

# Plain language

## **A Writer's Guide**

May 2009 DRAFT

Communications Nova Scotia

Better Regulation Initiative



# Table of contents

## Introduction

<b>What is plain language?</b> .....	<b>1</b>
▪ What does plain language look like?	
▪ Why use plain language?	
<b>Who are we writing to?</b> .....	<b>2</b>
▪ People like to do the right thing	
▪ People do what's easiest	
▪ Reading is work	
– <i>How well do Nova Scotians read?</i>	

## Think

<b>Who do we want to reach?</b> .....	<b>5</b>
▪ How well do they read?	
▪ What are their interests?	
▪ What do they need to know?	
▪ Where are they reading?	
<b>What do we want our readers to do?</b> .....	<b>6</b>
▪ Read our message	
▪ Act on our message	
▪ Share our message with others	
<b>Why should they read our message?</b> .....	<b>7</b>

## Organize

<b>Make an outline</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Break information into bite-size pieces</b> .....	<b>9</b>
▪ Headings	
▪ Bullets and numbering	

Write

**Write the way we talk.....11**

- Write to our readers
- Write in the active voice
- Use simple words and sentences
  - *Slaughter your darlings*
  - *Get off the freight train*
  - *Keep concepts to a minimum*

**Explain technical language .....15**

**Use examples.....15**

**Measure reading ease .....16**

Design

**Keep it simple.....17**

- Use 12-point type or larger
- Maximize white space
- Justify the left but leave the right ragged

**Show rather than tell.....18**

**Include a table of contents .....19**

Resources

**Examples of short words to substitute for long words or phrases .....20**

**Further reading.....21**

# Introduction

## What is plain language?

Plain language is writing that gives information to a particular group of readers in a way that makes it easy for them to understand the first time they read it.

## What does plain language look like?

- organized – the reader finds it logical and easy to follow
- friendly – it addresses the reader directly “you” or as a member of a team “we”
- active – subject-verb-object sentence structure
- short – short sentences, short paragraphs, short documents
- casual – the words we use are the same words our readers use in conversation

Graphic designers play a key role in creating plain language documents by designing them in a way that makes it easy for readers to find information quickly. Some design techniques include

- a table of contents
- typefaces that are easy to read
- illustrations
- text boxes

## **Why use plain language?**

Simply put, plain language is language that works. It does what it sets out to do. When we write in plain language we do three things:

- make it easy for all readers to understand and remember our message
- save time because we get the job done right the first time
- avoid mistakes and confusion

## **Who are we writing to?**

For the most part, we are writing to the general public. Before we look at our particular audience—whether they are snowplow operators, high school students, or farmers—we need to understand three things about people in general.

### **People like to do the right thing**

Most people like to do what is expected of them. Most people follow the rules. Most people like to answer “yes” instead of “no.” Most people do the right thing most of the time.

### **People do what’s easiest**

If we want people to change the way they act, we must work at making it easy for them. It must be easy for them to understand exactly what we want them to do and easy for them to do it. If people appear to resist the

change, it may be that they do not understand what we expect them to do and why. Frustrated people often react with anger.

If we need people to fill in a form, it must be easy to read and easy to understand. We know a form needs to be changed when people fill it in incorrectly.

### **Reading is work**

Think about what you read at work. Now think about what you read for pleasure. Is there a difference?

You may be surprised to learn that books by such best-selling authors as John Grisham, Tom Clancy, and P.D. James are written at a grade 7 level or lower. The same is true for Canadian authors such as Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, and Donna Morrissey. These authors have not “dumbed down” their writing to reach the masses. They write active, exciting stories in clear language, and we pay them for the pleasure of reading it.

We know an OHV Riders’ Handbook is never going to be a best-seller. But we have to make it attractive and easy to read and understand. If our readers are not being paid to read our work, we must work hard to make them want to read it.

Even when our readers are being paid to read, they often skim, scan, or skip whole sections. A recent study of senior executives in Canada showed that they rarely have the time or patience to read more than the opening remarks or chapter headings.

### *How well do Nova Scotians read?*

This chart shows how reading ability is spread across the population.

#### **Reading ability in Nova Scotia**

Excellent or very good – They can read complex documents.	1 in 5 Nova Scotians
Good – They like to read but need the information to be clear and well-organized.	2 in 5 Nova Scotians
Basic – They have trouble reading but can understand writing that is clear and direct.	1 in 5 Nova Scotians
Poor – They prefer not to read and find other ways to get their information.	1 in 5 Nova Scotians

The chart shows us that if we continue to write for ourselves and our colleagues, we will only reach one in five people. Statistics show that we are doing just that. A 1990 survey found that only two of five Canadians could deal with government forms easily. We can turn this around. By using plain language, we can increase that number to four in five.

