

Introducing Plain Language

Plain language is an approach to communication that begins with the needs of the reader. When you use plain language:

- What you write is determined by your purpose for writing
- How you write is determined by your audience's reasons for reading and their reading skills

Plain language matches the needs of the reader with your needs as a writer, resulting in effective and efficient communication. It is **effective** because the reader can understand the message. It is **efficient** because the reader can read and understand the message the first time.

Unless you write clearly and directly, with the needs of your audience in mind, your readers may be left with more questions than answers.

Difficult texts cause more:

- misunderstandings
- errors
- complaints
- enquiries
- staff time lost to problem solving.

There are many misconceptions about plain language. Plain language is not a simplified style of writing. It involves more than replacing jargon and complex language with shorter sentences and familiar words. Plain language looks at the whole message - from the reader's point of view. Clear writing, effective organization and inviting presentation are all keys to creating readable, informative documents.

PLAIN LANGUAGE WRITING:

- reaches people who can not read well or who don't have time to read well
- helps all readers understand information
- avoids misunderstandings and errors
- saves time, because it gets the job done well the first time.

Q: So far, plain language writing seems to be more like a course in communications than a course in writing. The Communications Sector in our Department looks after communications. Why should I learn this?

A: We all need to be good communicators. Plain language writing is an approach to writing that helps us make our writing clear and simple and more accessible to readers. Plain language writing is not a few rules on grammar and sentence structure. It is an attitude or approach to writing that will help you write better, no matter what type of document you are writing

Your Reader and Your Purpose

Plain language writing focuses on the needs of the reader. Instead of cramming in every bit of information the writer wants to share, the plain writer considers:

- what needs the reader has
- what information is essential
- how it can be organized and expressed most clearly.

The focus on the reader is central to plain language writing. Everything - from the tone you use to your choice of vocabulary, from document style to document testing and revision - flows from the belief that you must write for the reader.

Putting the readers' needs first can be hard when you are used to writing from your own perspective. Ask yourself a series of questions that will help you focus your writing and get your message across most effectively.

Who is your audience?

Your document may have only one reader, for example a supervisor. Or, your document may have many readers. For example, they may be employees with different jobs who work in one department, or the general public.

Your audience may be made up of readers of all ages, or of one age group. A pamphlet for, teens for example, may be read by 13 to 19 year olds.

Your document may be read by someone waiting in line or by someone who is annoyed with you. Your reader may be very busy or emotionally upset.

Are you writing only for professionals? Is your document intended for working Canadians, seniors, or members of specific cultural groups? Is English or French their second language? Are their reading skills universally low or high?

Look at the characteristics most of your readers share. Decide on the most important audience for your document. Do some research to find out more about your readers.

An advantage to all this work early on in the writing process is that it can help you clarify how you should distribute your document.

Also remember that your readers are probably less familiar with your subject than you are. Keep this in mind as you write. It will help you decide what the reader needs to know instead of what you want to write.

Why are you writing this document?

Are you writing about something completely new? Give your reader all the background information needed to understand. Try to link the new information to things the reader may already know.

Are you trying to change people's behavior? Make sure you mention how even small changes can bring

benefits that are important to your reader.

Is the document a "how-to" text? Be sure it includes any background information needed to understand your instructions.

It may be hard to single out one purpose. But, a document with one primary focus is more likely to communicate its message effectively.

Here are some examples of the purposes documents can have:

- to report
- to ask
- to inform
- to influence
- to explain

What do you want to say

Focus on what your reader wants and needs to know. Don't try to say more than you have to. Your readers' needs and wants should determine what information gets the most emphasis in your document.

How will your reader use this information?

How people use your document will help you decide how to organize the information in it.

- Will your document be a quick reference tool?
- Will your reader find your document in a display?
- Is your reader supposed to do something after reading the document?
- Is the reader supposed to remember certain information?
- Is the reader supposed to agree with your point of view?

The answer to these questions affects how you present information. If you want your reader to come to a meeting, then the date and time of the meeting might be the first thing in the document. Information about the agenda and the other participants might be of secondary importance.

