Plain Language

A guide to clear, effective communication

participant workbook

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Plain language: what is it?

> *"Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication."*
> **-Leonardo da Vinci**

Communication is about more than just written words. We send messages to the people we serve, our employees, our colleagues and our communities by the way we set up our office space, how we direct folks to and through services, and how we allow others to communicate with us.

Writing is an important part of communication. Good writing is 'clear thinking on paper' – writing that allows others to understand us and to be understood. Good writing is a skill that everyone can develop.

Also known as clear language, plain language uses a style of writing that is relevant to the reader, direct, easy to understand, and easy to follow.

Plain language presents an idea in the clearest way that the idea will allow. Because we are all individuals, we will all have our own thoughts on what that clearest way is. So, there are many ways that the same idea could be expressed using plain language. There's no right or wrong way to express your idea as clearly as you can.

That's why one of the most important aspects of using plain language is making sure that we always write with our audience in mind.

Plain language keeps the reader in mind at all times.

Plain language pays attention to:

- **Writing style**: We write the information in a positive tone using references our reader will understand.

- **Format**: We use design elements that help the reader move through the information easily.

- **Organization**: Readers can easily find the information they need.

- **Text choice**: We choose words that the reader will easily understand.

> Plain language conveys a mesage using the clearest terms that the message will allow.

Many people mistake using plain language for using simplistic text. Word choice is only one of four components to using plain language. All four components – style, format, organization and text choice – are very important.

Plain language:

- Puts the audience first.

- Improves writing style, content, organization and format.

- Promotes honest and open communication.

- Improves service through clearer forms, documents, letters and signs.

Plain language is not:

- Dick and Jane vocabulary.

- Improper language use.

- Patronizing.

- Changing the ideas in the document.

- Inaccurate or incomplete.

Why is plain language important?

People need to use written information to participate fully in society.

According to the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS), about 40% of adults in Saskatchewan have trouble with using printed material.

For these adults, coping in a world filled with words can be a struggle. Finding information in a newspaper, filling out forms at the doctor's office, balancing a chequebook, or reading a storybook to a child are everyday tasks which many of us take for granted. For adults with low literacy, these are daily struggles.

Who has low literacy in Saskatchewan?

- 33% of working age adults (16-65).
- 75% of seniors (65 and over).
- 63% of urban Aboriginal peoples.
- 60% of new immigrants.
- 37% of young adults (16-25).

When we choose our writing style, format, organization and text with the reader in mind, our materials can reach the broadest possible audience. If you work with the general public, then using plain language makes sense.

What workplace issues does plain language address?

Message Mashups:

Unclear workplace policies and procedures can result in complaints and poor labour and management relations. Plain language ensures an open dialogue between employees and employers.

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Safety Snags:

Unclear language can cost lives. If health and safety procedures are confusing or complex, people might not read or understand them. Plain language ensures all employees are safe and informed.

滑 全

TO TAKE NOTICE OF SAFE
THE SLIPPERY ARE VERY CRAFTY

Bureaucratic Blunders:

