Clear Writing and Design

A Reader-Friendly Handbook

Literacy in Action

CLEAR WRITING and DESIGN

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Clear Writing and Design: A Reader-Friendly Handbook - 2008

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Foreword

Literacy in Action is pleased to present this new resource, *Clear Writing and Design*, originating in the Eastern Townships.

During the handbook's creation, my concern has been, "Will we convince people to choose elements of clear language when they write for the public?"

The authors of this handbook, Melanie Cutting and Jan Draper, will not only convince you, they will make the task easier for you.

As you read and practice the guidelines set out here, you will discover important reasons for choosing to write effectively and simply, learn about readers and language levels, find ways to simplify what you want to say, and be guided through a process of organizing information.

Your approach to writing for the public will change, the presentation of your information will improve, and your message will be more widely read and understood.

I hope you share this useful resource with co-workers, fieldworkers and community partners.

Thank you, Mel and Jan, for responding with sincerity and respect to this very important literacy issue.

Kathy Richan, Coordinator of Literacy in Action

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The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.

Mark Twain, humourist and writer

Preface and Acknowledgements

We selected the tree as our metaphor for *Clear Writing and Design* for a number of excellent reasons:

- The tree represents the clear writing and design concept as an organic whole: the "roots" of the tree are those perceived needs which have given rise to the Clear Language movement; the strong and hardy "trunk" represents the many years and individuals devoted to supporting the movement; the "branches" are the many incarnations of the movement; the "leaves" represent the various components of clear writing text, and the colourful "fruit and flowers" of the tree bring to mind the design concepts that decorate and define our clear writing tree.

- Each document written in clear language is an example of the clear writing tree: it begins with the planning (*roots*); moves on to the organization phase (*trunk*), and then branches out into the clear language (*leaves*) and clear design (*fruit and flowers*), culminating in a beautiful and clear document (*tree*).

- Beautiful, stately and nurturing trees are emblematic of the densely forested Eastern Townships where this handbook originates.

Many thanks go to the following individuals and groups:

- Kathy Richan, LIA Coordinator, for the conception and elaboration of this project, as well as all the help and support she has offered
- The participants of the focus groups who helped greatly in focusing our efforts
- Jan Draper for the photographs
- Canadian Heritage for the funds to make this project possible
- Blanchard Litho for generously supporting Literacy in Action's many projects, including this booklet.

Introduction

This is a clear language handbook written in clear language, about clear language.
Throughout this handbook, we will be modeling simplicity and clarity.

Right now you may be asking yourself, "Why do I need this? I know how to write clearly!" Indeed, most of us know how to write, but a better question is, "Do our readers understand our message?"

Effective communication depends on a number of elements, including the use of language that is accessible to most people, and formatting that enhances the information and makes it easier to understand.

Difficulties with reading, busy lives, lack of time, and the effects of electronic communication are some of the many reasons why readers often ignore printed material. Writers' use of elevated vocabulary or ornate formatting seldom results in clear and accessible communication.

But, you say, won't clear writing insult my readers? The short answer to that question is, "No." Simplifying the way you present your message will not put your readers off. They would rather be able to grasp and use the information presented than struggle to understand words or concepts that sound impressive.

Presenting information in bite-sized, digestible and attractive chunks doesn't imply that either you or your reader is any less intelligent, but only that time is at a premium for most, and effectively conveying the information is the ultimate objective.

This handbook is filled with tips on how to say what you want to say, and make sure that your reader "gets it." An information document should not be a bumpy journey for your reader, but a smooth and enjoyable ride, ending with "OK, now I know!"

Enjoy!

Jan Draper and Melanie Cutting

photo by Maureen Quigg

Any fool can make things bigger, more complex, and more violent.
It takes a touch of genius and a lot of courage to move in the opposite direction.

Albert Einstein, philosopher and scientist

Chapter 1: WRITING FOR EVERYONE

Writers

In school we are encouraged to use big words and complex structures. Clear writing involves neither.