Try this:

Consider the characteristics of the readers in the following scenario.

Their department has been undergoing some reorganization. Some people in their sector will be moving to a new sector. Some new people will be joining their sector and some others will be laid off.

You have been asked to write a note to staff explaining these changes. How will these characteristics affect what you write?

Other resources online:

Writing *User-Friendly* Regulations - (U.S. National Performance Review)

["Engage Your Readers"](#)

["Identify Your Audience"](#)

The Plain Language Center in British Columbia

[The Plain Language Process](#)

Q:How can I find out more about my readers?

A:It may be possible to have telephone or in-person interviews with a few readers to gain a better understanding of their needs. Talk with staff who deal with the public. They'll know a lot about the public's information needs.

Using Appropriate Words

Words are symbols for what we perceive with our senses. They communicate what we think, feel and do. The more complex the idea or thought, the more difficult it is to express it precisely in words.

Plain language writing emphasizes the use of the clearest words possible to describe actions, objects and people. That often means choosing a two-syllable word over a three-syllable one, an old familiar term instead of the latest bureaucratic expression and sometimes, several clearer words instead of one complicated word.

Your choice of words should be based on what will be clearer for your reader. If you're not sure, ask. Test out your document with some of the people who are likely to use it. To help you draft easy to understand documents, here are some guidelines on your choice of words.

Use Simple, Everyday Words

Use simple, familiar words instead of unfamiliar words.

Write as if someone is asking you what you mean. If you are writing for a diverse audience, sometimes you must be an interpreter as well as a writer.

Here are a few examples of simple words and phrases you might substitute:

Instead of:	Use:
accomplish	do
ascertain	find out
disseminate	send out, distribute
endeavor	try
expedite	hasten, speed up
facilitate	make easier, help
formulate	work out, devise, form
in lieu of	instead of
locality	place
optimum	best, greatest, most
strategize	plan
utilize	use

Cut out unnecessary words

Here is a sample list of some alternative words for common, wordy expressions:

Instead of:	Use:
with regard to	about
by means of	by
in the event that	if
until such time	until
during such time	while
in respect of	for
in view of the fact	because
on the part of	by
subsequent to	after
under the provisions of	under
with a view to	to
it would appear that	apparently
it is probable that	probably
notwithstanding the fact that	although
adequate number of	enough
excessive number of	too many

Avoid using jargon

Using jargon can cause problems because your reader may not understand it. Also be wary of trendy, fashionable expressions such as "level playing field", "downtime" and "touch base". The fact that they are trendy will also mean that they will soon date your writing. Avoid them.

Instead of:

You will receive reactivation and assistance consistent with your requirements.

Use:

You will get the amount of help you need.

Avoid or explain technical words

Whenever possible, avoid words that your readers do not know. Every occupation and interest group has special terms. These terms become a problem only when you can't distinguish between terms that are necessary work tools and terms that are jargon.

If you must use a technical term define it - either by giving a definition or by giving an example.

Glossaries are more difficult to use if they are placed at the end of a book or booklet. Try placing a box defining the words on the same page as where the word is first used.

Instead of:

Economic espionage may be defined as the illegal or clandestine acquisition of critical Canadian economic information and technology by foreign governments or their surrogates

-Canadian Security Intelligence Service Public Report, 1992

Use:

Economic espionage means foreign governments or their agents illegally obtaining critical Canadian economic and technological secrets.

Don't change verbs into nouns

Nouns created from verbs are hard for the reader to understand and give the sentence an impersonal tone. When you write a noun that is derived from a verb, see if you can turn it back into a verb.

Instead of:

The *requirement* of the department is that employees work seven and one-half hours a day.

Use:

The Department *requires* employees to work seven and one-half hours a day.

Instead of:

You will work on the *establishment* of goals for the hiring, training and promotion of designated group employees.

Use:

You will *establish* goals for hiring, training and promoting employees from designated groups.