Unclear language contributes to vague decisions, needless delays and a climate of secrecy that can make people feel distrustful or frustrated. Plain language fosters trust in an organization's policies and procedures.
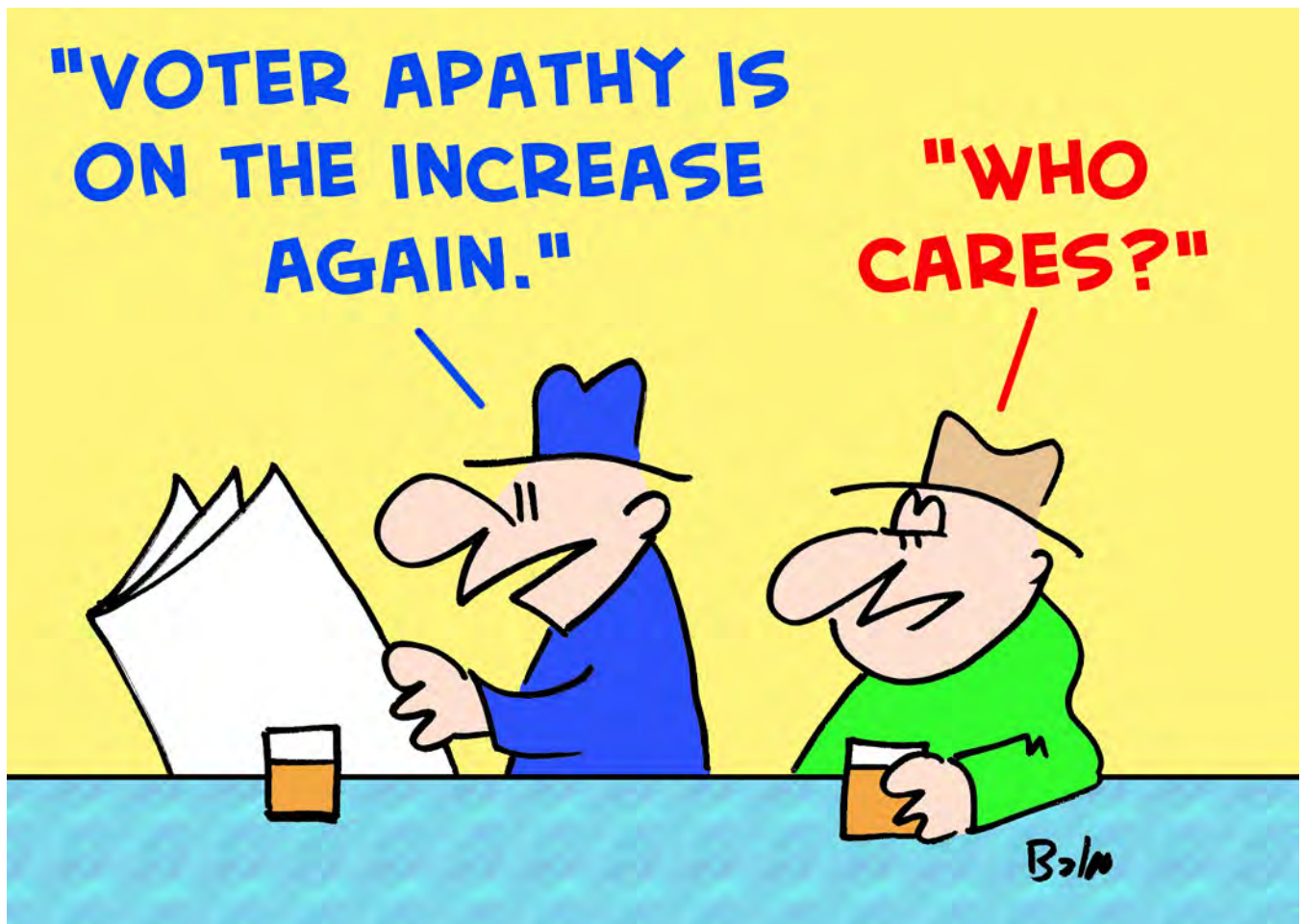

Passive Public:

When consumers feel they are not getting the services they pay for, they become cynical about organizations and how they are governed. When people cannot understand the processes behind organizations, they may be hesitant to get involved. Plain language makes sure the community can understand the work your organization does. This will help keep them interested and involved.

Who benefits from plain language?

- People with too little time.

- Younger workers and new employees who are still learning the language of their workplace.

- People with visual impairments or learning disabilities.

- People who are new to Canada or who are learning English.

- People with lower levels of literacy.