As writers, we may feel a sense of frustration at having to adopt a new style.

- We may be afraid that our peers may think that we can no longer write as we used to.
- We may resent our readers for our having to change.
- We may ask, "Why can our readers not understand what seems obvious to us?"

Readers and their needs are why we write. Without our readers, we have no reason to write and no work.

Feeling negative about the readers' need to know just makes our job harder, and the end product less effective. Information overload and a wide range of reading levels are a reality of our time, not someone's fault.

Everyone today is rushed and stressed.

By writing for everyone, we must learn a more precise way of thinking and a more rigorous style of planning and editing. We must find language, structure and design to include all readers. Our skills as writers and thinkers are being honed and improved by the process.

We can be proud to be able to write clearly – for everyone.

Readers and "Readability"

Our readers bring with them a range of experiences, knowledge, skills and reading levels.

Like writers, our readers are influenced by their feelings.

Stress shortens the attention span and everyone has stress in his or her life. Older readers may have lost a spouse, be facing illness or be moving out of their home; younger people face challenges in their work and relationships. Everyone experiences financial challenges.

The level of reading skills is influenced by lack of practice. It is more difficult to read if we have not done so over time because of the loss of our eyesight, the nature of our job or a situation in our lives.

In order to make the document **"readable"** for the greatest number of people, you need to

- choose the **simplest words** so every reader can understand the material as quickly as possible

- use a **respectful tone** and be positive and encouraging

- select the **information readers must know** so they do not lose interest because of unnecessary information

- choose **inclusive language** that refers to everyone, people of both genders, all ages, cultural backgrounds, and income levels

- engage the reader by using **you** or **we**

- organize the document with **one main idea per section and one idea per sentence** so that readers understand easily

- include methods for every **learning style** (observing, experiencing, experimenting, reflecting, thinking) - a graph for the thinker, a narrative for the reflector

- and select an engaging **format and design** to clarify the information.

Adult Literacy Statistics

The statistics used by the governments of Canada and Quebec are based on the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS).

Level	Percentage of Canadian adults reading at this level	Characteristics
1 22%		▪ Brief text ▪ Clear headings ▪ Information given as single facts ▪ Integration of facts is not required
2 27%		▪ Longer text ▪ More information ▪ Longer units
3 30%		▪ Conditionals (If…then) in the text ▪ Integration of ideas from several sections of the document.

Readability Test

You will find many readability tests online. Some tests involve calculating the ratio between the length of the text and sentences and the number of syllables per word. We suggest a simpler process.

Choose a section of your text
1. Count the number of words having more than two syllables. The more of these long words you have, the less readable the text.
2. Count the number of words per sentence. Sentences having more than fifteen words are more difficult to read.

Examples of Reading Levels

Example 1: **You will reach the largest percentage of readers by writing at this level.**

> It takes time to lose body fat. The key is to exercise and eat right. You need to exercise at least three times a week. Ride a bike. Go for a jog. Go for a swim. Walk the dog. Run up and down the stairs.
>
> You should change the way you shop and eat. Look for fat-free foods in the store. Do not eat candy and chips. Eat lots of fish, grains and fruit. Soon you will begin to look slim and trim.
>
> (Campbell, Brokop 5)

At this level

- Most words have one or two syllables.
- They are simple words that any reader would know.
- Most sentences are simple, "The key is to exercise and eat right." or are commands, "Walk the dog."
- The sentence structure and some words are repeated.
- Each sentence has one idea. Readers can easily see the connection among the ideas.

Example 2:   **Only 50% of readers will understand writing at this level.**

In Canada there are over 2 million cases of food poisoning each year. This condition is caused by germs. Salmonella is a common germ found in meat, poultry, eggs and egg products. The symptoms of salmonella food poisoning include nausea, stomach cramps, diarrhea, fever, and headache. These symptoms usually occur 6 to 72 hours after eating the food and can last from 3 to 5 days.

