

# WRITING MATTERS

Getting  
your message  
across

by

**Janet Pringle**

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Trail Blazers'  
Plain Language Service



**Calgary Region Community Board**  
Persons with Developmental Disabilities

**Strengthening the Community**

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## Contents

1	To Start With	4
2	Plain Language Then and Now	10
3	Jargon, Bafflegab and Yadda Yadda	14
4	Oh Groan! Not Grammar!	20
5	Plain Language: A Way with Words	27
6	<i>Really</i> Plain Language	36
7	Speakers of English as a Second Language	45
8	Testing and Revising	50
9	Layout	57
10	Choosing Fonts	63
11	Proofreading	68
	Appendix A: Choosing Your Words	70
	Appendix B: Plain Language Checklist	74
	Appendix C: Before and After	75
	Appendix D: Resources	81

# 1 chapter 1 To Start With

*Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can.  
That is the only secret of style.*

—MATTHEW ARNOLD

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT CLEAR PRINT COMMUNICATION ON PAPER and getting your message across. But this is rather vague, so I'm going to use the term *plain language*. It sounds simple, one would think. Actually, it is difficult to do. It is my hope that this book will give you tips and ideas to try.

The term plain language has become so familiar recently that people use it sometimes without knowing quite what it covers. I'll begin with a definition.

## **Definition**

Plain language is communication designed for the readers it is meant for. Sometimes we call it reader-based language—the focus is on the readers and not on the writer. Given this meaning, we can see that it is not simply for people who face literacy barriers, but has a much broader scope. It is good communication whoever the readers are.

We need plain language most in materials which have information for readers, such as health pamphlets, bus schedules, forms to fill out, reports, how-to manuals, legal advice, contracts and so on. Often these may not be subjects which really “grab” readers, so it helps if they are easy to read. For writers who prepare documents with useful, or even vital, information, the purpose of writing has failed if people cannot understand it. People read these materials for the information alone, not for the beauty of the language. This is not to say that writers can never make these materials elegant, but that is not the first aim.

Of course, we need plain language when writing for children, but that is a different genre and not discussed here.

Neither are we writing about works of fiction. Writers of fiction have a certain freedom in what they create. Our great works of fiction don't have to be mutilated to meet plain-language standards. Shakespeare, after all, wasn't writing do-it-yourself manuals. Fiction is not always intended to be fully accessible. Often there are different layers of meaning, so people take from a novel their own personal insights. Good plain language has only one layer and is not open to multiple interpretations.

## **Plain language for general readers**

For general readers, writers start at a reading level that is around Grade 8.

Of course, these “general readers” are not just a mass of faceless people. But we cannot possibly know them all and cater to every need when we write for newspapers or design a form, so we have invented this general-public reader. Experts have researched for many years to find out who reads what and how easily they do it. *The Globe and Mail* newspaper’s average reader, for instance, reads at a higher level than the *Calgary Sun*’s average reader, but both count as part of the general public.

From general reading levels, we can branch out into plain language for more specialized readerships: plain language for engineers, for instance, or lawyers or hospital patients. Though the principles are the same, each group has unique literacy needs.

### **Low-literacy plain language**

Plain language for people who face literacy barriers is language written at a simple reading level. This is the level people are thinking of when they complain about “dumbing down” (one of my least favourite expressions!). Sometimes materials written at lower literacy levels can look rather simple—to people who read with ease. But I have yet to hear a complaint about “dumbing down” from someone who needs materials at that level. This is low-literacy plain language. Writing simpler materials is surely better than leaving many people without information.

When you write for groups you may not belong to (maybe people who are deaf or who have developmental disabilities or who speak English as a second language) it is very important to test your materials with representative readers. You can only guess what they will understand. And if you write materials frequently, it is very likely you have a higher than average reading and comprehension level, which makes it even harder to know what is plain and what is not. It is good to test all documents, but for readers with literacy barriers it is absolutely essential.

These are some of the people who often need easier-to-read materials:

- Many people with developmental disabilities, especially now, as they are more likely to be living independently than in years past, when many would have lived in institutions or large group homes.
- People with learning disabilities often struggle with written text.
- So do some people with mental illnesses.
- People who are deaf or hard of hearing sometimes need fairly simple materials. American Sign Language does not correspond exactly to written language, so learning to read is learning a second language.
- People whose first language is not English may need, at least for a while, easy-to-read materials.
- The age of the reader has an effect on literacy. Older readers often left school at a younger age than is normal now. Seniors also tend to have poorer eyesight, which can affect how much they read.

- People who have spent years in manual jobs which needed little reading often lose some level of literacy skill. Reading becomes harder when it is not practised.
- People in crisis always have more trouble reading. If you have just been told you have cancer, you will not be reading with your normal fluency.

These are all groups with special needs for plain language. But as well as all these known groups, there is also a need for simpler materials for “average” readers. I’ll talk about literacy figures in the next chapter.

### WHY SHOULD WE BOTHER TO USE PLAIN LANGUAGE?

#### **Justice**

Most importantly, plain language is about justice. Everyone has the right to understandable information, especially when they will make choices based on it. This is true whether the information is about finances and credit, health, housing, jobs or legal rights. It is as important for readers with literacy barriers to be able to take part fully in society as it is for people who are blind or use a wheelchair. People who are blind need accommodations such as Braille; people who use wheelchairs need ramps; and people who have literacy difficulties need plain language.

#### **Legal documents**

Plain language saves us from having to sign papers we cannot make head or tail of. Most of us at some time have had to sign papers which we barely understood, whether they were mortgage papers, rental agreements, insurance applications or warranties. We are supposed to understand these documents before we sign them. Lawyers may tell us what is meant, in the case of legal papers, but we still have only their word—easy to forget and not provable later. It makes people vulnerable and dependent upon whoever explains the document.

#### **Informed consent**

This is another kind of legal form, usually covering medical services. Many of us would not agree to the conditions in a consent form if we really understood them. Often we sign them without understanding them because we know we need the medical treatment. But we don’t need to sign without a struggle. If every one of us complained each time we were given a consent form written in gobbledegook, these forms would improve.

#### **Independence**

Having plain language increases independence and our control over our own lives. As far as possible, we should not have to depend on others to explain what is written. Even people with limited literacy should have materials which they can read. For instance, people with developmental disabilities need less staff support if they can read the labels and prices when they buy groceries, when they use an ATM, or when they just need to find out when the next bus is due.

### **Health and safety**

Having clear documents improves our health and safety. Pamphlets on eating well help us choose what we buy at the store. People who take several medications will be more aware of the dangers of possible drug interactions when they have readable information with their pills. Janitors work with strong chemical cleaners and need to understand how to use them safely.

The Canadian Public Health Association is aware of these needs. It gives strong support for plain language and has held meetings across Canada on health and literacy.

An example of where plain language would have helped is that of a mother with a child who had an ear infection. She could not read the instructions on the bottle of medicine she had been given, so she poured the antibiotic into the child's ear, instead of giving it by mouth.<sup>1</sup> It is important to remember that not everyone is knowledgeable about medicine.

### **Increased profits for companies**

Ikea stays very competitive by shipping furniture in flat boxes and then giving clear instructions on how to put it together. Other stores are starting to copy this model. Without the clear instructions it gives, this business would have failed.

Think of how much money the banking industry has made for itself by installing ATMs and laying off staff. Users may not all be happy about it, but the banks certainly are. To use an ATM, people have to be given written instructions which are plain.

Royal Insurance of Canada increased its sales by 38% (from \$59 million to \$79 million) in 1977, when it adopted plain language in homeowners' insurance policies.<sup>2</sup> Customers are choosing companies that write clear policies, and because they make fewer mistakes when they fill out forms, fewer staff are needed to handle the paper work.

### **Money saved**

Plain language saves money. Big time.

Health information in easier-to-read formats not only increases safety but also saves money. For example, hospitals are able to discharge patients earlier with written instructions about their treatment.

Accessible information cuts down on preventable accidents which cost our health services.

The Alberta government now has clear evidence that plain language forms save money. At Alberta Agriculture, "with 1,034,530 forms processed a year, and savings in staff time of at least 10 minutes per form ... the annual saving to the government is an astounding \$3,472,014."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Parker, R.M., Ratzan, S.C., & Lurie, N. (2003).

<sup>2</sup> *Rapport: News about Plain Language*, 19, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Mowat, C. (1997, January).

“The Ontario Records Council estimates the government has about 83,000 forms. They cost \$29 million to print and \$2 billion to process. Processing costs are high because 80% of public forms are filled out incorrectly. It costs 10 times more to process forms completed with errors.”<sup>4</sup>

“Since the British government began its review of forms in 1982, it has scrapped 27,000 forms, redesigned 41,000 forms, and saved over \$28,000,000.”<sup>5</sup>

A study carried out in a financial services company called Banco showed that using plain language versions of their documents improved employee productivity by 36.9%, decreased employee errors by 77.1%, and decreased the frequency of calls to the help desk by 17.4%.<sup>6</sup>

### **Time saved**

Plain language saves time, which also saves money. Busy people do not have time to read poorly written documents. Instead of grinding through something that is long and confusing, people appreciate concise and clearly written materials.

### **Lies prevented**

When you use plain language, you can't befuddle people with untruths or half-truths. Plain language is open and doesn't hide behind a screen of difficult words.

As Dale Spender, in her classic book *Man Made Language* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), put it, “Language is not neutral. It is not merely a vehicle which carries ideas. It is itself a shaper of ideas.”

### **Some expensive communication bloopers**

Plain language saves costly mistakes. Here are some examples<sup>7</sup> of where big money could have been saved with better writing.

Computer manufacturer Coleco lost \$35 million in a single quarter in 1983—and eventually went out of business—when customers purchased its new Adam line of computers, found the instruction manuals unreadable, and rushed to return their computers.

A nuclear plant supervisor ordered ‘ten foot long lengths’ of radioactive materials. Instead of getting the ten-foot lengths it needed, the plant received ten one-foot lengths, at a cost so great it was later classified [as secret].

<sup>4</sup> Ontario Government Forms Management Survey Report. (1993).

<sup>5</sup> Eagleson, R. (1990).

<sup>6</sup> Grotsky, R. (2004, May).

<sup>7</sup> Egan, M. (1995).

**Some good news**

Many insurance companies are making their policies clearer. Clarica has been a leading supporter of plain language for many years.

The BC Securities Commission (a Crown corporation) has become a leader in the plain language movement by training staff and rewriting all its print resources so that they are easier for everyone to understand.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, investment information is now being clarified by many companies, so that investors understand how mutual funds, stocks and bonds work and are less likely to be bamboozled.

**The handbook outline**

I wrote this handbook to share with you some of the ideas I have tested and found helpful. As well, I'll mention some of the research and experience of others in this field.

We will begin in chapter 2 with facts about literacy in Canada and a short history of the plain language movement. Chapter 3 talks about jargon and how not to write. Chapter 4 goes over some grammar do's and don'ts, and chapter 5 broadens the picture to plain language composition and style.

Chapters 6 and 7 are primarily for people writing materials for lower-literacy readers and speakers of English as a second language, while chapter 8 covers testing and revising. Chapters 9 and 10 talk about making your documents look more readable through effective use of page layout and fonts. Chapter 11 has tips for proofreading.

And at the end of the handbook you will find a list of alternative, plainer words, a checklist you can use on your own documents, and finally some examples of plain and not-so-plain language, followed by a large section on useful books and Internet sites.

<sup>8</sup> Brockman, A. (2004).

## chapter 2

### Plain Language Then and Now

*Speketh not in the heigh style, but so pleyn at this time,  
I yow preye, that we may understonde what ye seye.*

—CANTERBURY TALES

AS THESE WORDS FROM GEOFFREY CHAUCER (1342–1400) show, complaints about difficult and confusing language are as old as English itself. Here is another grumble:

The ill and unfit choice of words wonderfully obstructs the understanding.

—Francis Bacon

There have also been writers who cared enough to create materials for the common people. The King James Bible, first printed in 1611, was written in plain language. We may find it hard to read now, as many words and expressions have changed meaning over the centuries, but just check out the number of one- and two-syllable words. It was intended for readers beyond just the well-educated clergy and was deliberately translated into the straightforward English of the times. Here is one example:

Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.  
Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.

—Matthew 5, 14–15

#### **The start of the plain language “movement”**

In the 1960s and '70s, a plain-language “movement” began and has been picking up speed ever since. There are now active organizations in many countries teaching and promoting plain language. Businesses are beginning to take notice, in particular insurance and investment services. Health services in several countries are strong advocates. Many lawyers and legal drafters are in the forefront of improving their writing (although, as we all know, much legal writing is still impressively tortured and unreadable).

Here are just a few details about government changes.

Sweden was one of the first countries to make a commitment to plain language at the government level and, since 1976, has had highly trained language specialists working with lawyers to ensure that all legislation is clear and understandable. For information in English, see [www.regeringen.se/sb/d/4409](http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/4409).

In Britain, during the 1980s, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher ordered all government departments to begin improving their forms, getting rid of some, simplifying others. They were required to give an annual report to

her. Her orders came after a demonstration was held outside the Houses of Parliament staged by the Plain English Campaign and led by plain-language experts Martin Cutts and Chrissie Maher.

When Nelson Mandela became president in South Africa, he asked for the new constitution to be written in plain language, a task carried out in part by a Canadian lawyer, Phil Knight.<sup>1</sup>

In the USA, Presidents Carter and Clinton both demanded that government documents be written in plain language, although those orders were later revoked under Presidents Reagan and Bush respectively. In March 2006, new legislation on plain language was introduced by the House Government Reform Committee's Subcommittee on Regulatory Affairs. Plain-language expert witnesses were called to give testimony about the effectiveness of plain language.

Many US states require that documents be written in plain language.

The Scottish parliament has made a commitment to improve the quality of its written documents. The Mexican government is in the early stages of developing a program. Australia has a strong plain language movement. The city of Bremen, in Germany, has a new translation bureau to provide plain explanations of some of the wordier health warnings, appliance instructions and legal papers.<sup>2</sup> The Irish government's Department of Education & Science funds a National Adult Literacy Agency, which has sparkplugged the use of plain language in law, business, media and all across Irish society.<sup>3</sup> Even in Afghanistan, President Hamid Karzai is demanding that government documents should be in plain language.<sup>4</sup>

### **In Canada**

Canada has plain-language writers for both official languages and has seen an enormous growth in the demand for plain language. The following are just a few examples of plain language work being done.

At the federal level, Health Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs and Parks Canada are developing plain language materials. In the 1990s, Revenue Canada began training all its middle managers to use plainer language in written documents.

The current Auditor General of Canada, Sheila Fraser, has promoted the use of plain language.<sup>5</sup> (See p. 18 for a particular example.)

Justice John Gomery, in his report "Who Is Responsible"<sup>6</sup> (itself a title that is unabashedly clear), wrote: "I have tried to write it in plain language that anyone should be able to understand, and to avoid using obscure legal

<sup>1</sup> Balmford, C. (no date). See also Viljoen, F., & Nienaber, A. (Eds.). (2001).

<sup>2</sup> "Office to tackle the bureaucrats' gobbledygook." (2005, September 12).

<sup>3</sup> National Adult Literacy Agency: [www.nala.ie/about/](http://www.nala.ie/about/).

<sup>4</sup> "Karzai Orders Afghan Ministers to List Accomplishments." (2005, November 14).

<sup>5</sup> Question Period. (2006, May 21).

<sup>6</sup> "Who Is Responsible." (2005, November 1).

expressions and bureaucratic jargon. I hope it is accessible to everyone....”  
In this work, he was assisted by plain-language experts.

And by the way, many lawyers are enthusiastic plain language writers. They are not only improving their own writing, but teaching law students and legal drafters. They even have an international legal journal devoted to plain language.<sup>1</sup>

We want to reverse the extraordinarily strange situation that free societies have arrived at where their members enter binding obligations they do not understand and are governed from cradle to grave by texts they often cannot comprehend.

—David Elliott

### **In Alberta**

Many departments in the provincial government too are changing their style of writing so that it is easier to read. Among others, Alberta Agriculture, Food & Rural Development, Alberta Health & Wellness, and the Human Rights & Citizenship Commission have all had documents written in plain language. Persons with Developmental Disabilities Boards and staff understand the need for low-literacy plain language.

### **Non-government plain language**

It is harder to list the commitment to plain language by individuals and non-government organizations, but we know there are many places where it is being used effectively. Local Calgary non-profit organizations include many rehabilitation agencies, Planned Parenthood Alberta, the MS Society, the Parkinson’s Society of Southern Alberta, AIDS Calgary, Calgary Centre for Newcomers, and the Women’s Centre of Calgary.

The Canadian Labour Congress has rewritten its constitution in clear language and printed the new version alongside the original version in a booklet called “Canadian Labour Congress Constitution in Clear Language: Unions make a difference in people’s lives.”<sup>2</sup> [See Appendix C for a sample.]

