

**Title: Plain language and clear design
A co-op writer's guide**

Prepared for the Co-operative Housing Federation of
Canada (Ontario Region)
by the Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto

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The Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada and the Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto have set up the Co-op Housing Bookstore as a joint project.

We publish

- books about the management of housing co-ops
- books about housing co-ops as communities, and
- brochures to help members take part in co-op meetings.

We write all our publications in plain language. They are printed by union labour on re-cycled paper.

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Foreword

The Co-op Housing Bookstore published its first plain language book in 1989. Since then, the Bookstore has published more than 50 books and brochures in plain language. Housing co-ops and federations have discovered the need to communicate with members in plain language.

Writing for members of housing co-ops is challenging because of our membership's rich diversity of education, culture, countries of origin and language skills. Many members and staff of federations and housing co-ops have responded by attending workshops on plain language and clear design.

This guide brings together the key points of the plain language workshops. It will help you write in plain language with a clear and consistent style. Your writing will become easier and faster. Your readers will get your message.

These guidelines are not the only, or always the best, way to communicate. There may be times when you decide that another approach works better for a particular piece of writing. However, this guide outlines the basic principles of plain language and clear design.

The Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada (Ontario Region) funded this guide and Dale Reagan worked with us through the draft stages.

We thank Judy Kondrat of East End Literacy for allowing us to use her draft of *Clear Language and Design Style Guide* as the starting point from which we developed this guide for the co-operative housing sector.

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Thanks especially to Frances Malandrino for sharing her insight throughout our work on this project.

Marlene Black and Brian Burke

Plain Language and Clear Design

Foreword

How to use this guide

Instead of a Table of Contents, we have written a brief summary of the key points in each section. Use these pages to help you find information.

Plain language — the basics 1

This is a summary of the basics of writing in plain language. Use it for a quick review of the principles of this style of writing.

Writing in plain language 3

To write in plain language, organize the information so that it makes sense to your readers and use words that your readers will understand.

' Organize the information 3

This section will show you how to break up long sentences, and when to use brackets, headings, paragraphs.

' Use words that your readers will understand 5

Simplify your style. Short forms, contractions, hyphens, Latin terms, numbers, signs and symbols can cause problems for your readers. This section will help you to decide which words and phrases to use and which to avoid.

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This section will help you to present information in a clear and readable style.

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How to use this guide

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This is a list of words and terms that may be in your vocabulary, but may not be familiar to all of your readers. We have suggested some common, everyday words that you may wish to use instead.

Examples using plain language and clear design 33

We have included a paragraph that we have rewritten in plain language. There is also a flyer that we have redesigned using clear design.

Plain language resources 39

Use this list to find more information about plain language.

Plain language — the basics

Use this section of the guide for a quick review of the principles of writing in plain language.

- Think about those who will be reading the information. What do they already know about the subject? What do they need to know? How well do they read? Is English their first language?
- Organize the information so that it makes sense to your readers.
- Put the most important idea first.
- Address the reader as *you*. Refer to the writer as *we*.
- Make sure that your tone is friendly and conversational not critical, authoritative or formal. The words and style you use will show how you feel about the people you are writing to.
- Use words that are familiar and concrete. Be consistent in what you call things. (See the list on page 19.)
- Avoid jargon and technical terms unless you are sure that your readers will be familiar with these terms. If you must use a technical term, define it. For example, co-op members will probably understand the term *housing charge*. However, if you are marketing units to the public, you must explain the term or use the more familiar word, *rent*.
- Use words that include all your readers. Use *chair* or *chairperson* instead of *chairman*. Use *maintenance worker* instead of *maintenance man*.
- Avoid using expressions that will be difficult for people who speak English as a second language, for example, *lip service*, *red tape*, *fast track*.
- Use short, simple sentences — no more than 30 words. Vary the length.
- Use joining words to connect ideas — *then*, *that means*, *so*, *because*.
- Use basic punctuation. If you are writing in plain language, you will not need

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Plain language — the basics

complex punctuation with lots of commas and semi-colons.

- Use the active, not the passive voice. In other words, the person or organization that is doing the action should be the subject of the sentence. For example, use *The board has decided* instead of *It has been decided by the board*.