Avoid chains of nouns

Chains of nouns are strings of two or more nouns used to name one thing. They are often difficult for a reader to understand.

Noun chains take some effort to untangle. They lack connecting words such as **of, for, about, in** and the possessive's, that would clarify how the nouns relate to each other.

Instead of:

World population is increasing faster than world food production

Use:

The world's population is increasing faster than its food production.

Choose your words consistently

Be consistent in what you call something. Avoid using two or more names for the same thing.

Do not be afraid to repeat the same word or the same idea if it is important.

Use acronyms carefully

Acronyms are formed from the first letter of words which they represent. Remember that not everyone may know what the letters stand for. Put the acronyms in brackets the first time you use the proper term. Then you can use the acronym in the rest of your text.

Some acronyms like U.S.A. or R.C.M.P. may be so well known that they need no explanation.

But, when in doubt, spell it out.**Try this:**

In the following examples, circle the words that you think would create problems for readers and then rewrite the sentence using the principles of plain language just reviewed.

1. Prior to completing the application the applicants should determine if their qualifications meet the requirements of the program.
2. The acquisition, operation and disposal of vehicles can be significantly improved.
3. In our present circumstances, the budgetary aspect is a factor which must be taken into consideration to a greater degree.
4. Timeliness of response, which usually depends on the proximity of rescue resources to incidents, is a critical factor in saving people in distress.
5. Where a cheque is tendered in payment, the name of the corporation must be entered on the face of the cheque.

Other resources online:

U.S. National Performance Review

["Simpler Words and Phrases"](#)

Writing *User-Friendly* Regulations

["Avoid Words and Constructions that Cause Confusion"](#)

The Plain Language Center in British Columbia

[Writing for real people](#)

Q:How can I incorporate technical language into the plain language process?

A:Technical words should be explained in the text by either a definition or an example if there is even a remote chance that the reader may not understand.

Clear and Simple Sentences

Here are some guidelines:

- Don't overload sentences.
- Use active sentences.
- Keep sentences short.
- Keep sentences simple.
- Avoid ambiguity in your sentences.
- Emphasize the positive.
- Avoid double negatives.

Good writers build ideas from sentence to sentence. The simple, declarative sentence is the easiest way to process information. Sentences that differ from that simple structure may cause readability problems.

Write in the active voice

If you leave out the subject, the sentences are harder to understand. Using the active voice clarifies the sentence and the readers' understanding.

Instead of:

Citizenship cannot be renounced merely by making a personal declaration to this effect.

Use:

You cannot renounce your citizenship merely by making a personal declaration.

Instead of:

In early April, all applications will be reviewed by the committee.

Use:

The committee will review all applications in early April.

Keep it Short

Readers can only take in so much new information at one time. Some people recommend that sentences should average 15 words in length and that no sentence should be longer than 25 words. This rule is not hard and fast, however. Readers can understand longer sentences if they are well constructed and use familiar terms. A variety of sentence lengths make your writing most interesting.

Instead of:

This policy does not appear to be well understood by line management in the region, even though this group has primary responsibility for implementing the policy.

Use:

The regional managers who are most responsible for carrying out this policy do not seem to understand it well.

Instead of:

The parameters of your responsibility are included in the job description you received on your initial day of work at the association.

Use:

Your responsibilities are listed in your job description. You received your job description the first day you worked here.

Link your ideas

Don't shorten sentences by leaving out words such as **that**, **which**, and **who**. Use these words to link the ideas in a sentence and make the meaning clearer for your reader.

Instead of:

The driver of the truck passing by told the officer in the cruiser the car he saw hit the little girl in the intersection was red.

Use:

The driver of the truck told the officer in the cruiser that as he was passing by, he saw a red car hit the little girl in the intersection.

Avoid ambiguity

When a pronoun is used there should be no doubt as to which noun it represents.

Instead of:

Michelle researched and wrote the speech herself, which everyone thought was impressive.

Use:

Everyone was impressed with the speech that Michelle researched and wrote herself.

