PLAIN LANGUAGE

How to Harness the Value of Clear Communication

ALLEN + CLARKE | write

Poorly written communication is both a waste of time for readers and a waste of money for organisations.

Plain language makes communication more efficient, effective, and accessible to all audiences.

The Plain Language Act 2022 requires government officials to use clear language when communicating with the public. However, using plain language benefits all businesses and organisations.

This guide will delve into the benefits of using plain language in your organisation, how to transform your organisation's writing, and practical tips for implementing plain language in all your communications, from emails to reports.

What is plain language ?

The International Plain Language Federation defines plain language as the following:

A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.

– International Plain Language Federation

This definition of plain language encompasses not just the words and sentences that make up a communication piece, but also considers its overall structure and design. It's a functional definition that marries the techniques of writing in plain language with the outcomes of plain language. It centres on the intended reader.

wrong action

lost opportunities

inaction

negative reputation

Consequence costs

frustration

questions

rewrites

legal risks

health and safety risks

unfulfilled goals

misunderstandings

From Rewrite: How to overcome daily sabotage of your brand and profit by Lynda Harris, Write, 2015

All words have a price

All words come with a price tag (thank you to Simon Hertnon, plain language communicator) – and poorly written communication is both a waste of time for readers and a waste of money for organisations. It is critical to understand the cost of poor communication to your organisation – including the 'consequence costs' that we sometimes don't think about.

Consequence costs can include misunderstandings, frustration for readers, delays to processes due to lack of clarity on expectations and deliverables, and even legal risks.

All words come with a price tag

– Simon Hertnon Plain Language Communicator

How plain language benefits organisations

Plain language has several benefits for businesses and organisations, including trust, customer satisfaction, equity, and efficiency.

Using plain language builds trust with your audience, stakeholders, and employees, as it demonstrates a commitment to transparency and clarity. In turn, this leads to client satisfaction and brand loyalty. Businesses and organisations that use plain language are perceived as more consumer-friendly, accessible, and reliable.

Plain language also demonstrates a commitment to equity, as it allows information to be accessible to everyone, regardless of their literacy level or background. By removing jargon, complex terminology, and unnecessary complexity, business and government organisations can reach a wider audience and empower their readers with the information they need.

Additionally, plain language improves efficiencies through reducing misunderstandings, errors, and confusion, and reduces the risk of needing to rewrite, clarify, or make amendments to communications.
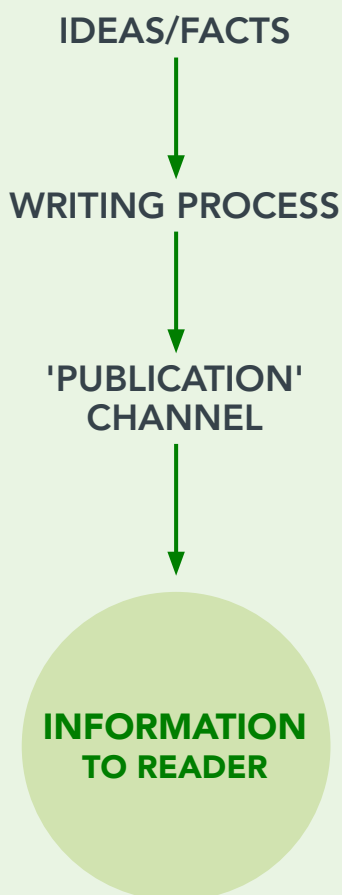
Streamlining the information process

The process of disseminating information from your organisation to your audience can be streamlined to produce communication that is more efficient, cost-effective, and accessible. The clearer your communication is, the more refined it is, and the easier the transfer of information is to your reader.

Achieving clear communication involves a writing process that is relentlessly focused on the reader. When writing, most people are focused on simply getting their ideas across, not on how their writing will be received and understood by others.

Developing an organisational standard that is centred on the reader's experience is key to crafting better communication. This also extends to how your information is published. Consider what would be best for your reader – would your information be communicated best through a webpage, a downloadable PDF, or a physical copy that can be picked up from a location or posted to people directly?