Passive

A Members' Meeting will be held on June 19 in the meeting room. All members are asked to attend. Changes to the Occupancy By-law will be presented by the board and will be voted on by the members.

(4 passive verbs)

Active

Please attend the Members' Meeting on June 19 in the meeting room. The board will present some changes to the Occupancy By-law. Members will vote on these changes.

(3 active verbs)

- Use short paragraphs. However, do not make each sentence a separate paragraph or the paragraphs lose their effect.
- Use headings to help your readers find important information.

Writing in plain language

To write in plain language, organize the information so that it makes sense to your readers, and use words that your readers will understand.

' **Organize the information**

Organize the information so that your readers can quickly and easily find the information they need. Readers need to know what is important and what you want them to do. Put the main ideas near the beginning. This will make it easy for your readers to grasp your most important point. It will also encourage them to read on.

Here are some other tips for making it easy for your readers to find the information they need.

Brackets ()

Use brackets to explain a term or to introduce a short form, for example, housing charge (rent) or Canada Pension Plan (CPP).

Do not use brackets to introduce a new idea into the middle of a sentence. Re-write and separate the ideas into 2 sentences.

Bullets (•)

Lists and long sentences are easier to read if you separate them with bullets.

Bullets can make a sentence with 3 or more points easier to read.

For example A members' meeting is a place where members

- share ideas
- get information
- talk about their concerns and
- make decisions.

instead of A members' meeting is a place where members share ideas, get information, talk about their concerns and

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Writing in plain language

make decisions.

Bullets can also highlight each point in a list.

For example This will involve 3 committees

- Finance — to prepare a budget
- Membership — to prepare a change in the Occupancy By-law
- Maintenance — to prepare unit inspections.

instead of This will involve 3 committees: Finance, to prepare a budget; Membership, to prepare a change in the Occupancy By-law; and Maintenance, to prepare unit inspections.

Punctuating bullets

There are no set rules on how to punctuate a bulleted list. We have adopted a style that has as little punctuation as possible — simply a period after the last item in the list. We will also put a period at the end of a complete sentence within an item in a bulleted list.

Headings

Use headings. They break up the text and help your readers find important information.

Paragraphs

Leave extra space between paragraphs, a full space if possible.

Indenting the first line with no extra space will make the page look like one long paragraph.

If every sentence is a separate paragraph, the paragraphs lose their effect

Periods

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Writing in plain language

Use 2 spaces after a period.

' **Use words that your readers will understand**

Think about the words and symbols that you use when you write. Will your readers understand them? Some words that are familiar to you may be difficult for some of your readers.

When writing for a general audience, try to use common, everyday words. These words are easier to read than longer, formal words. Many people use common words in conversation, but revert to longer, more formal language when they sit down to write. This is fine if you know that your readers understand this language, but not if your readers have mixed levels of reading skills. The list on page 19 suggests common alternatives to many difficult words.

Short forms, contractions, hyphens, Latin phrases, signs and symbols can also cause problems for your readers. The following suggestions may help you simplify your style.

Abbreviations

See **Short forms** and **Initials and acronyms**.

Contractions (can't, didn't, don't, won't)

Avoid using contractions. For example, use *cannot*, *did not* and *will not* instead of *can't*, *didn't*, and *won't*.

Hyphens

Use a hyphen if it will make a word or phrase easier to read. For example

- < use a hyphen to separate identical vowels
co-operate, co-ordinate, re-employ

- < use a hyphen to separate two vowels
by-election, re-injure, re-arrange, multi-unit

- < use a hyphen to separate identical consonants
non-native, over-ripe, sub-basement

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- < use a hyphen for nouns that end with *up*
mark-up, line-up, follow-up
- < use a hyphen if the syllables may be confused
co-worker

Do not end a line with a hyphen.

Most word processing programs have non-breaking hyphens that keep words like *co-op* from splitting at the end of the line. Look in the Help section for non-breaking (hard or character) hyphens.

Initials and acronyms (AIDS, CMHC, MMAH, RGI)

Try to avoid acronyms and initials. If you are writing a long piece, use the full name followed by the short form in brackets for the first mention, for example, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). After that, you can use the short form, CMHC.

Sometimes, the reader will be more familiar with the short form than with the full name, for example, AIDS. In this case, use the short form.