(Campbell, Brokop 35)

At this level

- There are a number of words that have three or four syllables.
- Not all adult readers would know these words.
- Not all literate adults could sound them out. Example: nausea, diarrhea.
- Most sentences are simple (subject-verb-object) but include some lists without bullets.
- There is more than one idea per sentence.
- This example requires more reading skills to understand both the words and the ideas.

Four Learning Styles

Discovering your own learning style can make you aware of why you write as you do. Including a variety of structures in your writing will accommodate the learning styles of your readers.

The Doer - is outgoing; likes to learn by doing and from other people

- *Use second person "you" to try to involve the reader*
- *Be upbeat and positive*
- *Be interactive: put games in a brochure, Q&A section in a letter*

The Reflector/Observer - is sensitive to others' feelings; is imaginative and creative

- *Use appealing formatting*
- *Add short stories to involve the reader's emotions*

The Abstract Thinker - is interested in ideas and concepts

- *Use diagrams or models to summarize a process or give an overview of the material*

The Experimenter - likes concrete information and practical applications

- *Give figures and data to demonstrate your points.*

(Adapted from David Kolb)

References

Campbell, Pat and Flo Brokop. *Canadian Adult Reading Assessment: Student's Assessment Booklet.* Edmonton: Grass Roots Press, 2004.

Clear Language and Design (CLAD).
http://www.eastendliteracy.on.ca/clearlanguageanddesign/
For a readability test and many other resources see this site.

Human Resources and Social Development Canada. "International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)".
http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/hip/lld/nls/Surveys/indexsurv.shtml
This site includes power point presentations you can download and links to many other sites on Canadian literacy.

Kolb, David A. *Experience-based Learning Systems.* New York: Hay Group, 1999.
David Kolb's analysis is useful for adults. His learning style survey is not available free online but there are many summaries of his theories. If you wish to find out your own learning style using a survey other than Kolb's, you can go to a site called Businessballs.com. Despite the name, this site offers a great deal of information and many tools. Once you have waded through the jargon, it is quite helpful.

Making the simple complicated is commonplace; making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that's creativity.

Charles Mingus, jazz musician

Chapter 2: GETTING STARTED

Jan says, "If writing is easy for you, that is great. Enjoy your good fortune. For me, it is not easy…but I have stopped worrying about it."

In the first stages of preparing your document, your goal is to do the following:

- Choose the information readers need to know
- Remove unnecessary details
- Organize the information clearly
- Consider effective formatting.

There are three parts to this process:

1. Explore the context
2. Collect and select content
3. Organize and format the information.

1. Explore the Context

Who will read your document?

- Who needs to read your document?
- What do they need to know?
- What do they know already?
- What format, organization and language will make the document easiest for the readers to understand?

When you write, consider these challenges:

- Your readers' levels of language and learning styles
- The information overload we all experience
- Effects of TV and the Internet on our patience with the printed word.

What is the appropriate tone for the readership?

Always be
- Respectful of the readers
- Serious about the content.

What kind of a document are you preparing?

Choose a format
- Letter? Pamphlet? Press release? Newsletter?

Examples:
Are you writing a brochure? Will it be one page folded in three, or four pages stapled?

Are you writing a letter to parents to explain a complex new procedure at your school? Can you include all the information in the letter or will you need to add an information sheet for parents to keep?

2. Collect and Select Content

You need to think about all of the information you will want to include to avoid omitting anything essential.

Collect the information

From sources

- Libraries
- Internet
- Documents from government, community and other groups

From people

- Individual interviews
- Focus groups
- Brainstorming or clustering with colleagues

From your own thoughts

- Brainstorming or clustering
- Free writing
- Keeping a journal.

You will find a description of some of these methods on the following page.

Select the information

Review the objective, format and length of the document.

- Are you selecting suitable information for the readers?
- Do you have the correct amount of information for the document you have in mind?

Review your choice of information with a colleague to make sure that you have included what readers need to know?

Methods of collecting information

Brainstorming

- Everyone suggests ideas and someone records them. Stopping to evaluate an idea is not allowed, to avoid interfering with the flow of ideas. Even irrelevant information can cause someone to think of an important fact.