The point is, everyone benefits from communication that is easily understood the first time.
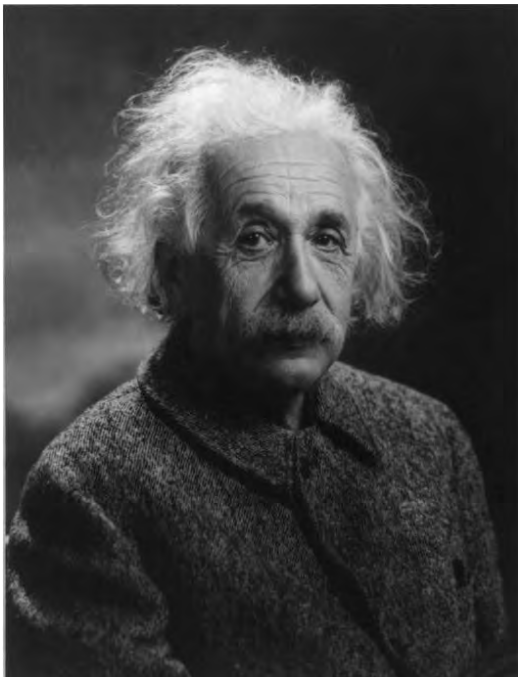
"Any fool can make things bigger, more complex, more violent. It takes a of touch of genius and a lot of courage to move in the opposite direction."
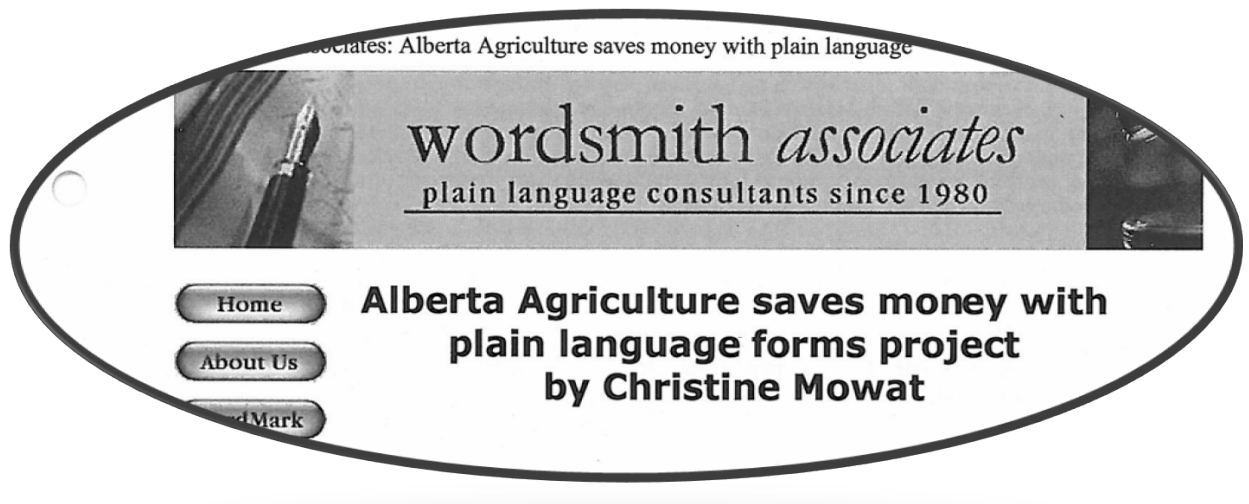**–Albert Einstein**

Five misconceptions about plain language:

1. Plain language costs too much and takes too long!

At the beginning, the plain language approach asks you to invest time to get a clear picture of:

- What you want to write,
- Why you are writing it,
- Who you are writing it for, and
- How you can write it clearly.

Employees who understand your written direction will have less confusion on the job. They will need less clarification, make fewer mistakes and will likely feel less frustration.

Clientele who understand what they read are more likely to be satisfied, feel understood and have a sense of loyalty to the organization.

Plain language can save time and money!

2. Plain language talks down to people.

This is a very common misconception. First, last, and always, good communication is about respecting your audience. Plain communication is not insulting. If you address a broad audience, respect the range of educational and language backgrounds of your readers by being clear. If you write for colleagues, respect their busy schedules by getting straight to the point.

"Excellent mumbo jumbo, Foster.
The computer didn't understand a word of it."