Isn't that our job? We all have a right to know what our government is doing and what our rights and responsibilities are as residents and citizens regardless of how well we can read.

## Think

Who do we want to reach?

Before we begin writing, we need to know four things about our readers.

### **How well do they read?**

Groups are rarely homogenous. We often find that even within our targeted group, reading ability varies greatly from person to person. We should try to reach the poorest reader in our group.

### **What are their interests?**

People understand information better if they can relate to it. Use terms and analogies that reflect our readers' interests.

### **What do they need to know?**

Think about the one thing readers must know after reading our document. This will set the tone for everything we write. For example, safety was the number one concern of the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal when it rewrote the Winter Operators' Manual. Everything in the manual stresses this one idea.

## **Where are they reading?**

It is important to know if our information will be read in a crowded hallway, on a snowmobile trail, or in a classroom. Forms that need to be filled out on the spot must be clear and easy to follow. Even the best reader doesn't like to spend much time in this situation.

Motor vehicle handbooks need to be in a format that fits easily in a vehicle. Information must be so well organized that the reader can get to it within seconds.

Classroom materials should be broken up to allow for discussion or input from the instructor.

What do we want our readers to do?

## **Read our message**

Whether it's a form, an information brochure, or a handbook, the first thing we want our readers to do is read. Think about what our group of readers will find attractive. High-school students are attracted to different words, graphics, and images than fishery workers.

## **Act on our message**

Remember, people like to do the right thing. They need to know what it is.

Which instruction are you likely to follow?

- Suspend forward motion
- Stop

### **Share our message with others**

Use words and phrases our audience uses in their day-to-day conversations. This makes it easy for them to share our message with their family, friends, and co-workers.

Here are some words you can use to replace more official sounding terms. To find out more about using plain words to replace official terms, see the reference section at the end of this document.

<b>Instead of</b>	<b>Use</b>
accede	agree
commence	start
endeavour	try
initiate	start or begin
with reference to	about or concerning

Why should they read our message?

Think about why we want people to read our message.

- Do they need to comply with a new law or regulation?
- Will it make them safer or healthier?
- What make this new message different from what we have already told people in the past?

## Organize

### Make an outline

Before we begin to write, we must take the time to put our thoughts in order. Jot some ideas down on paper. Arrange them in an order that will be logical for the reader. Some writers put their ideas on post-it notes and move them around until the ideas flow logically. Some write a list of ideas, cut it up with scissors and rearrange it, again until the ideas are in a logical order.

Several years ago, the Nova Scotia Fisheries Sector Council saw the need for a handbook that would help fishery workers do their job more safely. The result was FishSafe, published in 2004.

That document reorganized critical safety information under the following headings:

- Problem
- Hazard
- Warning Signs
- Solution

The organization uses a logical progression that the reader can identify with easily.

As we put our ideas in order, think about what questions the reader might ask. Organize the information to answer those questions first.

Once we have our ideas in order, we can create an outline. Refer to it often. We can always change it if we notice an idea is not where it should be.

Often the outline becomes the document's table of contents. Make sure to put the main message at the beginning of the document. Use an introduction or summary section to tell readers what the document is about and why we are writing to them.

### Break information into bite-size pieces

A section should deal with one idea. Readers often skim or scan documents. They don't always read every word. Our message should still come across loud and clear.

### **Headings**

Make them meaningful. Good headings make our main points clear to the reader. They may be the only words some readers look at. Headings also break up the text and make it less intimidating to readers. Some readers are so intimidated by large blocks of type that they give up before they begin. When we break the information into sections, we stand a better chance that our message will be read and understood.

### **Bullets and Numbering**

These help our readers focus on important details. Use a numbered list when it is important that readers do things in a particular order.

For example:

To hunt in Nova Scotia, a new hunter must

1. Take the Canadian Firearm Safety training
2. Take the Hunter's Training Course
3. Get a Firearm's Licence

Use bullets for lists where the order is not important. Think of a grocery list. Do we write, "When I go to the store I will buy eggs, milk, cheese, broccoli, pasta, and butter"? Or does it look more like this?

Things to buy

- eggs
- milk
- cheese
- broccoli
- pasta
- butter

If this is the way we write for ourselves when we are not at work, this is the way we should write to our readers.

## Write

### Write the way we talk

Without even thinking about it, we do three things when we talk:

- We speak to one another using personal pronouns such as I, we, and you.
- We speak in the active voice.
- We use simple words and sentences.