The Canadian Public Health Association promotes plain language and produces information on how to write it.

Most provinces have literacy organizations which recognize the need for plain language.

Literacy Alberta has fact sheets about literacy and the effects of low literacy on other aspects of life such as employment, written as easier-to-read materials. In Manitoba, Partners in Literacy has rewritten many documents to be accessible for lower-literacy readers.

These are only a few of the organizations and government departments now trying to use plain language. Some plain language documents are better than others, but at least it is a beginning and some are very good indeed.

<sup>1</sup> *Clarity*, the journal of Clarity, an international association promoting plain legal language.

<sup>2</sup> Canadian Labour Congress Constitution in Clear Language. (2005).

Why is so much emphasis now being put on plain language? Partly, I think, it is in reaction to some of the really bad writing we are being exposed to. But another reason is the growing awareness of the extent of the problem of limited literacy, which is coming to light with surveys. It is not that many people in Canada are illiterate, but that their levels of literacy are lower than had previously been thought.

For example, in an International Adult Literacy & Skills Survey carried out in six countries in 2003, some 23,000 Canadians between 16 and 65 were tested in four areas of competency:

- prose literacy (understanding text such as newspaper articles);
- document literacy (understanding text such as maps and charts);
- numeracy; and
- problem solving (clarifying the nature of a problem and finding solutions).

The study showed that four out of ten Canadian adults lack skills that are important in our increasingly knowledge-based society. There has been a decline in literacy scores among teenagers since the previous international study, carried out ten years before.<sup>1</sup>

Canada averaged in the middle of the six countries on all four scales tested, behind Norway, Switzerland or Bermuda, depending on the scale, but in all cases ahead of Italy and the USA.<sup>2</sup>

Literacy matters to society. People with limited literacy are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed, more likely to live in poverty, more likely to have both chronic and short-term health problems (physical and mental) and to die younger.<sup>3</sup>

Literacy also directly affects the economic status of Canada. A 2004 study suggested that a country achieving literacy scores 1% higher than the international average ends up with labour productivity averaging 2.5% higher than other countries, and GDP per person 1.5% higher.<sup>4</sup>

So, there is no doubt we need to adjust many print materials so as to reach more people with information. There is no point in saying that people *ought* to be able to read and understand more. That does nothing to solve the problem.

### **An aside: controlled language**

Before we move on, there is another term to mention: “controlled language.” It refers to the trend in certain industries to use terms to mean one thing and one thing only. It is used in circumstances where absolute clarity is needed, such as at airports. *Clear the runway* means everybody must get off the runway; it does not mean shovel the snow off the runway.

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada. (2005, November 30).

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada. (2005, May 11).

<sup>3</sup> Statistics Canada. (2005, November 30).

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada. (2004, June 22).

## chapter 3

### Jargon, Bafflegab and Yadda Yadda

*He that uses many words for explaining any subject, doth,  
like the cuttlefish, hide himself for the most part in his own ink.*

—JOHN RAY

THE GAGE CANADIAN DICTIONARY gives several definitions of *jargon*. Two of them are of use to us here.

- The language of a particular group or profession.
- Language that fails to communicate because it is full of long or fancy words, uses more words than necessary, and contains lengthy, awkward sentences.

We tend to think of jargon always in a negative sense, but it is not always so. In fact, everyone uses it and when it doesn't exist, we invent it. Supposing we were builders and didn't know the term *a two-by-four*. Most immigrants to Canada, even English-speaking ones, are unfamiliar with the term, although it is common enough here. Each time we needed one, we would have to ask for a piece of wood that is two inches deep and four inches wide. That is many more words than just asking for a two-by-four. The term is just short-hand, developed to save time. It is construction jargon. *Have you changed the baby* is parenting jargon, and it doesn't mean we have swapped the baby for something else or transformed it into something different. Nursing jargon has been known to include *Have you fed the appendix in bed 5?* When doctors talk about *harvesting*, they are more likely to be taking bone marrow from a donor than cutting down wheat or rye. It's just medical jargon.

We all know what we mean when we talk about medical jargon, engineering jargon or any other kind of jargon. It is specialized vocabulary used by an "in" group and it excludes others, albeit perhaps not intentionally. A doctor may talk jargon to another doctor, but when the patient is included, doctors should try to avoid jargon, so that the patient understands as well.

Excluding people from a conversation makes them peevish, not surprisingly, which is why jargon has a bad reputation. While using jargon is convenient, sometimes it is also a way for a speaker or writer to demonstrate power over people. When others cannot understand, they can be silenced or intimidated.

#### Acronyms and initialisms

Jargon incorporates acronyms and initialisms. Just think how many people would be prepared to say "United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund" every time they talked about UNICEF, or the "Young Men's Christian Association" each time they went for a swim at the Y? Shortening

lengthy names of organizations is extremely common and can be extremely confusing to someone hearing them for the first few times. Some organizations even create crib sheets for new employees so they can memorize what the abbreviations stand for.

An acronym is a word made up from the initials or sometimes longer pieces of a name or title. *Radar*, for example, is a word made from RADIO Detecting And Ranging. NATO is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. UNICEF is an acronym. On the other hand, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is not shortened into an acronym, but into an initialism—the letters are spelled out as U-N-H-C-R. The YMCA is another initialism. We say Y-M-C-A. Often, however, all of these shortened names are known as acronyms.

### BAFFLEGAB

*The problem with communication is  
the illusion that it has been accomplished.*

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

Now we need to address the second meaning of jargon—language that fails to communicate because it is full of long or fancy words, uses more words than necessary, or overuses a word or phrase until it becomes meaningless. I'm going to call it bafflegab, to distinguish it from usable jargon. This style of writing is also frequently known as bureaucratese, officialese or management-speak. I am sure we have all seen many examples of this kind of writing. Here are some:

- By utilizing effectively designed strategies created by consultant-led focus groups representing a cross-spectrum of our principal stakeholders, we demonstrated consistent leadership.
- Based on the core values of our organization and incorporating best practices, our management team was able to initiate and implement effective organizational imperatives which challenged traditional assumptions and employed innovative ideas.
- We are committed to responsible governance and a culture of leadership. We strive to encourage people-interaction skills and the identification of key competencies so that the work environment may be conducive to the creation of a total business integration solution.

You get the idea. I'm sure we have all seen this kind of writing. I made these examples up so as not to embarrass anyone by quoting directly, but they could be real. I wrote these sentences in a few minutes. They flow easily, don't they? But what do they mean? Would an organization admit to inconsistent leadership? Would we admit it if we were planning to incorporate second-best practices? Would we actually admit to wanting irresponsible governance? And what exactly do we mean when we say we are *committed*? Many people (often in positions of power) use this term when it means they have no intention of making changes. It implies a wishy-washy, benign sentiment that needs no further action. *Strive* is another word in the same class. We can strive, but it need not mean we expect to succeed.

It has become a habit to state the obvious but to use inflated phrases that seem to carry a heavy burden of meaning, when what we are really saying is quite simple. Sometimes our message may be so trite that it has to be wrapped up in verbiage to disguise itself. We are awash in words, whether on paper or on the Internet. More and more people feel the need to keep more and more records. And records are all too often written in an unnecessarily wordy fashion. We've all seen examples. "At this point in time, during our extended organizational restructuring, it is anticipated that some of our valued associates will be encouraged to find alternative employment." Or "Sorry, buddy, we've just scrapped your job."

Sometimes this language is used as deliberate deception to cover up a lack of action or planning, or an unpopular action. It is possible even to hide dishonest and disreputable actions.

Often the language is used to impress. James Lichtenberg conducted a study<sup>1</sup> in which a Dr. Fox (a fictitious name) presented a one-hour lecture that was complete garbage (double talk, meaningless words, false logic, and contradictions). The audience (highly educated social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, educators and administrators) filled out a questionnaire following the lecture, in which they claimed to have found the lecture clear and stimulating. It was a case of the Emperor's new clothes, with nobody wanting to be the first to say anything.

### **Political bafflegab**

The use of bafflegab and gobbledegook are the reasons politicians have earned such a poor reputation. Some of them are undoubtedly honest, but there has been a growing cynicism about them all.

Gobbledygook may indicate a failure to think clearly, a contempt for one's clients, or more probably a mixture of both. A system that can't or won't communicate is not a safe basis for a democracy.

—Michael Shanks (former chair, National Consumer Council, UK)

*Accounting irregularities* is an expression that can fit under both politics and business. Either way, it usually means fraud or embezzlement.

Alan Greenspan, until recently the head of the US Federal Reserve Board, took incoherent mumble-speak to a high level in order to speak about sensitive topics without causing markets to overreact. In a speech to a Senate committee in 1987, he said, "Since becoming a central banker, I have learned to mumble with great incoherence. If I seem unduly clear to you, you must have misunderstood what I said."<sup>2</sup>

### **Business bafflegab**

Some of the bafflegab habit has arisen from business. All the expressions used for laying someone off—for example, *downsizing*, *right-sizing* and *re-*

<sup>1</sup> Lichtenberg, J. (1985).

<sup>2</sup> Stewart, H. (2005, August 21).

*source rebalancing*—remove us from any connection with humans out of work, so that it is easier not to feel indignation or sympathy. It sounds as if some neutral, unavoidable force has somehow done the deed.

The business of businesses is to make profits. But, checking the mission statements of a number of large companies, you would never know it. Nike talks about bringing *inspiration and innovation* to athletes. CACI (the company contracted to carry out interrogations at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq) says they provide *innovative solutions* for, among other things, information and intelligence services.<sup>3</sup> I'm sure they do, but maybe we should have asked for their definition of "innovative."

McDonald's 2004 annual report tells us the company is "a leader in social responsibility"! Furthermore, McDonald's mentions that it manages its business by serving one customer at a time. That makes it unique, I suppose?

TV commercials assure us the next program is *all new*. I'm glad to hear I'm not going to watch something that is only half new.

### **Military bafflegab**

We can find some of the best bafflegab experts in the military. *Collateral damage* means dead civilians; fire may be *friendly fire* but you are still dead, which is a mistake and not the normal action of a friend; *ethnic cleansing*—once again, dead bodies, with the added twist that cleansing is usually a positive term. An *uncontrolled landing* by an aircraft is actually a crash, probably with injuries or deaths, but neutralized to sound as if the aircraft may just have landed without permission from a flight control tower.

US military staff say *extraordinary rendition* when they mean outsourcing prisoners to countries with weak judicial systems, where torture could be used to extract information. *To render* means to hand over, hand down a judgment, or give a performance. The term is less familiar than *hand over* and most of us would not immediately interpret *extraordinary rendition* as meaning handing over a prisoner to another country. The term is being used to obscure the act and its sinister purpose.

And *outsourcing* is itself a bafflegab term for laying off permanent workers and using cheaper workers instead. These euphemisms are picked deliberately to lull the public into thinking nothing very bad is happening.

### **Smoking bafflegab and so on**

What about the signs that read "For the convenience of smokers, smoking is permitted on the east side of the building behind the bicycle racks." It is not for their convenience at all. In fact, it's usually very inconvenient for them. Why not be honest and just say it is for the comfort of non-smokers. Or don't give any excuse. We all know why smokers are limited to certain areas.

Bafflegab, even when it is not hiding something grim, is becoming unwelcome, as more people begin to resent it. Either they don't understand it and

<sup>3</sup> Watson, D. (2005).

are confused, or they do understand it and understand also that the speaker or writer is trying to bamboozle them. This annoyance is beginning to make itself felt and the demand for straightforward, simple language is growing.

Many more simply don't read it. Reports that are verbose and opaque pile up on one corner of our desks, while concise and clear ones are read and remembered.

### **Un-bafflegab**

To show how powerful words can be, women in Argentina in the 1970s refused to say their loved ones were *missing* (a neutral term) and insisted on calling them *disappeared*. This is a new way to use the verb *to disappear* and implies that an action has been taken to cause the missing people to be absent.

In another example, Canada's Auditor General, Sheila Fraser, was asked in a television interview why her department was receiving so much more publicity than previous auditors general ever had. She replied that one reason was because she used plain language, avoided bureaucratic jargon and made sure the messages were clear. The interviewer commented that journalists "loved getting into" her reports when they came out, and enthused, "I can't tell you how much we appreciate it [the plain language]."<sup>3</sup>

### **Breaking the habit**

It is really hard to break the wordiness habit. Writing flowing corporate-speak feels good—we've just produced something that will make others think we are diligent and intelligent. George Orwell wrote that prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house. (*Politics and the English Language*, 1946)

Writing simply takes practice. It also takes an entire organization if plain language is to succeed in a company. A major excuse used by writers is that they are writing like everyone else in their place of work. Plain language is certainly unachievable if only those in the lower ranks of the hierarchy are expected to write in that way. Staff feel there is a risk they will look less educated and less intelligent when they would much rather impress their boss. If the boss sets an example by writing simply and promoting plain language, the whole organization can improve its communications.

Here is an example of unplain language for you to enjoy, from a bus company's instructions to its drivers:

Where passengers cannot be accepted because of the potential overload of the vehicle, you should inform positively of the situation and where possible [provide] appropriate information as to how to complete the journey.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Question Period. (2006, May 21).

<sup>4</sup>McBeth, J. (2004, July 26).

Many folks are now taking swings at bafflegab (or gobbledegook). There are even “gobbledygook generator” sites, including one from Dilbert, at

[www.strauss.za.com/sla/newspeak.html](http://www.strauss.za.com/sla/newspeak.html)

[www.BuzzWhack.com](http://www.BuzzWhack.com)

[www.weaselwords.com.au/plague%20rats.htm](http://www.weaselwords.com.au/plague%20rats.htm)

I found one of my all-time favourite bafflegabs by reading over the shoulder of a man working on his laptop beside me on a flight.

...provides procurement quality information for catalogue rationalization.

Laura Penny, in her book *Your Call Is Important to Us*, points out that bafflegab is produced not to inform us, but to impress us, confound us and ultimately to bore us so that we don't notice what is being planned. People's growing cynicism is a direct result of this bafflegab and balderdash.

For the moment, it might help to compile a list of words and expressions to avoid.

### WORDS TO AVOID

action items	initiatives
actual facts	innovative
best practices	integrated
bottom line	interaction
breakthrough	interface
commitment	knowledge base
customer service representative	leading edge
dedicated	moving forward
deliverables	on the ground
effective and efficient	outcomes
empower	potential
ensure	sit down and talk
for your convenience	social capital
forward-looking	strategy
free gift	strive
guiding principles	synergies
high-quality learning environments	transparent
holistic	to deep six
implement	vision
	win-win

And *yadda-yadda*? That just means society is being buried in verbiage, clichés, banality and redundancy. Not to mention scrippage. Enough, already.

## 4 chapter 4

### Oh Groan! Not Grammar!

*One should aim not at being possible to understand,  
but at being impossible to misunderstand.*

—QUINTILLIAN

**D**ON'T FRET. I'LL MAKE THIS AS PAINLESS AS POSSIBLE. Remember, we all learned grammar when we were toddlers and we use it every time we open our mouths to speak. Well, almost every time!

#### **First aid for the flummoxed**

If you are worried about your grammar skills (or even if you aren't), it is useful to have one good grammar book you can refer to. There are many to choose from, but my particular first choice is *The Gregg Reference Manual*, edited by Sabin, Miller, Sine and Strashok. Make sure you buy a Canadian edition, not a US one, as some practices vary between the two countries. *Gregg* is easy to use, thorough, and friendly in tone.

So, why focus on grammar in a plain language manual?

There is a good reason to include a grammar chapter. Grammar is the foundation that makes your writing clear (and often more concise). Clear writing is always easier to read than unclear writing. And because it is easier to read, it becomes really important when you write for people who have difficulties with print or people who are reading in a hurry.

There are both rules and conventions in written English, although we have probably learned them all as rules. Rules are there to make sure our writing is understandable. Conventions are "rules" which have little or no effect upon the meaning of the sentence but have been upheld by tradition.

Certain rules are necessary to make our writing work. Like using turn signals when driving a car, language rules help show where our sentence is going. Periods, for example. Imagine what it would be like if we gave up using periods. Confusion would reign.

#### **Dangling phrases**

Dangling phrases are an example of where a rule is needed. These are phrases, usually at the beginning of a sentence, which do not have a clear subject or actor. They are often made up of a participle—a verb part which ends in *ing* in the present tense or *ed* (in regular verbs) in the past tense—combined with some further words. Here is an example: *Going into the park, we watched the children playing.* The first part, *Going into the park*, describes

the “we” of the sentence. But if we said *Going into the park, rain began to fall*, it sounds as if it is the rain which went into the park. The sentence no longer makes sense. The rule is that the phrase has to agree with the subject or actor in the sentence.