3. Plain language doesn't allow the use of technical terms.

Remember, plain language conveys a message in the clearest way that the message allows. If your message involves technical terms, will your audience need some prior knowledge of terminology before your message is understood? Your job as a clear communicator is to keep your reader in mind at all times. That means expalining any required terminology before using it.

4. If no one complains about documents being hard to read, there is nothing wrong with them.

Your documents may be very clear. On the other hand, you may have a hidden problem. We must be sensitive to the stigma that people may feel when struggling with issues of literacy. If documents are unclear, many people will assume it is their fault.

People with low literacy often do not feel comfortable raising the issue. Even individuals confident in their reading abilities could feel intimidated by confusing messages.

Ask Yourself:

- Do we ask for feedback about our communication in a way that makes it easy for our audience to respond?

- Are we working with people who might feel intimidated by complex language or uncomfortable admitting that they do not understand?

5. **Once you change one document into plain language, you have to change them all.**

You do not have to do it all at once. Start with documents that will have the biggest impact on an audience in terms of errors avoided or time saved.

Take manageable bites. One or two documents may be enough for your organization to start feeling comfortable with the process. You'll probably start to notice that the effort makes daily activities much easier for everyone.

Plain language guidelines

Plain language asks that you invest some time and effort at the beginning of the process in order to benefit in the long run.

Before you start, ask yourself:

- Is this document of long-term interest or need?
- Can this document be clarified without losing its meaning?

If the answer is yes, the following guidelines should help you clarify the style, organization, formatting, and yes, even the text within your documents.

> *"Making the simple complicated is commonplace; making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that's creativity."*
> **-Charles Mingus**

**Think of plain language as adding power
to your communication!**

P   Pinpoint your purpose and audience.

O   Outline your document.

W   Write or rewrite.

E   Enhance with design.

R   Read, test and revise.

Power

Pinpoint your purpose

Consider the following:

- Why might we need to write (or rewrite) these materials?

- What are the most important points that we want to convey?

- Does this document affect immediate, everyday life, or does it deal more with overall vision and/or standard procedure?

- When and where will readers be using this document?

- Will your reader be rushed or stressed while reading the document?

    - Research shows a direct link between crisis and our ability to absorb information. If this document is an emergency response item, it will require extreme plain language – more graphics, less text.

    - Readers who use the document in a rushed or noisy atmosphere will have different needs than readers who will have a quiet place and uninterrupted time to go through the document.

- What does this document need to do? Plain language in a policy and procedure manual will look very different from the plain language used in a public information pamphlet.

> **Note the correlation between crisis and our ability to absorb information. Your reader's frame of mind will affect your reader's ability to understand the document.**

- Is this an internal document?
  - If the material will be read by employees only, there may be more technical or workplace-specific jargon that you will need to consider.
- Is this an external document?
  - A document meant for the general public will usually have a larger audience with a broader spectrum of literacy abilities, frames of reference and contexts to keep in mind.
- Does this document require any prior knowledge in order to understand it?
- What should people know about after they have read this document?

Pinpoint your audience

Consider the following:

- Am I familiar with my readers' demographics in terms of:
  - Age: Note the provincial literacy level averages of different age groups, mentioned earlier.
  - Cultural background: This will affect word and graphics choices, as well as the use of colloquialisms, idioms, metaphors and contractions.
  - First language: How many people in your audience have learned English as a second or additional language?

Activity: Pinpoint your document's purpose and audience using the worksheet provided.

P**O**wer
Outline your document

Make it easy for the reader to find exactly what they are looking for. Be consistent in the way your document is organized – create a pattern and follow it.

Always start with introductions.

- Begin with a clear statement of what the reader can expect. Use an opening statement:

  - "This handbook explains your health benefits."

  - "This paper shows how to handle customer complaints."

Consider using subtitles.

- Teeth: Good brushing can help you stay healthy!

Research shows that many readers do not read an entire document. Always place the most important information at the beginning.

Organize ideas in reader's logical order.

- Include a table of contents for longer documents.

- Try outlining your information step-by-step.

- Try writing in chronological order.

Explain how the document will be organized.