We should do the same when we write

### **Write to our readers**

We should address our readers directly using words like 'you,' 'I,' 'we,' or 'us.' These words make our writing personal. They help us think about the effect our words will have on our readers and help us to clarify our thoughts. They also make the reader feel engaged.

For example:

“The program challenged employers from all sectors to create meaningful summer jobs that can give young people real learning opportunities. By responding to the challenge, employers in all sectors stand to strengthen the caliber of Canada’s future workforce.”

Can be changed to:

“Whether you run a repair shop or manage a large financial company, you can give a young person a meaningful summer job. By giving a student

the opportunity to learn about your business, you are helping to train Canada's future workforce."

### **Write in the *active voice***

Each sentence must have three parts

- subject – Who or what is acting?
- verb – What are they doing?
- object – Who or what are they doing it to?

Often in government writing, we bury the subject and turn the verb into a noun. This buries the action, gives writing an impersonal tone, and makes the sentence more difficult to understand. Sentences written in the active voice are shorter and stronger.

For example:

"The provision of meteorological services will be the subject of an inter-branch study to be completed early in the new fiscal year."

Can you answer the following questions?

- Who or what is acting?
- What are they doing?
- Who or what are they doing it to?

Now try this one.

"In the spring, an inter-branch team will study how we provide meteorological services."

Can you answer the same questions as in the first example? Which is easier to understand?

Breaking down our ideas in this way helps us to write in the active voice.

## **Use simple words and sentences**

### *Slaughter your darlings*

We writers love words. That's why we write. But some of those words have to go. The most common things we can cut are

- Modifiers – adjectives and adverbs. Our nouns and verbs should be strong enough to stand on their own.

“Substitute ‘damn’ every time you’re inclined to write ‘very’. Your editor will delete it and your writing will be just as it should be.” – Mark Twain
- Repetition – for example, “quick and easy” is repetitive. Things that are easy are usually quick.
- Jargon – Readers have trouble understanding trendy terms like “take the discussion offline,” and “create winning conditions.” Use everyday terms like “let’s speak privately” and “find the best way.”

### *Get off the freight train*

In an effort to make sentences shorter we often create chains of nouns called “freight trains.” These are difficult for most readers to understand because it is not clear how the nouns relate to each other. Sometimes adding a few more words will actually make the sentence clearer.

For example:

“World population is increasing faster than world food production.”  
[9 words]

Can be changed to:

“The world’s population is increasing faster than its food production.”  
[10 words]

***Keep concepts to a minimum***

Another thing we do when we’re trying to be concise is jam too many concepts into one sentence or paragraph. This example is from the 1991 State of the Environment Report:

“A little more than 200 years ago, however—a threshold that coincides with the beginnings of both the industrial revolution and a massive increase in human population—the concentrations of these gases began to rise rapidly and move beyond the boundaries of recent natural variability.”  
[43 words]

Breaking this sentence up to separate the different concepts makes it easier to understand and uses fewer words.

“Just over 200 years ago, the concentrations of these gases began to rise rapidly, beyond normal amounts. This rise began at the same time as the start of the industrial revolution and a massive increase in human population.”  
[17 + 21 = 38 words]

## Explain technical language

Sometimes we must use technical terms. Be sure to explain them clearly. Use simpler words to explain the concept before introducing the term. A barrage of big words will tire and discourage our readers.

“The extent of these [climate] changes is often determined by the existence of internal feedback mechanisms among the components of the climate system itself. Negative feedbacks will moderate a change by creating changes in other elements of the climate system that offset the initial change.”

Can be changed to:

“The climate system is made up of many factors that work together in complex ways. Some changes in the climate system create changes in other parts of the system that reduce the impact of the original change. This is called a negative feedback mechanism.”

## Use examples

Examples make ideas concrete and easier to understand. The 2008 Litter Survey Report by Environment Nova Scotia is littered with examples (pardon the pun).

Rather than using generic terms like litter or garbage, we used examples of litter: paper cups, chip bags, candy wrappers. Examples help the reader visualize what we are writing about.

## Measure reading ease

After we've written at least 100 words, we can begin to measure how easy it will be for our readers to understand what we have written. We do this using the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level formula.

$$0.39 \times (\text{average number of words per sentence}) + 11.8 \times (\text{average number of syllables per word}) - 15.59 = \text{grade level}$$

Many word processing programs have this as part of the spelling and grammar checker. If the statistics do not appear after you have completed spell check, type "Flesch-Kincaid" into your help menu's search field. It should tell you how to display readability statistics.