Adverbs and adverbial phrases also need to be placed properly to avoid confusion. If improperly placed, the adverbs **only**, **even**, **both**, **merely**, **just**, **also**, **mainly**, **in particular** and **at least** can cause confusion.

Instead of:

Supervisors and staff are required to both participate in orientation sessions and department seminars.

Use:

Supervisors and staff are required to participate both in orientation and in department seminars.

Emphasize the Positive

Positive sentences are inviting and encourage people to read on. Negative sentences can seem bossy or hostile. They can cause your readers to mistrust your words and often discourage people from reading on.

Instead of:

If you fail to pass the examination, you will not qualify for admission.

Use:

You must pass the examination to qualify for admission..

However, negative phrasing is appropriate for emphasizing dangers, legal pitfalls, or other warnings. You can also use negative phrasing to allay fears or dispel myths.

Avoid double negatives

It isn't enough to remember that a double negative makes a positive. We avoid writing, "I don't know nothing about it," if we mean that we know nothing about it. But, watch out for two or more negative constructions in a sentence.

Instead of:

He was not absent.

The procedure will not be ineffective.

It was never illegitimate.

Use:

He was present.

The procedure will be effective.

It was always legitimate.

Avoid unnecessary preambles

Unnecessary preambles can weaken or hide the point they introduce.

Here is a list of some unnecessary preambles:

- It is important to add that...
- It may be recalled that...
- In this regard it is of significance that...
- It is interesting to note that...

Try This

Review the following sentences. Identify the problem or issue from the point of view of clear and effective sentences. Then, rewrite the sentence.

1. Illiterate adults are not able to read most work written for adults. Most illiterate adults are, however, adult thinkers. Nevertheless, they are often unable to carry out democratic tasks like voting. They are, however, fully capable of making decisions required for such tasks.
2. It is hoped that this directory will provide a valuable resource for all our business people.
3. At the same time, the economic approach pursued by this study to highlight the importance of volunteer work does not imply that organized volunteer work should be regarded as a commercial economic activity, as this term is normally not misunderstood.

Other resources online:

**Writing *User-Friendly Documents*
(U.S. National Performance Review)**

"Use Short Sentences"

"Use Active Voice"

Rapport

A Crash Course in Plain Language

Q: Isn't writing that is made up of only short sentences boring to read? Won't it sound too choppy?

A: Yes. The point is to use shorter and simpler sentences more often than long, complex ones. Obviously you will want to adjust your sentences so that they flow easily.

Clear and Effective Paragraphs

Limit each paragraph to one idea unless you are linking related points. If you are comparing old and new, for example, it makes sense to bring them together in one paragraph. Complicated information, or a discussion of several ideas, generally needs to be broken up into separate paragraphs to be easily understood.

Keep it simple

Sometimes you need to use a paragraph instead of just a few sentences to make your message clear. The clearest isn't always the shortest.

Instead of:

Plateauing or career blockage refers to structural barriers to career advancement arising due to a combination of age imbalances and a static or contracting workforce.

Use:

"Plateauing" or "career blockage" refers to the lack of opportunities for public servants to be promoted to the executive level. This problem arises because there is a large number of public servants who have many years to work before they retire and because the size of the public service is being reduced. For these reasons there are fewer openings available at higher levels. Another way to break up blocks of information and draw the readers' attention to important elements is to use a question-and-answer format. This will help your reader, find information that is important to them.

Use transitions

A transition is a word, phrase, sentence or paragraph that shows the relationship between two or more parts of your writing. They help your writing move smoothly from idea to idea, sentence to sentence, section to section. Transitions help the reader understand the relationships that are familiar to you.

If you find that you have one or two favorite transition words, you may be trying to compensate for poorly organized text. Use transition words when you need them, but avoid overusing them.

Put parallel ideas in parallel constructions

Whenever a paragraph includes a series of similar items, make sure that all the items are in the same form. Describe each item using similarly constructed phrases. For example, use the same tense for all verbs that describe listed items.

