Plain Language and Editorial Resources

What is Plain Language?

Plain language is a requirement for Canadian government communications.

An institution's duty to inform the public includes the obligation to communicate effectively. Information about policies, programs, services and initiatives must be clear, relevant, objective, easy to understand and useful.

To ensure clarity and consistency of information, plain language and proper grammar must be used in all communication with the public. This principle also applies to internal communications, as well as to information prepared for Parliament or any other official body, whether delivered in writing or in speech.

Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat,
Communications Policy of the Government of Canada,
http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id=12316.

A general definition:

Plain language is clear language. It is simple and direct but not simplistic or patronizing. Using plain language doesn't mean everyone's writing must sound the same. There is no one "right" way to express an idea. Every thought can be expressed in many different ways and the variety comes from the individual way we approach an idea or writing task. There's plenty of room for your own style—but it will only blossom once you have overcome the poor writing habits that are typical of most government writing.

Nick Wright, from the EPA writing course
http://www.plainlanguage.gov/whatisPL/definitions/wright.cfm
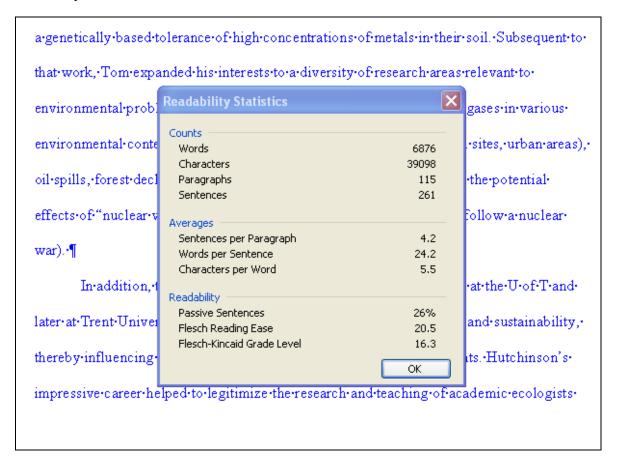
Document Checklist for Plain Language

- [ ] written for the average reader
- [ ] organized to serve the reader's needs
- [ ] has useful headings
- [ ] uses "you" and other pronouns to speak to the reader
- [ ] uses active voice
- [ ] uses short sections and sentences [no more than 20 words per sentence, about 150 words per paragraph in 3 to 8 sentences]
- [ ] uses the simplest tense possible—simple present is best

☐ uses base verbs, not nominalizations (hidden verbs) [i.e., don't turn verbs into nouns]
☐ omits excess words
☐ uses concrete, familiar words [avoid jargon]
☐ uses "must" to express requirements; avoids the ambiguous word "shall"
☐ places words carefully (avoids large gaps between the subject, the verb and the object; puts exceptions last; places modifiers correctly)
☐ uses lists and tables to simplify complex material
☐ uses no more than two or three subordinate levels

<div align="right">Plain Language and Information Network (PLAIN) website,
http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/quickreference/checklist.cfm</div>

Tools for Writers

1. **Use word counts, averages, and readability statistics in your word-processing program:** If you select the grammar check option in your spellcheck program, you'll generate the following report each time you run the spelling and grammar option from your Tools menu:

This spellcheck report tells you:

- the number of words, paragraphs, and sentences in your document
- the average sentences per paragraph (4.2 meets the plain-language goal of 3 to 8 sentences per paragraph)
- the number of words per sentence (at 24.2, this is slightly higher than the plain-language goal of about 20 words per sentence)
- percentage of passive sentences (at 26%, this seems fairly high)
- Flesch Reading Ease (20.5 indicates a text that is at US college graduate level)

EXPLANATION: The Flesch Reading Ease Score rates the text on a 100-point scale. The higher the score, the easier it is to understand the text.

