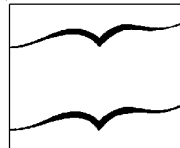




How to Cut the Gobbledegook: an introduction to plain language writing and clear design



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How to Cut the Gobbledegook: an introduction to plain language writing and clear design

We created this manual to use with our workshop. It is part of our *Fostering Plain Language in Public Communications* project funded by the National Literacy Secretariat.

The manual contains:

- information about literacy levels in PEI
- questions to consider before writing
- some principles of plain language and clear design
- exercises and examples to reinforce the principles

We hope that you will find the manual useful as a reference for your writing. We believe these techniques will help you become a better communicator.

Catherine O'Bryan, Executive Director
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Why use Plain Language ?

Plain language and clear design is a way of organizing information that makes sense. This style of writing or speaking uses straightforward, concrete and familiar words. You can use these techniques to adapt what you have to say to the abilities of your audience. Using plain language to explain concepts and procedures involves using examples that relate to your reader's experience.

Plain Language:

- √ reaches people with low literacy skills
- √ helps everyone understand information
- √ avoids misunderstandings and errors
- √ saves time, because the message is received the first time



Common Objections to Plain Language

We don't have time.

It does take a little longer to write using plain language, but the more you use it, the easier it gets. The time will be well spent because your materials will be more effective.

It will insult people who read well.

Materials written for adults should not be childish or insulting to anyone. If they are clear and easy to read, they will have the greatest **benefit** for people who don't read well. But people who do read well can **find** out what they want to know more quickly from material that is clear, focused on the main ideas, and well designed. Nobody will complain about that.

Literacy is not a problem for our audience.

This may be true, but it is becoming clearer that literacy is a problem for more people than we had realized. Any material that is written for the general public should be clear and easy to read, since as many as 42% of Canadian adults have difficulty using print to get information.

What we have to say can't be written simply — we have to use technical language.

Some material is written for a special audience that has the background to understand technical language, or specific terms. But when material is written for the public, the writer must explain those terms so that more people can understand. If it's important for the audience to know the terms, then define them and use them consistently. That way the audience will have a better chance of understanding. If the words or terms are not essential, then choose



a more common word that will get the idea across, even if it's not quite as precise.

I'm paid to write — my writing is fine.

Chances are this person is right, but the material she or he produces may not be useful for a wide audience. You can apply the techniques of plain language and design in all forms of writing, but they are most useful when you want to expand your audience to include as many people as possible.

It costs too much.

Studies in the U.S. and Britain have shown that clear writing saves money. The text is often shorter because it sticks to the point and staff spend less time answering questions and dealing with complaints.

Insurance companies in the U.S., U.K. and Australia report that customer relations have improved dramatically and profitability has increased as a result of using plain language.



Six Questions to Consider Before You Start Writing

Who is Your Audience?

What do You Want to Say?

Why are You Writing this Document?

How Will Your Reader Use the Information in this Document?

How Should You Organize the Information?

How Should You Present the Information?

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 are the reader's needs
- what information is essential
- how it can be organized and expressed most clearly

To find this out, you can ask yourself a series of questions which will help you focus your writing and get your message across most effectively. Getting the answers to these questions may take a little bit of research, but the time you spend planning what you write will save you time and trouble later.

Who is Your Audience?

Are you writing only for professionals? Is your document intended for young people, seniors, working people, public servants or members of specific ethnocultural groups? What do you know about the reading skills and backgrounds of the people who will use your document? Is English or French their second language? Are their reading skills likely to be uniformly high or low, or to vary? If even a few of your readers are likely to have low reading skills, you should write in a way that makes most of what you are saying understandable to them.

Consider the particular needs of readers with disabilities. Print is not appropriate for all audiences. Think about using alternate media for your message, such as audio tapes, braille, or large print. You may want to use radio or TV to advertise an event rather than only the newspaper or a brochure.



