again. I hope that I will see interesting sights.

___

# Translating into Plain Language

# Overview

1. Plain language must have the same information as the original source

2. Making a new outline

3. Defining vs. replacing terms

4. Checking reading level

# Plain Language version **must** have the same information as the original source

# Plain Language must have the same information

- It will likely have additional sentences that further explain and clarify the information from the original source

- The point of translating something into PL is to **broaden the audience that has access** to the original information, so it's important that you don't leave out certain parts.

- If you leave out some parts, you're **not giving your audience equal access** to the information.

# Start by making a new outline

- Starting with a complex document means you'll need to break it down into smaller parts.

- You can start with making a new outline that condenses the main ideas in your original document.

- Creating this outline can also help you fill in the information "gaps" that you may have in your original document.

- You may need to flesh out concepts that were not fully explained in the original version.

# Defining vs. replacing terms

Two ways of handling complex terms: defining or replacing with more common words

**Keeping:** We will usually keep terms that readers are **likely to encounter again** outside of our document.

- For example, you might decide that "affordable housing" is a commonly-used phrase in housing policy, so you could define it.

**Replacing:** Less common terms are better off being replaced.

- For example, a document on natural disasters could rephrase a less-common term, like "emergency management," to something simpler. Someone could reword this phrase to say "dealing with an emergency". Then, they could define what an emergency is in the context of a natural disaster.

# Defining vs. replacing terms

- When we keep complex terms, we also make sure to include the terms and their definitions in a "Words to Know" section
- "Words to Know" sections should have all the important terms from the document

**deficit**

When the government spends more money than it gets from taxes.

**discretionary spending**

Money the government can only spend when a budget bill is passed.

# Checking reading level

- Reading level scores reflect **how easy it is to read a piece of text**. Reading level takes into account word difficulty, sentence and paragraph length, sentence structure, and other factors.

- Plain language documents should be **6th-8th grade** reading level **or lower**

- There are lots of websites that can check the reading level of a document. We primarily use Hemingway and Readable

**Hemingway** *Editor*

**R readable**

# Checking reading level

- All reading level checkers score reading level using a group of scales. These scales can show a wide range of reading level scores for the same content.

- It is generally easiest to take the average of all of these scores as your overall reading level. You should also go through the document and check places that the websites flag as being less accessible.

  - Some of these flags may be for reasons that don't matter. For example, flagging adverbs.

  - Other times, these flags may be a good hint to shorten a sentence or change a word.

# Checking reading level: Readable

All reading level checkers score reading level using a group of scales. These scales can show a wide range of reading level scores for the same content.

It is generally easiest to take the average of all of these scores as your overall reading level. However, you should also go through the document and check places that the websites flag as being less accessible.

Some of these flags may be for reasons that don't matter. For example, many readability checkers flag adverbs as being difficult to understand, even though our readers have never had trouble with them.

Other times, these flags may be a good hint to shorten a sentence or change a word.

| GRADE | ISSUES | REACH | WORDS |
|---|---|---|---|
| B | 3 | 100% | 114 |

**Readability Grade Levels**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ☺ | Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level | 8.0 |
| ☺ | Gunning Fog Index | 10.0 |
| ☺ | Coleman–Liau Index | 9.5 |
| ☹ | SMOG Index | 10.3 |
| ☺ | Automated Readability Index | 8.4 |
| ☺ | FORCAST Grade Level | 10.0 |

# Checking reading level: Hemingway

**Hemingway** *Editor*

**Readability**

Grade 8

Good

*Words:* 115

Show More ▼

All reading level checkers score reading level using a group of scales. These scales can show a wide range of reading level scores for the same content.

It is generally easiest to take the average of all of these scores as your overall reading level. However, you should also go through the document and check places that the websites flag as being less accessible.

Some of these flags may be for reasons that don't matter. For example, many readability checkers flag adverbs as being difficult to understand, even though our readers have never had trouble with them.

Other times, these flags may be a good hint to shorten a sentence or change a word.

**0** adverbs. Well done.

**0** uses of passive voice. Nice work.

**3** phrases have simpler alternatives.

**1** of 7 sentences is hard to read.

**1** of 7 sentences is very hard to read.

# Checking reading level: Pre-defined words

Reading level checkers can't tell when you've defined a complex word - they just see a complex word. The checker also doesn't know what words your readers will already know.

Often times, even words like "disability" have thrown off our scores and made them higher!

To get more accurate scores, we'll replace certain words or phrases with shorter placeholders, like "apple" or "banana"

# Checking reading level: Pre-defined words

The House and the Senate both have a lot of small groups, called committees. Committees pay special attention to different topics, like education or the army. The committee that pays attention to how to spend the money in the budget is called the Appropriations Committee. The House and the Senate both have their own Appropriations Committees.

| GRADE | ISSUES | REACH | WORDS |
|---|---|---|---|
| B | 5 | 94% | 56 |

Readability Grade Levels

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ☺ Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level | 8.8 | ☆ |
| ☺ Gunning Fog Index | 9.9 | ☆ |
| ☹ Coleman–Liau Index | 11.8 | ☆ |
| ☹ SMOG Index | 12.6 | ☆ |
| ☺ Automated Readability Index | 9.4 | |

# Checking reading level: Pre-defined words

The House and the Senate both have a lot of small groups, called bananas. Bananas pay special attention to different topics, like education or the army. The banana that pays attention to how to spend the money in the budget is called the Apple Banana. The House and the Senate both have their own Apple Bananas.

| GRADE | ISSUES | REACH | WORDS |
|-------|--------|-------|-------|
| A | 3 | 100% | 56 |

**Readability Grade Levels**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ☺ | Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level | 7.6 |
| ☺ | Gunning Fog Index | 9.9 |
| ☺ | Coleman–Liau Index | 8.3 |
| ☹ | SMOG Index | 11.7 |
| ☺ | Automated Readability Index | 6.6 |

# Checking reading level: Pre-defined words

# Re-write activity: Support in college

As more autistic individuals enter higher education across the United States, college campuses have begun to explore how to best facilitate the success of these students. Many campuses have created support programs specifically for autistic students; however, there are no universal standards for what kinds of support these programs should provide. (Grade level: 13.5)

# Re-write activity: Support in college

As more autistic individuals enter higher education across the United States, college campuses have begun to explore how to best facilitate the success of these students. Many campuses have created support programs specifically for autistic students; however, there are no universal standards for what kinds of support these programs should provide. (Grade level: 13.5)

The number of autistic people going to college is going up. Colleges have started thinking about how to help these students succeed. Many colleges have made support programs for autistic students. The programs give different kinds of support. Some programs don't give the same kinds of support as other programs do. The colleges don't all agree on what kind of support is best. (Grade level: 5.9)