

Measuring Up: Guidelines for Using Plain Language



... How do you Measure Up?

Plain Language writing ensures information is understandable to as many people as possible. Using Plain Language can be an important step in making sure that everyone in your community knows about available services and is able to participate.

Here are some tips to consider when writing in Plain Language:

- Think about who will be using what you are writing. Will it be persons with English as a second language, older persons or persons with different levels of reading ability?
- Start with your most important information first and highlight it by using a **bold** font, a **larger** font, an *italic* font, underlining, using **colour**, or by leaving extra space around it.
- When you are writing about information that will be new to your reader, include all the background information needed for them to understand what you are trying to say.
- Use words that are easy to understand to explain ideas. Here are some examples of words that are easy to understand which can be used instead of similar words which are more difficult to understand:

| Difficult to Understand | Easy to Understand |
|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Accomplish | Do |
| Endeavour | Try |
| Locality | Place |
| Utilize | Use |

- Don't use two or more words to describe the same thing.
- When writing, address your reader personally. Use words such as "you", "I", "we", "us" and "our."

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- Use pictures, if possible, to help explain what you are trying to say.
- Leave a space between your bullet points and paragraphs.
- Limit your paragraphs to one idea unless you are linking old and new information together. The ideal length for a paragraph is four to five sentences.
- Keep sentences limited to one idea. Start a new sentence if you need to add new information or if you have more to say.
- Your sentences should be kept short. The ideal length is between 15 and 25 words.
- If you choose to use charts to explain information, make sure that the information shown is clear. Sometimes charts can be difficult to understand.
- Avoid using “jargon”. If you must use a “jargon” word, then explain this word on the same page where it appears. A “jargon” word is a word that is related to certain subjects, jobs or groups. Here is an example:

Difficult to Understand
“Please flip me the information”

Easy to Understand
“Please email me the information”

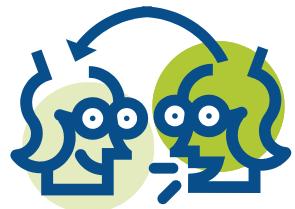
- Avoid using acronyms, or the short forms of words, as these can be difficult to understand if you have not seen or heard them before. If you must use an acronym, spell it out and put the acronym in brackets.

For example:
“The Accessibility and Inclusion Advisory Committee (AIAC) met on Thursday.”

- If you are writing about research, it may be important to explain the steps of your research and what your goals were. When doing this, explain “jargon” words and give clear examples.

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- Think about whether it would be helpful to have what you write available in more than one language, or if it should be available in other formats such as Braille, large print or audio.
- Choose a solid and plain font. The font should be easy to read and be at least 12-point font in size.
- Print your document with dark ink (blue or black) on light coloured paper (cream or white).
- When you have finished writing, try getting feedback from readers who you think will be using what you write. Ask them if it makes sense and if they enjoyed reading it, and make any changes they suggest.



These guidelines were developed based on:

Plain Language Clear and Simple.
Human Resources and Social Development Canada, 2003.