What do You Want to Say?

Focus on what your reader wants and needs to know. Don't try to say more about your subject than you have to. You may have to include information such as registration and deadline dates. If you can leave out some less important information, do so. Make sure that your reader's needs and wants determine what information gets the most emphasis. This information should go at the beginning or get the most attention in your document.

Why are You Writing this Document?

Are you writing about something completely new? Give your reader all the information they need to decide if they want to attend your new program or activity.

Are you trying to change people's behaviour? Make sure you mention how even small changes can bring benefits that are important to your reader.

Is your document a "how-to" text? Be sure to include any background information your reader may need to understand your instructions.

How Will Your Reader Use the Information in this Document?

When you know how people will use your document this helps you decide how to organize the information.

Will your document be a quick reference tool that your reader will use on the job? Will your reader find your document in a display, skim it to see if there is anything of particular interest, then read only one or two sections? Will your reader want or need to read it through to get a thorough understanding of the subject?



How Should You Organize the Information?

What does your reader most want to know? What is your main message or theme? Decide what information must be included and what can be left out. Then divide your information into main and secondary points.

Develop a structure for your document that will make it easy and enjoyable to use. Chronological order might be the most logical approach for describing procedures - step-by-step instructions, for example - or a sequence of events.

If people already know something about the subject and you are sharing new information, start with the old information, then introduce the new. If it's a new way of doing something familiar, describe the old procedure briefly before explaining the new steps.

If you are describing something completely new, start with general information about the program objectives or the reason for the policy, then deal with the specifics, such as the application procedures or rules.

How Should You Present the Information?

To decide on your document's format, ask yourself if your reading audience has any special needs. Should your document be multilingual? Should it use large print, drawings or photographs? Should it be a pamphlet, booklet or book? Should it be portable or will it stay on a bookshelf for quick reference in an office?

Your answers to these questions will help you keep on track as you write and will ensure that your finished document meets your needs and those of your reader.

Who is Your Audience?

What do You Want to Say?

Why are You Writing this Document?

How Will Your Reader Use the Information in this Document?

How Should You Organize the Information?

How Should You Present the Information?



How long does it take to say “no”?

A customer in England wrote to a company asking if it sold blank CDs. All she wanted was a simple yes or no. Instead she received this reply:

We are currently in the process of consolidating our product range to ensure that the products that we stock are indicative of our brand aspirations. As part of our range consolidation we have also decided to revisit our supplier list and employ a more intelligent system for stock acquisition. As a result of the above certain product lines are unavailable through jungle.com, whilst potentially remaining available from more mainstream suppliers.

This response earned the company the Golden Bull award from the Plain English Campaign, a British group dedicated to promoting plain language. The Golden Bull award is given each year to the worst example of communication.



Principles of Plain Language

1. Use active voice.
2. Write directly to your reader.
3. Use a positive language whenever possible.
4. Use common words rather than technical jargon.
5. Use short words and short sentences.
6. Don't change verbs into nouns.
7. List important points separate from the text.
8. Write instructions in the order that you want them carried out.
9. List items in a parallel form.
10. Test what you write.



Principle #1

Use the active voice.

Instead of:

All correspondence is to be filed in chronological order.

Use:

You should file all correspondence in chronological order.

Instead of:

A mistake was made on the bill.

Use: *I made* a mistake on your bill.

Instead of:

Funding for literacy programs will be cut.

Use:

The government will cut literacy funding.

Hint for identifying passive voice:

The sentence usually contains a past participle (generally with “ed” on the end) and a form of the verb “to be”.



Principle #2

Write directly to your reader.

Use the words **you, your, I, we, us,** and **our** to make your document more personal and to focus on your reader.

Instead of:

Staff must use proper program codes when submitting supply orders.

Use:

Please use the proper program codes when you submit a supply order.

A friendly tone is more likely to elicit the response that you want.



Principle #3

Use positive language wherever possible.