Here is another example of a dangling phrase: *While cleaning the bath, a spider scared me*. What I meant was: *While cleaning the bath, I was scared by a spider* or *While I was cleaning the bath, a spider scared me*. One more example: *Skiing down the hill, two wolves were seen*. I didn’t know wolves could ski! To be clear, we need to say: *When the boys were skiing down the hill, they saw two wolves*. The rule tells us to make sure the participial phrase agrees with the subject of the sentence.

### Awkward referents

Referents belong to the thing they refer to. Sounds simple, doesn’t it. But they can easily be unclear. Consider the following sentence: *Lizzie wrote a book which surprised everyone*. Does this mean that everyone was surprised because young Lizzie actually sat down and wrote a book, or was it the book itself which was surprising? The sentence would be clearer if written thus: *Everyone was surprised at the book Lizzie wrote*. Or thus: *Everyone was surprised that Lizzie wrote a book*.

These are easy mistakes to make and may cause embarrassment for you, as well as amusement for your readers. Careful proofreading is recommended! Here is another example, in this case without a verb: *For Sale: antique desk suitable for lady with thick legs and large drawers*.

### The apostrophe—where and when to use it

This poor wee mark has been sorely tried. It is the mark between the *t* and the *s*, as in *it’s*, which tells us that we are looking at a contraction made from two words—*it is*, as in *It’s time to go*.

The apostrophe can also mark ownership, as in *Janet’s book* or the *dog’s tail*.

Illogically, though, the apostrophe is not used for ownership when the owner is expressed by a pronoun, such as *he (his)*, *she (hers)*, *we (ours)*, *they (theirs)* and *it (its)*. The *its* without the apostrophe is correct when you say *Its tail was green*.

Many people over-correct and use the apostrophe too often. If in doubt, leave it out. If you are wrong, people may think you have just forgotten it. If you put it in and it’s wrong, people know for sure you’ve made a mistake. Thinking of *mine* may help you. If you can substitute *mine* for *its* or *theirs*, you do not need to use an apostrophe. So, when the sentence says *The book is theirs*, try putting in *mine* instead, so that it reads *The book is mine*. In that case, you can see it makes sense, so you know *theirs* does not need an apostrophe.

If you can substitute *I’m* for *it’s* or *there’s*, you have a contraction and need the apostrophe to show there is a letter missing. An example would be *There’s going to be a party*. But it can also make sense (at least as far as grammar goes) if you say *I’m going to have a party*. The different spellings of *their* and *there* should also give you a clue.

Please don't think it is necessary to put in an apostrophe every time a word ends in an *s*. Sometimes those are indicating plurals, not ownership. *One dog; two dogs. One dog's tail; two dogs' tails.* And, as you can see, in the plural, the apostrophe goes after the plural marker *s*. The *Gregg* book is also helpful about irregular plurals.

### Spellings your spell checker will miss

When you use the spell checker on your document, remember it cannot tell the difference between *there* and *their*; *here* and *hear*; *affect* and *effect*; and *to*, *too*, *two*. You need to check these yourself. One way is to use the Find function (usually under Edit on the menu bar on your computer). It will display each use of the word you are checking, so it is easy to correct when necessary. Remember, you are the boss of the spell checker.

In Canada, we usually differentiate between *practise* and *practice*. Spelled with an *s* it is the verb and spelled with a *c* it is the noun. Think of this: *I practise every day in my medical practice.* I remember the difference by thinking of *advice* (the noun) and *advise* (the verb). These are easier to remember, because we pronounce them differently.

If you think correct spelling is not very important, it is. I have seen people struggling to read something I thought was fairly straightforward, only to find out that the problem was a spelling error. When you have limited literacy, you tend to blame yourself when you can't read something, rather than realizing it is someone else's mistake.

### Subject and verb agreement

This is usually a simple rule. Subject (sometimes called the actor) and verb need to agree. *The book is green; the books are green.* We use a singular verb with a singular noun, and a plural verb with a plural noun.

If there are two subjects joined by *and*, they need a plural verb. For example, *Janet and Annie bought new cars this year.*

If there are two or more subjects, but each one has *each*, *every*, or *any* before it, use a singular verb, as in *Each dog and cat deserves a good owner.*

If the subject is *either* + a singular noun...*or* + a plural noun, the verb follows the nearest noun. So, in the sentence *Neither the eagle nor the crows were interested in the roadkill*, the verb is plural to go with the plural *crows*. But if we put it the other way around, we would say *Neither the crows nor the eagle was interested in the roadkill*, using the singular verb to go with the lone eagle.

A noun which stands for a whole group, such as group or family, needs a singular verb if the group is seen as a whole, but needs a plural verb if the members of the group are acting on their own. We say *Is your family well?* or *Are your family all well?* What we mean is *Is your family [as a whole] well?* or *Is each individual member of your family well?*

There is one difficulty which strains the rules: that is the use of general single nouns (called compound pronouns) like *someone*, and *everyone*. Even

here the rule usually applies—a singular noun needs a singular verb. Here is an example: *Someone needs to drive to Edmonton*. Singular noun, *someone*, followed by singular verb, *needs*.

The exception is when we want to use *someone* and follow it by the plural pronoun (*they* or *them*), as in, for example, *If someone has an accident, make sure you stay with them until help arrives*. When I first wrote this sentence, I tried saying *make sure he or she...*, but the paragraph became long and ugly. So then I tried a plural: *If people have accidents, make sure...* . But the image of many people having accidents all around you at the same time seemed unlikely. So I ended up with *If someone has an accident, make sure they...* . It's what we do in normal speech. It's what many great writers have done, too, including Jane Austen. You will offend a few readers, for sure, but most grammar gurus say it is perfectly acceptable. The rule is actually a convention. Our understanding has not been compromised, even though we seem to have broken the rule.

The singular *they* was in common use from the fourteenth century up until Latin scholars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries tried to stamp it out. In spite of them, it has never quite disappeared, at least in spoken English. If it makes you feel any better, remember that we use *you* for both singular and plural, having abandoned the older singular *thou*. Think of *they* and *them* as the polite, ungendered third person singular to use instead of *he* and *she*. Even the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary allows it.

Other authors who have used the singular *they* with *someone* include William Shakespeare, Anthony Trollope, Robert Louis Stevenson, Walt Whitman, W.H. Auden and even George Orwell (who was a stickler for correct language). For those of you who are not convinced, there are many websites you can check. I have used [www.crossmyt.com/hc/linghebr/austheir.html#X1a](http://www.crossmyt.com/hc/linghebr/austheir.html#X1a).

### The verb *to be*

Here is a so-called rule which is really more of a convention. We have all, I'm sure, been taught that there are special rules for the verb *to be*. A regular sentence has a subject and a verb, usually followed by an object. *The girl saw him*. *He likes her*. *We will see them*. In these sentences, *the girl*, *he* and *we* are all the subjects or actors, and *him*, *her* and *them* are all the objects—something is done to them. But grammarians claim the verb *to be* is different and we are supposed to use another subject after it. So, we would write *It is I* or *It was he*. Not *It is me* or *It was him*. This is another rule taken from Latin. Mostly it has disappeared in spoken English and we say *It is me*. Saying *It is I* sounds rather pompous.

The rule clings on in written English at times, though. If you want to impress or appease knowledgeable readers, you may choose to use the *It is I* rule. It is losing ground, however, and many people no longer see it as necessary.

What has happened, sadly, is that people remember there is some kind of rule but can't quite remember what it is, so they over-correct. It is very common to hear people say *She gave the books to Ian and I*. (We also under-correct in the other direction, as in *Me and Jenny went to the zoo*.)

If in doubt, take away the second person in the sentence and you will quickly see what is wrong. We don't normally say *She gave the books to I*. Nor do we usually write *Me went to the zoo*, unless we are the Cookie Monster.

### Dialects

One word of caution here. English comes in many varieties and there are countries where the dialect uses *he* and *she* instead of *him* and *her*. In the past, dialects were considered incorrect or uncouth. Nowadays, many people write in dialect and challenge the authority of Standard English. As one example, Shani Mootoo's latest novel is entitled *He Drown She in the Sea*. So, if you are editing something and come across language that looks wrong, just make sure it is not there on purpose.

### Which and that

Some people think it is important to know which of these words to use when. Grammar rules in the US are strict about this. Rules in Britain are much less rigid. As usual, Canada falls somewhere between the two. Here is the rule: *which* is used for a clause that can be removed without destroying the meaning of the sentence. For example, *The rose bushes, which we planted last year, have flowered*. We could take out the *which we planted last year* and the sentence will still have meaning. The rule says *that* should be used when the clause is necessary for the meaning of the whole sentence. We would say *The roses that we planted last year have flowered better than the older ones*. Here is another example: *The meetings, which I don't go to, are long*. And *The meetings that I don't go to are long*. In the first case, the speaker avoids all the meetings. In the second case, the speaker avoids only the long meetings.

### Conventions

Now let us dispose quickly of a few conventions that some people still consider rules.

"NEVER END A SENTENCE WITH A PREPOSITION."

Prepositions are words like *up, on, at, in, to, from, by, for* and *with*. Forget this rule. Almost all good writers end sentences with prepositions sometimes.

A sentence is a fine thing to put a preposition at the end of.

—William Zinsser

"NEVER START A SENTENCE WITH AND, BUT OR BECAUSE."

Forget this rule too. These opening words, used in moderation, can make the text flow more easily. William Sabin, an editor of *Gregg's Reference Manual*, recently pointed out that those who object will frequently begin their complaints with *But you can't do that!*

"NEVER SPLIT YOUR INFINITIVES."

The infinitive is the form of a verb that includes *to*, as in *to go, to do, to split*. To "split an infinitive" is to insert a word in between the *to* and the rest of the verb.

The rule forbidding this is still in place, but it is not absolute. For example, in the sentence *I have to quickly do this*, it is preferable to say *I have to do this quickly*. On the other hand, there are times when a sentence will sound better and its meaning will be clearer if the infinitive is split. Here is an example: *It is important to really like your job when the pay is so little*. In this case the word really does not fit well anywhere else. People tie themselves in knots trying to conform to the convention, when sometimes it is asking to be broken.

“NEVER PUT A COMMA BEFORE AND.”

Writing about this means opening a can of worms. People feel very strongly for or against this dictum. Those who use this rule say the comma is a replacement for *and*, and that therefore it is unnecessary to use it when you have an *and*. And it is true that you can clutter up your text with too many commas.

However, I suggest (and I am in very good company) that a few extra commas can clarify what you are writing. Take this example: *The dessert menu lists cheesecake, chocolate mousse, rhubarb pie and ice-cream*. If you were to put these items into a vertical list, would it look like this:

cheesecake  
chocolate mousse  
rhubarb pie and  
ice-cream

or like this:

cheesecake  
chocolate mousse  
rhubarb pie and ice-cream

In other words, are we being offered three desserts or four?

Skimming books by Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Michael Ondaatje and Wallace Stegner, I found many commas before *and* in each one, usually on the first page I looked at. Whichever choice you make for your commas, someone will probably disagree with you.

Here is an example of the importance the comma may have: *Woman without her man is nothing*. What if you were to write it thus: *Woman, without her man is nothing?* The meaning changes completely.

As a plain-language writer, I may overuse punctuation marks occasionally, but it minimizes the likelihood of misunderstanding. Also the extra commas demonstrate pauses that are useful “breathing spaces” for people who need to read slowly.

“A PARAGRAPH MUST ALWAYS HAVE MORE THAN ONE SENTENCE.”

Why?

**Quotation marks**

By the way, here is one other punctuation point. Americans always put the period before closing quotation marks. It looks like this: *I say "this is difficult."* In Britain, however, periods after a few words in a sentence go outside the quotation marks, as in *I say "this is difficult".* If the quotation is a complete sentence in British English, the quotation marks are outside the period, just as they are in US English. In Canada, either way is acceptable, but I have found the US version is more common. Just be consistent with whichever you choose.

There, this grammar chapter wasn't so bad, was it.

## 5 chapter 5

### Plain Language: A Way with Words

*The finest language is mostly made up of simple unimposing words.*

—GEORGE ELIOT

**T**HIS CHAPTER IS ABOUT WORDS AND SENTENCES. And about time, you'll be saying. But I hope you have realized by now that plain language is not just about short words. It covers every aspect of your writing and editing. The advice in this chapter is all about good writing.

Use familiar words—words 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

As with all the other chapters, the first piece of advice is to think of your readers. That will guide you to the kind of writing that is necessary.

Is it for lawyers, general readers, immigrants, people who live on the streets, people with developmental disabilities? How much specialized vocabulary can you use?

#### **Order**

Before we move into the words and sentences, the first step is to make sure we really know what we want to say and how we want to say it. Make some notes for yourself, or an outline. Think logically and put the information you want to share into a recognizable order so that the reader is not jumping from one topic to another.

It doesn't matter whether you go from general information to specific or the other way around, as long as you are consistent. For instance, if you are helping a friend to plan a holiday, you can start with a general idea of where to go—perhaps somewhere warm. Then you can narrow it down, maybe discounting India (because of the cost of travel) and Disneyland (too noisy). You might end up with tenting in the Okanagan. Or you can start with the specific (your friend really wants to go to Hawaii), but when that is impossible, find out what it is that your friend thinks she likes most about Hawaii and broaden the search to somewhere else. Is it the climate? The pineapples? The beach? No, she thinks it is the feeling of being on an island, surrounded by water. In that case, maybe Pender Island would be an acceptable alternative.

Put the most important information first, so that readers will find it, even if they give up before reading the whole document. That is how newspapers

are written. The first paragraph gives you the big news. Succeeding paragraphs fill in the details or add less important facts. It makes it easier for editors to cut paragraphs from the end of the article when it is too long.

Cut out any non-essential information. (If it is still interesting or useful to have, put it into a separate section, a box or sidebar.) It will take you several drafts to get your information into a logical order, but it is worth persisting, as it makes the reading so much easier.

### Sentence length

An early task when making your document easier to read is to make sure your sentences are short enough. That alone simplifies anything you have to say. People writing legal documents have suggested there should be no more than about 35 words to a sentence. For general readers, that usually is too long. For them, an average of about 15–20 words is long enough. As with most rules, there will be exceptions. It is sometimes important to vary sentence length in order to keep your readers awake. But when you use the occasional longer sentence, balance it with short ones.

For people with literacy barriers, aim for 15 to 20 words also, but be stricter with yourself about sticking to the shorter length.

The other way to measure this is to allow for no more than two simple clauses in a sentence. An example would be *The girl patted the dog because it wagged its tail.*

Jim Taylor, an outstanding teacher of editing, suggests that if you have only a few minutes to improve a document, look first at the sentence length. On average, there will be about 20 words in two to two-and-a-half lines (in 12 point type on a standard 8½ × 11 page). So, scan the document, using a pencil to circle every period. Then, wherever you find more than two lines between two consecutive periods, look to see if you can break the sentence down into two or even three sentences. You may need to add the occasional word to make the sentences work, but it is still an easy way to improve the readability of the document. Here is an example:

Lucy admitted that she hadn't yet made the Jell-O, as we stood and watched the children in the schoolyard running, playing with yo-yos, jumping rope and waving from the top of the jungle gym.

34 words.

Now let's see what we can do with it:

Lucy admitted that she hadn't yet made the Jell-O, as we stood and watched the children in the schoolyard. They were running, playing with yo-yos, jumping rope and waving from the top of the jungle gym.

Two sentences, 19 words and 17 words respectively.

This "ideal" number of words per sentence has become lower over time. If you read Henry James, you'll find much longer sentences. For instance, the opening sentence in *The Turn of the Screw* is 61 words long. As our lives have

become more hectic, we have lost the time and habits needed for unhurried reading. We also receive much of our information and entertainment from television, a medium which requires less concentration than books. Consequently, writing has to accommodate this different lifestyle.

Here is an example of a long sentence:

A policy is needed which defends non-commercial cultural goods, which incorporates the development and education of all kinds of artistic personnel, which introduces children and young people to the best of our cultural values, and which promotes the highest cultural values and achievements.<sup>1</sup>

43 words.

There is, of course, no single correct way to rewrite this sentence, but here is one version, ignoring other problems with the sentence and focusing only on length.

A policy is needed which defends non-commercial cultural goods and incorporates the development and education of all kinds of artistic personnel. It needs to introduce children and young people to the best of our cultural values. It also needs to promote the highest cultural values and achievements.

21, 15 and 11 words.

Remember, a sentence should express one idea only, using a subject and verb. This idea may need more words to complete it, but it is safe to say that if you are thinking of two ideas, you should have at least two sentences. You should be able to read it aloud in one breath, or possibly with just a second quick breath where there is a comma or semicolon.

### **Get rid of the extra words**

The second way to make your sentences shorter is to cut the number of words used. This is one of the most useful ways to make documents clearer. Most of us use more words than are necessary.

A man who uses a great many words to express his meaning is like a marksman who, instead of aiming a single stone at an object, takes up a handful and throws in hopes he may hit.

—Samuel Johnson

I am sorry this is such a long letter, but I did not have the time to write a short one.

