

# The Clarity Kit

## Effective Communication for Municipalities

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## Developing a Strategy for Clear Language in Municipal Communications

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Key Steps in a Clear Language Strategy

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How to Get Organized

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How the Clarity Kit can Help

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## Developing a Strategy for Clear Language in Municipal Communications

Clear language is an approach to communication that puts the reader first – it focuses on action. Clear design uses the visual aspects of communication, such as type, formatting, and graphics, to help readers get the message.

### What is This Kit For?

This kit is for clear language champions who work in Canadian municipalities. It was developed jointly by the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators (CAMA) and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), with support from the Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program, Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC).

The tools in this kit are designed to be used co-operatively by both management and union advocates. We have modeled the process on that used to set up joint labour/management workplace literacy programs in many Canadian municipalities.

Changing the way a large organization communicates is a major cultural shift. It involves change, not just in how we speak to the public, but in how we speak to each other throughout the municipal workplace.

Like all major cultural changes, clear language reform is hard work. It takes time, energy, resources, and strategy. It requires new skills and a shift in perspective. It calls for tools to get the job done.

That's what this kit is for.

### What Does a Clear Language Initiative Look Like?

A workplace clear language initiative can be broken down into nine steps, starting with finding your allies, and ending, we hope, with a big party.

Here are the steps:

#### 1. Identify Clear Language Champions and Supporters.

Look for the people and places in your municipality where you can find support to get started. Is there a joint workplace training committee in place that can help?

Is there an elected representative willing to champion clear language?

Which departments or divisions have already done some work or training in this area? Where have union members been most active on this issue? Which managers are the most supportive?

#### 2. Form or Find a Stakeholder Committee.

Your workplace may already have a committee with a mandate to take on this kind of initiative. For instance, is there a workplace education committee or a communications committee already in place? If possible, take advantage of this existing resource. Your committee should have the support of senior management and the union executive. There should be shared union/management leadership and balanced representation from a good cross-section of the workplace. You should have a clear understanding of how you will make decisions and when members may have to take decisions back to their constituencies.

Make sure your committee has the resources it needs to get started. For instance, make sure each member has management support for the time needed to serve on the committee. Are there meeting rooms you can use? Is there money to hire an outside consultant or facilitator if needed? Can you get some help with co-ordination and paperwork?

#### 3. Set Overall Goals.

Come to agreement about the over-arching goals for your initiative. Here are some examples of over-arching goals:

- Raise awareness of the need for clear language and design throughout our organization.
- Secure funding for a pilot clear language initiative in one department.

- Get a clear language policy passed for the whole organization.
- Become a more inclusive and open municipal workplace.

When you set your goals, make sure you know how, and when, you are going to measure your success. For instance, how will you know that awareness is growing in your organization? You might look, for example, at the number of requests for information your committee gets. Start with a baseline number during the early weeks of the committee's existence. Monitor the requests monthly and check for growth over time.

#### **4. Conduct a Needs Assessment (The Clarity Audit™).**

A Clarity Audit is a way to include everybody in the municipal workplace in assessing the need for change in the organization's communications. It helps to identify what and where the problems are and how best to get started.

Before you do the audit, develop a communication plan that will ensure you get a broad sample of responses from across the organization. When you collect your information, use a combination of surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one sessions to get the best data you can.

#### **5. Build Awareness and Commitment.**

Use the promotional tools in this kit to build a dynamic presentation that speaks to the key points, addresses common concerns, and gives concrete examples and success stories. Use the findings from the Clarity Audit™ to back up your recommendations for a realistic, achievable plan with measurable results.

Begin by presenting your findings first to decision makers, so that you can gain support and secure funding for your clear language initiative. Then fan the message out through your organization. Use your presentation to raise awareness and identify more champions and mentors for the initiative.

#### **6. Develop Strategic Priorities.**

Using the results of the Clarity Audit and the feedback you hear when you are building awareness, develop a list of priorities. What were the most frequent issues raised? Which areas of the organization showed the greatest need for change?

As a committee, agree on a way to rank your strategic priorities. For instance, if there are areas of the organization where clear language is critical to health and safety, is that the place to start? What about starting with departments or divisions that showed the greatest openness to change? Would that be the quickest way to get the ball rolling?

How many of the priorities you identified can you take on at once? How much time and money will each take? Are there areas where the priorities for management and unionized workers differ? Work together to decide on:

- manageable priorities
- reasonable timeframes
- measurable results.