Instead of:

Do not fail to notify your supervisor in case of illness.

Use:

Please notify your supervisor when you are ill.

Sometimes, however, negative language gives a clearer message:

Instead of:

Use plain white paper for in-office memos.

Use:

Do not use letterhead stationery for in-office memos.

It's more friendly and information will be more readily accepted.
--

The Foot in Mouth award is given to the most baffling piece of communication. This year's winner was a British politician who said: "I could not fail to disagree with you less."



Principle #4

Use common words rather than technical jargon.

Instead of:

Adopting a collaborative approach to coordinating the utilization of office equipment would be much appreciated by the office staff.

Use:

Let's work as a team to coordinate the use of office equipment.

Remember: Jargon is exclusive – it makes people feel unequal and sounds like a secret code or private language.

Some examples:

“We have nuanced the literacy problem and dialed up the honesty of the issue.” – TAXI advertising agency

“If you are determined to have a disability, we will pay you the following:” — government publication



Principle #5

Use short words and short sentences.

Instead of:

The rules of the Centre are included on the registration form you completed on the initial day your child attended the Centre.

Use:

We listed the rules of the Centre on the registration form. We gave you a copy on the first day you were here.

A good test to see if your sentence is too long is to read it aloud – if you need to take a breath before you reach the period it could be too long.

This way of writing is not simplistic like “Dick and Jane” but simply using common words.



Principle #6

Don't change verbs into nouns.

<u>Verbs</u>	<u>Nouns</u>
decide	decision
reimburse	reimbursement
examine	examination
inspect	inspection
pay	payment

Instead of:

All decisions pertaining to the *reimbursement* of staff travel expenses that exceed \$400.00 are the prerogative of Management.

Use:

Management *will decide* if it *will reimburse* travel expenses over \$400.00.

Instead of:

Regulations governing the *establishment, operation and dissolution* of the credit unions falls under this Act.

Use:

The regulations made under this Act tell how to set up, operate and dissolve a credit union.

Changing verbs into nouns is called nominalization. It may mean the sentence is in passive voice.



Principle #7

List important points separate from the text. Don't hide important information such as dates, times and places inside a paragraph.

Instead of:

Employers are requested to pre-register by the due date, stating their interest in attending an Information for Employers seminar sponsored by the WCB on April 12, 2006.

The seminar will be held in the WCB Boardroom and should be of benefit to all who attend. WCB will cover meal costs. Attendees will be requested to pay \$10 for seminar materials and to pre-register.

Use:

Workers Compensation Board (WCB) Seminar Information for Employers

Date: April 12, 2006 9:30 am - 4:00 pm
Place: WCB Boardroom, 14 Weymouth St. Charlottetown
Price: \$10.00 for seminar materials
Lunch: Provided by WCB
Pre-register by: April 1, 2006



Principle #8

Write instructions in the order that you want them carried out.

Instead of:

Before submitting Workers Report of Injury/Form 6 to the Workers Compensation Board, be sure to meet with a Client Services Officer and report the injury to your employer.

Use:

Please report your injury to your employer before meeting with a Client Services Officer to help you complete your Workers Report of Injury Form 6.



Principle #9

List items in a parallel (the same grammatical) form.

Instead of:

Three good work habits are:

1. **Setting** priorities
2. You **should finish** what you start
3. It is important **to do** your best

Use:

Three good work habits are:

1. **Setting** priorities
2. **Finishing** what you start
3. **Doing** your best

Good workers:

1. **Set** priorities
2. **Finish** what they start
3. **Do** their best

HINT: Check the first word of each item on your list



Principle #10

Make sure that you “test” what you write.

Always have someone else read and comment on what you write. If you are preparing documents that will be widely circulated, conduct a test among people who represent your audience. Consult with people who know your audience better than you do. This process will tell you:

- ✓ if your audience **wants** to read your work
- ✓ if they **can** read it
- ✓ if they can **make use** of it

If your draft does not pass the test, the results will give you valuable information on how to revise your work for your audience.