—Mark Twain

This report, by its very length, defends itself against the risk of being read.

—Winston Churchill

I try to leave out the parts that people skip.

—Elmore Leonard

<sup>1</sup> Russell, M., Russell, N. & Juszczynski, M., eds. (1996).

Take a critical look at your writing. At this first stage, you are probably writing in a conversational style. Certainly, this tone is usually a good idea, but there are likely to be many expressions that are redundant. In our culture, we tend to fill up air space when we talk, with *ums* and *ahs*, and their verbal equivalents, like *like*, *you know* and *basically*.

### Wordiness

As a further disadvantage, the world of business has become a major source of language and it often produces extremely bad results. It is as if the writers believe they will have no credibility unless they use convoluted phrases and tired buzzwords. Actually, it is very easy to write in that vein. The ponderous words just roll off our fingertips onto the keyboard and may resonate magnificently in our heads.

Think of the following terms and see how easy it is to replace them with just one or two plainer words:

afford an opportunity	let, allow
at the end of the day	in the end
at the present time	now
at this point in time	now
attached herewith is	here is
ballpark figure	about
bottom line	profit, result, point
during such time	while
has the capability	can, is able to
in excess of	more than
in lieu of	instead of
in the absence of	without
in the course of	while
in the event that	if
in the near future	soon
in view of the fact that	because
perform an assessment of	test
prior to	before
provided that	if
terms of reference	what we do
the manner in which	how
until such time	until
with a view to	to
with reference to	about
with respect to	on, about

I'm sure you can add to this list. You may well use some of these—I know I catch myself at times. But they are clumsy, clichéd and seldom needed.

### Noun clusters

Similarly, do what you can to eliminate noun clusters. A noun cluster is three or four words, mostly nouns although some may be adjectives, which are strung together. Sometimes they are called noun strings. Two words together can be easy to understand:

kitty litter, course instructor, car lot, Oscar winners, Parks Canada.

When we have three words together, it becomes harder. We have to unpack each word before we can understand what the phrase means. Here is one for you: *budget management strategies*. And another: *cost impact considerations*. And there is also *outcomes management process*. Sentences with noun clusters explained more clearly are often a little longer, but this is one case where extra words are needed to improve comprehensibility. *Cost impact considerations* really just means *We must think about the effects that the cost will have on . . . .*"

When noun clusters are longer than three words, your writing becomes leaden and reading slows down. An example is *community capacity initiatives fund*. Another one is *quality control booklet review customer focus workshop summary*. Have you noticed that you have to read right past the start of the phrase and reach almost to the end before you can begin to make sense of the words?

Noun clusters cause many people to stop reading and throw the document down. They are the modern equivalent of telegrams, in which people tried to convey their meaning with as few words as possible because they had to pay per word.

But after warning about being too succinct, I'll now return to the importance of eliminating words.

Cutting out unnecessary words is a process that cannot be done all at once, although practice will increase the speed. Leaving a gap of several days will always bring improvement to your writing.

33 words.

That last paragraph was something I wrote three days ago. Let's try it again:

Cutting out unnecessary words cannot be done all at once, although practice will increase the speed. Leaving a gap of several days will always improve your writing.

27 words, with no change of meaning.

A longer gap will produce even more improvements. Which of us has not looked at a piece we wrote six months earlier and immediately wanted to make changes.

A report usually has a deadline and may be relevant for a limited time. But information pamphlets may go on being used for years. In this case, you could consider the first edition to be a work in progress. With the next print run, make changes that have occurred to you, or which readers have suggested. If no one is picking up the pamphlet, or you know that actions sug-

gested by the pamphlet are not being carried out, maybe the whole thing needs reworking.

### Use plain words

Don't use *transparent* when you can use *clear*. Don't say *automobile* when you can say *car*, nor *utilize* when *use* is enough. Later in this handbook there is a list of words with alternatives. Use the list as a starting point, not a definitive thesaurus.

If you can't explain something simply, you don't understand it well.

—Albert Einstein

I'd like to show you a letter that demonstrates just how straightforward writing can be, even when the reader is educated and in a position of some authority.

Dear X:

I have decided that I must resign from the company.

As you know, I thought the problems of the company were mishandled. I agreed to stay on after you gave me a promise that you would address my concerns, but I have seen no changes so far. This makes my position impossible.

I am proud of what we have achieved in the past. And I am sorry that it has ended like this.

Yours,

Y<sup>1</sup>

It's polite and concise with no room for misunderstanding.

### Using numbers

When you use numbers, round up or down. So, instead of saying 1,050, say 1,000. And instead of 96, say 100. That is, unless the exact number is vital. Usually people will only remember an approximate number and are more likely to remember it if it is easy to do so.

Tables are very difficult for many people to read. A pie chart graph is a little easier than a column-style graph, as long as there are not too many slices. Keep the information simple. Colours help (but be careful if the document will be photocopied in black and white, as all the colours will end up as shades of grey).

### Sleep on it

By the way, if you find you are stuck and are not managing to simplify your words as you would like, try sleeping on the problem. A few nights away from your document will nearly always make answers come more easily. Sleep researchers confirm this. As Robert Stickgold, a sleep researcher at Harvard medical school, put it, "Sleep seems to nail down the information we have and reorganize the way it is stored in the brain."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Minimally adapted from a genuine letter, to ensure confidentiality.

<sup>2</sup> Ravilious, K. (2005, October 27).

### Active and passive voice

I avoided putting this in the grammar chapter because there is nothing inherently wrong with using the passive voice. Sometimes it is useful. Passive voice is the term used when some tense of the verb *to be* is attached to a verb and the action points back toward the subject instead of forward toward the object. So, instead of saying *The dog bit the man*, the sentence will read *The man was bitten by the dog*. Another example might be *We were expected at 3 pm*. The action is really the expectation someone had about us.

Using the passive voice is acceptable when you do not want to sound aggressive. *Your bill has not been paid* sounds more polite than saying *You have not paid your bill*. You can also use it if you do not know the actor. For example, *The forest fire was started yesterday*. And the passive voice can be used where the action is more important than the actor: for example, *The plane was shot down*. In the first few hours at least, the public's concern is usually for the passengers and not so much for the exact Dick or Jane who shot the plane down.

*Mistakes were made* is a passive expression found very useful by some people. It can be used to protect the person who made the mistake. But prick up your ears any time you hear this, as it can also mean the person who made the mistake is avoiding responsibility for it.

Be wary of over-using the passive voice. Several things happen when you use it. First, it usually makes the sentence longer. Second, it makes the sentence harder to understand, as you have to look to the end of the sentence for the real actor or subject. Indeed, the actor is not always named and it is up to you to fill in the gap. In the sentence *We were expected at 3 pm*, we have to imagine who was expecting us. Third, the sentence is weak and flabby. The active voice has energy and movement, while the passive lacks both. Try to have no more than 10% of your sentences be in passive voice.

Have you ever written a letter to a politician and felt unhappy with the answer you received (assuming you received one)? The chances are that at least one or two of the sentences in that letter were in the passive voice. Many politicians prefer not to take individual responsibility for decisions made. Some of them are happy to sap our energy so that we are less likely to write again. Here are a couple of examples (I won't shame the writer by identifying him or her). *You are to be commended for your work in this area* (but the writer is darned if he or she will be doing the commending). *A committee has been appointed to review this program* (but the writer doesn't expect any quick improvements). And so on. Writing like this is often because of habit, but it certainly serves certain people well.

### Positive, not negative

Try to keep a positive tone. Partly this helps people pay attention. Even more to the point, you avoid bringing the negative alternative to people's minds. If I were to say to you, "Don't eat candy," what is the first thing you think of? Right, candy. It's better to say something positive, such as "Eat your vegetables."

### Double negatives

Avoid using expressions like *not unlike* or *it is not unreasonable to think...*. Your readers have to mentally cancel them out to find the meaning. Remember those multiple choice questions with double negatives? Confusing, weren't they. Fortunately, expressions like these are not as popular in writing today as they were for the Victorians.

### Tone

Keep your tone as friendly as you can, given the purpose of the document. Too often we succumb to unnecessary formality in an effort to seem businesslike. But there is nothing unbusinesslike in using a friendly tone. One way to do this is to address the reader. Call this person *you*. Call yourself *I* or *we*. So, don't say *The company wishes to inform...* or *The bill is now due*. Say *We at Pringle's Woolly Underwear wish to tell you...* and *You can pay this bill at...*

On the other hand, if you are giving a command, don't mess around trying to make it sound as if you aren't. Saying something like *We recommend you pay this bill by the end of the month* is not as clear as saying *Please pay by the end of the month*.

### Gender

Avoid using gendered language. It is no longer acceptable, and using it will definitely distract most readers from the text.

This advice causes problems, however, when we try to use the third person singular pronoun *he* or *she*. Are we going to write both of these pronouns every time we need to use one or the other of them? It looks fussy and is irritating to read. And the *s/he* form is hard to read and should be avoided.

Usually there are ways around the problem. One way is to omit the pronoun altogether. Instead of saying *When you visit the doctor, ask her or him to give you a prescription*, you can say *When you visit the doctor, ask for a prescription*.

Often you can change the noun into a plural. So, instead of saying *When you talk to the shop assistant, always be polite to him or her*, you can say *When you talk to shop assistants, always be polite to them*.

Another way is simply to use the third person plural as a singular. I talked about this in the grammar chapter. So, instead of saying *When someone gives up her or his seat on the bus for you...*, you can say *When someone gives up their seat on the bus for you...*

Yet another way is to alternate between *he* and *she* throughout your document. This still jumps out at readers, but it is becoming more common.

If you find yourself stuck with something that looks ugly, or you are not sure it is grammatical, feel free to change the entire sentence or paragraph around. Remember the apocryphal story about a zookeeper asking for more than one mongoose. First he wrote *Please send me two mongooses*. That looked strange, so he tried *two mongeese*. Finally he wrote his letter asking for just

one mongoose, but he added a postscript which said *Please send me another mongoose too.*

When you have checked your work for sentence length and use of passive voice, eliminated all the unneeded words and changed all the difficult words to simple ones, you will have reached the stage of testing the text.

If you are writing for any lower-literacy readers, you will want to read the next chapters for people with developmental disabilities and people with ESL. They include useful ideas for many marginalized groups. And then you will be ready to test your document.

## chapter 6

### **Really Plain Language**

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

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

**W**HEN WE WRITE FOR PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES, all the plain language tips apply, plus more. This type of writing takes even longer and needs even more care. Of course, we will never manage to write for everyone in this population—there is a huge range in reading and comprehension abilities. Some people in this population can read with great fluency, while others will find any print materials too hard. (See also chapter 8 on testing, in particular at p. 55.)

Remember, people may have good comprehension and poor literacy, or they may have good literacy and poor comprehension. One attribute does not necessarily equate with the other.

#### **Avoid abstract terms**

People with developmental disabilities tend to think in concrete terms. So, it is important to avoid abstract words wherever possible. This is what makes it really hard for them to understand “mission and values” statements. A mission is a trip in a helicopter to rescue some soldiers, isn’t it? And I have had values explained to me as jewellery. “Guiding principles,” “objectives” and many of those other words we love to use in rehabilitation organizations are all pretty airy-fairy for most service recipients. When rewriting such a document, you may sometimes find yourself really stuck trying to explain something simply. In that case, ask the original writer for clarification. If they cannot explain it themselves, it will help them understand your problems and what needs to be altered in the document.

Thinking in concrete terms, we would say *Take the bus* rather than *Use public transportation*. We would say *You will get very sick if you swallow this* and not *Poisonous if taken internally*. If you write *If you are sick, phone your boss at once*, the boss may be phoned at two in the morning. Say instead *Phone your boss an hour before your work start time*.

#### **Keep text short and simple**

Aim in your writing for as simple a text as possible. There is no use producing a 20-page document with tons of detail when you know your readers won’t get past page 3. Leave out all but the most essential information, or

break the information into several smaller booklets, so that the reader is not overwhelmed. You can also put an address or phone number at the end of the document, so that readers can ask for more information or an explanation if they want. Most people understand what they hear better than what they read.

You may need to use correct but difficult terminology at times in your writing, but when you do, include an explanation immediately. We are addressing adults, and sometimes they need to know the correct term, whether it is a part of the human body, or the type of professional they are being referred to, or an illness they may have. Keep these harder words to a minimum, though. It is another layer separating the reader from the text.

Keep sentences short—the shorter the better. Imagine someone reading slowly through the text, with a finger under each word as it is read aloud. If the reader needs to take a breath during a sentence, it is probably too long.

Be prepared to find the process frustrating and a lot of work. And you will never feel that your document is completely perfect. All low-literacy plain language is the result of compromises. If you aim for the very simplest level you can, you will be limited in the amount of useful information you can include. If you put in harder words, you exclude more readers.

If you write about difficult subjects, such as mortgages or menopause, you will have to include concepts which are hard to explain really, really simply, so your readers will be those who can read simple text with some ease. Any low-literacy materials can be used, however, by family or staff to help them explain things to low- or non-readers.

### **Use direct language**

Avoid implied meanings, as they are likely to be misunderstood. *It's not a good idea to be rude to that big guy* may not have the same effect as saying *If you shout at that big guy he may hit you*. *Look both ways before you cross the road* implies that someone will not cross if there is traffic, but it is safer to say *Look both ways, and if there is no traffic, then cross*.

### **Use consistent language**

Be consistent with the words you use. If you use *cat* on one page, don't use *pussy* on the next; if you write *bike*, don't later use *bicycle*. People may be able to read one but not the other, and so may stumble. Also, they may think you are writing about two different things.

Use stories to illustrate the point you are making, if you can.

### **Use simple tenses and avoid “ing” words**

Use simple tenses where you can. This often means avoiding words which end in *ing*. Both people with developmental disabilities and people with English as a new language have difficulty with these very common words. We often use continuous, or progressive, tenses—*I am doing something*, or *Will you be doing something*, or *Have you been doing something*. Maybe you

can change a present continuous tense like *Are you going to the store*, to *Will you go to the store*. It doesn't have exactly the same meaning, but it is close and it is much easier for people to read.

### **Avoid noun *ings***

It is not only the use of continuous tenses which makes reading harder. Words which end in *ing* are harder in themselves to read. Sometimes, it is awkward to avoid them. For instance, nouns like *feelings* and *meetings* may be difficult to replace, but even with these, you can sometimes get around them. Instead of *What are your feelings about...* you can say *How do you feel about...* And instead of *When is your meeting with...* you can say *When do you meet with....* Many of us have developed a habit of using nouns ending in *ing*, when a verb is shorter and neater. So, we might have said *You can work on teaching the parrot to speak*. Instead, you can say, *You can teach the parrot to speak*. It is shorter and less clumsy.

### **Using numbers**

When you need to use numbers, they are easier as numerals than as written words, until they reach high numbers. So, write *8* instead of *eight*, even though that is not what you were taught at school (another convention). Counting up zeros, however, and manipulating them into words when they involve hundreds, thousands or millions is a complex task that often creates difficulties. So, say *eight thousand* rather than *8,000*. I agree this is a contradiction, but oh well. If you spell out the number and then add it in brackets as a numeral, as they do in legal documents, readers usually will read the number twice. So, *I have ten (10) eggs*, will be read as *I have ten ten eggs*. I usually avoid the repetition.

### **Avoid percentages**

Percentages too are difficult. I have found it possible to use terms such as *half* and *quarter*, but much beyond that becomes too abstract. *Ninety per cent* or *90%* means nothing to many readers. Using rows of little stick figures with nine black and one white can sometimes be used, but be prepared to find that while the reader understands that the nine figures represent one thing and the one white figure is different, this does not translate into 90 out of 100, or 90%. These little stick people are interpreted in a literal fashion. Pie charts have limited usefulness unless they are carefully explained and kept simple. Column or row graphs are no use at all.

After the simplest *one-half* or *one-quarter*, I usually will say *many*, *most of*, *hardly any*, *only a few*. Of course, this is not as accurate as giving a percentage, but at least the readers get an idea, which is more than they are likely to get if you use more accurate terms. You lose accuracy but gain better comprehension. Again, it is a compromise.

### **Avoid foreign terms**

Try to avoid using foreign terms if at all possible. *E.g.*, for instance. Most people will look at *e.g.* and ask how it can mean *for example*. It is an abbreviation for the Latin term *exempli gratia*. Why not say *such as* or *like*? *I.e.* is

another one, standing for *id est*, and meaning *that is*. So, just use the English. *Vice versa* means *conversely*; *versus* means *against*; *RSVP* stands for *répondez s'il vous plaît* and means *please reply*. There is usually a perfectly adequate English expression for what you want to say.

### **Avoid contractions**

And while we are on the subject of foreign words, contractions can look equally obscure. It sounds more formal to say *I will not* or *we have not* or *you could not*, but they are easier to read than *won't*, *haven't* and *couldn't*. Check some early-grade reading books and you will find that contractions don't appear. They are introduced at a more advanced grade.