- If people run out of ideas, read the list aloud but without evaluating the items. New ideas may result.

- When people have stopped thinking of new ideas, examine the list and delete what does not belong. Add any missing details and create examples.

Clustering

- Write down the general or central topic in the middle of a large sheet of paper. Around this general topic, write subtopics allowing space to list ideas for each subtopic. The final product will resemble a spider web.

- Once each subtopic has been fully explored, go back to the main idea to review or add. When you have run out of information, establish links among the ideas and delete the irrelevant.

- Use what remains as a basis for your outline.

Free Writing

- Begin to write what you might want to include. Let your mind wander. As with brainstorming, you might find that your free associations produce good ideas and examples.

Keeping a Journal

- If you have some time before you need to produce your document, you could start a notebook. Whenever you have a few spare minutes, jot down your thoughts.

3. Organize and Format the Information

An outline shows you at a glance the relationship among the ideas.

Prepare an Outline

Here are three steps to prepare an outline.

1. Begin by dividing your information into **SECTIONS.**

   - Each section should focus on one central idea

   - Each section should begin with a clear heading

2. Choose a **STRATEGY** for organizing the information.

   - Logic - Ideas related because of their meaning

   - Time - Steps in a process that must take place in sequence

   - Importance - A list with the most important items first

3. Choose a **FORMAT** for each section.

   - Paragraph - for description or short narratives, to hold the reader's attention or give an example

   - Point form - for lists, steps in a process

   - Boxes or shading - for definitions, critical information, contact information

   - Postable section - for a summary of information that can be posted

   - Tear-off sheet - for a section to be completed and returned (Make sure there is nothing essential on the back of the tear-off)

   - Picture, diagram or chart - for a summary or example.

   Note: If you are not comfortable with outlining, you might want to go straight to work on a draft that you edit until you have arranged the ideas in a way you find suitable.

Use familiar words - words that your readers will understand, and not words they will have to look up. No advice is more elementary, and no advice is more difficult to accept. When we feel an impulse to use a marvellously exotic word, let us lie down until the impulse goes away.

James J. Kilpatrick, grammarian and columnist

Chapter 3: Clear Writing

Once you have completed the planning stage, you are ready to move on to the actual writing. Here are guidelines to help you communicate clearly and effectively.

Short and simple words
- Short words are easier for the reader to understand.
- Try to limit yourself to words of one or two syllables.

Synonyms
- Do not try to find many ways to say the same thing.
- Repeating the same word will help readers to understand.
  *Mel says, "Variety is **not** the spice of effective communication, so use your Thesaurus sparingly."*

Acronyms
- Acronyms are formed from the first letters of a series of words.
- If you must use an acronym, write out the words first, followed by the acronym in brackets.
  Example: Megantic English-speaking Community Development Corporation (MCDC). By spelling it out, you can then use MCDC comfortably throughout the remainder of your document.
- Do not make an acronym the central focus of the title page.

Technical terms
- Define technical terms when you use them.
  Example: Smoking may cause a *myocardial infarction*, known commonly as a heart attack.
- Include a glossary when there are many technical terms.

Jargon
- Assume the reader may not understand terms that are not in general use.
  Example: The use of a *six-point widget* will make the job go faster.

Idioms

- An idiom is a word or expression that cannot be translated from one language into another.
  Example: Good neighbours always *lend a hand* when needed.

Biased language

- Biased language excludes people.
  Example: Ask your doctor any questions you may have about your medical condition. *He* will certainly be happy to help.

Noun chains

- Stringing nouns together creates complicated text.
  Examples:
  Buyer approach/avoidance expenditure patterns = buyers have trouble spending money.
  Information documentation production = producing information documents.

Pronouns

- Use the proper case of pronoun to clarify your meaning.
  For instance: *who* and *whom* and *we* and *us*. *Who* and *we* are subjects. W*hom* and *us* are objects.
  Example: "*Who* will ask for *whom* the bell tolls?"
- Use plural pronouns to avoid the awkward "he/she".
  Example: *"Customers…they"* rather than *"A customer…he/she"*.
- Use *you* instead of "he, she or they" to involve readers.
- Address one person, not a group.

