
How to use plain language to win allies and honor people

Clarice Amorim Freitas and Kaitlyn Lyle



Overview

- Welcome and Introductions (15 minutes)
- Background (20 minutes)
- Group exercise (20 minutes)
- Group discussion & Takeaways (15 minutes)

Objectives

- 1** Understand how plain language makes it easier for everyone to participate authentically throughout the policy change process.
- 2** Understand the importance of using plain language to communicate messages to everyone.
- 3** Practice using plain language to discuss program priorities with everyone.
- 4** Have **fun!**



Introductions

- Share your first name
- Describe your job or role in 1-2 sentences but do **not** include your job title in your explanation

An example

Request: Additional Waste Capacity

With reference to your request for additional waste capacity, The Environmental Protection Act 1990 authorizes Fife Council in making requirements with regard to receptacles for household waste and allows making provision with respect to size construction and maintenance of the receptacles. The criteria for granting applications for a 2nd or larger bins was approved by the Council to ensure maximum recycling over landfill

To qualify for additional waste capacity Fife Council does require proof of evidence that information given against the criteria is correct. Under the Data Protection Act, we do not keep copies or record of any of your personal details but failure to provide evidence may result in your application being refused.

Please complete and return the attached request form within 21 days. On receipt of the form, we may follow up with a visit to verify the information given before we are able to advise you whether your request will be granted.

Written in plain language

Thank you for your letter asking for an extra garbage can.

I enclosed a form for you to complete with your personal information and the reasons why you need the extra can. Please return the completed form within 21 days. Someone from Fife Council may visit you to check that the information on the form is correct.

We will let you know if we can give you the extra garbage can as soon as possible.

What is
plain language?



Definition: plain language

It is a message written or spoken with the reader in mind and with the right tone of voice, that is clear and concise.

Plain language includes:

- Mostly common, everyday words – limit technical terms only to those that are absolutely necessary
- Personal pronouns (“we” and “you”)
- Active voice/verbs
- Logical organization
- If written, an easy-to-read format, including bullets, tables, and use of whitespace.

Advantages of plain language

Advantages of plain language

1. Faster to write
2. Faster to read
3. Faster to speak
4. Faster to understand
5. Get your message across more often, more easily and in a friendlier way

**Why is plain language
important?**

Why does plain language matter?

- Only **1 out of 3** Oregonians over the age of 25 have a bachelors or advanced degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017)
- Only **about half** of Oregon elementary and middle school students score as “proficient in reading and writing” (Oregon Department of Education, 2018); rates are as low as **1 in 3** for Black, Native American, and Latino students.

Why does plain language matter?

- Plain language writing saves time (and money):
 - It is easier for everyone to understand
 - Readers have less questions, need less explanations
 - Folks make fewer mistakes filling out forms and following instructions
- Plain makes life easier for the public and for public health professionals; more people are able to understand and share your message.

5 steps for plain language

Step 1. Identify and describe who you are communicating with

Define who will use the document, and how they will use it.

- List and prioritize top tasks by audience group.
- List what people need to know to complete the task.
- List characteristics of the audience that should influence design (for example, age, computer experience, etc...).

Defining your audience helps you know who you are and who you are not communicating to, what you want them to do, what they already know, and what they need to learn.

Step 2. Structure the message to guide the reader through it

- A well organized message flows in a an easy and logical way.
- Break content into short sections that reflect natural stopping points.
- Write headings to tell readers what is coming up.

The structure works well when readers can quickly and confidently find the information they are looking for.

Step 3: Write the content in plain language.

Keep it short and to the point.

- Write short, logical sentences.
- Present important information first in each section.
- Include the details that help the reader complete the task.
- Leave out details that don't help or may distract readers, even if they are interesting.
- Use transitions to connect ideas, sentences, paragraphs, or sections.

Step 3: Write the content in plain language.

Set a helpful tone.

- Use a conversational, rather than legal, bureaucratic, or academic tone.

Pick the right words.

- Use strong verbs in the active voice.
- Use words the audience knows.
- Make titles or list elements parallel (for example, start each with a verb in the same tense).

The language works when readers understand the words and grasp the intended message quickly and confidently.

Step 3: Example

Before:

Delaying your registration for the conference will result in higher fees.

After:

You will save money by signing up for the conference early.

Step 3. Example

Before:

If you have hypertension, reduce your salt intake.

After:

If you have high blood pressure, eat less salt.

Step 4: Use information design to help readers understand your message.

- Use headers and whitespace to organize information.
- Use typography (font size, color) to guide the reader's attention.
- Use bullet points or numbers to list items.
- Use images to make content easier to understand.

It's best to use bold and italics *sparingly* for heading, emphasis or to call out something, such as a **date** or **number**.

Step 4: Example

Before:

The due date is March 26, 2017 for submitting your renewal form.

After:

Please send us your renewal form before **March 26, 2017**.

Step 5: Work with your audience to test the design and content.

Test the message design and content at multiple points.

- Were audience needs prioritized based on user research?
- Did you test the content for readability and understandability?

Use evidence-based testing strategies.

- Were the participants representative of the audience you are trying to communicate with?

Step 5: Work with your audience to test the design and content.

Check that the final product is useful and usable.

- Ask readers to describe who the document is communicating to and what the document is intended to do.
- Have readers show you how they would find the information they want or need using your document.

The document works when its intended audience can find what they need, understand what they find, and act on it confidently.

Group Exercise

Instructions

Read the scenario and role play with your partner.
Remember to use plain language.

Role play – 3 minutes

Debrief – 2 minutes

Take turns role playing and debriefing.

Group Discussion

Takeaways

- 1** Plain language is faster to write, read, and speak.
- 2** Plain language gets your message across more often, more easily, and in a friendlier way.
- 3** Plain language takes practice.
- 4** Plain language benefits everyone.

Contact Information

Kaitlyn Lyle

Kaitlyn.e.lyle@state.or.us

Clarice Amorim Freitas

Clarice.Amorim.Freitas@devnw.org