Latin words and phrases

Some Latin words and phrases still linger in office jargon. Use modern expressions that are easier to understand and spell.

Some examples

- < *ad hoc committee*
single-purpose, special
- < *as per*
as for, as in, following
- < *bona fide*
legitimate, valid, genuine
- < *de facto*

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- in fact
- < *e.g. (exempli gratia)*
for example, such as
- < *etc. (et cetera)*
and so on, and others
- < *ex officio*
because of their position
- < *i.e. (id est)*
that is
- < *per annum*
a year, each year
- < *per diem*
each day
- < *per se*
in itself, as such
- < *pro forma*
form, sample, example, blank form
- < *pro rata*
adjusted, adjust
- < *proviso*
limitation
- < *verbatim*
word for word
- < *vs, versus*
compared to, against, opposite
- < *via*
through, by

Per cent and *percentage* are widely used and understood, so we will

leave them in peace.

Mini words

Mini words are short, common words of one, two or three letters. They are very important in English. Some examples are *go, get, he, she, for, it, the, a.*

If sentences contain only mini words, readers may become confused. Try to use mini words together with words that are a little longer. However, it is better to have too many mini words than too many long words.

Numbers

The usual rule is to spell out whole numbers below 10 and use figures for 10 and above. However, plain language writers often use figures for numbers below 10 because figures are easier to read. For example, *Keep these records for 5 years.*

Use words for ordinals. For example, use *first, second, and third* instead of *1st, 2nd, and 3rd.*

Do not use ordinals for dates. For example, use *January 1, 2002* instead of *January 1st, 2002.*

Note

When you use figures, do not let the number become isolated at the beginning or the end of a line. Use a non-breaking (hard) space to keep words and figures on the same line.

For example The Special Committee discussed Item 3, the Occupancy By-law changes, at their meeting on Saturday, December 10, 2000.

instead of The Special Committee discussed Item 3, the Occupancy By-law changes, at their meeting on Saturday, December 10, 2000.

Pronoun gender

Avoid using mixed pronouns such as *s/he, he or she, him/her, him or her, his/hers* and *his or hers*.

You may be able to re-write the sentence. For example, try making the subject plural. If the plural will not work, use *they, them* or *theirs* with a singular subject.

For example

Members are responsible for painting their units.

or

The member is responsible for painting their unit.

instead of

The member is responsible for painting his/her unit.

Short forms (app't, asap, c'tee, cont'd, ext, mtg, ON)

In general, avoid short forms. Use short forms only if your readers use them regularly, for example, RGI, B.C. or P.E.I.

See **Initials and acronyms**.

Slash/slant (the president/vice-president, his/her)

Avoid using a slash to replace the words *and, or*. Use *or* and add *or both* if necessary. You may need to write 2 sentences.

For example The president or the vice-president sets the agenda.

instead of The president/vice president sets the agenda.

Spelling

Many words have more than one accepted spelling in Canada — usually a British spelling and an American spelling.

British		American
ageing		aging
analyse		analyze
cancelled		canceled
centre		center
colour		color
co-operative		cooperative
fulfil		fulfill
judgement	judgment	
neighbour		neighbor
organise		organize

Choose the spelling that will be most familiar to your readers and use it consistently, especially within a single document.

You may want to start a list of preferred spellings for your office. You may also want to ask everyone in your office to use the same dictionary. When the dictionary gives alternative spellings, use the first spelling listed. Oxford and Gage publish good Canadian editions.

Symbols

Do not replace words with symbols unless they are part of a proper name or address.

For example

<i>and</i>	instead of	&
<i>at</i>	instead of	@ except in e-mail addresses
<i>number</i>	instead of	# This symbol is often unnecessary.

You can use the symbol, %, for percent as most people are familiar with it.

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Writing in plain language

Clear design — the basics

Clear design aims for clean, uncluttered, easy-to-read design that directs the reader through the material. The design should support the information, not overwhelm it. The purpose of clear design is to make sure that readers get the message.

Using colour

Colour can add interest and clarity to a document. It can draw the readers' attention and help them find important information.

However, pay attention to **contrast** when you use colour. Strong contrast is important for older readers and readers who are colour blind. It is also important if the document will be faxed or photocopied.