Verbs: singular or plural?

- The verb must agree in number with the subject.
- Find the verb (word expressing action or state of being), then ask "who" before the verb to find the subject. Do the subject and verb agree?
  Example: *One* of the musicians *was chosen* to represent the orchestra. *Was chosen* is the singular verb.
  Who *was chosen*? *One.* (Not *musicians* which is plural).

Positive tone
- Use positive and encouraging words.
- Words like *avoid, don't* and *never* create a negative tone.
  Example:
  Instead of - *Never* raise your voice with your children.
  Use - Children *react best* when spoken to gently.

Some thorny words
Its (Possessive) - The car and *its* engine go together.

It's (Contraction of *It is*) - *It's* a nice day.

There (Pointing out) - *There* is the new building.

Their (Possessive) - Raj and Sunita left *their* car at home.

They're (Contraction of *They are*) - *They're* planning to walk outside.

Site - The *site* of the new mall is a mass of mud right now.

Sight - The *sight* of a cat in the sun is pleasing.

Cite - The driver was *cited* for speeding. If you *cite* an author's work, you must give him or her credit.

Compose - Our multicultural society *is composed of* many types of people.

Comprise - We live in a multicultural society, *comprising* many types of people.

Keep related words together
- The position of words in a sentence shows their relationship.
- The subject should be near the verb.
- Words that modify or describe should be as close as possible to the word they refer to.
  Example:
  Confusing - "He noticed a large stain in the rug that was right in the centre."
  Clear - "He noticed a large stain right in the centre of the rug."
  (Strunk, White, 28)

Short sentences

- Keep the meaning clear by editing out excess words.
- Use sentences of fifteen words or less.
- Split one long sentence into two shorter ones.
- Include only one idea in a sentence.

  Mel says, "KYSSS: Keep Your Sentences Short and Simple."

Active sentences

- Write the sentence: subject - verb - object.
  Examples:
  Active - Jack *threw* the ball. - Subject-verb-object
  Passive - The ball *was thrown* by Jack.

Table of contents

- Place a table of contents at the start of a lengthy publication.

Headings

- Headings allow the reader to see easily what the section is about.
- The font size, typeface, and other formatting elements of a heading help the reader distinguish the sections of a document.

Complex ideas

- Break down a complex idea by using a chart, list or diagram.

  Example:
  Complex - Intake offers front line services to the general population, regardless of age (0-100 years old), as well as crisis and emergency intervention. Intake receives all requests for psychosocial services, evaluates the needs and refers the person to the appropriate services…The service stabilizes the person's situation before referring him or her to another service.

  Simple - Services offered –
  - Crisis and emergency interventions
  - Information and referral
  - Evaluation and diagnosis
  - Prompt intervention.

Question and answer format – Q&A

- Ask questions and then answer them.
- Reading Q&A is enjoyable for some readers.
  Example:
  Q: How many times can you use the service?
  A: As often as you like.

Narratives

- Writing some of your document as a story has appeal for many readers.
- Include testimonials or other narratives when appropriate.
  Example: "I always wanted to know how, now I do!"
  Marie-France Jones, Sherbrooke

Bilingual text

- Pamphlets in Quebec are often in both French and English.
- When including bilingual text, you can do the following:
  - Put French on one side of the document and English on the other.
  - Put both languages on the same page but vary the colour of the print, font or shadings to distinguish one from the other.
  - Remember that French text usually takes more space than English text.

Punctuation

Jan says, "If in doubt, leave it out."

Apostrophes
- With possessives
  A singular noun - add apostrophe and "s".
  Example- *Tony's* book is on the table.

  A singular noun ending in "s" - add apostrophe and "s".
  Example- *Lois's* father is coming to visit.