The formula for the Flesch Reading Ease score is:
$$206.835 - (1.015 \times ASL) - (84.6 \times ASW)$$
where:
ASL = average sentence length (the number of words divided by the number of sentences)
ASW = average number of syllables per word (the number of syllables divided by the number of words)

Sample Flesch Reading Ease scores:
100.......easy to read
65.........Reader's Digest
60–70....US Grades 8-9
60.........plain English
50–60....US Grades 10-12
52.........Time Magazine
40–50.....Score required for insurance documents by most US states
32.........Harvard Law Review
30–0......US college graduate level
0 =........practically unreadable

- Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Score (16.3 indicates a document where the grade level is about 4th year college or university—Grade 12 plus 4 years)

EXPLANATION: The Flesch-Kincaide Grade Level Score rates the text on a U.S. grade-school level. For example, a score of 8.0 means that an eighth grader can understand the text.

The formula for the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score is:
$$(.39 \times ASL) + (11.8 \times ASW) - 15.59$$
where:
ASL = average sentence length (the number of words divided by the number of sentences)
ASW = average number of syllables per word (the number of syllables divided by the number of words)

Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham* has a grade level of –1.3 (5.7 words per sentence and 1.02 syllables per word).

Material for a general audience should score about 12.

2. **Create a Style Sheet.** A Style Sheet is a list of preferred spellings, rules for treatment of numbers, measurement, and punctuation, and any notes that will help you ensure consistency in your document.

Sample Style Sheet	
serial comma ("apples, oranges, and pears" not "apples, oranges and pears")	catalogue
	cellphone
9 a.m. to 5 p.m.	centre
5 to 10 percent (not per cent)	calibre
24-hour (adj)	colour
35mm	cooperative, cooperate
people aged 50 to 60	counsellor
twentieth century; nineteenth century, etc.	décor
song titles – roman, quote marks	defence
books, journals – italic, no quote marks	e-mail
	entrée
baby boomer	favour
behaviour	David Foot (not Foote)
business people (not businesspeople)	IKEA

3. **Hire an editor.** Résumés of freelance editors across Canada are available at the Editors' Association of Canada website, http://www.editors.ca/. You can search for editors by specifying subject-area expertise, the kind of edit you are interested in (substantive, stylistic, copyedit, etc.), and your region. Sample contracts are provided.

Useful references

Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, *Communications Policy of the Government of Canada*, http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id=12316.
    The annex explaining plain language is not yet available.

Plain Language and Information Network (PLAIN) website, *Improving Communication from the Federal Government to the Public*, http://www.plainlanguage.gov/.
    This is a US government website with many resources about plain language, including free training slides at http://www.plainlanguage.gov/resources/for_trainers/index.cfm.

Gunning Fog Index calculator, http://simbon.madpage.com/Fog/fog.cgi.
    You can paste text into this calculator, which will tell you how many years of formal education are required to understand your document.

Chicago Manual of Style Online, *Chicago Style Q&A,*
http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/CMS_FAQ/new/new_questions01.html.
> The Chicago Manual of Style is an editor's Bible, but a very expensive investment. However, each month the Q&A website page presents queries submitted by writers and editors. (You can even get a monthly preview of questions via email.) The answers are written with a winning combination of useful advice and dry humour.

Carol Fisher Saller, *The Subversive Copy Editor: Advice from Chicago (Or, How to Negotiate Good Relationships with Your Writers, Your Colleagues, and Yourself).* **(Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).**
> Writers should read Chapter 5, "Dear Writer: A Chapter of Your Own" to better understand the writer/editor relationship.

Susan Bell, *The Artful Edit: On the Practice of Editing Yourself.* **(New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).**
> Great advice on macro- and micro-editing techniques: when to edit, to print or not to print, etc.

Editors Association of Canada, *Editing Canadian English*, **2nd Edition (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2000.)**
> An indispensable reference for understanding the differences between Canadian, US, and British conventions in spelling and punctuation. Canadian copyright law, citation guidelines, and abbreviations are also discussed.

The following books are classic references for writers and editors:

William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*, **4th Edition. (New York: Longman, 1999).**

Margaret Shertzer, *The Elements of Grammar* **(New York: Longman, 1996).**

Arthur Plotnik, *The Elements of Editing: A Modern Guide for Editors and Journalists.* **(New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1982).**

William Zinsser, *On Writing Well: An Information Guide to Writing Nonfiction. 25th Anniversary Edition.* **(New York: Collins, 2001).**

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November 24, 2009

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