#### **7. Design the Initiative.**

Now that you have support and a financial commitment, you can design the details of the clear language initiative. Look at the strategic priorities you identified from the results of the Clarity Audit. Then start asking yourselves more detailed questions.

For example, are there particular document types that keep coming up as problems? If so, do you need an outside expert to do a clear language analysis of selected documents? Will you need to develop new templates for these documents? Consider selecting one or two documents, or a group of documents that are similar, for analysis. Once you have learned from that process, you can expand it to include more of your organization's documents.

How extensive are your training needs? What training formats did people say they prefer? Will a 'train-the-trainer' program

work – do people have time to take this on? Are you going to set up a mentoring system? What kinds of supports and costs will be involved? How fast can you roll it out?

Finally, don't forget to define how you will evaluate the success of each component you design. Make sure you have a manageable list of achievable, measurable, time-limited results.

### 8. Develop a Communication Plan.

Before you launch your initiative, you need to expand your original communication plan so that everyone can see how the Clarity Audit is turning into action. There are lots of opportunities to talk about the initiative: workplace and union meetings, newsletters and bulletin boards, intranet sites and email broadcasts are just a few ideas.

Who will co-ordinate the communication tasks? What kinds of preparation and support will your 'point people' need for the presentations they make? How are you going to gather feedback from the organization? And how are you going to turn that feedback into more momentum for your initiative?

### 9. Evaluate and Celebrate Results.

Go back to that list of measurable, achievable, time-limited results you planned at Step 7. Which ones can you turn into a

party? How will you honour graduates of your training programs? Can you find ways to recognize or reward great writing projects?

How will you keep your champions motivated? What are the vehicles for celebration in your organization? Picture in the newsletter? Special presentation at a departmental luncheon?

Think about how you can keep the initiative in front of the decision makers too. Clear language is a good news story – make sure that your champions in the union and at the top levels of your organization get the credit they deserve.

### Remember: Change is Cyclical

People come and go in large organizations. Skills get rusty. Support for change ebbs and flows. Your organization could go through the steps in a clear language initiative many times. Or, different parts of the organization could be going through different steps at different times.

The key is to keep the process alive and to build on your success. Each time you complete a clear language initiative, you'll add something new and creative to your organization's communication culture.

*Focus on all staff, not just professional communicators. If everyone does not understand the clear language approach, documents may be changed for the worse during the approval process.*

Ruth Baldwin, What's Happening in Clear Language? (CAMA & CUPE)



### Plain-Language Project Wins County Quality Award

By Tim Bissell, Deputy Director

Department of Consumer Affairs, County of Los Angeles

This newsletter excerpt shows how clear language champions in Los Angeles County found ways to value and honour the skills, teamwork and results of their pilot clear language initiative.

## Using the Promotional Tools

The most important factor for the success of your clear language initiative is 'buy-in'. You want firm support from your decision-makers and a small army of enthusiastic people pushing the initiative from all parts of the organization. The promotional tools in this kit are designed to help you tell people about the initiative and get that buy-in.

Draw from these tools for presentations, posters, newsletter articles, Web site and intranet postings. Adapt them to reflect your workplace and the goals of your initiative. Here's what we've included:

### Why Use Clear Language?

This set of talking points explains what clear language is and describes the problems it helps to solve in a municipal context. Then the points focus in on the real benefits of clear language reform for municipalities – transparency and more accountability; an inclusive, service-driven workplace; an informed, democratic union.

Use these talking points when you are organizing support from the decision-makers in your organization. Gather real examples of the problems and benefits from your own municipality to drive the points home.

### Questions People Often Ask About the Clear Language Approach

Because a clear language initiative involves a major cultural shift, you can expect resistance. This section addresses common misconceptions and fears about the clear language approach. It will prepare you to address those concerns head-on.

It's important to treat these concerns with respect. Often, they are voiced by people who have a real love of language and a desire for quality in communication. If you can answer their questions clearly, with

up-to-date research, you may be able to win over talented allies to help with your initiative.

### Case Studies

Nothing helps people grasp new ideas better than telling a story. We've included two excellent case studies in this kit – one from Los Angeles County and one from the government of Saskatchewan. In the U.S. example, you can find out how one clear language project measured success and what lessons were learned through the project. In the Saskatchewan story, you'll discover the astonishing impact that revising just one brochure had for a social assistance program.

Use these case studies to develop your own ideas about how you might pilot a clear language initiative and measure your success. Tell the stories to your decision-makers to get them thinking about tangible results. With a clear picture of what's possible, they are more likely to get behind your initiative.