  A plural noun ending in "s" - add only the apostrophe.
  Example: All of the *students'* parents were at the graduation.
  Note: Do not confuse possessives and plurals. The plural form of a noun even though it adds "s" does not require an apostrophe.

- With contractions
  The apostrophe belongs in the place of the letters left out.
  Example: *There's* more than one way to do that job.

  Remember - In clear writing avoid contractions.

Commas
Use commas to separate
- Items on a list.
  Example: *Trains, planes and automobiles* are common forms of transport.
- A word or phrase that comes between the subject and verb.
  Example: Clear writing, *the focus of this book*, is important for everyone.

Colons
- Use after an *independent* clause (one that can stand alone) to introduce a list of items or explanation.
  Examples:
  Right -The prescription should be taken as follows: once in the morning, once at night, and once at noon.
  Wrong - Things to watch are: the news, history shows, and sports.

Semi-colons

- Use to join two *independent* clauses instead of a conjunction (but, and, or).
  Example: To look is not to see; to listen is not to hear.
- In clear writing, it is better to make two sentences.
  Example: To look is not to see. To listen is not to hear.

Quotation marks

- Use to indicate someone else's words.
  Example: She said, "He reads really, really well."
  The period falls INSIDE the quotation marks.

- Use to single out a particular word or phrase that is out of context, such as a casual expression.
  Example: That TV program is known for being *"over the top"*.
  In this case, the period is OUTSIDE the quotation marks.

- When you must use quotation marks within quotation marks, the inside quotation marks are single.
  Example: Maria said, "The word 'heretofore' is fine for legal documents but not in a letter written in clear language."

- Use to indicate the title of a short story, play, or chapter of a book BUT the title of a book or film is put in *italics* or <u>underlined</u>.

References and Resources

Baldwin, Ruth. *Clear Writing and Literacy.* Toronto: Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2000.

Strunk, William and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style.* New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1979.

Human Resources Development Canada. *Plain Language: Clear and Simple.* Ottawa: Canadian Government Publishing, 1991.

Quick Punctuation Table	
Apostrophes in contractions	They mark where letters are missing BUT avoid contractions in clear writing.
In possessives	A singular noun - add apostrophe and "s" Ex: *Tony's* book
	A singular noun ending in "s" - add apostrophe and "s" Ex: *Lois's* father
	A plural noun ending in "s" – add only the apostrophe. Ex: All of the *students'* parents
Colons	Use after an independent clause (one that can stand alone) to introduce a list or explanation.
Semi-colons	Use to join two independent clauses of a compound sentence instead of a conjunction (but, and, or). It is better to make two sentences.
Commas	Use commas to separate - a word or phrase that comes between the subject and verb or verb and object - items on a list
Quotation marks	Use to indicate someone else's words. The period falls INSIDE the quotation marks.
	Use to single out a particular word or phrase that is used out of context, such as a casual expression. The period is OUTSIDE the quotation marks.
	When you must use quotation marks within quotation marks, the inside quotation marks are single.
	Use to indicate the title of a short story, play, or chapter of a book. The title of a book or film is put in *italics* or underlined.

Examples of choosing short and simple words

Use	Avoid
Go with	Accompany
Do	Accomplish
Enough	Adequate number, sufficient
About	Approximately
About	Relating to
Now	At the present time
Show	Demonstrate, exhibit
Can, is able	Has the capability
Same	Identical
Start, begin	Institute
Did not	Failed to
Talk, discuss	Interface
If	In the event that
Tell	Notify
Buy	Purchase
Next	Subsequent
Happen	Transpire
Saw	Witnessed
End	Terminate

Examples of Edited Texts

Example 1 – Original
Any person attempting to avoid full payment of telecommunication services by any method, scheme or device is in violation of the law. Persons committing such theft are liable for heavy fines or imprisonment.

Example 1 – Revised into clear writing
It is illegal to avoid paying telephone charges. You will be fined or jailed if you are caught.