- If the document is long, give a brief explanation on where to find different information:

  - "See the table of contents to find our Frequently Asked Questions."

  - "See the back page for contact information."

Divide your document into short sections.

- Keep similar information grouped together.

- Start a new paragraph for every new idea or concept.

Activity: Outline your document in the worksheet provided.

Write or rewrite

Use short, clear words.

- Use every day words that are applicable to your audience. Avoid using words with more than 3 syllables.

Avoid common writing traps:

- Wordy phrases:
  - Saying "an adequate number of" when the word "enough" will do.
  - For a list of plain language substitutions, see the back of this workbook.

- Noun chains (a series of consecutive nouns, with all but the last functioning as adjectives):
  - Baseball game ticket.
  - Baseball game ticket price.
  - Baseball game ticket price increase.
  - Baseball game ticket price increase proposal.

- Double negatives: These can be confusing, and are almost always unnecessary.
  - Not unlike.
  - Not untrue.
  - "Now correct me if I'm incorrect, but I was told it is not untrue. Was I not misinformed?"

- Idioms, like "hit the wall", "keep an eye out" or "change the baby".
  - It can be hard to understand the real meaning of these phrases, especially for people whose first language is not English.

"The problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished."
- George Bernard Shaw

- Abbreviations: These can also be confusing for those with low English literacy skills.
- Acronyms:
  - Some acronyms are so well known, we may forget what they actually stand for (like RSVP or UNESCO). But these may not be as commonly known to others with a different frame of reference.
  - Acronyms should only be used if their use helps make the document clearer, and after you have explained their meaning. This means fully introducing the acronym the first time you use it in your document.

Define technical terms when the reader may be unfamiliar.

- It is a common misconception that clear language does not allow for the use of technical terms. If the message you need to convey includes technical terms, then the message requires them. It is your job to ensure that your intended audience understands them.

Keep terms consistent.

- Will you use the term patron or customer? Elevator, or lift? Foot wear, or shoes? Choose your terms based on what will best suit your reader, and stick to them.

Keep sentences short.

- If a sentence contains more than one concept or message, break it into more than one sentence.
- Mix short and longer sentences, aiming for no more than 20 – 25 words per sentence.

Use a positive tone.

- Your writing style should convey a positive message. If writing about need, be sure to include, and better yet, focus on, strengths.
- If you are unsure whether you write with a positive or negative tone, ask someone whom you trust.

> Remember: Plain language conveys a message using the clearest terms that the message will allow.

Use an active writing style.

- Avoid writing in passive construction. This means sticking to a 'subject-verb-object' sentence construction.
  - Passive: "Nancy was invited to a party by Laura."
  - Active: "Laura invited Nancy to a party."

Write short paragraphs.

- Try to use about 4 – 5 sentences per paragraph.
- Focus on 1 idea per paragraph.
- Use headings and subheadings.
  - People often scan information instead of reading a full document. Headings and subheadings allow people to quickly find the information they are looking for.

Keep the length manageable.

- Direct the reader to more information if necessary.
  - If more information is required, break the message up between the main point and clarifying points.
  - If there are websites, books or articles which would be useful, list them. Be sure to include that list in your table of contents!
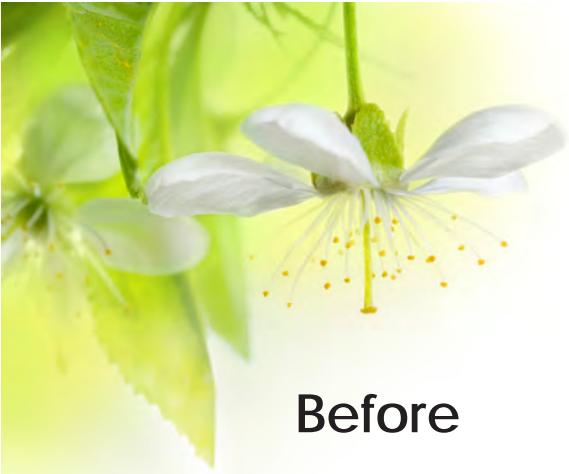
Use gender inclusive language.