Black text on white paper is the easiest to read because of the clear contrast between the light page and the dark ink. When you choose colours, make sure that there is a strong contrast between the text and the paper. Avoid combinations such as green and blue, yellow and white, or grey and white.

Paper colour

Coloured paper can make a page stand out. Use coloured paper for flyers or covers where there is very little text on the page.

Use light-coloured paper with dark ink for the best contrast. Yellow, cream or very light grey paper with dark ink is best, especially if there is a lot of text.

Be careful using blue and green paper. Even light blue paper can reduce the contrast with the ink and make the page hard to read.

Many people find it very difficult to read text printed on dark coloured paper. Glossy papers and neon colours also cause problems for many readers.

Ink colour

If your budget allows, you can use a different colour of ink for graphic elements, important information, or headings.

Be aware of contrast when you choose an ink colour. Dark ink on light paper is best. Make sure that important information and text elements such as headings stand out.

Setting up the page

Justification

Left Use left justification (the left margin is even, the right margin is ragged) for blocks of text. Left justified text is easiest to read because the spaces between the words are even and the eye knows where to find the start of the next line.

Full Avoid fully justified text (text with even left and right margins). Full justification makes this paragraph look neat. However, the text becomes very dense. Full justification also creates uneven spaces between words. Compare the spaces between the words in the first line of this paragraph with the spaces in the sixth line. Uneven spacing makes the text hard to read.

Centre Centre titles and headings only.

Lines

Lines of text that are 50 to 70 characters long are easiest to read. Lines that are too short need too many eye sweeps. Lines that are too long are tiring for the eye.

Avoid hyphens at the end of lines. Also check that phone numbers and dates do not split at the end of a line. Most word processing programs have non-breaking hyphens and non-breaking spaces. Look in the Help section for non-breaking (hard or character) hyphens and spaces.

• **Choosing type**

Choose typefaces carefully. There are thousands of typefaces available. Some work, some do not.

Style

Typefaces can be divided into two basic groups.

Serif *Serif* typefaces have “hooks” on the ends of the letters. Most readers find this style easiest to read. Use a *serif* typeface for blocks of text. This guide is in *Times New Roman* — always a good, standard choice.

Sans serif *Sans serif* type has clean lines with no hooks on the letters. You can use it for short headings and signs. The title and headings in this guide are in *Arial*, a standard *sans serif* typeface. Sans serif type can be hard to read so avoid using it for large blocks of text.

Variety

Unusual typefaces can add visual interest to a document. However, make sure that the typeface retains the standard shape of the letters. If there are numbers in the text, check the numbers for readability as well.

- Comic Sans is an interesting and easy-to-read typeface.
- *Curlz MT* is interesting but much harder to read.
CURLZ MT is interesting but much harder to read.
- *Do not use script!*
Do not use script (fonts that look like handwriting).
Script can be very hard to read.

If you use more than 2 typefaces on a page, your document may look cluttered.

Size

Use at least 12 point type for text. Use larger type for older readers or for people who have difficulty reading. However, avoid overly large type. It can make the document look crowded.

- This guide uses 13 point *Times New Roman*.
- This is 10 point Times New Roman.
- This is 15 point Times New Roman.

Note

Twelve is the minimum for *Times New Roman*. Other typefaces may need a larger point size to give the same readability.

- This is 12 point Times New Roman.
- This is 12 point Gill Sans MT Condensed.

Highlighting information

Use the design to make important information stand out and to guide readers through the document.

Bold

Use **bold** for emphasis, **but too much bold type loses its impact and is hard to read.**

Boxes

Use boxes to highlight important information. However, too many boxes will make the document cluttered and the reader will not be able to find the most important information.

Bullets

Use bullets (usually small black dots) for each point in a long sentence or a list. You can use other shapes such as arrows and checkmarks for variety, but be careful not to clutter the page.

Capital letters

Do **not** use all capital letters.

TEXT IN ALL CAPS IS HARD TO READ. NORMALLY, READERS RECOGNIZE WORDS BY THEIR SHAPE. IF YOU USE ALL CAPS, ALL THE WORDS BECOME RECTANGLES.

Contrast

Avoid light print on dark backgrounds.