### **"Everyone" or "everybody"**

Here is an odd piece of advice. Use *someone* and *everyone* instead of *somebody* and *everybody*. I've never found a really good explanation for this, but it has been consistent in the testing I have done. I always wonder about that *eo* and *yo* in the middle of these words, but somehow they puzzle readers less than having a *body* in the word.

### **Use long words if they are familiar**

Using long words which occur frequently in the lives of people with developmental disabilities can often be OK. Most are used to seeing *developmental disabilities*, for instance, or *guardian*. These same words would be difficult for immigrants learning English. On the other hand, immigrants can usually read *immigrant* and *sponsor* quite easily. So, remember that life experience plays a large role in reading.

### **Pick the best word**

Notice how some comparatively simple words can floor people. *Decide* and *choose* often cause difficulty. We tested these many times and eventually found that *pick* worked well, even though it is not very elegant. Another suggestion is *make up your mind about* something. Be careful with *change* and *chance*, as they are easily mixed up. I avoid both when I can.

### **Meaning**

There is an interesting thing to notice if you are rewriting someone else's documents, especially ones meant for lower-literacy readers. Every word we use has a particular meaning, and changing a word creates a difference. We hope to make the change so minor that the meaning is still what the original writer intended. But sometimes the tone will shift, just as it does when changing *terrorist* to *freedom fighter*, or *the disabled* to *people with disabilities*. We try to get it right, but sometimes you may have a dispute with the writer and together you must try to reach common ground. If you have had the document tested by people with developmental disabilities and you are satisfied they understand, you may need to try convincing the writer that the language used is necessary. Otherwise the work of the folks with developmental disabilities is devalued. But if you have not caught the meaning and intention of the document, then you must go back and rework it. The

tendency for many writers is to want to put some of their favourite words and phrases back in, and you may need to emphasize that the results were reached with input from people with developmental disabilities and that this is what they understood.

Occasionally you may hit a real difficulty when your plain language exposes something the original writer wanted to keep under wraps. A warranty, perhaps, or a consent form. If the writer insists on keeping important information unclear, you may have to cut your losses and back out of the work in order not to be complicit in the deceit. (And this situation does occasionally occur.)

### **Mixed readerships**

If you are asked to produce a document which can be used by low-literacy readers and also by general readers, you will need to decide how to accomplish this. Trying to produce one version for everyone will probably mean it is too hard for low-literacy readers and maybe not detailed enough for others.

### **Executive summary or parallel text**

A better way is to keep the original document but write a simple executive summary for lower-literacy readers. Or, create parallel text. In this, the original text is in one column, and beside this column is a second one with a simple, one- or two-sentence summary of each paragraph. Then people can read whichever they prefer. I can almost guarantee that the short, simple version will be read by everyone. Most of us get so much print, we are delighted to receive something so easy and short. Then, if we want more details, we can look at the longer version.

### **Instructions**

When writing instructions, make sure they are thorough, in order and clear. Using numbered lists is a help if the instructions need to be done in sequence. This is how you heat a can of soup:

- 1 Open the can
- 2 Pour the soup into a pan
- 3 Put the pan on one of the burners on the stove
- 4 Turn on the burner

and so on.

If you are using a partial sentence followed by a list, it is better to repeat yourself each time. So, instead of saying:

Today, do you want to clean:  
 the bathroom  
 the lobby  
 the mud off your boots or  
 the kitchen counters?

it is clearer to repeat words which otherwise might be forgotten before the end of the list is reached.

So, the list would look like this:

Today, do you want to  
 clean the bathroom  
 or clean the lobby  
 or clean the mud off your boots  
 or wipe the kitchen counters?

Even better, write:

Here are some things you can do.  
 Do you want to clean the bathroom?  
 Do you want to clean the lobby?  
 Do you want to clean the mud off your boots?  
 Or do you want to wipe the kitchen counters?

Repetitious, I know, but at least the meaning doesn't become lost while the choices are being read. Using bullets may help too, though some people find them irritating.

### Testing

Document testing is particularly important for materials intended for people with developmental disabilities. Readers are unlikely to use a dictionary if they don't understand what you have written. And you, if you are reading this, are not in the shoes of most people with developmental disabilities, so you are guessing (albeit maybe with much learned knowledge) what is understandable. Before testing with lower-literacy readers, make sure the document is in a large, clear font. Otherwise you will be testing eyesight rather than the resource. There is more information on fonts in chapter 10.



### Illustration

Pictures can play a very important role in easy-to-read materials. They make reading more interesting for everyone, especially those facing literacy barriers. Like text, though, images can mislead and confuse. They need to be chosen with care and tested, just as you would test the writing. Much of what we "see" in pictures depends upon our life experiences. As writers, educated and comfortable with words, many of our experiences will likely be different from those of people with developmental disabilities.

Mostly, I imagine, you will be using clipart. The choices offered have improved greatly over the last ten years. Thank goodness! But you may still search to find exactly the right pictures, particularly those of people with disabilities. On the plus side, clipart takes up relatively little space in your file and the pictures are easy to use.

In this chapter, I have put doubtful choices of pictures on the left side of the page, and better choices on the right.

Photos can be useful but take up much more space and can lead to simply enormous files. Also, they usually need



plenty of space on the page. You cannot slip one in beside every couple of sentences. They must be printed large enough that the details can be easily seen. Many photos, too, have fussy backgrounds which make them harder to “read.” If you intend to use your own photos, make sure the background is plain and you have the consent of the people in the picture.



Pictures of people, whether clipart or photo, should mirror the reader. I’ll explain what I mean.

People with developmental disabilities usually have very limited incomes. Because of this, pictures should show ordinary people doing ordinary activities. For instance, few people with developmental disabilities go downhill skiing. They are more likely to get their exercise by walking, swimming in a local pool, or bowling.



They will seldom, if ever, have the opportunity for a trip to Paris, so, if you are writing about vacations, avoid showing the Eiffel Tower and focus instead on West Edmonton Mall or visiting relatives or camping, or maybe even Disneyland. For eating out, choose pictures of cheerful diners rather than fine restaurants. Choose burgers and fries rather than unusual vegetables like artichokes. Skip the waiter carrying a bottle of wine.



(I am, of course, generalizing here. If you are writing for an individual or group which you know takes trips abroad or out to fancy restaurants, for sure pick more glamorous pictures.)



Avoid symbols unless they are essential, in which case write beneath them what they represent. A red circle around two cars means nothing unless the readers have learned it (and remembering how few people with developmental disabilities drive vehicles, learning road symbols is not often a high priority).



Other symbols too can be hard to understand. If you asked someone what a picture of a finger with a string tied around it means, your answer would likely be “it’s a finger with a string tied around it.” The symbolism (of the string as a reminder) has been added to the literal meaning and many have not learned it. The old “light bulb over the head” symbol is sometimes OK to use, as it has been seen so often in cartoons that many people “get it.”



*[Doubtful picture choices are on the left, better ones on the right.]*

We use many metaphors in speaking of money, which can confuse.



Money doesn't grow on trees.



It can't be stretched.



Neither is it usually found in a pot of gold



or in a piggy bank.



It doesn't shelter us,



but neither does it rain on us.

Remember that most people with developmental disabilities use very concrete thinking. You can show someone with coins in his hand, dollar signs, bills or coins, but in every case, keep them clear. When writing for Canadians, show Canadian money, not US.



Jobs for people with developmental disabilities usually fall into the less skilled category, such as cleaning, or stuffing envelopes. Showing someone in corporate clothes and carrying a brief case would not represent most of your readers.



Most clipart collections seem to include many silhouette pictures. These can be difficult to interpret, so try to avoid them. Many collections also include pictures in which features are omitted—eyes, mouths and the like.

These irritate and are apt to lead readers away on a tangent. Questions will arise such as Why have they got no faces? Where is their hair? Why is that woman not wearing shoes? This is why plain representational pictures are best.



Some pictures look really cute. Beware! These are some of the pictures readers may find insulting and patronizing. Adults with developmental disabilities have been treated too often as children and we do not need to add to that impression.

*[Doubtful picture choices are on the left, better ones on the right.]*



The universal symbol for disability is an interesting one. Most people know that it means “disability” but many people with developmental disabilities think it applies only to people who use wheelchairs. There is no symbol that represents developmental disabilities.

### Finishing the picture

So, after all these “do not’s,” what do you choose.

First, second, third and last, keep your pictures very realistic, even if you think you could find some that are more interesting. Keep them large enough that they are easy to see (remember how many people have vision problems). And label anything that does not tell a clear story.

When I say keep them representational, I really mean it. It is surprising how often a minor detail can lead people off on a tangent.

There is a British company, called Photosymbols Ltd., which sells a package of photos on discs, designed for use with people who have developmental disabilities. The models are all people with developmental disabilities and support staff. Many of the photos are very useful, although there are a number which are particularly British—policemen, job centres, post boxes and such like. But the collection is increasing all the time.

Photosymbols Ltd. has a website at [www.photosymbols.com](http://www.photosymbols.com).



## 7 chapter 7

# Writing for People Who Speak English as a Second Language

*The chief virtue that language can have is clearness,  
and nothing detracts from it so much  
as the use of unfamiliar words.*

—HIPPOCRATES

**I**N CANADA, there are many people who learned to speak other languages before learning English.

Though our country has two official languages, French and English, people whose first language is not English obviously are not a single homogeneous group. There are many aboriginal people whose first language is neither French nor English. Among immigrants from elsewhere in the world, there are people who have arrived only recently; children of people who have been here many years but have learned their parents' language before English; and immigrants who have been here a long time but have not had opportunities to learn English.

There are people who know different alphabets or scripts, such as syllabics, Arabic script or the Cyrillic alphabet, and they must learn the Roman alphabet before they can read in English. Some immigrants have not had opportunities to attain literacy in any language. Others arrive here with university degrees and familiarity with half a dozen languages, including English.

There are languages with very different grammar from English. It's not just that a language like German puts the verb at the end of the sentence. Some languages, such as Chinese, do not have different tenses as English does. Others, like Polish, are more complex than English. Many, such as Spanish, have more regularities in grammar and pronunciation than English does. As well, language-learning skills vary tremendously from person to person.

It is useful to have materials in many languages, but it is also essential to have English-language materials that are suitable for the needs of all those who are less fluent in English. For immigrants who are at a low reading level in English, this is usually a temporary situation. They will need easy-reading materials, but only for a short time.

### **What works, what doesn't**

Because there are so many different needs for English materials among people whose first language is not English, it is impossible to give many definite rules about what works and what doesn't. But it is certainly important to make documents look inviting. Plenty of detailed headings and

subheadings are helpful. Longer documents benefit from an extensive table of contents, as it is hard to skim quickly in a foreign language. Pictures can be very useful.

Education is one consideration, culture another, family circumstances yet a third. People arriving as refugees have different problems to face than people arriving through the family reunification program, or as entrepreneurs, or as people born here but primarily speaking other languages.

A major point in writing for these groups of people is to remember that they will almost certainly be using more formal language than first-language English-speakers do. We may try to make materials easy by using everyday language, but make sure meanings do not depend upon colloquial words, idioms or phrases, unless they are defined. As an example, when I wrote pamphlets on separation and divorce, I found that people with developmental disabilities struggled with those very words, but had no difficulty understanding *split up with*. The opposite was true for immigrants learning English. They knew, or could look up, the words *separation* and *divorce* very quickly, but *split up with* was unfamiliar.

Use the full form of any verbs, not contractions (*they are* rather than *they're*).

Then there are initialisms and acronyms, such as RRSP T4, CPP, EI, BC and MLA. All will be unfamiliar, so remember always to spell out these terms the first time they are used in a document. Sometimes they vary even from province to province. Alberta, for instance, is the only province to use the term AISH (Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped).

As a side issue, difficulties can and do arise with immigrants whose first language is indeed English. Terminology varies from country to country. For instance, on one of my first days in Canada, I firmly told my young daughter to stay on the pavement to play, and received a cross look from a passer-by. *Pavement* in Britain means *sidewalk*, not *street*! The problem works both ways, too. I have heard a story about a Canadian who moved to Britain and answered the door one day to a couple of burly workmen. They told her they were her *dustmen*. Somewhat worried, she told them she did her own dusting. After some confusion, she discovered that in Britain *dustmen* are *garbagemen*.

Try to keep verbs in as simple a form as possible. As with people who have developmental disabilities, many immigrants struggle with words ending in *ing*. And many of our continuous tenses and conditional moods of verbs are quite complicated to use correctly.

Don't talk down, though. There is no point in using baby words—they sound insulting and people still have to learn the correct words.

### **Avoid using metaphors**

Many of these, like *hat trick* or *three strikes and you're out*, are sports-related and may not mean anything to people unfamiliar with North American

sports. Many more are simply out of date, such as *a baker's dozen* or *grist for the mill*. Many are totally obscure until you have learned them. What, for example, is a *housing bubble* or a *couch potato*? If you say something is *a piece of cake* when you are speaking to new English-speakers, they may well wonder where the cake is.

### Using pictures

Pictures are very useful for people whose English is limited. In fact, pictures are useful for most readers.

Here are some examples of pictures. On the left side of the page are pictures you need to avoid, or at least stop and think about before using. On the right are pictures which are acceptable in the right context.

Signs and symbols will often need to be accompanied by an explanation. Even basic "male" and "female" symbols for washrooms may not be understandable.



There are two areas in which special care is necessary. The first is in using pictures which represent aspects of North American life or celebrations. The carved pumpkin lantern, witches, broom sticks and black cats for Hallowe'en have no equivalent in many other countries, so illustrating an invitation that is "labelled" with these symbols will not convey much meaning. The same is true for Thanksgiving pictures. Make sure you spell out in words what you mean.

The other caution applies to using Christian symbols. Christianity has been the principal religion in Europe for many centuries and was brought to North America by early missionaries and other immigrants. For this reason, Christian symbols are ingrained in our culture. Not only do most of us understand them, but they have become intertwined with non-Christian celebrations, so that there are times when we use both interchangeably. The Christmas tree is one instance. It has no relevance to Christianity, but it is called a Christmas tree and you can find it in almost every Christian church at Christmas time.



It is, of course, appropriate to use Christian symbols for Christian-based church services, prayer meetings and similar occasions. It is quite often inappropriate to use the same pictures for a simple seasonal get-together. Many Canadians do not practise any faith or are non-Christian and may feel insulted or excluded when Christian symbols are used in the wrong context.

For a secular party, use a picture of Santa Claus rather than a nativity scene. (You may still need to explain it, however.) Or find pictures which reflect other faiths and Canada's rich diversity.

The Easter holiday is often mixed with Spring Break. Be even more careful about using Easter symbols. Do not muddle the religious





significance of Easter with spring and fertility symbols.

Using a cross or a white dove is a mistake unless the intention is Christian. If you use a picture of a lamb, make sure it is not accompanied by a second symbol such as a cross or a Jesus figure, as the lamb can represent Jesus as well as spring. If your intention is to celebrate spring, use pictures of rabbits, eggs, chicks or flowers. Whatever pictures you use, stop to think about whether they need a word description with them.



Be careful if you use pictures which specifically represent something purely American. Those of us who have lived here for years are accustomed to “translating” into Canadian when this happens, but newcomers may not realize there is a difference. In terminology, for instance, we do not have *Miranda* rights (although we see them in practice almost any night on TV). US money (as in the picture) is different from Canadian. The July 4 celebrations are not Canadian. Neither do we have “affirmative action” in Canada; the Canadian term is “employment equity.”



Some new Canadians have spent time in refugee camps, having survived war and social upheaval in their country of origin. Showing soldiers or police can trigger fears. So can pictures, however humorously meant, of prisoners in striped clothing.

Pictures in materials intended for people with English as a second language do not always need to be as literal as they do for people with developmental disabilities.

In many countries, people (especially women) do not appear in skimpy clothing. You don't need to use pictures in which people are covered from head to toe, but bikinis are perhaps not a good choice for a lakeside picnic picture. Indeed, pictures of “sexy” women are offensive to many people whatever country they are from, as these are often used to objectify women.



Showing a man and a woman working together can lead to misunderstanding. In some cultures, the picture on the left would likely be interpreted as a married couple, rather than two business colleagues. This does not mean pictures like this should never be used, but decide how important it is for readers to get the main point.

Do show pictures of women in positions of authority at work, as that is finally, if slowly, becoming a reality in Canadian society.



*[Doubtful picture choices are on the left, better ones on the right.]*



It may be tempting, in trying to show Canadian diversity, to use pictures which portray people wearing national costumes. What can happen, though, is that others who do not wear these clothes feel they are not being addressed. And pictures, also, can promote stereotypes.



Certainly it is important to show Canadian diversity, but show people wearing more generic North American clothing.



If your documents are going to be photocopied, be careful about your choice of pictures showing people who are really dark-skinned. They need to be included as representative Canadians, but you may need to adjust the darkness of the image if it becomes too dark to “read” when copied. If you do not intend to copy materials, this is not an issue.