Literacy experts tell us that most people prefer to read text written at a grade 6 to grade 10 level. This includes people who are able to read more challenging work. Writing that is evaluated at a level higher than grade 10 will be more difficult for our readers. Consequently, they will be less likely to read it. This document scores a grade 6.3.

There are times when we must use technical terms that bring our grade level up. But if we follow plain language principles, we can still make these terms easy to understand for the general public.

## Design

Clear design is as important as clear writing. They work together to create clear communication. Here are some tips we can use to help us design our own documents.

### Keep it simple

Busy designs get in the way of our message. Leave fancy fonts and graphics to the professionals.

We need one or two fonts at the most for our documents:

- **a serif font for blocks of text**  
Serifs are small extensions at the corners and the ends of the letters that make the text easier to read. We used Palatino for this document. Garamond is another easy-to-read font for this document because it is among the easiest to read.
- **a sans serif font for headings**  
Sans serif means “without serifs.” We used Verdana because it is among the easiest to read.

### Use 12-point type or larger

Most people find 12-point type comfortable to read. When we must use a smaller font, we need to increase the amount of space between the lines to make it easier to read.

Avoid BLOCK CAPITALS because they are more difficult to read.

## Maximize white space

White space allows our eyes to rest. Text that is surrounded by white space appears easier to read. Many readers are intimidated by dense blocks of text and will avoid reading such documents. Breaking the text up with white space makes the text more inviting to such readers.

### *Three ways to maximize white space*

- Use wide margins. This gives a shorter, more pleasing line length.
- Indent to indicate levels of information
- Leave extra space between big ideas

### *Justify the left but leave the right ragged*

We use a justified left margin and a ragged right margin in this document. Fully justified text is common in letters and reports because it looks more formal. It may look nice, but it is more difficult to read. That's because the amount of space between words varies as the text is pulled across to the right margin.

## Show rather than tell

A picture truly is worth a thousand words. The easiest way to explain an idea is to answer the question: "What does that look like?" And the easiest way to answer that question is with a picture or graphic.

In a booklet about the Nova Scotia Legislature to be published this fall, we used a cartoon-style illustration to explain the complex process of turning a bill into law. By doing this, we made the process easier to understand, particularly for those who have trouble with large amounts of text.

## Use a table of contents or index

People like to get at the information they need as quickly as possible. The easier we make it to find information, the more likely it is that our readers will read it.

A table of contents does two things

- It tells the reader, at a glance, what our document is about.
- It helps the reader find the information they need quickly.

## Resources

Some examples of short words to substitute for longer words or phrases

<b>Instead of</b>	<b>Use</b>
accomplish	do
ascertain	find out
disseminate	send out
endeavour	try
expedite	hasten, speed up
facilitate	help, make easier
in lieu of	instead of
locality	place
optimum	best
strategize	plan
utilize	use
with regard to	about
until such time	until
it would appear that	apparently
subsequent to	after
adequate number of	enough
a number of	several, many
at the present time	now
presently	soon
as yet	yet
in situ	as it is, as they are
it is appropriate that	we should
in a similar fashion	similarly
as many as	up to
undertake some action	do something
deplane	get off the plane
diurnal	during the day

## Further reading

### General

*Oxford Guide to Plain English.* Martin Cutts. Oxford U. Press, 2007.

*Writing at Work: How to write clearly, effectively and professionally.*  
Neil James. Allen & Unwin, 2008.

Plain Language Association InterNational  
[www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/](http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/)

### Writing for the web

*Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works.*  
Janice (Ginny) Redish. Morgan Kaufmann, 2007.

### Legal writing

*A Plain English Handbook: How to Create Clear SEC Disclosure Documents.*  
1998. [www.sec.gov/news/extra/handbook.htm](http://www.sec.gov/news/extra/handbook.htm)

*A Plain Language Handbook for Legal Writers.* Chritine Mowat. Carswell,  
1998.

Clarity, an international association promoting plain legal language  
[www.clarity-international.net/](http://www.clarity-international.net/)

*Lifting the Fog of Legalese: Essays on Plain Language.* Joseph Kimble.  
Carolina Academic Press, 2006.

*Plain Language for Lawyers,* 3rd edition. Michele M. Asprey.  
Federation Press, 2003.

*Style and Procedures Manual: A Guide to Drafting Regulations in Plain  
Language.* Nova Scotia Registry of Regulations. January 2005.  
[www.gov.ns.ca/just/regulations/styleman/index.htm](http://www.gov.ns.ca/just/regulations/styleman/index.htm)