- Use a mix of masculine and feminine pronouns, keeping the reader in mind.

Keep your reader in mind.

- In all of your word choices, think about who will be reading it and why, and write accordingly.

Activity: Try rewriting some of the examples provided using clear language principles.

Before

After notification of NMFS, this final rule requires all CA/OR DGN vessel operators to have attended one Skipper Education Workshop after all workshops have been convened by NMFS in September 1997. CA/OR DGN vessel operators are required to attend Skipper Eduation Workshops at annual intervals thereafter, unless that requirement is waived by NMFS. NMFS will provide sufficient advance notice to vessel operators by mail prior to convening workshops.

After

Notice from the National Marine Fisheries Service:

All fishermen must attend an annual skipper education workshop before operating a fishing boat.

(There are exceptions. See your supervisor for details.)

Enhance with design

The design elements you choose to include in your document must be the best match to the type of document you are creating and the audience who will be reading it. Here are some tips:

Use plenty of white space.

- White space refers to the areas on the page not taken up by text or design, such as margins and space between paragraphs.
- Try listing information using bullet points, questions and answers, or checklists.
- Columns can be an effective way to organize text.

Highlight important information.

- Text boxes are a great way to highlight key concepts, like this one:

> Clear language conveys a message using the clearest terms that the message will allow.

- Bold or underline titles and subtitles.
  - These are easy ways to highlight information. However, they can lose their power if they are overused in a document. Too much bolding or underlining can result in a document that is difficult to read.
  - However you choose to highlight your key points or separate sections, be consitant throughout the entire document.

Use fonts that are easy to read.

- Many studies have been done to determine which fonts are preferable for written material:

Serif (like Times New Roman):

A serif font has short, light lines or curves at the top or bottom of the letters. Serif fonts are said to guide a strong reader's eye more quickly through text.

Sans Serif (like Century Gothic)

A sans serif font has no extra lines or curves at the top and bottom of letters like serif fonts do. They are very straightforward. This means letters are easier to recognize, especially on a computer screen.

The results of these studies are inconclusive and often contradicting. Test different fonts with your intended audience, and use your discretion. As long as the font you choose isn't *too curly*, too small or TOO RIDICULOUS, it should be fine.

Consultation with adult literacy learners in Saskatchewan showed that learners prefer sans-serif.

Avoid these practices:

- **Using a tiny font to squish ideas into a small space.**

- Hyphenating words at the end of a line (Such as the example shown here).

- Expanding and contracting lines of text to fit the line space. This is often seen in newsprint, and can cause eye strain.

- Using all capital letters. THIS IS DIFFICULT TO READ, ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE WHOSE FIRST LANGUAGE IS NOT ENGLISH. ALSO, KEEP IN MIND THAT IN AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT, IT MEANS YOU ARE YELLING!

- Using several different fonts in one document: **Using more than one font is a design choice.** Using too many fonts can look messy and unprofessional. If you choose to break up text titles and subtitles with different fonts, be consistent, be discretionary, and ask for feedback from others.

Use colour effectively.

- Use black text on a white background or a combination of colours with a high contrast.

- Use colour to draw attention to important pieces of the document.

Use photos, charts and other graphics to help explain information.

- Photos and graphics can bring meaning to text, but they can also bring confusion and even negative emotional responses. For example, people unfamiliar with North American traditions such as jack-o-lanterns or pumpkin pie may not understand these seasonal references.