It may sometimes be a good idea to use objects rather than people. They can be very effective and they avoid cross-cultural misunderstandings.



Test pictures as well as text with the readers you are writing for. As I said before, this is very important. People see things in different ways and what may look obvious to you may be obscure to someone else.



## chapter 8

# Testing and Revising

*The most essential gift for a good writer  
is a built-in shockproof shit detector.*

—ERNEST HEMINGWAY

**H**OW DO WE FIND OUT HOW PLAIN OUR WRITING IS? There are two answers to this question and both are important.

First, we should look to see if the plain-language strategies we've been outlining here have been used. To a certain extent, these can be measured with various reading-level tests.

Second, and more important, we should try to test our documents. I'll talk about this later in this chapter.

### **Different readers, different contexts**

It probably seems obvious to think about how you write, but are you taking into account not only different readers, but different reading situations?

First, we must ask "Plain to whom?" What an engineer might find easy, a physician might not. What a seismic crew might understand, a flight crew might not. And so on. Knowing who our readers are and writing specifically for them wherever possible is important. In fact, this is the first and most important step in creating plain-language materials.

We've mentioned several different groups which might have different reading skills. Now let's look at some other aspects which can affect how much readers understand. If you know they will be reading your materials on a crowded bus, you will need to write at a simpler level than for readers sitting quietly at home.

Readers also lose some literacy skill when they are sick, hungry, scared or otherwise stressed. If your materials will be for people you know are in these less than ideal circumstances, write at an easier level. We have probably all felt at times a shiver of anxiety that temporarily "freezes" our brains.

Interest level is another complication. People who are interested in a topic may know more of the words associated with that topic. They may also be more prepared to use a dictionary and persevere than they would be if they were bored. If you have to write something that is not very interesting, what can you do to make it easier for readers to stick with it?

## READABILITY TESTING TOOLS

There has been extensive research into developing ways to create valid tests. Hundreds of papers have been written and at least 200 different formulas have been designed over the last 50 or 60 years to find the best way to measure text readability.

Initially the focus was on measuring text difficulty for schoolchildren, but in 1934, Dale and Tyler published a readability formula for use with adults. Many more have been developed since then. Most of these are based on some formula of sentence length and word length. For example, Gunning's Fog Index is based on the percentage of words with three or more syllables in a document. Other refinements sometimes include counting the number of words which are not in a standard collection of familiar words; or counting the number of adjectives and adverbs in the sentence.

The US military has done literacy testing over many decades in order to produce materials for recruits. It has had the luxury of large numbers of substantially similar participants to test, making it simpler to draw conclusions from the results.

### Rudolf Flesch

Rudolf Flesch, in 1949, wrote an account of his Flesch Reading Ease scale (FRE). This scale is still commonly used today. It measures from 100 to 0, with higher numbers meaning easier reading. For example, *Our New Friends* (a Dick and Jane book) measures at 100 FRE (meaning most people can understand it); Martin Luther King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech scores 62.5; chapter one of Albert Einstein's *Relativity: The Special and General Theory* is 39.7; and a couple of paragraphs picked at random from a standard set of condominium by-laws measures at FRE 9 (meaning almost no one can understand them).

Many mission statements measure at 0, which means they are really high-level reading. This, however, is not altogether fair, as FRE needs at least 200 words to give a fair measurement. It is interesting, though, that organizations are so prone to squeezing a lot of long words into one long, unmemorable sentence.

### Flesch-Kincaid Reading Level

Rudolf Flesch also worked together with J.P. Kincaid, to create a further test. Flesch-Kincaid gives measurements in the form of a school grade level.

### Readability tools on your computer

You can usually find both FRE and Flesch-Kincaid on your computer, as part of whichever word-processing software you use. For instance, in Microsoft Word XP, it is in the spelling and grammar section. After checking your grammar, you can view the readability statistics. These include a count of the number of words, sentences and paragraphs. Below that are the average number of sentences per paragraph, words per sentence, and characters per word. And below that are readability figures—the percentage of passive-voice verbs used, the Flesch reading level and the Flesch-Kincaid level.

**SMOG**

The SMOG scale is yet another measure of readability, developed by G.H. McLaughlin in 1969. MOG stands for measure of gobbledegook, while the S is variously described as standing for simple, standardized, short or statistical. This test can be done by hand, but it is a lengthy and cumbersome process.

**SMOG+**

There is, luckily for me and anyone else who quakes when asked to work with numbers, an easier way to do a SMOG calculation. Clear Language & Design (CLAD), a Toronto-based literacy organization, has a free Internet service to help you with it. Not only that, CLAD also asks you for further details about your readers and includes that information in its calculations. The site is at [www.eastendliteracy.on.ca/ClearLanguageAndDesign](http://www.eastendliteracy.on.ca/ClearLanguageAndDesign).

**Cloze test**

One other test can be mentioned here—the Cloze test, in which readers are given a prepared text with some words omitted, often every fifth word. Readers are asked to fill in the blanks, and the number of correct answers is used to show how much of the text has been understood. This has the advantage of showing there has been a real understanding of the text—something that cannot be demonstrated by word-count and sentence-count methods. This testing is helpful when you work with people who can read fluently but may not understand the content.

Commonly, people understand words better if they hear them than if they read them. Aural skills are usually higher than reading skills.

**Criticisms**

Critics, myself included, often point out that sentence and word length alone cannot always adequately measure how readable a document is. Imagine writing health pamphlets for less skilled readers. A pamphlet about tonsillitis is likely to test at a higher level than one about cancer simply because *tonsillitis* has four syllables while *cancer* has only two. As a testing problem, this comes up regularly in materials designed for people with developmental disabilities (where the words *developmental disabilities* are five syllables each).

Nevertheless, using a measurement like Flesch-Kincaid will give you a rough idea of how difficult your materials are. And the grammar check tool is very useful for checking sentence length and the percentage of passive verbs used. These are both important points to work on when making text easier to read.

You may be asked to produce a document at a particular reading level, often for classroom use. The idea is useful, but not always practical. You may be writing about a topic whose name contains several syllables, or quoting a number of people who happen to have long names. Either situation will make it nearly impossible to reach the required level. If you are having this problem, try checking a copy of your text after temporarily deleting key words that appear the most often. You may find the difficulty rating drops

by as much as two grade levels. In this case, there is clearly a limit to how far you can reduce the reading level.

If you need to use a word that may be unfamiliar, fluent readers may appreciate a glossary at the end of the document. For readers with greater difficulties, keep an explanation of the word close to where the word is used, either in brackets or in a new sentence. For instance, if you use *counsellor* in a low-literacy document, you may want to add that this is *someone who is trained to listen to you and help you sort out your problems*.

You will notice, if you try different readability formulas, that materials rated with SMOG show as being more difficult than the identical texts tested with Flesch-Kincaid. This is because the designer of SMOG based his rating levels on all participants being able to read the text correctly, while Flesch-Kincaid required only 75% of participants to be correct. Consequently, a text that rates at, say, Grade 7 with SMOG will often score lower, maybe even as low as Grade 5, when using Flesch-Kincaid.

By the way, someone who has completed Grade 12 is supposed to be able to read at a Grade 12 level. Remember, though, that in any class, some students will read above and some below grade level. Even for those who can read at Grade 12 level, reading at that level is a stretch. It's not easy bedtime reading. Most people read comfortably at a level at least two grades below their final year of education. In fact, to reach the general public, written materials should be no more than about Grade 8.

#### FACE-TO-FACE TESTING

Beyond using standardized readability checks, there is a very important way to find out how easy your materials are to understand: ask real people! This is probably the most necessary part of plain-language writing, certainly for lower-literacy materials. We cannot rely on our own reading skills to tell us whether something is easy or hard. (Which of us writes something we ourselves find too hard to understand?!) Finding appropriate testers is by far the best way to produce good-quality materials for any readership that is different from the writer's.

Ask colleagues first for constructive feedback (and offer them the same service). Something that looks obvious to you may be totally confusing to someone else because you have skipped a step in an explanation.

Your first, second and third drafts are only the beginning, unless you are the rare exception who is able to imagine a complete document before writing. For the rest of us, only after we have got down what we need to say can we begin to shape our material. Reorder, refocus, and condense or expand as needed. It is easy to wander off topic, as our minds work in interesting ways and can lead us in many directions.

Colleague feedback is only a first step. It is equally important to ask your intended readers what they think, what they understand, and what they like

or don't like. This takes time and costs money, but it is the best way to find out whether your work will succeed, and it will save costs in the long run.

Sometimes you can tell, after the fact, whether your materials are working or not if your brochures are not picked up, or people stop buying your newspaper, or your customers complain they cannot understand the instructions for the new DVD player they have just bought from you. It is, however, more cost-effective to get it right before you have printed thousands of copies.

### **Focus groups**

Focus groups are one way to test materials. There are commercial agencies that can arrange these for you. Sometimes you can also tap into the goodwill of an organization that works with the readers you are targeting, and they will help you put together a few focus groups. I have done this with immigrant groups when I have written for that population. Most are very willing to help.

If you are writing for a particular business, ask for time at a staff meeting to present the materials and encourage feedback. Of course, receiving such feedback can be hard on your confidence, but always remember that your writing is not the total of who you are. Put your ego aside and listen to the suggestions. They may be really useful in improving your writing. If you don't like what you have heard, think about it for a while. Maybe there is yet another way to say something that is different from your original version but sounds better to you than the critics' suggestions.

If it is a health brochure you have written, it is sometimes possible to do some informal checking by asking patients at a clinic to read it over while they wait to see the doctor. There are also organizations specifically for particular health problems (such as diabetes, arthritis or cancer) which may be able to help you with testing if the topic is relevant to them.

Seniors lodges may be a good source of volunteers for focus groups if the topic is of interest to seniors. Some retired people have more time to give you and may be enthusiastic about helping.

If your target readers are parents, it may be possible to send letters home from school with the students, asking for volunteers to critique a new publication.

## **TESTING LOWER-LITERACY DOCUMENTS**

### **Testing with people who have developmental disabilities**

Testing your work is particularly important when your readership will be people with developmental disabilities who have limited literacy. As the writer, you probably have a higher reading level than they do, so you can do no more than guess at what they understand. Most writers overestimate, partly because we are comfortable using words and partly because of the care most of us take not to sound patronizing. I would go so far as to say that a document intended for this population cannot be guaranteed as plain until it has been passed by readers with developmental disabilities.

When I write for this readership, my aim is to produce materials that are accessible for people who can read a little but are by no means fluent. These are the people I ask to work with me in testing the writing. In my experience, you may have to search out people with more limited literacy skills, as neither they nor their support staff think of themselves as readers. It is very easy to employ people who are comfortable reading, but then we may not notice some problem spots in the documents.

For people who cannot read at all, simple materials can still be useful, as such materials give support staff a simple way to explain things. It is perfectly possible to have people who do not read at all in the testing group we work with, as long as they are not the only people on the team. Non-readers enable us to test how comprehensible our texts are when read aloud. Of course, I would never claim that print materials are the only way to communicate information. They are just one tool.

### **Organizing the meeting**

For a team “translation” meeting, I keep it to no more than two hours. (I say “translation” because it is more than just having people agree with what you have written. It is a re-creation of the document. Some people call it “transformation.”) One and a half hours is even better. The concentration needed is tiring. Two or three people plus the facilitator is a good size for the team. With bigger groups, some people are more likely to stay quiet and not participate. I try to have team members with various levels of reading ability.

Participants take turns reading the text aloud, if they are able, and then we discuss what the words mean. I ask them to tell me what the sentence means, rather than simply asking whether they understand it. If they can explain in their own words, I know they have understood well. Sometimes they will explain by telling a story to illustrate their understanding. One person, for instance, when I asked her if she knew what shoplifting was, told me without the slightest hesitation that she had been arrested a couple of times! If there is a problem with a word or phrase, we talk about it and see if together we can come up with something that is clearer. As one translator put it, “It’s better to work in a group than just with one person, because everyone can think, and it’s not wrong”<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes one person can tell the others what something means. Sometimes it is necessary to leave a particularly difficult passage and come back to it later. Many times someone will suggest a word that may be close, but not quite right, but it may trigger a better word.

It is important to make sure no one feels put down during a translation session. Participants must feel they can speak up without being criticized. It needs to be a safe place, and sometimes that takes time to develop. This is why it is helpful to employ the same people regularly, and to pay them adequately. They are the experts in what they understand, and, as a writer, I am using their skills.

<sup>1</sup> Pringle, J. (2000, Spring).

With time, they become comfortable in the situation and better at saying what they don't understand. They also become braver about suggesting better words. They learn that it is the document we are testing, not them.

Interestingly, as they become better at translating, their reading usually improves, so it is also a good idea to bring in new people from time to time. This improvement in reading has been an exciting side-effect of plain-language work.

Translators gain confidence in themselves, too. They know that when they say they don't understand something, they are helping many, many others who would otherwise also struggle with the words.

### **Testing with ESL speakers**

It is also important to test materials for people who are learning to speak English. For this audience, though, it is not so necessary to have small teams or to work repeatedly with the same translators. I have worked with larger groups and even entire ESL classes. The participants bounce ideas off each other and sometimes can raise questions about topics that may be so familiar to us that we have not seen the difficulties. Even the most ordinary of terms, may be unfamiliar, like the famous *two-by-four* we saw in chapter 3 on jargon.

I also find that I can just ask an ESL group if they understand something without always requiring them to explain meanings. These sessions can be a lot of fun and very helpful for both writer and participants. An inclusive approach is by far the most effective way to create information materials which are useful to these readers.

## chapter 9

# Layout

*Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.*

—LEONARDO DA VINCI

THE WAY OUR INFORMATION IS PRESENTED can be just as important as the actual words we use. Of course, if we have a publisher who will be looking after all the design decisions, we won't have to worry if our thousand-page manuscript is typed single-spaced with quarter-inch margins and only first-line paragraph indentation. But what if we are publishing our materials ourselves?

Poor layout can really deter readers from even starting, while good layout can help a document look interesting enough to encourage reading. It can also make it easier for readers to find the information they want. Obviously, graphic design is a huge topic and I can do little more than touch on various aspects here.

Probably the single most important thing is not to be afraid to play around a bit with your document. The computer has made this very easy. You can change fonts, line spacing and margins; try various styles for headings and subheadings; add pictures; rearrange the order of your information or the colours you are using. Have some fun. You will learn what you like as you experiment. But please, having done that, end up with something that is not fussy.

If you've written a lengthy instruction manual, your readers likely will not be ploughing straight through it from start to finish. Instead, they will probably be referring directly to particular parts or browsing around. So we need to include a complete table of contents at the beginning, and maybe also an index at the end which people can use to find a particular word or section.

Depending on the purpose of the manual, readers may be using it in a workplace with poor lighting, or while leaning under the hood of their car on a dark night. We cannot all do our reading in a comfy chair with a reading light focused right on the page. Sidebars (those wee boxes with information that is interesting or funny but not essential to the main text) are useful for letting people see that these parts can be left to read later (or not at all).

### **Headings and subheadings**

Try to break the contents down into chapters and sections, and clearly mark these with concisely worded headings or subheadings. Keep the type style of these consistent throughout. This means choosing where you will place the heading (centre, left and so on) and where you will use capital letters.

Headings and subheadings are like mini-summaries of the text that follows them. Differentiate between headings and subheadings by using a different type size, or **bolding like this**, or centring headings while putting subheads to the left. I usually don't leave a space between the subhead and the following line. If you do want to leave a space, make sure it is smaller than the space between the subhead and the last line of the paragraph above. Otherwise the heading looks as if it is standing all alone, not belonging anywhere.

### **Choice of format**

Small booklets,  $5\frac{1}{2} \times 8\frac{1}{2}$  inches, are an easy way to make your information attractive and accessible. Instead of one larger product, you might want to break the information into several booklets. These are less likely to frighten slower readers, as they can pick up just the one they think they'll need, or take the set and work through them at different times.

Maybe you are writing something even shorter. The choice may be between a brochure or a single page. Think about how much information is absolutely necessary and leave out everything else. A two-fold pamphlet on an  $8\frac{1}{2} \times 11$  inch page will give you four columns of print, plus the front and back panels. The back panel is usually kept for contact addresses or phone numbers. A three-fold pamphlet on  $8\frac{1}{2} \times 14$  inch paper will give you six columns plus the front and back panels.

Brochures are easy for people to pick up and tuck into a purse or pocket. Single sheets are more useful if you want your information posted for many to see or if there is no time to make a well-designed brochure. They are like mini-posters. With both brochures and single pages, the information needs to be kept to a minimum. Do not try to squeeze too much in by reducing the margins or using tiny print.