Example 2 – Original
Starting when the insured reaches age 65 or on the 10th anniversary of the TRANSITION 4 – T75 coverage, whichever is later, and until the termination of the TRANSITION 4 – T75, the applicant may, on written request, terminate this coverage in order to take advantage of the Flexible Return of Premiums Benefit provided that no critical illness benefit has been fully paid.

In accordance with the previous paragraph, starting when the insured reaches age 65 or on the 10th anniversary of the TRANSITION 4 – T75 coverage, whichever is later, the amount paid by the Company equals 75% of the total premiums paid since the issuance of the coverage including extra premiums, but excluding those payable for additional benefits and the Transition 4 Child Rider, if any, without interest. Afterward, the percentage of reimbursement of paid premiums increases proportionately to reach 100% when the insured reaches age 75, the date on which the coverage terminates. When the TRANSITION 4 – T75 coverage is issued following the conversion of the Critical Illness 4 – T10 R&C coverage that contained the Flexible Return of Premiums rider, the premiums paid since the Critical Illness 4 – T10 R&C was issued will also be included in the payment of the Flexible Return of Premiums Benefit, in proportion to the premium related to the converted insurance coverage.

Example 2 – Revised into clear writing

Refund of premiums, TRANSITION 4 – T75 coverage
If you have made no claims by age 65 (or 10 years after the policy is issued, whichever comes later)

- you can cancel this policy and get back 75% of the amount you have paid in premiums (with certain exceptions).
- each additional year beyond the first 10 will add 5% to the amount you can get back, up to 100% upon 15 years of coverage.

If you had previously been covered by the **Critical Illness 4 – T10 R&C policy with the flexible Return of Premium Benefits,** the premiums you paid then will also be included.

Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.

Leonardo da Vinci, scientist, mathematician, artist, inventor

Chapter 4: DESIGNING AND FORMATTING

Clear design goes hand in hand with clear writing. Careful selection of formatting elements helps to add visual appeal to attract and engage your reader.

Fonts

- There are two main font types:

    Serif - with little "tails" on each letter, such as Times New Roman and Bookman Old Style

    Sans serif - with no tails, like this line written in Arial

- Use *sans serif* for titles, and *serif* for text

- *Serif* is easier for the eye to follow

- Mixing many fonts in the same document will make it confusing and busy. One or two fonts are sufficient.
  Example: This book is set in Garamond with headings in Arial Rounded MT Bold.

Text Size

- Twelve-point text is neither too big nor too small, and very easy to read.

- Headings should be larger, with major headings the largest.

Capital letters

- Capitalize your letters for emphasis and headings.

- DO NOT CAPITALIZE MORE THAN A FEW WORDS AT A TIME. NO ONE WILL READ THEM.

Style of print

- Add clarity and emphasis by using **bold print**, *italics* and some CAPITALS.

Justified text

- Text aligned right or left is easier on the eye than justified text.
- Text aligned in the centre is difficult to read.

Column size

- Use no more than two columns on a letter-size page.
- Narrow columns may cause readers to read across the page instead of down.
- Wide columns may be hard to follow and tire the eye.

Bulleted lists

- Use a period or question mark for each complete sentence on a bulleted list.
- Use no punctuation if the list is comprised of phrases.
- Use a period at the end of the last line.

White space

- Clean, text-free space is an important element in clear design.
- Leave sufficient white space in your document: wide (1") margins all around, 1.5 or double line spacing.
- Too little white (or blank) space makes the document less inviting and difficult to read.

Colour: text, shading and graphics

- Colour attracts and holds the readers' attention.

  Most engaging: four-colour documents are the most reader-friendly.

  Less engaging: One or two colours, (For example: many shades of blue and black).

  Least engaging: Black and white.

- **Coloured text** can be used to highlight headings.

- Black text may be **shaded** to attract attention to important information.

- Dark text is difficult to read on a dark-coloured background. Example: **Here is an example of this**
  Also, it does not photocopy well. Dark text on a light background works best.

Graphics: charts, diagrams and pictures

- Use graphics to engage the reader and emphasize the message.