Consider what would be best for your reader

IDEAS/FACTS

↓

WRITING PROCESS

↓

'PUBLICATION' CHANNEL

↓

INFORMATION TO READER

STREAMLINING THE INFORMATION PROCESS

- Good analysis, critical thinking
- Lean, efficient process focused on the reader
- Appropriate channel considered

The Rewrite for Change™ model

The Rewrite for Change™ model is a tool for implementing a plain language standard across your organisation, and it can be adapted to meet your organisation's individual needs.

© Write Limited. Image by Lynda Harris, Write, 2015.

Audits, reviews, and surveys

Foundation, advanced, and refresher training

Measure writing quality against the Standard

Train everyone in the Standard

Set a Standard

Support everyone so they can meet the Standard

Expect everyone to meet the Standard

Champions, resources, and PR programme

Peer review, QA, and performance appraisal

This model is centred on creating a plain language standard for your organisation. Setting a standard with clear expectations for what plain language looks for your organisation moves it from an abstract concept to a concrete one. Having a standard also enables consistency across your organisation and ensures all stakeholders understand what plain language means and what is expected from them.

The model has four main pillars based on implementing a plain language standard: Measure, Train, Expect, and Support. When beginning a plain language journey in your organisation, start with measuring your organisation's current communication against the standard you have created.

Evaluating your baseline helps to see how your organisation is currently performing against the standard and to identify areas for improvement that you can measure in the future. Measurement can also involve surveys and interviews with stakeholders and organisational leaders. It can be a good idea to have an external provider carry out this process to provide an objective lens.

Achieving clear communication involves a writing process that is relentlessly focused on the reader

Training is the next step in implementing your communication standard, to equip your organisation with the knowledge and tools needed to fulfil the goals outlined in the standard. This, in turn, cements the expectations of your plain language standard. Ideally, plain language standards will be baked into your organisational processes, including through the creation of a quality assurance standard, a style guide, and resources for employees.

Support is essential to help everyone ensure they are meeting their expectations under the standard. Having 'champions' in your organisation who are specialists in plain language allows for continued leadership and guidance for employees and that plain language processes are consistently reviewed and upheld.

Using plain language

The following tips for writing in plain language encompass three main considerations:
Big picture elements, Language elements, and Presentation elements.

Big picture elements

- *The purpose of the document is clear right from the beginning*

  Follow the inverted pyramid structure for your writing; order your content from the most important information to the least important. This ensures that your key message is upfront and easy to find.

- *The content supports the purpose of the document*

  The content of your document should be clear, concise, and focused on the purpose of the document. Exclude any superfluous or irrelevant information so that your key message doesn't get lost.

- *The structure of the document is clear and logical to the reader*

  Once again, the inverted pyramid structure provides a clear flow of information that is easy to follow and delivers your key message from the outset. Whatever structural device you use, make sure you are considering the reader's and not the writer's needs.

- *Use headings to signal key content*

  Your headings are also part of the story. Use them to outline what the content of each section will be about. Headings also break up large chunks of information, allowing the reader to easily scan through the document.

Language elements

- *Use short paragraphs focused on one topic*

  Paragraphs should be 3–4 sentences long and stay focused on one topic. This makes information easier to digest and creates a more efficient content flow.

- *Use short and straightforward sentences*

  Break long sentences into short sentences and try to use less than 20 words per sentence.

- *Use words that are precise and familiar*

  Remove or explain technical jargon or complex words that readers may not understand. Avoid idioms, slang, and colloquialisms, especially if you are communicating to audiences for who have English as an additional language or who struggle with written English. Idioms can be confusing for those who are not familiar with them.

The tone supports the purpose of the document

Use straightforward language to get your point across quickly and clearly. See the example below.

Before

These estimates precipitated the need to develop and implement a customer-focused research programme to assess public confidence in the Employment Services (ES) branch of the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) and inform the development of performance measures.

(1 sentence, 39 words).

This sentence is extremely long and difficult to follow. The meaning is lost within the complex words and passive voice, and the purpose of the message is unclear.

After

These estimates showed us that we needed to assess the public's confidence in MBIE's Employment Services branch. So, we are implementing a research programme to survey our customers. We will use their insights about confidence to develop our performance measures.

(3 sentences, made up of 17 words, 11 words, and 12 words respectively).

Through short sentences and precise, familiar words, the meaning of this sentence is immediately clear to the reader.