A word about cultural diversity...
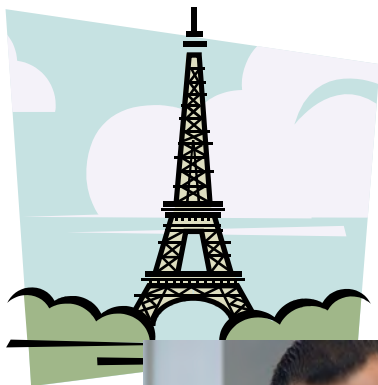
Has everyone in your audience lived in North America for more than one year, to see the seasonal cultural references? Has anyone ever spent time in a refugee camp? Does anyone have a religious or cultural background that might affect the photos of women or dress that you might choose? Are you using pictures of cultural or gender stereotypes?
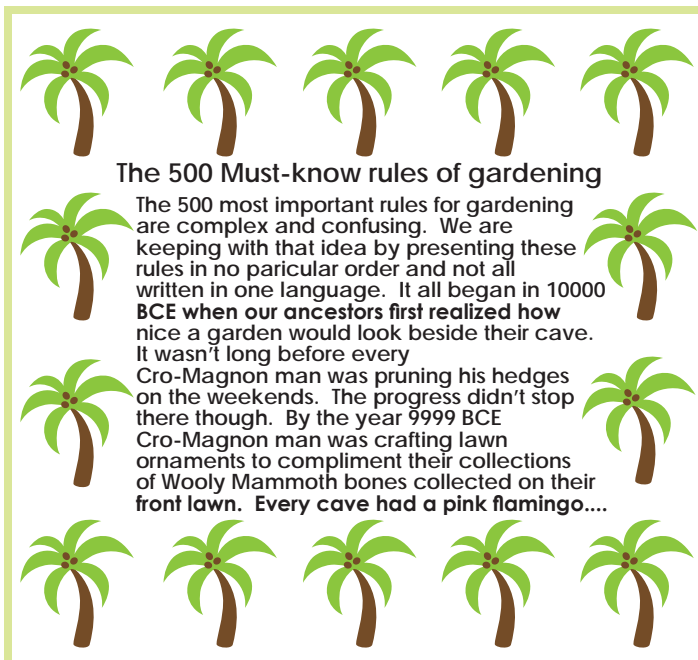
When used with sensitivitty to your audience's background, graphics are a great way to break up text and add meaning to your document.

Bad Design

Don't use all uppercase

Don't align text to the right

Don't use a patterned background

IT'S HARD TO USE POOR DESIGN.

A patterned background **can make it very difficult** to read text. Using all uppercase letters also **makes the text difficult to** read. Text should generally be aligned to the left, not to the right as in this example.

The 500 Must-know rules of gardening

The 500 most important rules for gardening are complex and confusing. We are keeping with that idea by presenting these rules in no paricular order and not all written in one language. It all began in 10000 **BCE when our ancestors first realized how** nice a garden would look beside their cave. It wasn't long before every Cro-Magnon man was pruning his hedges on the weekends. The progress didn't stop there though. By the year 9999 BCE Cro-Magnon man was crafting lawn ornaments to compliment their collections of Wooly Mammoth bones collected on their **front lawn. Every cave had a pink flamingo....**

Don't over-crowd text

Don't over-use images

Don't over-load with information

Good Design

Use lots of white space
Use easy to read text

www.website.com

Escape winter with an all-inclusive vacation to a tropical getaway.

Prices from
$529 USD
for one week.

*ocean not actually as clear as pictured.

Use colour effectively
Stick to the point

Read, test and revise

Rseareah has swohn that you can witre the ltteers in a word in any oderr as lnog as you have the fsrit and lsat lrettets in the correct pclae and you wlil sltil be albe to raed your txet.

Our brains have a tendency to autocorrect our own mistakes!

Watch for punctuation errors.

- These often go unnoticed and can dramatically change the meaning of a sentence:

this:

- Let's eat, mommy!
- Giant moving sale Friday.
- A woman without her man is nothing.

or this:

- Let's eat mommy!
- Giant moving, sale Friday.
- A woman: without her, man is nothing.

Read your document out loud.

- Ask yourself: Did the changes I made change the message? Is it still complete? Is it still too complicated? How might someone say it 'in other words'?

Scan your sentences backwards.

- This can help you catch more spelling errors.

Ask for feedback.

- Have others read through your document to catch any errors you may have missed.
- Show a draft of the document to readers who represent your target audience.
- Use this feedback to revise your document.