### Before and After Examples

Most people grasp the importance of clear language for the first time when they see how a piece of 'gobbledygook' has been rewritten. The effect is dramatic and immediate – fewer words, more white space, the message up front – what a relief!

We've selected several powerful before and after samples that deal specifically with communication in the municipal context, including collective agreements and municipal bylaws.

### Top 10 Clear Writing Tips

What's clear writing all about anyway? When you first start building support for your clear language initiative, you likely won't get much time on the agenda to

make your case. But it's important at this stage to give people a 'taste' of training – if only to show that these techniques just make good sense.

'Top 10 Clear Writing Tips' is a great 'takeaway' from your presentation that people can pin to their bulletin boards. In your presentation, stress that clear writing is a skill that requires training and above all practice. Make sure that your organization sees this as something to incorporate into ongoing staff development programs.

### Where to Go to Learn More

Here we list print and online links to CAMA and CUPE resources, as well as some useful new audio-visual material you can use in presentations.

### A Short Slide Presentation

Congratulations! You've got the opportunity to be on someone's agenda. To help you make the most of your time, we have developed a short presentation that goes with the Clarity Kit. Called, *Use Clear Language to Improve Municipal Communications*, this presentation will help you:

- Explain the basics about clear writing and effective communications.
- Get your audience thinking about how to move forward with clear writing.

Use the talking points, the answers to common questions, and other materials in this kit to speak to the summary points on the slides.

Customize the slide show with examples from your own municipal environment. Mix and match the slides to make a presentation that fits the time you have and the goals you want to achieve at this stage in your initiative.

*Use Clear Language to Improve Municipal Communications* is available in PowerPoint or slide format from the following Web sites:

**Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators**

[www.camacam.ca/downloads/en/2005-01-Clear-Language-Literacy-Resources.pdf](http://www.camacam.ca/downloads/en/2005-01-Clear-Language-Literacy-Resources.pdf)

**Canadian Union of Public Employees**

[www.cupe.ca/clearlanguage](http://www.cupe.ca/clearlanguage)

## Conducting a Clarity Audit™

### What is a Clarity Audit?

A Clarity Audit is a way of gathering information about how an organization communicates, from the perspective of both management and unionized employees. It is not a test – it does not measure the respondents' writing abilities or single out any one person. Instead, it gives you a good sense of what is happening in the organization and how to move forward to improve communications.

### Seven Important Reasons to Do a Clarity Audit

1. A Clarity Audit builds support for the clear language initiative across the organization by consulting with people in a respectful way.
2. It makes the case for a clear language initiative by pointing to well-researched needs, spotting problems and identifying priorities.
3. It helps you find out what kinds of clear language projects and practices are already in place in the organization – activities that you can build on while avoiding duplication.
4. It helps you to identify champions – people you can recruit to promote the clear language initiative, build support, find resources, and act as mentors.
5. It gives you information about the 'lay of the land' – strategic information about what is going on in the organization that might help or hinder a clear language initiative.
6. It reveals how the need for clear language skills is linked to the need for other kinds of workplace training, such as literacy and foundational skills training.
7. It identifies the different interests and common concerns of management and unionized workers.

### How to Carry Out a Clarity Audit

The Clarity Audit tool asks a series of questions that help you get a picture of what's happening in your organization around clear language. Filling out the questionnaire also helps people in your organization to become more aware of clarity issues.

There are a number of ways you can collect your information:

- Send out a broadcast email with the Clarity Audit tool as an attachment. Establish one central email address for collecting the results.
- Post the Clarity Audit tool on your intranet as an online survey.
- Pass out the Clarity Audit tool as a group exercise when you make clear language presentations.
- Organize focus groups throughout your organization with the Clarity Audit tool as the centrepiece.
- Interview key people one-on-one to make sure you get complete information for the audit.

### Analyzing Your Information

Some of the information you gather from the Clarity Audit will be easy to analyze and use to build your strategy for a plain language initiative. For instance, if the audit shows that your organization has no policy on clear language and no explicit support from the top, getting that support will be a priority.

You can summarize a lot of the information using the ranking system at the end of each section of the Audit tool. For instance, you can calculate how many respondents felt that your municipality is doing well at clear language training. If that percentage is low, you've identified another priority.

Some of the information can be used to help your committee decide where to invest energy for the highest return. For instance, if most of the respondents say that report writing is a big problem, then reports might be a good focus for a pilot project.

And finally, some of the information will help you move your initiative forward. Watch for people who put extra thought and energy into completing the Clarity Audit. These are your potential allies and champions. Get in touch with them and find a way to get them involved!



## Acknowledgements

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