Presentation elements

The layout and presentation help the reader absorb the message quickly and easily.

Tips for document design include:

- *Contrast:*

  High contrast between text and background makes text easier to see. Black text on a white background is usually best. Additionally, balance between text and white space is important; a 50/50 balance between text and white space is easier to scan through.

- *Font:*

  Use fonts that are easy to read. Be careful with using bold text in your paragraphs as it is distracting; bold text is best reserved for headings. Text written in all capitals is also difficult to read.

- *Iconography:*

  If you are using icons or images in your document, simple designs are best. Repetition is also important; if you are using an icon to represent something, make sure to use that same icon throughout the document.

- *The document is error-free and consistent with your style guide*

  Ensure your document is free from typos and follows the guidelines as outlined in your style guide.

Write has various free resources on plain language, which are available on the Write website under resources

Click here to find Write resources
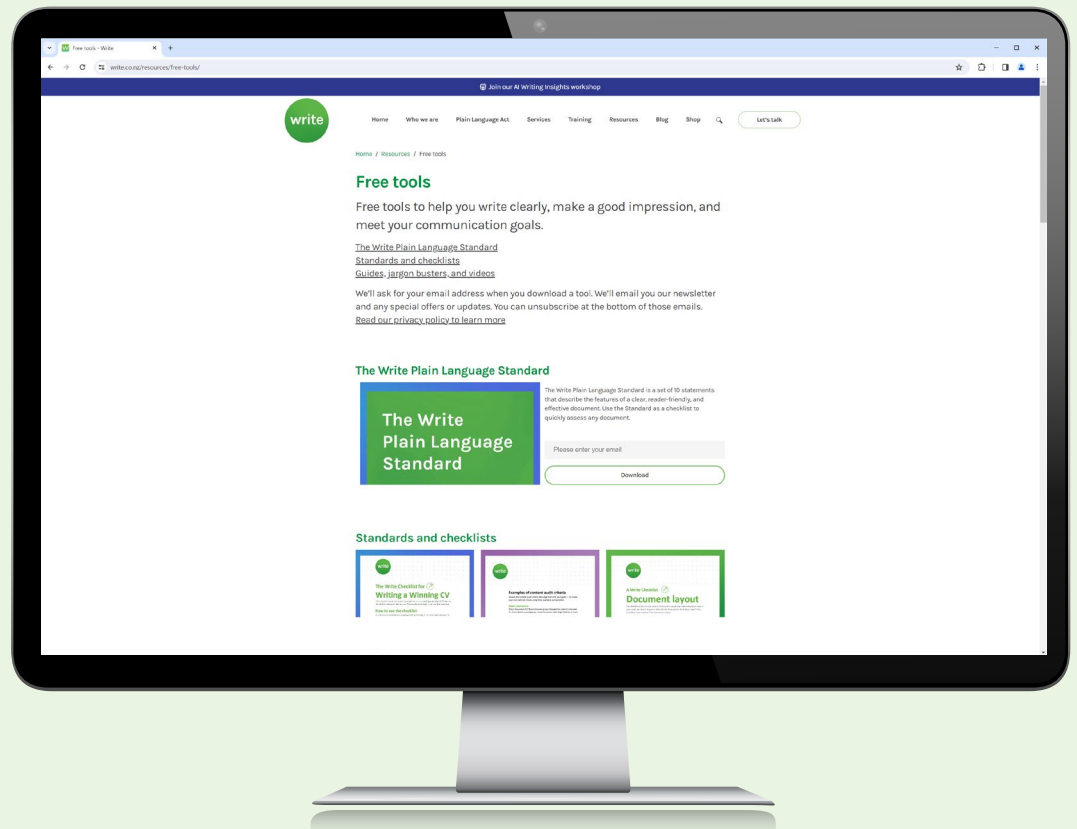
Additional resources

- Free tools from Write Limited:
https://write.co.nz/resources/free-tools/

- Blog post: Five ways to make plain language work for your organisation, Megan Bennett, Write, 2023.
https://write.co.nz/five-ways-to-make-plain-language-work-for-your-organisation/

- Blog post: Just do it! Change minds to change cultures, Jayne Dalmer, Write, 2021.
https://write.co.nz/just-do-it-change-minds-to-change-culture/