This is the first time the Foot in Mouth award has crossed the Atlantic in several years. Donald Rumsfeld said:

“Reports that say that something hasn’t happened are always interesting, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know that there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns the ones we don’t know we don’t know.”

To read more about the awards, visit <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk>



Cut the Gobbledegook Workshop Practice sheet #1

Please re-write the following exercises keeping plain language principles in mind.

Principle 1. Use active voice

An application form will be filled out by each apprentice.

Principle 2. Write directly to your reader

ATTENTION: Employers must complete all paper work at the end of the OJT session.

Principle 3. Use positive language whenever possible

Do not leave plumbing supplies around the worksite because someone might trip on them.

Principle 4. Use common words rather than technical jargon

It appears evident that nasal inflammation, likely due to hypersensitivity to one or more allergens found on the fairway, has manifested on his proboscis.



Principle 5. Use short words and short sentences

The responsibilities of the apprentice to the employer and the Board are manifold and can be onerous if the proper attention is not paid to the rules specified in the contract that each applicant is recipient of at the commencement of the training.

Principle 6. Don't change verbs into nouns

a) The new health-care policy will make provision for employees who work part time.

b) The requirement of the Department is that employees work seven and one-half hours a day.

Principle 7. List important points separate from the text. Don't hide important information such as dates, times, and places inside a paragraph.

The PEI Literacy Alliance invites you to meet and greet old and new friends at our Golf Tournament for Literacy on Thursday, June 14th. The reception will be held at the New Glasgow Lobster Suppers. A variety of refreshments will be available for your consumption. Entertainment will be provided by Sassafrax. You are encouraged to confirm your attendance before the deadline, which is at least two weeks in advance of the event. Join us for our 16th annual tournament.



Principle 8. Write instructions in the order that you want them carried out

Before building the wall you must nail the studs well, cut them to length and choose straight lumber.

Principle 9. List items in parallel (the same grammatical) form.

A good plumber:

Cleans up after the job

Be a good solderer

It's important to keep your truck well stocked

10. Make sure that you “test” what you write.

It is important to have someone with “fresh eyes” review what you have written. If you are writing for a particular group, test your draft with a few members of the group. Are they getting the message? Is there anything confusing or easily misunderstood? Is there any information missing?



Principles of Clear Design

1. Choose left flush justification.
2. Choose type that is clear and easy to read.
3. Pay attention to how the text looks on the page.
4. Use illustrations and graphics effectively.



Principle #1

When you format your page, choose left flush justification. It is easier to read.

Left flush justification is the format of this paragraph. The spaces between the words are all the same, and the reader can move from one line to the next with little or no problem.

Avoid:

Full Justified Margins

This format makes straight margins on both sides of the page. It can be hard to read because the spaces between words are not all the same, creating holes in the text. Newspapers often use full justification so the sides of their columns are straight.

Centred Text:

This format is fine for titles and headings. You should not centre paragraphs of text, because it is harder for readers to find the beginning of each line.



Principle #2

Choose type that is clear and easy to read.

Avoid:

Italics, **OR A TYPE THAT CHANGES THE NORMAL FORM OF THE LETTERS**. These make reading more difficult.

BLOCK LETTERS SHOULD BE AVOIDED AS WELL. THIS FORMS A DENSE BLOCK OF TEXT THAT CAN TIRE THE READER. IT ALSO MAKES IT MORE DIFFICULT FOR THE READER TO RECOGNIZE THE SHAPE OF THE WORDS.

Words printed in lower case have more distinctive shapes than words printed in UPPER CASE.

Use:

Serif fonts because they are easier to read. **They can also be bolded to highlight important information.** Examples of serif fonts are:

Charter BT Bookman Old Style
Prestige Elite Times New Roman



Principle #3

Pay attention to how the text looks on the page. Organize your text so that there is more white space.