Instead of:

Going on vacation?

inform a neighbor of your departure...

your neighbor should pick up your newspapers...

small valuables should be stored...

use clock timers that activate lights...

before leaving, ensure all entries are secured...

Use:

Going on vacation?

inform a neighbor of your departure

have your neighbor pick up newspapers

store small valuables

use clock timers that activate lights

secure all entries before leaving

Use point form and lists appropriately

You can make parallel points clear and easy to remember by using tabulation or a dropped list. Each item in the list is preceded by a bullet or a number. Bullets or numbers draw the readers attention and separate the items better than dashes.

Here are some guidelines for tabulation:

- The items in the list must form a logical group.
- Each item should contain only one idea.
- Each item should work separately with the lead in to form a complete sentence.
- Put anything common to all items in the lead in.
- Use bullets to identify each item in the list.
- Use numbers instead of bullets only when you are describing step-by-step procedures.
- If bullets are used, all items in the list should begin with a lower case letter.
- Use commas or no punctuation. Put a period after the last item if it is the end of the sentence.
- If the list consists of alternatives, put "or" after the second to last item.
- If the list is inclusive, put "and" after the second to last item.

Try this

For the following paragraph, identify the problem or issue from the point of view of clear and effective paragraphs. Then, rewrite the paragraph.

Exploring the Community

The advantage of this is that its demands are based on day-to-day experience, that its scope is flexible, and that it allows the teacher to gain a full measure of insight into parents' lives. The first task is to explain to students that the community is its people and then to have them list family members and to go home and gather stories and objects which their parents consider to be of special significance. The objects should be displayed and the stories shared. Once this has been done parents should be invited to come and elaborate or to tell new stories themselves. The project can end at this point with family portraits, family trees, family histories, travel journals, biographies etc. It can, however be expanded to take in the entire neighborhood. In this case, it may culminate in the preparation of street maps, the drawing up of bar graphs (on the relationship between one- and two-story houses in a five-block section, for instance), the making of models of places of interest, the recording of interview with local businessman, the consideration of local concerns, the production of neighborhood directories or tourist guides. Parents can take part in all these ventures - helping to make contacts for research purposes, accompanying groups or individuals on measuring or sketching expeditions, acting as guides for field trips to churches, synagogues, stores and restaurants, finding materials, giving advice. They can be invited to view

work in progress or at the time it is complete.

Other resources online:

Writing *User-Friendly Documents*
(U.S. National Performance Review)

"Divide Your Material Into Short Sections"

"Limit Each Paragraph to One Topic"

Design

Spacing

- Keep paragraphs no more than four or five sentences.
- Leave space between paragraphs.
- Divide your documents into sections of related information.
- Don't print on every inch of space on your page.
- Be generous with margin space.
- Use left justified and right ragged margins.

Headings

Use clear and consistent style for headings and subheadings.

Highlighting

- Use boxes to separate key information from the rest of your text.
- Use bullets for point form lists.
- Use italics to emphasize a phrase or word.
- Underline titles.
- Use color or shaded areas to set text apart.

Table of contents

Make a table of contents for long documents. Use an Introduction section in shorter documents. This helps readers find the information they are looking for. It is especially helpful for people with low reading skills.

Type style and size

Choose a solid, plain typeface which is easy to read. Don't combine more than three different typefaces on the same page because it will give a busy, confusing appearance.

Make sure the typeface is big enough for your readers. Ten point is the minimum size to use. Consider that some people may prefer a larger type size. Twelve point is a good size for most writing.

Don't use all capital letters as they are harder to read.

A serif typeface makes text easier to read because it leads your eye from letter to letter. A sans serif typeface is good for titles because it draws your eye down into the body of the text. Some

examples of serif fonts are:

- New York
- Palatino
- Times Roman
- Schoolbook
- Courier.

Color of ink and paper

- Use dark ink (blue or black) on light paper - white or cream.
- Avoid color combinations with low contrast like yellow on white.
- Avoid large passages of light print on a black background.