- Graphics must not overwhelm the text.

- Graphics should relate to the text and may be decorative.

- Pictures of faces attract readers best.

- Some people find that charts and diagrams convey information in an immediate way and are easiest to understand.

- Essential information in a chart or diagram should also be summarized in the text.

  Mel says, "Pamphlets produced with the help of professional graphic designers can look very polished, but occasionally seem a little too fancy to the audience."

[Writing is] largely a matter of application and hard work, or writing and rewriting endlessly until you are satisfied that you have said what you want to say as clearly and simply as possible. For me that usually means many, many revisions.

Rachel Carson, writer, ecologist, scientist

Chapter 5: EDITING AND PROOFREADING

Editing

Editing is the process of looking closely at the content and style of the document, to ensure that it says what you want it to say, the way you want it said. It is also a check on the appearance of your work, to ensure that it helps the document fulfill its purpose. A writer edits the document throughout the writing process, but a final edit, followed by proofreading, is critical.

You will find an **Editing Checklist** on the following page.

Proofreading

This final step is for finding text errors and omissions, and checking for consistency. At this point you are reading less for content or meaning, but rather examining each word and sentence to ensure correct spelling and that nothing has been omitted.

Process:
- Re-read your document page by page, beginning with the last page, or read it aloud. These techniques allow you to spot and eliminate errors that may have become so familiar that they appear correct.
- Examine the way each page looks to make sure the look is consistent throughout.
- Look closely at each word and sentence to eliminate typos and other errors.
- Ask a friend or colleague to do the same. A second reader is absolutely necessary!

  Mel and Jan say, "Remember, proofreading is an essential (although time consuming) step. You cannot use your program's spell check or grammar check feature to do the work for you!"

EDITING CHECKLIST

Organization
Is the purpose of the document clear?
Is the purpose of each section clear?
Is the relationship among ideas clear?
Are the steps in a process clear?
Have you included all necessary information?

Language
Is every sentence clear?
Are any sections confusing?
Are there unnecessary words or details?
Are all words the simplest ones available?
Can jargon, technical terms, clichés or trendy expressions be removed or simplified?
Is there a clear definition for all technical terms or is there a glossary?

Tone
Is the tone respectful or is it negative or patronizing?
Is the tone suitably encouraging and positive?

Lists
Is the introduction to the list clear?
Is it clear which items are included on the list? Do they all belong?
Are lists clearly lined up with straight margins?
Is the punctuation consistent?

References
Have you acknowledged all sources used?

Punctuation
Is necessary punctuation there?
Are apostrophes in the correct places?
Is material from other sources in quotation marks?

Design and format
Does the cover engage the reader's attention?
Does the cover inform the reader of the document's purpose?
Is there enough white space to make reading easy?
Is the text size large enough?
Is the text visible and clear in the colours you have chosen?
Do the charts and diagrams emphasize and clarify the text?
Do the pictures relate to the meaning and/or purpose?

The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.

Mark Twain, humourist and writer

Writers

Melanie Cutting

Jersey girl Melanie Cutting came to the Townships in 1972 when her application to work at Champlain College in Montreal was redirected to the Lennoxville campus. Thirty-three years and two children later, she retired as the Director of Student Services at Champlain. In 1990 she became the first graduate of the Professional Writing in English program at Université de Sherbrooke. Since her retirement, she has been active in writing, editing, translating and volunteer work, sometimes combining all four. This is her first foray into Clear Writing, being more accustomed to producing Byzantine but humourous prose forms.

Jan Draper

Jan Draper grew up on a dairy farm in Brome in the Eastern Townships. For many years she taught English and International Studies at Champlain College, Lennoxville. She continues to work on international education projects primarily in the Amerindian communities in Guyana, South America. She began taking photographs in 1997 while working on a Unicef project there.

The quotations accompanying the photographs are taken from "Historical Quotes on Plain Language and Writing Simply" found at *Plain Language.gov.*
http://www.plainlanguage.gov/resources/quotes/historical.cfm

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