Reversed print can be hard to read especially if there is a lot of text. Reverses can also be difficult to fax or photocopy.

Italics

Use *italics* to identify titles, special terms and words or phrases in other languages. *However, it is hard to read more than one or two words in italics so try to avoid using italics for emphasis.*

Size

Large type can make **important information** stand out.

You can also use different sizes of type to help readers understand the structure of the document. For example, you could use 17-point type for main headings and 15-point for subheadings. Make sure that you use these sizes consistently throughout the document.

Space

Use *white space* (any blank space on the document) to make important information stand out.

Important Information

Underlining

Do **not** underline text.

Lines under the words hide the shapes of the letters. Readers depend on being able to see these shapes.

' Making pictures and graphics work for you

- Use pictures and graphics to bring out the meaning of the text. The pictures and graphics should illustrate the subject or draw attention to certain items.
- Allow for lots of white space. Too much text gives readers the message that this is going to be hard and boring. Too many graphics can make it hard for readers to focus on the most important information.
- Use graphics to help readers understand the structure of the document. The graphic layout should lead your readers through the information.
- Be consistent. Always use graphics such as symbols, bullets, boxes and type size in the same way throughout a document.
- Think about your readers. Will they relate to the pictures and graphics? Do the pictures and graphics reflect their diversity? Will the pictures and graphics have the same meaning for every reader?

Plain Language and Clear Design

Clear design — the basics

- Pictures and graphics should not hide the text or interrupt normal reading patterns.
- Objects and textures behind the text make it difficult to read the message. Do **not** use watermarks (objects behind the text) and textured backgrounds. This is especially important in documents that will be copied or faxed.
- Do not have more than one colour under a single block of text.
- Try to avoid screens (shading behind the text). If a screen is necessary to make the text stand out, use a very light screen in a colour that contrasts with the text.

Remember, screens will cause problems when you are faxing and photocopying.
- Select pictures and graphics that will stand up when faxed or photocopied.
- Check the quality of the final reproduction. This is especially important if your readers will be making copies of the document or faxing it to others.

• **Tips for photocopying and faxing**

Paper colour

Use white paper. Coloured paper will not photocopy or fax well on some machines.

Margins

If you are preparing a document for faxing, leave at least a 1 inch margin at the top and bottom of the document and a ½ inch margin at each side. This will allow for differences between the printing areas of various fax machines.

Pictures and graphics

Use simple pictures and graphics in black and white. Pictures with grey shading may not photocopy or fax well.

Reverses

Light type on a dark background will not fax or photocopy well. It also uses a lot of toner.

Backgrounds

Avoid textured backgrounds, screens and watermarks. They can become very dark and completely hide the text when the page is photocopied or faxed.

Choosing common words

The words in the left hand column below may be difficult for your readers. Read through this list to see if you are in the habit of using these words. The column on the right lists some common words that you could use instead.

However, these alternative words will not work in every situation. We often use the same word in different ways — as a noun, a verb or an adjective. Some words have many different meanings. For example, the Oxford dictionary takes 5 pages and almost 15,000 words to explain all the meanings of the word *what*. You may have to find other common words to say what you want or you may need to re-write the sentence completely.

Instead of	Use
A	
a number of	some
abbreviate	shorten
abundance	enough, a lot
accede to	allow, agree to
accelerate	speed up, go faster
accentuate	stress
accommodation	where you live, home
accompanying	with
accomplish	do, finish
according to our records	our records show
accordingly	so
accurate	correct, right
achieve	do, make
acquire	get

Plain Language and Clear Design

Choosing common words

Instead of	Use
additional	extra, more, other
adequate number	enough
adhere to	follow
adjacent	next to
adjustment	change
administer	run
advise	tell
afford an opportunity	let, allow, give a chance
alleviate	ease, reduce
allocate	give, set aside
alternative	choice, other
amendment	change
anticipate	expect
apparent	obvious, clear
appropriate	proper, right, suitable
approximately	about
arise	come up
as a consequence of	because
as a means of	to
as of the date of	from
as regards	about
ascend	go up
ascertain	find out
assemble	build, put together