Graphics and Illustrations

Use graphics with caution. Make sure that they mean the same thing to your reader as they do to you. Ask people who would be using your document to look over the choice of graphics and illustrations. Don't use too many graphics.

Place all graphics and illustrations as close as possible to the text they refer to. Place them on the page in a way that does not interrupt normal reading patterns.

Make sure all graphics and illustrations are clear and the captions are easy to read. Be wary of using charts to explain information. People with poor math skills can find charts hard to understand.

Try this:

Collect several samples of documents used within your organization. Look at the material and identify examples of effective and ineffective presentation of information. Compare these against the guidelines presented here.

Other resources online:

Writing *User-Friendly Documents*
(U.S. National Performance Review)
["Write in a Visually Appealing Style"](#)
["Use If-Then Tables"](#)

Rapport: Design
[Revise for your readers: Layout and design](#)

The Plain Language Center in British Columbia
[Layout and design principles applied](#)



More Information

Congratulations on completing the Plain Language Online Training Program! It is now time to disembark from the train. Before you go, consider the following:

Give your friends a souvenir of your trip! Click [HERE](#) for the Plain Language Document Checklist that summarizes this training program.

Where is the train heading next? We are considering additional modules on Plain Language Legal Writing, Plain Language and Literacy, and Plain Language in Education. Send us mail on what you would like to see.

And don't forget to send us a letter and tell us how your trip went. Send your comments to plain@web.net.

Other resources online:

**Writing *User-Friendly* Regulations
(U.S. National Performance Review)**

["Table of Contents"](#)

The Plain Language Online Center

[Introduction to Plain Language](#)

The Plain Language Center in British Columbia

[Resources and Links](#)

Rapport: Plain Language

[Plain Language Resources and Links](#)

Plain Language Checklist

Area	Activity	Completed?
Audience	Who are my readers	<input type="checkbox"/>
	What do my readers already know	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Why will they read this	<input type="checkbox"/>
	What do my readers need to know	<input type="checkbox"/>
Organization	Is the information presented logically	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Do they understand what they are about to read	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Do they know how the document is organized	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Do they know what its purpose is	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Is the most important information first	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Can the reader quickly and easily find what they are looking for	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have I guided my reader through the text	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have I used headings and subheadings	<input type="checkbox"/>
Words	Have I written directly to my readers	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Did I use words that my readers would when talking about this subject	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have I explained unfamiliar terms and acronyms	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have I used verbs to describe action	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have I used words my readers know	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have I used words with clear meanings	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have I used appropriate examples	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have I used bias free language	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have I avoided using nominalizations	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have I avoided using jargon	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have I avoided using words from foreign languages	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Sentences	Have I written sentences with only one idea
Have I written sentences with an average length of 15 to 25 words		<input type="checkbox"/>
Have I used the active rather than passive voice		<input type="checkbox"/>
Have I written clearly, concisely without surplus words		<input type="checkbox"/>
Have I avoided using unnecessary preambles		<input type="checkbox"/>
Have I avoided using double negatives		<input type="checkbox"/>
Have I avoided using prepositional phrases		<input type="checkbox"/>
Have I used point form and tabulation lists where appropriate		<input type="checkbox"/>
Paragraphs	Have I used paragraphs with only one topic	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have I used paragraphs with sentences that relate to each other	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have I used paragraphs with appropriate transitions	<input type="checkbox"/>
Design	Have I used a serif typeface and a type size of 10 or 12 points	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Do my headings and subheadings stand out	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have I used visual images appropriately	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have I used a justified left margin and a ragged right margin	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have I used plenty of white space	<input type="checkbox"/>
Testing	Have I decided what variables I am testing for	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have I analyzed my audience	<input type="checkbox"/>
	How many people should I include in the test groups	<input type="checkbox"/>
	How much time and money will testing cost	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Whom will I choose to read my document for informal testing	<input type="checkbox"/>
	How will I evaluate the results of my testing	<input type="checkbox"/>
	What changes will I make as a result of the testing	<input type="checkbox"/>