### **White space**

One of the first points to consider is white space. This is not simply "dead" space which can be filled up with more words. It is the clothing which dresses our words. Look at your document carefully. The margins around the text should be generous—don't push the text right to the edges. There is a temptation to do this so that fewer pages are needed, but it is not effective. If you think you have too many pages, try to cut out some content. If you can put the document aside for a few days or weeks, it is surprising how much can then seem unessential. If you can't delete anything, stick with a longer document rather than a squished one.

### **Paragraphs**

Paragraphs are usually indicated by either an indented first line or a line space. For information documents, I recommend the line space. These break up the text into manageable chunks as well as making it easier for readers to find their way around. If you are reading this, it is probably because you are approaching a writing task in which you need to get information across. Your readers may need to reread some paragraphs and maybe skip others altogether. Having line spaces makes this easier to do. Keep paragraphs short, just one main idea in each.

## Justification

Word processing programs give us the choice between left or right justification, as well as centred or full justification. These are not suggestions about our politics, but about the shape of our lines. This paragraph is left justified—that is, it is aligned on the left side of the page with the right side left uneven (sometimes called “ragged right”).

Right justified is the opposite and has quite limited usefulness, as it is hard to read longer chunks of text when the left side is ragged. But it can look attractive on a business card or a small advertisement or a photo caption. This, as you’ve no doubt guessed, is right justified.

Centred justification starts in the middle of the line and moves in both directions as you type. It can be used for major headings or on posters.

Fully justified (sometimes simply called justified) makes both the left and right margins even. Look at this paragraph in justified text. Its edges look very straight. You can find this style in many magazines, newspapers and books. But there are problems with it. In order to make the margins even, it stretches and squeezes the spaces between the letters and words. This may not be obvious to you at first, but your eyes can tire more easily with it, and it increases the difficulties for people who already have reading problems. In some cases it leads to very obvious and ugly gaps between words. Sometimes it leads to an excess of words being split, with half the word at the end of one line and the other half at the beginning of the next one. Check out a newspaper that uses narrow columns and full justification and you will find this. For readers other than those with literacy barriers, the choice between left and full justification may sometimes depend merely on what they are accustomed to. But for those who struggle with print, full justification can add to their difficulties. As usual, think of your readers when making choices on their behalf.

**D**ropped capitals, like this one, can make a page look interesting. But, again, think about your readers before you decide. “Drop caps” are a literacy barrier for many people who have reading difficulties. These readers commonly miss the capital altogether and would start the first line with “ropped.” Or they may try to add the capital to one or more of the next lines and see a word like “Dagain” that make no sense. As no doubt you have noticed, this handbook is not designed to adhere to all my instructions!

## Line length

This newspaper-style arrangement is attractive and easy to read, unless the columns are too narrow. The *Calgary Herald*, for example, uses narrow columns that are fully justified.

The lines in these columns are roughly 20 characters long. But if your lines get longer than about 80 keystrokes, or about 5½ inches in 10 to 12 point, they will be too long for many readers. Their eyes may wander to the line

above or below. Also, the text looks intimidating. If your lines are too long, widen your margins, ask yourself whether a larger type size would be better, or use a two- or three-column setup.

### Hyphenation

Hyphenation is putting a short dash between two words to join them. Hyphens are also used to split a word over two lines in order to make the lines similar in length. Hyphenation for doubled words (such as “plain-language writer”) makes sense and makes reading easier. Words split over two lines make reading much harder, particularly for people with limited literacy. If you really have to split a word in this way, make sure it doesn’t look silly. In this sentence the split is obviously not correct:

“The rope had been climbed by thrills-  
eeking young girls.”

Can’t you see them just eeking away!

In many software programs, it is possible to turn off the hyphenation feature so that your words will never be in this unhappy situation.

### Crowding the text

Keep the text from looking crowded. Some fonts have tall letters and the lines may look too close together. If you use such a font, you may want to set the document up with a little extra space between lines. The font you are reading right now, however, 11-point Palatino, is at the standard line spacing (called “leading” and pronounced “ledding”) of 120% of the point size. You can read more about fonts in the next chapter.

Too wide a space between lines makes it easy to lose concentration while reading. I seldom use double-spaced lines. This is double spacing. It takes up space and adds very little to the clarity of the words. Use it only when asked (for example, for schools) or if you want the reader to make notes between the lines.

### How we read

If we have grown up in a Western country, we have been trained from early childhood to begin reading a page at the top left-hand corner and finish at the bottom right. It becomes habitual, so if we are designing an article for a magazine, we need to take that into account. Don’t try to be too fancy and stick your headline in the middle of the page, surrounded by the text. At least, not if the article is important. Many readers will start there and read on downwards. Colin Wheildon, an Australian who carried out testing on how comprehension was affected by fonts and layout, called this the “gravity factor.” People resist returning to the top to read, after looking at headlines further down.

Don’t put a graphic or a  
ing on both sides, like this.  
to find where the sentence

A “pull-quote”  
is text “pulled”  
from the story.

pull-quote with text continu-  
Many people find it confusing  
continues.

While graphics are very important, do not use them simply for the sake of cheering up some dull prose. If they are not relevant, they will hinder rather than help what you want to say. It is a temptation if the topic is boring, but should be resisted.

### **Paper**

The kind of paper to use varies according to purpose, naturally. For a small poster, you may want to choose a bright colour. For photocopying, white is better than dark colours, which don't copy well. Shiny paper may be difficult for people with vision problems. Paper that is so thin it is possible to see vague shapes through from the other side is harder for people who read with some difficulty. Pastel-coloured paper can make a brochure look attractive and a little more eye-catching than white and is sometimes less tiring than a really strong contrast between black letters and white background.

Most people read most comfortably when there is dark text on a pale background. Black letters are still the most easily seen, but dark blue can also be used. Colour-blindness is a common problem, especially for reds and greens, so be cautious about using those. And remember that too many different colours will make your text look confusing and fussy.

Please don't ever put yellow letters on a white or soft green background. They simply don't show up well enough. (And if you think that never happens, I received an instruction booklet recently that was set just that way.) "Reversing" text, so that the letters are white on a black background, can look very effective. Reverse print is tiring to the eyes and harder to read, however, so use it very sparingly.

And, as I will suggest in the chapter on fonts, please don't put long chunks of text in upper case (capital) letters.

If you are giving your text to a designer, make sure the layout doesn't overwhelm your lovely plain writing. Sometimes designers become so fascinated with all the wonderful things they can do that the text gets overlooked. For instance, when a picture or pattern is used as a background, words are often harder to read. If it really has to be that way, at least make sure the background picture is very faint. Please also resist your designer's desire to write in spirals, or waves. Clever looking, maybe, but not very readable.

- **Use numbers and bullets**

Bullets are a useful way to list information. And you may also need numbering, for example where instructions have to be in sequence. Clarity is the aim in this case, rather than continuity. Some people find bullets irritating, but there is no doubt they help readers grasp what you are saying.

### **Take a second look, then a third and a fourth**

When you have completed your document, set it aside for a few days if you can. Then look at it with fresh eyes. How does it appear? This is not proof-reading, but an overall "stand-back" glance that will show you if something is out of kilter, unbalanced or ugly. Ask a colleague to critique it. Maybe all

those fancy scrolls you are so proud of really just muddle up the text. Maybe one word (and a not particularly important one) jumps out ahead of all the other, more important ones. And just maybe you have omitted something like the date of the concert your poster is advertising, or the location.

So, there you are. A lay person's introduction to layout.

# 10

## Chapter 10

### Choosing Fonts

*Knowledge is knowing . . . or knowing where to find out.*

—ALVIN TOFFLER

**W**HWO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT there was so much to know about fonts! This chapter will give you a (very) brief introduction to them. Some of you may be font experts, but for those who aren't, here is a little rundown.

Like so many other details for creating easy-to-read materials, it is important to think about your readers when you choose a font. Are you writing for the general public or for people with more specific needs? Will your readers be mainly seniors? If so, the type will need to be relatively large. For people with developmental disabilities fonts need to be plain and large. People with dyslexia also need a plain font, with clear differences between *ps* and *qs* and *bs* and *ds*, such as Lexia (available for free from [www.k-type.com/fontlexia.html](http://www.k-type.com/fontlexia.html)), as people with learning disabilities often reverse letters. People with vision problems also need large print.

First, let's look at two basic styles of font: serif and sans serif.

#### **Serif fonts**

Serif fonts have little tails at the ends of their letters. This is the most common type of font for books and many other materials. People say that the tails lead your eye along the line, making it easier to read continuous text. Times New Roman is the name of one of the most widely used serif fonts. It is the default font on most computers, so unless you have changed it, it is probably what you see every time you switch on your computer.

This sentence is set in Times New Roman at 11 pt,  
the same size as the Palatino body text of this book.

If, when reading, you are unaware of the font being used, chances are it is a serif font. They are for the most part unobtrusive. The original Times font was designed in 1932 for *The Times* newspaper of London, England.

The other aspect of a serif font is the weight of its strokes. Each letter has thicker and thinner strokes. In old-style serif fonts, the variations of thickness are on the diagonal, imitating the strokes that would have been made by scribes using broad-nib pens.

Here are some other older serif fonts, all in 11-point:

Garamond

Baskerville

Goudy

Bodoni

In newer serif fonts, the thick and thin lines are often vertical, not slanted, and are more exaggerated than the old fonts. These fonts are effective for titles of books or pamphlets, but are less suitable for large areas of print. Here are some modern serif fonts.

Cheltenham      Melior      Charter BT

### Sans serif

The sans serif style has no tails. *Serif* is probably from a Dutch word meaning stroke or line, and *sans* means “without” in French. Arial and Helvetica are the most common sans serif fonts.

This is Arial,  
and this, Helvetica.

These are easy to read and ideal for people with vision problems. In long passages of text, however, both can look rather heavy and dense.

Here are some other sans serif fonts:

Avant Garde      Gill Sans MT      Trebuchet      Century Gothic

Some sans serif fonts use letters which resemble hand-printed letters. If you are writing for people with limited literacy, look at the letters *a* and *g* in a sans serif font. Some are clearer than others. People with literacy difficulties often find it easier to read text that resembles hand printing. On the other hand, in most fonts with this style of letters, the tail on the *g* is very short, so an *a* and a *g* may be confused.

**This is Vag Rounded.**

### Roman and italics

The fonts I have shown you have all been roman-style fonts, with upright letters. Most have an italic style to go with them. In some cases, the italic is just an oblique version of the roman, while in others the italic is a separate style. Computers label them all as italic.

This is Trebuchet, in Roman and *oblique (italic)*.  
And this is Times New Roman *in italics*.

Notice the italic “*a*” does not have an extra line over it like the roman “*a*” does. Serif italics are often harder to read, as they are narrower.

Another point to consider when using sans serif fonts is the look of the upper case “*I*” and the lower case “*l*.” In many sans serif fonts, these are almost identical and therefore may cause confusion.

The I and l in ITC Officina Sans  
and the I and l in Trebuchet

are clearly differentiated; but both faces use the doubled-over “*a*” like the one we saw above in Times Roman. It is a matter of judging which font has most of the features you think you need for your audience.

**X height**

An interesting point to notice is the variation in size of different fonts. Type is measured in points, based on the total height of the characters. This means the height of the letter from its base to the top of letters such as *t* or *b*. But fonts of the same nominal size have different x-heights. The x-height is the core size of the letter, excluding ascenders (the tall shafts of letters such as *b* and *d* that rise above the height of other letters such as *n*, *o* or *x*), and descenders (strokes that drop below the baseline, such as in *p* and *q*). Thus, a font with a small x-height will look very different from one with a large x-height, even if their point size is the same.

This is Verdana 11 point.  
And this is Bernhard Modern BT, also at 11 point.

Though both of these are the same nominal size as the Palatino used as body text in this handbook, the Verdana looks larger, the Bernhard smaller.

**Type size**

All these examples I have given are 11 points in size. For books, 10 point is often the size of choice, depending on the font and the nature of the content. For many documents, including legal ones, a bigger size is more useful. For people with reading problems, 10 point is definitely too small and even 12 point can be difficult. I recommend 14 point, or certainly no less than 13, unless you are using a font with a taller x-height.

On the other hand, you do not want the font to look so big that people have to move their eyes from the beginning of the word to the end. A 16 point font may be useful for people with vision difficulties, but it can create its own problems for others.

This is Verdana 16 point.

A size this large for body text would allow only a few words per line.

**Readable fonts**

In my experience, a sans serif font is slightly easier for readers with literacy barriers. Some of these readers will be running a finger under each word as they read. And materials for this audience tend to be short, so there is less need to maintain continuous reading. The text also needs to be as clear and unfussy as possible.

I prefer a font such as Zapf Humanist (also called Optima) when I write for these readers. It is a modified sans serif font, with no tails, but it has the thick and thin strokes of a serified face. I find it readable and attractive, clear without being heavy.

This is Zapf Humanist, or Optima, 14 point.

I am aware, however, that many people do not agree with my choice of a sans serif font. If you have a chance, try different fonts with your readers to see which they find easier.

There are many who argue in favour of serif fonts. Colin Wheildon is one such person.<sup>1</sup> He designed several research projects to test various aspects of font use and comprehension. These showed that serif fonts were easier. He was, however, using participants whose education level was mostly above average. And maybe some people chose not to participate if they thought their reading level would shame them.

It is also worth noting that the research was carried out in one country—Australia. There, serif fonts are very commonly used, as they are in North America as well (with the exception of many technical manuals). People read more easily when they are used to a particular style. So, what works in Australia may not be the same for countries which use more sans serif fonts. In Britain the Plain English Campaign recommends sans serif fonts because public notices are often in sans serif and people are used to that look. The Nora Fry Institute (a research institute for people with developmental disabilities) also recommends them.

Now that I've said all this, I'm sure you will start looking at fonts more carefully. Here are a few to check. The *Calgary Herald* uses a serif font, with a sans serif for information in boxes; *Canadian Geographic* uses a serif font, with a sans for sidebars. *Alberta Views* magazine also has both, with a serif font used in the main articles. *Fast Forward Weekly* uses a lightly serified face, while the Ikea catalogue uses a sans serif.

### Computer use

A sans serif font is definitely recommended for computer use. The screen tends to make letters slightly fuzzy, so an unfussy font is less tiring for your eyes. We also are usually further away from a screen than from a book we hold. Verdana is a font specifically designed for computer use. As you can see from the sample on the previous page, its letters are broad and plain.

The differences among fonts don't end there, though. Before making a choice, look at details such as how clear the periods are. Both Times and Arial have small periods, easy to miss. These fonts were designed this way because in newspapers the print was likely to spread or smudge. If you are using Times or Arial and addressing people with reading problems, you may want to revert to the old typewriter practice of putting two spaces after periods. Georgia is a good replacement for Times, and has bigger periods:

This is Georgia 11 point; its punctuation is more emphatic.

### More fonts

Comic Sans is often used when a plain font is needed. It has a good plain *a* and is informal enough to encourage people to read.

This is Comic Sans.

In fact, it is so informal that it is unsuitable for some documents. And it does tend to become irritating if used too frequently. A good font is one which is seldom noticed.

<sup>1</sup> Wheildon, C. (1995).

Maybe we want to dress up our document by using a less common font. On the next page are some ideas, all at our comparison size of 11 point with line spacing set for automatic.

**How about Jokerman?**  
**Or this one called Sacrificial**

*Or something cute like Giddyup*  
**Or maybe Olde English Text?**

Not good ideas, as you can see. These fancier fonts are great for posters or other display advertising but are usually to be avoided in longer documents, for good reason, as they are much harder to read.

It does not help to mix too many fonts in a document. Two is usually sufficient, one for body text, the other for headlines. When I use Zapf Humanist, I might use Arial for headlines.

### **Kerning**

Kerning is the term used for spreading letters wider apart or bringing them closer together. This is useful if you have an awkward space to fill, just a little too big or too small. But when kerning is used to bring letters closer together, it is important to make sure they are still clear. You do not want the word *burn* to end up looking like *bum*.

### **Upper case**

Using all upper case does not make for easy reading. Much of our word recognition comes from letter shapes, in particular from the ascenders and descenders. Check it out in the next paragraph.

USING ALL UPPER CASE DOES NOT MAKE FOR EASY READING. MUCH OF OUR WORD RECOGNITION COMES FROM LETTER SHAPES, IN PARTICULAR FROM THE ASCENDERS AND DESCENDERS.

And here is one other test of your reading skills. Try this!

Rserceah has swohn that you can witre the ltteers in a wrod in any oderr as lnog as you have the fsrit and lsat lretets in the crorect pclae and ploepe will sltil be albe to raed your txet.

Neat, isn't it! It shows how ingeniously your brain can unscramble words if we read frequently.

And, as always, try to check with representative readers to see which font they like best. You may be able to set up some focus groups (see chapter 8) and test comprehension of a document by giving one group a version in one font and a second group the same document in an alternative font.