Plain Language and Clear Design

Choosing common words

Instead of	Use
assign	give
assistance	help
at an early date	soon
at its discretion	can, may
at the moment	now
at the present time	now
at your convenience	when you can
attempt	try
attend	come to, be at, care for, look after
authority	right, power
authorize	allow, let
available	ready

B

beneficial	helpful, useful
breach	break
by means of	by

C

calculate	work out, decide
capable of	can

Plain Language and Clear Design

Choosing common words

Instead of	Use
cease	stop
commence	start, begin
communicate	talk with, write, telephone
compile	collect
complement	go with, support
complete	fill in, finish
comply with	follow, meet
component	part
comprehensive	complete, full, total
conceal	hide
concerning	about
conclude	close, end, finish
concurrent	at the same time
consequently	so
consider	look at, think about, vote on
considerably	much
consolidate	put together
constitutes	is, makes up, forms
construct	build
consult	talk to, meet, ask
contains	has, holds
contravene	break, not follow
contribute	give, take part in
conversation	talk

Plain Language and Clear Design

Choosing common words

Instead of	Use
correspondence	letter
cumulative	added up, added together, total
currently	now
D	
decrease	drop, fall, go down
deduct	take off, take away
defer	put off, delay
deficit	loss
deliberate	talk over, discuss
deliver	give, hand out, send
demonstrate	show
descend	go down
describe	tell
designate	set aside, appoint
despite the fact that	although
determine	decide, find, work out
detrimental	harmful, damaging
difficult	hard
dimension	shape, size
disclose	tell, show
discontinue	stop, end
discuss	talk about
disseminate	spread, show
distribute	send, share

Plain Language and Clear Design

Choosing common words

Instead of	Use
documentation	documents, papers
due to the fact that	because
 E	
effective	works, real
elaborate	explain, set out
eliminate	cut, drop, get rid of, take away
emphasis	stress
empower	allow, let
enable	allow, let
enclosed	inside, with
encompass	hold, take in, include
endeavour	try
ensure	make sure
equivalent	equal, the same
establish	show, find out, set up
evaluate	check, test, judge
evidence	proof
examine	look at, study
excessive	too much, too many
exclusively	only
expenditure	spending, expense, purchase
expertise	skill, knowledge
expire	run out, end

Plain Language and Clear Design

Choosing common words

Instead of	Use
explain	tell
F	
facilitate	help, make possible
fail to	do not
failure to	if you do not
feasible	can be done
for a period of	for
for the purpose of	to, for
forward	send
framework	way, how
frequently	often
fundamental	main, basic, key

H	
harmonize	make the same

I	
identify	find, say which
illustrate	show

Plain Language and Clear Design

Choosing common words

Instead of	Use
immediately	now, at once
implement	begin, start, do, put in place
in addition to	and, also, as well as, plus
in lieu of	instead of
increasing	going up, rising
increasingly	more and more
indicate	point to, show
inform	tell
initial	first
initiate	start
innovation	new, fresh
intention	plan
investigate	look into, see
irregular	off and on
it is essential	must

L

legislation	law
location	place

M

Plain Language and Clear Design

Choosing common words

Instead of	Use
maintain	keep, hold
mandate	responsibility
mechanism	way, means
modification	change
multiple	many
N	
negotiate	work out
negotiations	talks
O	
objective	goal, aim
observe	see
obtain	get
on behalf of	for
on numerous occasions	often
on the grounds that	because
operate	run
opportunity	chance
option	choice
organization	group, body
original	first
owing to	because of

Plain Language and Clear Design

Choosing common words

Instead of

Use

P

participate	take part in, join in
perform	do
permit	let, allow
personnel	staff
persons	people, anyone
portion, proportion	part
position	job
possess	have, own
postpone	put off, do later, set a new date
preliminary	first, draft
presently	now, soon
previous	before, last
principal	main
prior to	before
procedures	ways, rules
proceed	go ahead
produce	make, do, write, get
promptly	quickly, at once
provide	give
provided	as long as
punctual	on time

Plain Language and Clear Design

Choosing common words

Instead of	Use
purchase	buy
Q	
qualify for	can get, be able to get
R	
receive	get
reconsider	think about again, look at again
reduce	cut
regarding	about
regulation	rule
reimburse	pay back, repay
relocation	move
remain	stay
remainder	the rest, what is left
remaining	left over
remuneration	pay, wages, salary
request	ask
require	must, need
requirement	need, rule
reside	live
resources	money, funds