White space refers to any of the blank space on a document, such as the margins and the space between sections. A text with little white space can look too crowded, and discourage readers. This also avoids clutter.

Avoid:

A Family Resource Centre's Purpose

The purpose of the centre is to provide quality childcare and promote healthy child development. The purpose of the centre can be described by two terms: Safe and Healthy Environment and Meaningful Activities.

Use:

A Family Resource Centre's Purpose:

The purpose of the centre is to provide quality childcare and promote healthy child development.

The purpose of the centre can be described by two terms:

- Safe and Healthy Environment
- Meaningful Activities



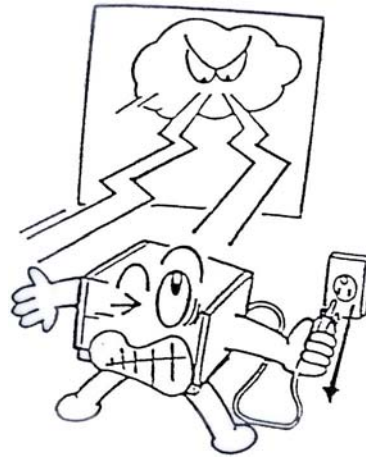
Principle #4

Use illustrations and graphics effectively.

- Use illustrations and graphics to help your reader understand the text.
- Make sure they are clear and the captions are easy to read.
- Place them on the page in a way that does not interrupt normal reading patterns. Your reader should not have to “jump” over an illustration to read the text.

Avoid:

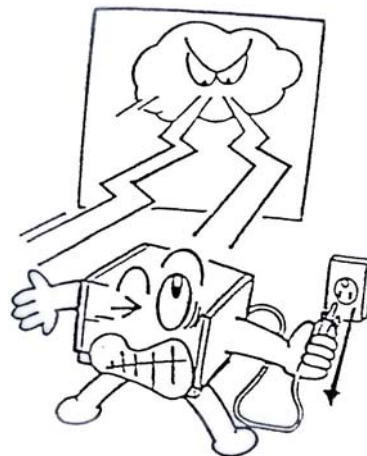
With proper grounding, about 90% of lightning damage can be prevented. During severe electric storms, you should turn the power switch off and disconnect the power cord and line cord.



90% of prevented. however, off and telephone

Use:

With proper grounding, about 90% of lightning damage can be prevented. During severe electric storms, however, you should turn the power switch off and disconnect the power cord and the telephone line cord.





Appendices



What is Literacy?

Literacy is the ability to understand and use printed material at work, at home, and in the community -- to achieve one's goals and develop one's knowledge and potential.

(International Adult Literacy Survey 1996)

Kinds of Literacy

Prose literacy is the ability to understand and use information from texts, such as newspapers, magazines or novels.

Document literacy is the ability to find and use information from documents such as job applications, maps or loan forms.

Numeracy is the ability to apply arithmetic operations such as balancing a chequebook or figuring out a tip.

What are Literacy Rates in Atlantic Canada?

In 1996 and 2003 Canada took part in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). The survey found that half of Atlantic Canadians have literacy skills at levels one and two. They have difficulty reading food and drug labels. They may not be able to read the materials required to do their job safely.



What are literacy skill levels?

People have different skill levels when it comes to literacy. They range from having difficulty with basic reading to being able to understand very complex material.

In the International Adult Literacy Skills Survey researchers divided literacy into five skill levels:

Level 1: People have great difficulty reading and usually know they have a problem.

Level 2: People can read but not well. They can deal with material that is simple and clearly laid out. Often they do not realize they have a problem.

Level 3: People can read well but have some problems with more complex tasks.

Level 4 and 5:

People can meet most reading demands. These levels are combined for convenience.



