PLAIN IS POWERFUL

Five steps to plain language for accessibility and inclusion

Stiff

Plain language equals respect

It ensures that communication is accessible and inclusive.

The way we engage with others must constantly change in tandem with the world we live in. Today, that is a world struggling to be more equitable, diverse and inclusive. Plain language is vital to communicate using those qualities—to respect audiences with simple, clear content that leaves no one out.

Those who uphold clarity and simplicity in their writing are perceived to be more transparent and credible than those that don't. No wonder plain language is a priority for governments and businesses around the world—and in numerous languages.

Our five steps to plain language, and our recommendations for their practical implementation, will help you begin your plain language journey. Plain language isn't inelegant or dumbed-down. It is wording, structure and design that communicate in the most accessible and inclusive way possible.

Know your audience

Get up-close and personal.

Being personable means getting to know the people you're trying to connect with. This is particularly true in corporate writing, where the goal is to persuade readers to do something: to buy, to learn, to agree, to trust. The likelihood of success depends on your awareness of the reader. Success also relies on their perception of the work you've done to get to know them. Audiences need to know they are being heard. What are you doing to show them that?

Go beyond the data

Increasingly—and especially in a world now better tuned to equity, diversity and inclusion—you cannot pretend to understand your audiences. Communications must be based on iron-clad evidence. Yes, demographics provide helpful evidence about people, but pure data lacks the personal truth that can be acquired from people. Plain language requires that you understand the people behind the data. Who are they, really? What circumstances do they face? What do they need from you?

Forge stronger audience bonds

Thorough audience research shows that you give a damn. In effect, you're making a friend, so be genuine.

These days, research often includes community consultations that put writers and clients directly in front of the people they hope to influence. Surveys enable audiences to describe their situations in their own words. People appreciate and tend to reward this effort to connect. Listen, and they will set you straight.

Get out of your bubble. See where and how people live. Know what they do. It helps forge stronger bonds.

Be brief

Stick to one idea per sentence.

You know the saying: this could've been an email. Often said in jest, the expression holds some truth. Don't waste people's time with vapid meetings. And if it's going to be an email, make it short. Preambles are for writers who don't know what their readers want.

The Center for Plain Language notes that people read about 18% of what's on a page online. The reasons are many, but you can bet that excess verbiage ranks high.

The unnecessary scroll

Ever looked up a food recipe online? Notice how every food post seems to begin with the writer's life story?

> *"The first time I ever had paella was during a romantic adventure in Valencia in 1964..."*

We. Don't. Care. (And if we do, we'll read it later.) Get to the point. Don't make me scroll for your recipe.

This presents one of the biggest hurdles for new plain language writers. You have a minute to capture the attention of your audience, and the window to pull them into a written text is even briefer.

Less is best

Plain language is honest and direct. Enforce a 1:1 ratio in your writing: one idea per sentence. An excess of ideas don't make you smarter; they reduce the likelihood that your message will be received.

This step goes beyond ideas. Monitor your sentence length. A good rule of thumb is to vary your cadence—every five sentences or so, insert a sentence of five words or less. It works.

Your audience will thank you.

Be clear

*Clarity is the goal and
ambiguity is the obstacle.*

Make your intentions clear

Ambiguity is a problem partly because the meaning is often clear only to the writer. Don't leave your reader confused. Remember the first plain language step—know your audience. When you know them, you review your text with their eyes and ears. Will they understand what you mean? Have you been as clear as they need you to be? It's not enough to be clear in your own mind; you need to deliver what will be clear to your reader.

If impartiality is tricky, ask someone to review your writing. Their fresh eyes are the next best thing to those of your audience.

Talk to them, not at them

Clarity addresses audiences from we the speaker/writer to you the listener/reader. Meaning: address the reader directly. Personally.

- *"We believe you can do it."*
- *"We know you need a better product."*
- *"We recognize your need."*

It's how we're connecting with you in this article. Right here.

So, how's it going?

Be direct. Be clear. It's an invaluable tool for connection.

Lean into formatting

How content is organized and presented plays a role in its clarity. Plain language favours headers and sub-headers to organize thoughts and ideas logically. People are busy and mostly overloaded with information. Provide markers that help readers to skim (or scroll) through content and still understand the intention of the message. Mix it up: use charts, graphs and tables to complement written content—especially for visual learners.

Keep it simple

Favour simple word choices.

The five steps of plain language are all expressions of respect for readers and their time. We've covered knowing your audience, brevity and clarity. But connecting with your audience also demands simplicity.

Plain language calls for the use of common words rather than obscure ones, and short snappy words rather than longer and often multisyllabic words of Greek or Latin origin. Short words communicate meaning quickly and directly.

The origins rule

A good rule of thumb is to opt for Anglo–Saxon words, which are consistently easier to understand. Consider:

- *raise* **rather than** *elevate*
- *look* **rather than** *investigate*
- *end* **rather than** *finalize*
- *do* **rather than** *undertake*

Measure readability

Many writers believe words that are longer and more obscure show their skill. The opposite is true.

Readability is a good way to keep your pride in check. Plain language is generally at a grade–eight to nine readability level. How do you know where your writing ranks? Use a readability tool, such as the Hemingway app or the Editor built into Microsoft Word. This post comes in at grade 7.6. Not bad.

Note that text written at a grade–three reading level doesn't express the ideas of a nine–year–old. But it does use language in a way that a nine–year–old could understand. It takes more thoughtfulness to craft a sentence that communicates its idea simply.

Favour action

Retain readers' attention.

Communication is conversation. In business, neither is idle chit–chat. That's why the final of our five steps of plain language is to favour action. It works in two ways.

Avoid passive constructions

Plain language prefers the basic *subject > verb > object* sentence construction that all readers know. The overarching voice is active, not passive. Look at these examples:

> *The program was found to be useful by the team.* **vs.** *The team found the program useful.*

> *The report will be written by the deputy because of the deadline.* **vs.** *The deputy will write the report because of the deadline.*

Neither of the two first sentences is grammatically incorrect, but the active versions are sharper. It takes less time to understand the sentences' meaning because the subject and the action are immediately clear. And when you use that construction, the result is clear.

Plain language doesn't stumble, which means the reader doesn't either.

Give the reader something to do

Corporate writing is about getting shit done. How is your writing contributing to that? Plain language demands clarity about what you want your readers to do. Take the time to answer the question, "Now what?" Calls to action (CTA) do more than increase your click–through rate—they are uncommon courtesy. Please call this number. Visit this website. Learn about this policy.

The human on the other side of the screen will notice.

Get in touch at get@stiff.ca to learn more about plain language and our Backdraft system.