Remember: Clear language keeps the reader in mind at all times.

Using readability tools to assess your document

Many readability formulas have been developed to predict reading levels. These formulas are mathematical equations using factors such as the number of syllables, words and sentences in a selected piece of text.

We say a document is 'readable' when the language and ideas can be understood by the reader. Readability is measured by the ease or difficulty experienced by the reader in trying to understand the document. (Stephens, 1992)

The pros and cons of using readability instruments:

Pros

- Usually easy and fast to use.
- Scores are loosely equivalent to grade levels.
- Do not require extensive training to use.
- Appropriate for adult reading materials.

Cons

- Some instruments are vague in their instructions, which can affect their accuracy.
- Most have a margin of error.
- The instruments may oversimplify what makes something hard or easy to read.

There are other qualities of readability that determine the difficulty of materials, including:

- The type of reading material (non-fiction, fiction, textbook, legal document, etc.).
- The purpose for reading (enjoyment, to learn and remember, etc.).
- The interest of the material to the reader.
- The visual appeal of the material (illustrations, graphics, charts, etc.).
- The design and layout of the material (making it easy or straining on the eye).
- The tone and style (formal or informal, use of jargon and acronyms, etc.).
- The organization of the material (headings, bullet points, etc.).

Activity: Try using a readability tool on some of the examples provided.

Field testing

In addition to having a co-worker or colleague read what you've prepared, having members of the intended audience read the document is a good way to know if the document works. This can be as simple as asking a few community members or clients to read it.

You can also conduct a more intensive field test if the document:

- Will be widely distributed – this means a broad audience with a broad range of needs.

- Will be costly to produce – this means any corrections after the document is printed will cost even more.

- Will be used for a long period of time – this means the document needs longevity and complex language can often become dated.

"If you can't explain something simply, you don't understand it well."
– Albert Einstein

If you decide a field test is needed for your document, here are a few guidelines:

- Provide general background information, such as the purpose of the document, why you are asking for feedback, and how the feedback will be used to improve the document. Emphasize that it is the document being tested, not the people.

- If it feels appropriate, ask permission to audiotape the session. That way you can focus on facilitating the discussion, not capturing comments.

- Have a sheet ready to record demographic information. Be sure to explain that individual information is confidential and no records will be kept of names, addresses, etc.

- Explain what to expect in the focus group. For example, perhaps they will each read the document silently, and then answer questions about how easy or difficult it was to read, which words or phrases they found difficult, etc. You may want to ask them specific questions about content, and then have participants find the information and write it down.)

- Ask your test audience:

  - Is the information placed in logical order?

  - Can you find what you are looking for easily?

  - Do the main points stand out?

  - Is the document taxing on the eye?

  - Is it sensitive to your frame of reference (age, background, culture, etc.)?

  - Are the pictures and graphics helpful?

  - Is there too much information? Too little?

- As you end the focus group, thank your participants and emphasize that their feedback will help improve the document.

- Once you receive these suggestions for improvement, create your final draft.

Final tips on using plain language principles.

- Clear, or plain language, is a process, not a science.
- Language is about relationships. Communicating clearly builds transparency and trust with our co-workers and with the people we serve.
- Plain language keeps the audience in mind at all times.
- Clear language always conveys the message as clearly as the message will allow.

Activity: Practice the plain language process on a document you have brought or on one of the examples provided.

Additional plain/clear language resources:

- National Adult Literacy Database Library (NALD)
  http://www.clear.nald.ca/
- Plain Language Consultants Network
  www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/
- Plain Language Action Network (US Government)
  www.plainlanguage.gov
- Cheryl Stephens Plain Language Wizardry
  www.plainlanguage.com
- Clear Language and Design
  www.eastendliteracy.on.ca/clearlanguageanddesign
- Clear Language at Work – A Case for Plain Language
  www.clearlanguageatwork.com
- http://www.web.net/~plain/PlainTrain/
- http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/
- http://www.wordsmithassociates.com/

Questions?
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651-7288 or 1-888-511-2111

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