Low Literacy Performance in Canada

Percentage of the adult population at literacy levels 1 and 2

	Yukon	PEI	Nunavut	Canadian Average
Prose	33	48	73	48
Numeracy	43	56	78	55

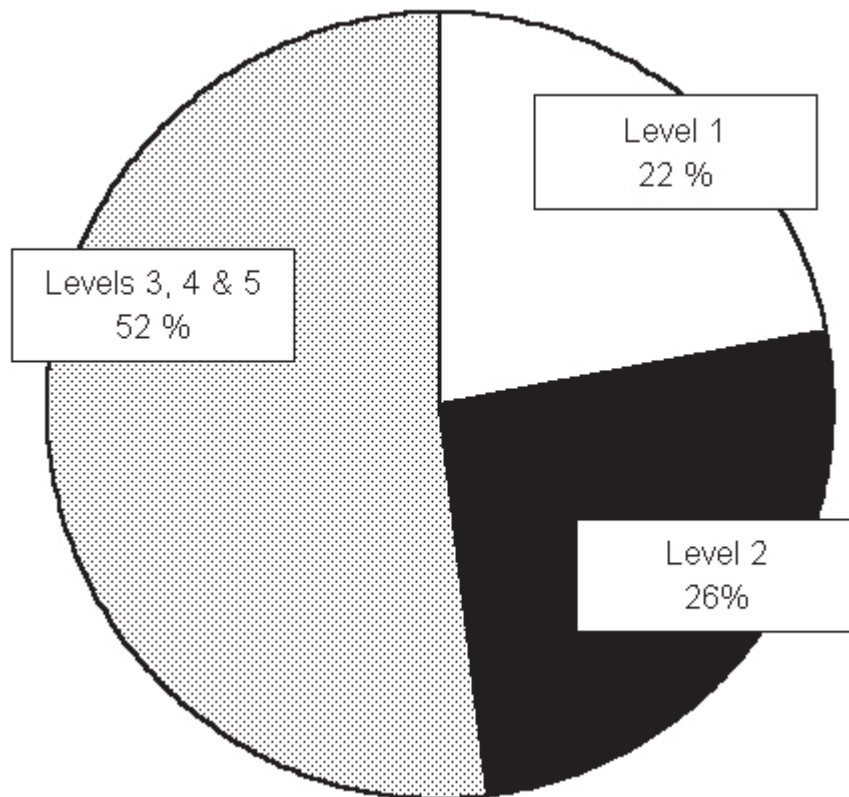
Adults 16 to 65 at level 1

Percentage of the working age population at the lowest literacy level

	Yukon	PEI	Nunavut	Canadian Average
Prose	9	14	46	15
Numeracy	14	20	55	20



Prose Literacy Levels - PEI Adults over 16





Signs of Low Literacy in People

Observing Verbal Responses

Sometimes the way people respond to a reading situation can alert you to possible literacy difficulties. A person with low literacy skills may tell you:

- “Can I take this home with me? I have to discuss it with my family anyway.”
- “I’m in a rush. Can I read this later?”
- “My eyes are tired. Can you just explain what it says?”
- “I don’t feel well enough right now.”

Observing Behavioural Responses

Sometimes a person’s literacy difficulties will be apparent from their behaviours. These behaviours often reflect the coping skills the non-reader has developed. Patients may have literacy difficulties if they:

- Read slowly and with obvious effort (especially handwriting)
- “Read” something much faster than expected
- Fill out forms incorrectly (including spelling, grammar or mechanics)
- Never refer to or mention written information that they have already received
- Never jot down notes when receiving instructions
- Ask a lot of questions about the content of written material when they receive it
- Don’t ask any questions at all (indicating lack of understanding)
- Insist on having a family member or friend with them at all times
- Don’t show up for appointments and offer vague excuses



Clients or patients with literacy difficulties may display certain **exaggerated behaviours**. They may:

- Become angry and storm out
- Show resistance if they are unable to carry out instructions or guidance
- Show no interest at all in the information they receive
- Deny that their condition is serious enough to warrant reading additional information or following complicated treatment procedure

In contrast, some clients or patients with literacy difficulties will display certain **subtle behaviours**.