Plain Language and Clear Design

Choosing common words

Instead of	Use
retain	keep, hold
return	come back, go back
revised	new, changed

S

scrutinize	watch carefully, read carefully
shall	will, must
significant	large, strong, big, important
similar to	like
submit	send, give
subsequent	later, next
substantial	large, real, strong, big
substantiate	show, prove

T

take into consideration	look at, consider
terminate	end, stop
therefore	so
thus	so
transfer	change, move

Plain Language and Clear Design

Choosing common words

Instead of

Use

U

undertake agree, promise, take on, do

unoccupied empty

utilize use

V

vacant empty

valid real, proper

variation change

visualize see, predict

W

whereas since

with reference to about

with regard to on, about

with the exception of except for

withhold keep back

within in, inside

witness see

Plain Language and Clear Design

Choosing common words

Example using plain language

Sample government form

You can qualify for benefits under Section 43 if you are sixty-four or older and unable to work, and that section also provides benefits in the event that you are blind in one eye, or both eyes, or are permanently disabled in the course of your employment.

Comment

This single sentence contains 48 words. The language is difficult. The appearance is intimidating. People who write like this are writing for themselves. There is no effort to communicate with people who have disabilities. Unfortunately, this kind of language is part of “bureaucrat-ese”, and many government forms are similar to this sample.

T The first step in re-writing is to break up the sentence.

T The second step is to get rid of unnecessary words such as “in the event”. The reference to Section 43 can be left out. The person who needs benefits does not need to know the section that makes the benefits available. If you think that the reference is necessary, put it in brackets at the end of the text.

T The third step is to make sure that you use common, everyday words.

Rewrite

You can get benefits if

- you are 64 or older and cannot work, or
- you are blind in one or both eyes, or
- you were permanently disabled at work.

Plain Language and Clear Design
Examples using plain language and clear design

Example using clear design

Compare the flyers on the next 2 pages. What makes the second flyer easier to read?

Think about how the design leads your eye through the information.

Note the length of the lines and the justification. How do they affect your ability to read the flyers?

Consider the style and size of the type. Which type is easiest to read? Why?

Look at how important information is emphasized — the use of bold, bullets, caps, italics, underlining and white space. What works best?

Do the pictures relate to the subject? Do they make it easier or harder to understand the message?

FACTS ON LITERACY

Statistics Canada reports that ALMOST 20% OF CANADIANS HAVE SERIOUS PROBLEMS WITH READING AND WRITING.

This means that 3 million Canadians have trouble understanding the information on a medicine label, following instructions on common household products, filling out an order form, and reading to a child.

Another 22% of Canadians are unsure of their reading and writing skills. They avoid reading unless the material is very clearly written and simply designed.



May 2001



Facts on Literacy

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- understanding the information on a medicine label
- following instructions on common household products
- filling out an order form
- reading to a child.

Another 22% of Canadians are unsure of their reading and writing skills. They avoid reading unless the material is very clearly written and simply designed.

May 2001

Plain Language and Clear Design
Examples using plain language and clear design

Plain language resources

- ' **Books on plain language available from the Co-op Housing Bookstore**

Plain language: Clear and simple, Human Resources Development Canada, 1998.

The plain language law dictionary, edited by Robert Rothenberg, 1996.

- ' **Other books on plain language**

Better writing for lawyers, by Timothy Perrin. Law Society of Upper Canada, 1990.

Clear lines, by Gordon W. E. Nore, Frontier College Press.

Words that count women out in, Ontario Women's Directorate, 1993.

- ' **Web sites**

Clear Language And Design
www.eastendliteracy.on.ca

Plain Language Association International
www.plainlanguagenetwork.org

Plain Language Health Services, Canadian Public Health Association
www.pls.cpha.ca

- ' **Where to find plain language books and booklets**

The Co-op Housing Bookstore carries plain language books about co-op housing. You will find a list on the Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto's Web site at
www.coophousing.com

Community Legal Education Ontario (CLEO) produces plain language information about the law in Ontario. For a list of booklets, visit CLEO's Web site at
www.cleo.on.ca

Plain Language and Clear Design

Plain language resources