This is a mere taste of all the information you might want to know about fonts. If you want to know more, you could start with *The Non-Designer's Design Book*, by Robin Williams (no, not the actor). And for those who are really keen to learn more, Robert Bringhurst's *The Elements of Typographic Style* is elegant and very authoritative, though it does assume some knowledge of typographic terminology.

# 11

## chapter 11

### Proofreading

*Our paper carried the notice last week that Mr. Jonas Marjoriebanks is a defective on the police force. This was a typographical error. Mr. Marjoriebanks is, of course, a detective on the police farce.*

—ANON

*Be not ashamed of mistakes and thus make them crimes.*

—CONFUCIUS

**D**ID YOU KNOW THAT TYPING ERRORS (which we'll just call typos) breed secretly, at night? And when you fix one, six more grow up in its place. At least, this is my theory.

So, how do you catch the little monkeys? First, start fresh. Don't expect to proofread effectively the minute you have finished writing.

#### **Margins and such like**

Take a look at the overall impression your document gives you. Are your margins all lined up as they should be? Maybe you had headings centred and subheadings on the left, so check that they are where they should be. Does some print look bigger or darker than the rest? Maybe some mistakes slipped in when you decided to change the font or the font size. If your headings are all supposed to be in bold, make sure they are. Make sure your choices of capitalization in headings and subheadings are consistent.

#### **References**

If you have references, check that they are correct. Make sure all the periods and commas are in the right places. It is very easy to slip up with these. For Internet addresses, try them out.

#### **Placing of pictures**

If there are pictures, are they still beside the text they are supposed to be illustrating? Sometimes during editing, they can move. If there are photos, are the photographers named, and the people in the photos? And do you have the pictured people's consent, in writing, to publish photos of them?

#### **Spelling and grammar check**

Now you are almost ready to start on the text itself. Do you have your word-processing program set to Canadian English? If you have not made that change, it will almost certainly default to US English. Even with Canadian English, it may omit the *u* in words like *colour* and *honour*. Whichever

way you plan to spell, just make sure you are consistent. Canadians tend to favour the extra *u*. We also spell words with *re* where Americans more often use *er*, as in *centre*, *sombre* and *calibre*. Using *s* instead of *z* (as in *organisation* or *organization*) is yet another difference between US and British English which Canadians must make up their minds about.

For people who have trouble spelling, remember it is not a moral failing!

Run the document through the spell check and grammar programs. The spell check will catch at least some words where you have left out a character and said something like *don* instead of *done*. The grammar program will show you if you have repeated a word, such as *in in*, or left out a verb somewhere. Don't trust it as the final arbiter of your writing, however. Use a grammar reference manual to check anything that sounds odd.

Use the Find and Replace tools to find and fix words which won't be picked up by the spell check, words like *to*, *too*, *two*; *there*, *their*; and *practise*, *practice*. Be particularly careful with words like *public*, as a missing *l* can alter things a smidge.

Look for extra spaces. The Find and Replace tool can also do that for you.

### Skim

Now you are ready to read. But you won't really be reading. You are not interested in content at this stage, just typos. One way to do this is to begin looking half way along the line, then go back to the first half. Do this for each line. Do it quickly and try not to read actual words.

Now put it away for the night. Tomorrow you can do it all again.

It is also really important, if at all possible, to have someone else proofread it as well. Your eyes are incredibly clever at seeing what ought to be there. Remember the mixed-up letters in the example on page 67.

Make the corrections. Try not to change too much of the content. It's always tempting to think you have found a better way to say something, but it opens up huge possibilities for extra typos. If you can, coerce another person to read it through for mistakes. Writers for magazines are seldom allowed to do the final proofread of their articles, as it is so easy to miss an error when you know what you expect to see.

In workshops, I have often given out a pamphlet which had been in use for several years. Once, after I had talked about proofreading, a workshop participant quietly pointed out to me that I had twice written *you* when it should have been *your*. I had never noticed it.

### Check the hard copy

It is also important to do at least one read-through on paper. You will see mistakes that are easily missed on the screen.

And finally—keep your fingers ~~crissed~~ ~~crosassed~~ crossed!

## appendix A

# Choosing Your Words

HERE IS A MINI GUIDE to help you find easier words. The list on the left has harder words, while the list on the right gives easier alternatives.

accompany	go with
accomplish	do
acquired	got
additional	extra
advise	tell
adequate	enough
anybody etc.	anyone etc.
applicant	you
ascertain	find out
ask for advice	ask for help
assist	help
at the present time	now
choose/decide	pick/make up your mind about
collaborate	work together
colleague	co-worker
commence	start
complete	fill out
comply with	keep to
components	parts
conclude	end; finish
concur	agree
confidential	we will not tell anyone about you; no one will know what you said
consent	say yes; agree
consequently	so
consult	ask
contains	has
demonstrate	show
determined	decided
detrimental	harmful
discuss	talk about

disseminate	send out; distribute
during such time	while
dwelling place /unit/residence	home; where you live
economical	cheap
eliminate	cut out
emphasize	stress
employment opportunity	job
enable	allow
enclosed	inside
encounter	meet
endeavour	try
ensure	make sure
entails	means
exhibit	show
expedite	speed up
expend	pay out; use up
expeditiously	as soon as possible; quickly
expenditure	money spent
expire	run out
facilitate	help; make easier
failed to	did not
finances	money; funds
following	after
formulate	plan; work out
forward	send
has the capacity	can; is able
henceforth	from now on
identical	same
immediately	at once
implement	carry out; do
in accordance with	under; keeping to
in excess of	more than
it is probable that	probably
in lieu of	instead of
in the absence of	without
in the course of	while
in the event that	if
in the near future	soon
in view of the fact	because

indicate	show
initial	first
initially	at first
initiate	start
information	we can tell you
inquire	ask
inquiry	question
interview	talk to
invoice	bill
it is necessary	you need
legislation	laws
limited number	few
locality	place
mandatory	required; you must
modify	change
notify	tell
notwithstanding	in spite of, despite
numerous	many
obtain	get
on receipt of	when we (or you) get
optimum	best, most
option	something you can pick
parameters	limits
particulars	details
per annum	a year
perform an assessment of	test
permit	let
policy	rule
prior to	before
procure	get
prohibited	forbidden
provide	give
Provincial	Albertan (or other province)
purchase	buy
referral	we can tell you where . . .
refuse	say no
regarding	about
regulations	rules
reimburse	pay back
relatively	quite

remainder	the rest
remittance	payment
remuneration	pay; wages
render	give
report	tell
represents	shows; stands for
request	ask
require	need
reside	live
retain	keep
should you wish	if you wish
state	say; tell
strategize	plan
subject to	under
submit	send, give
subsequent to	after
sufficient	enough
supplement	go with; add to
terminate	end
terms of reference	what we do
the manner in which	how
to date	so far, up to now
undertake	agree; promise to do
until such time	until
you are required	you must
utilize	use
whereas	since

# appendix B

## Plain Language Checklist

USE THIS LIST TO MAKE SURE YOU HAVE COVERED THE BASICS.

- Think about your readers
- Don't overestimate readers' abilities
- Know what you really want to say
- Use familiar words
- Use consistent words
- Cut out unnecessary words
- Use correct spelling and grammar
- Use active voice verbs
- Use you and we, not they
- Use short sentences
- Use short paragraphs
- Don't split words over two lines
- Use left justification, with ragged right
- Don't overcrowd the page
- Use type sizes that are at least 12 point
- Use lower case, not caps
- Use headings and subheadings
- Use a polite tone
- Test with your readers**

  
appendix C  
**Before and After**

HERE ARE A FEW EXAMPLES to show how communication can be made clearer. Some revisions were written by me, and some by others. Also included are some examples of original plain-language materials, not revisions.

**FROM THE CANADIAN LABOUR CONGRESS  
CONSTITUTION IN CLEAR LANGUAGE**

(portions reprinted with permission)

**Charter of  
Labour Rights (original)**

The charter calls for:

1. The unfettered right to peaceful assembly and picketing.
2. The right to bargain collectively on all matters arising out of technological change and automation.
3. The right to strike during the term of a collective agreement if bargaining cannot resolve matters in dispute which are not covered by such an agreement.

**Section 3(a) (original)**

Special Conventions may be called by direction of a regular Convention, by order of Executive Council, or on request of affiliated organizations representing a majority of the total membership of the Congress, as evidenced by the records of the Secretary-Treasurer reported to the last Convention.

**Charter of  
Labour Rights (revised)**

All workers should have the right to:

Assemble

1. Assemble peacefully and picket.

Technological change

2. Bargain collectively on all matters arising from technological change.

Strike

3. Strike during the term of an agreement if bargaining cannot resolve a dispute about a matter not covered in the agreement.

**Article 12 (revised)  
Special conventions**

Who calls it

1. Special conventions can be called by:
  - a regular convention;
  - executive council; or
  - a group of affiliates representing a majority of the Congress membership, according to the records reported at the last convention.

## FROM THE PLAIN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION INTERNATIONAL (PLAIN)

[www.plainlanguagenetwork.org](http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org)

(reprinted with permission)

**from an insurance company  
form letter (original)**

We have recently implemented an enhancement to our computer system that will enable us to provide better service to our valued customers. This has resulted in a slight delay in the processing of your renewal. The difference you will notice is in the payment schedule. Your annual policy premium has been divided over 11 (eleven) months, and as a result your monthly payment will have increased due to the reduced number of monthly instalments

**revised**

We are a little late in sending your renewal documents because we have made a change in our computer system in order to provide better service. Your annual premium will now be divided over 11 months instead of 12 so the monthly payment will increase slightly.

**from an industrial  
inspection report**

During the inspection, load checking of several tendons in the upper stressing gallery of G4 was witnessed. Several points were raised with the company about this procedure. These were: the numbering of the tendon anchorages, the numbering of strands for load checking and the calibration of the feeler gauge used to determine when tendon lift-off occurred. The company reported that all the load-checking procedures were under review. The latter point was accepted and would also be incorporated into the procedure. These changes will be reviewed by the author during the next site visit.

**revised**

During the inspection, I watched load checking of several tendons in the upper stressing gallery of G4 and raised the following points with the company about this procedure: the numbering of the tendon anchorages, the numbering of strands for load checking, and the calibration of the feeler gauge used to determine when tendon lift-off occurred. The company reported that all the load-checking procedures were under review but accepted the last of these points and said they would incorporate it into their procedures. I will review these changes during my next site visit.

## FROM THE VOCATIONAL AND REHABILITATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE

[www.vrri.org](http://www.vrri.org)

(original, reprinted with permission)

**from a brochure *How to be a Good Worker*** (pictures omitted; original font reduced)**Time**

- Be on time for work.
- Come back from lunch on time.
- Do not hang about in the washroom.
- Do not stop until your work-time ends.

**Phone**

- Phone your boss if you cannot go to work.
- Phone at least 30 minutes before your work starts and say why you cannot work.

**A bad day**

It is not OK to skip work because you slept in, or missed the bus or just wanted to do something else.

**When to stay home from work**

- It is OK to stay home if you are very sick.
- It is OK to stay home if someone in your family has just died.
- It is OK to stay home if there is a big snow storm.

**Stay clean and neat**

- Wear clean clothes. They should not smell, look dirty, or have holes. Sometimes you will get clothes at work, so you look like other workers there.
- Wash yourself every day.
- Keep your hair clean and tidy.
- Brush your teeth every day.
- Keep your finger-nails clean.
- If you are a man, shave or keep your face-hair very clean.

**Listen**

- Listen to what the boss tells you to do.
- Tell the boss when you do not understand.
- Ask for help when you need it.
- If you did not hear, ask for things to be said again.
- Listen if your boss tells you ways to be a better worker.

**Other workers**

- Do your best.
- Try to work well with others.
- Let them get on with their work.
- Ask before you use people's things—do not just take them.
- Be polite—say please, thank you, and excuse me.
- Do not swear at anyone.
- Do not stand really close to others.
- Do not touch others, unless you need to for your job.
- Do not talk too much about sex or tell jokes that put people down.
- Do not steal things from work.
- If you feel upset about something, talk to someone you trust at work.
- If you get angry, do not shout and do not hit anyone. Take a break, and calm down. Then talk to your boss about the problems that made you angry.

**These tips will help you be a good worker.**

[Flesch-Kincaid reading level = 2]

## FROM THE LITERACY PARTNERS OF MANITOBA

[www.mb.literacy.ca](http://www.mb.literacy.ca)

(reprinted with permission)

**Referral letter (original; see next page for revisions)**

Dear Sir/Madam

I am writing to you at this time to advise you that I have received a referral for you/your child to have a hearing test. The referral was dated upon receipt and is being held on the waiting list accordingly.

There was a four-month service disruption caused by the relocation of audiology to the new Primary Health Care Centre, so my waiting list is presently 5 or 6 months due to the backlog. In accordance with our mandate children are given a prioritized status and every effort will be made to see them as soon as possible. Your patience is greatly appreciated.

The schedule is booked in 6-week blocks, so it may be a few months before you hear from us, regarding an appointment booking. When your name comes up to be booked, we will contact you. Please contact us if your address or phone number changes (Audiology Reception 123-4567). In the event that you are unable to make your appointment, I would appreciate it if you call in advance to cancel. If you do so, you will be given the next available appointment. In fairness to all who are waiting, anyone who does not show for their appointment and who has not called in advance will be moved to the end of the waiting list.

There are waiting lists at all of the other regional centres where hearing testing is funded by the government. For anyone wishing to obtain service more quickly, there is the option of being seen by one of the audiologists in a private clinic (see listing on back page). Please note that there may be charges for testing at private clinics and not all clinics are set up to test children, especially young children. For questions regarding costs and services you must contact the private clinics directly.

I hope that you will find this information helpful and I look forward to meeting you.

Sincerely,

[Flesch-Kincaid reading level = 9.8]

**Referral letter (revised)**

Dear Mrs. Brown,

Doctor Smith has referred your son Bobby to me for a hearing test. I have put him on the waiting list.

We are behind due to the movement of our offices to the new Primary Health Care Centre. I hope to see your son in about five months' time.

In about three months, we will let you know the date of Bobby's appointment. Please tell us if you change your address or phone number.

Please tell us if Bobby cannot keep the appointment. I will then see him on the next available date.

You may wish to set up an appointment with another audiologist who can see you sooner. Unfortunately, the other regional centres have waiting lists as well.

In case you wish to visit a private clinic, I have given you a list on the other side of this page. Please contact them directly and ask

- If they can test children and
- What you will have to pay.

Please phone our office at 123-4567 if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

[Flesch-Kincaid reading level = 6.1]

**Referral letter (I have simplified the letter even further.)**

Dear Mrs. Brown,

Doctor Smith has asked me to give your son Bobby a hearing test. I have put Bobby on the wait list.

Our wait list is longer than usual because we have just moved. Our office is now in the Primary Health Care Centre.

In about three months, we will let you know when Bobby can come to see us. Please tell us if you cannot bring Bobby on that date, or at that time. We will change it.

Please tell us if you move or get a new phone number.

You may wish to go to another clinic which can see you sooner, but other centres in this region have wait lists as well.

In case you wish to visit a private clinic, I have given you a list on the other side of this page. Please contact them directly and ask

- if they can test children, and
- what you will have to pay.

Please phone our office at 123-4567 if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

[Flesch-Kincaid reading level = 4.5]

FROM CALGARY REGION COMMUNITY BOARD,  
PERSONS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

[www.pdd.org/calgary](http://www.pdd.org/calgary)

(original, reprinted with permission)

**from the booklet *Mortgages and other money matters***

(pictures omitted; original font and size reproduced)

The first thing most people think about when they want to buy a home is—how much will it cost and where will I find the money for it? Not many people have all they need to pay for a home. So they must borrow. The money you borrow to buy a home is called a mortgage (sounds like MOR-gaje). You can borrow from a bank, a credit union, an insurance company or some other big lender. We will just say lender in this booklet.

Most often a mortgage is money that is borrowed for 25 years. You must pay it back over that time, as well as pay interest. This is the profit the lender makes. Often you sign a paper that says you will pay back so much over 3 years or 5 years (you and the lender together make a plan). After that, you need to make a new plan. The interest you pay may go up or down with each new plan.

[Flesch-Kincaid reading level = 5]

# D

## Appendix D

### Resources

[All Internet addresses cited were accessed on May 24, 2006.  
Where such an address breaks to a second line, no space or punctuation is intended.]

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### **Computer-related**

Photosymbols: Professionally produced positive images of persons with disabilities. Bristol, UK. [www.photosymbols.com](http://www.photosymbols.com).

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Janet Pringle was born and raised in Scotland but is thoroughly Canadian now. She has worked in Calgary for twelve years with people who have developmental disabilities, as a researcher, as a plain language writer and as an ally and advocate. Her focus is on low-literacy materials, suitable for the many people who face literacy barriers. She has written on legal topics, health and safety, home-buying, board participation, and women's concerns. She can be reached at [j\\_pringle@telus.net](mailto:j_pringle@telus.net).