Non-verbal signs of discomfort:

- Loss of eye contact
- Heightened facial colour
- Nervous finger tapping
- Less relaxed physical posture

Signs of diminished self-esteem:

- Non-confident body language
- Lowered tone of voice
- Verbalizing diminished self-concept



Introduction to Plain Language Workshop

Practice sheet

Please re-write the following exercises keeping plain language principles in mind.

1. Write in the active voice

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

All bursary applications will be reviewed by December 15th.

2. Keep it short

Readers can only take in so much new information at one time.

Adult education policies do not appear to be well understood by front line college instructors, even though this group has primary responsibility for the implementation of these policies.

3. 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.

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

4. Avoid ambiguity

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

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



5. 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.

If you fail to replace your divots the course marshall will not admit you to the putting green.

6. Avoid double negatives

Instead of:

- a) He was not absent.
- b) The procedure will not be ineffective.
- c) It was never illegitimate.

7. 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 significant that...

It is interesting to note that the PM said that, with respect to literacy programming, at this point in time, his government has no plans for augmentation of this issue.



8. Review

Review the following sentences and rewrite them in a clear and effective manner.

a) Poor golfers often are not able to play under par. Most poor golfers can, however, improve with practice. Nevertheless, they are often able to play well enough for tournaments. They are, however, fully capable of making improvements to their game.

b) It is hoped that this workshop manual will provide a valuable resource for all our students.

c) And now with the new Canadian standards for rating windows as well as incentive programs in certain provinces for consumers and builders using high-performance varieties, some manufacturers are working to bring their products up to the performance levels needed to qualify under the incentive programs.



Plain Language Writing at a Glance

Plain language writing means creating a document that is:

- visually inviting,
- logically organized, and
- understandable on the first reading.

To create a Plain language document:

- know your audience
- know what you need to say
- organize your material logically
- avoid repetition

Use these tools to write clearly:

- active voice with strong verbs
- short sentences
- personal pronouns
- concrete, familiar words
- no surplus words
- no legal jargon
- tabular presentation of complex information
- design and layout that increase comprehension



Design and Layout - Some Things to remember

Number of characters in a line

Once you go beyond 65 characters in a line, readers have great difficulty reading at their normal speed. You may want to switch to two columns or another layout that makes your document easy to read.

Margins

Justifying the right hand margin decreases readability because it causes the eye to stop at irregular spacing between words. Justifying means making the margins flush. This document has a justified left margin, and an unjustified, or ragged right margin.

Capital letters

It is very difficult to read sentences in all capital letters because it is unnatural and the normal visual cues are missing. A short header is readable in all caps, but anything more strains the reader. Consider these other methods to highlight important information: boxing the information, changing type size or font, using italics, or a light screen.

Descriptive headers

You increase readability by using headers that specifically describe the sections of your documents. Your reader absorbs information more quickly and easily, and understands its relationship to other information, if you use headers. The headers can then become a table of contents that communicates information more effectively to the reader.

Dense text

If dense copy fills a page, you increase the chances that your reader will become discouraged. Give your reader a visual and mental break by using shorter paragraphs and headers.

White space

Although cost may dictate how much white space you can use to open up your document and make it easier to read, make use of the white space you currently have. If you have a page where the text ends in the middle, ask yourself if you could have used a bigger type size and headers more effectively.



Interesting Websites:

www.web.ca/~plain/PlainTrain/

www.plainlanguagenetwork.org

www.plainlanguage.com

www.clearart.co.uk

<http://home.comcast.net/~garbl/writing/plaineng.htm>

www.hrsdc.gc.ca/asp/gateway.asp?hr=en/hip/lld/nls/Resources/plainws.shtml&hs=axa