

Health and Safety Programs

Hazard Communication - Using Plain (Clear) Language

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What is plain language?

Simply put, plain language is a style of writing that puts the intended reader first. Plain language allows the reader to locate, understand, and act on the information presented. Plain language looks at the whole message from the reader's perspective, including wording, structure, and design elements.

Plain language is also known as clear language. Using plain language can help workplaces communicate their safe work procedures or policies more effectively. It can help make sure that directions are followed, and provide information in a manner that is easily understood.

Documents written in plain language should be clear, concise, well organized, and easily convey the message to the reader.

Plain language is:

- direct
- effective
- thoughtful
- well organized

- active

Plain language is not:

- oversimplifying
 - dumbing down
 - dull
 - unsophisticated
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Why use plain language?

Everyone has the right to the knowledge that helps them perform their work in a safe manner or helps them remain healthy. It is important that people understand what they are reading, whether they are reading a safety document at work, or filling out a medical form for their doctor.

When readers do not understand the information, they are not making informed decisions. This gap creates communication barriers and contributes to frustration, errors, and misunderstandings. Adopting plain language principles allows information to be easily understood, acted on, and inclusive of all literacy levels.

Who benefits from using plain language?

Plain language benefits everyone, including:

- people who may not read well
- people who do not see well
- people who do not speak that language as their first language
- people who may not have time to read a lengthy document (e.g., people who are working on an active job site)
- people with disabilities

Several communication barriers affect people's ability to understand. Writing plainly helps remove these barriers. When plain language is used, writing becomes more accessible to everyone. Readers are more likely to understand and comply with the information presented and act on the information with fewer mistakes.

How does plain language apply to health and safety?

Workplaces should communicate information using plain language principles, especially when it affects workers' health and safety.

There may be a communication problem in your workplace if:

- there are high injury rates
- there is low hazard reporting
- safety procedures are not being followed

Workplaces should incorporate and encourage the use of plain language by:

- making sure that all health and safety information is written in plain language
- applying plain language guidelines for all documents
- providing plain language training

Types of documents include, but are not limited to:

- policies, programs, and procedures
- health and safety manuals
- work plans
- departmental policies
- memorandums
- health documents
- any document that contains public knowledge

How are plain language principles applied?

Before writing, ask yourself the following questions:

- Who am I writing for?
- What is the main message?
- What do you want the reader to do or understand after reading the document?

Once you have determined your audience and purpose for writing, begin to form a blueprint. Some authors find it helps to write out all of the ideas, then review and choose the ones most relevant to their message and purpose.

Applying the inverted triangle method, as outlined in the [US Immigration Department's](#) online video, can be a helpful tool when creating a plain language blueprint.

When you are ready to write:

- present the most important information first
- be concise
- describe one item or concept at a time
- present the information logically (e.g., list the steps or actions that must be taken in the correct order)
- break up long sentences and paragraphs
- divide information into steps or lists of instructions.

Use

- short, familiar words
- active voice – such as subject-verb-object order (e.g., John hit the ball.)
- examples to explain complex concepts
- positive language
- conversational tone
- personalize the message by using I, you, and we.
- repeat what you want the readers to do

Limit

- passive voice (e.g., The ball was hit by John.)
- jargon
- unneeded or unnecessary words
- legal or bureaucratic tones
- complex or abstract words
- details that will distract the reader from the main goal of the document

What is information design and how does it apply to plain language writing?

Information design uses specific methods to organize information clearly. Plain language is not only about the words used in a document, but it also includes the design and layout of the document.

Information design includes but is not limited to:

- Font: Size and Style
 - Use readable typefaces and sizes. A12-point font is reader-friendly for most people. Use a larger font for seniors or people with visual impairments.
 - Use serif fonts for information with lots of text. Serif fonts have “feet” or “tails” at the bottom of each letter, which may help visually guide a reader across the page (e.g., Times New Roman)
 - Use sans serif fonts for short headings and titles. Sans serif fonts help emphasize important titles and provide a visual contrast to the reader (e.g., Calibri)
- Bullet points
 - Bullet points help organize information clearly for the reader
- Headings and subheadings
 - Headings and subheadings help act as an organizational tool, showing the information in a logical order
 - Can highlight the information that is available in each section
- Open space
 - Space between paragraphs, headings, and subheadings helps a reader draw attention to how information is organized on the page
 - Leave approximately 50% of the total page area as “white space” or “open”
- Simple graphics
 - Using simple graphics helps a reader understand information without relying only on reading words
 - Important information can be emphasized by strategically using bold font, boxes, illustrations, images, tables, graphics, and colours

[Source: *TERMIUM Plus*® Writing Tips Plus, 2022]

Avoid

- Fonts that are too small
- Using italics, underlining, and shading as they are hard to read
- Using all capitalized words (Readers associate words with shapes. All capitalization obstructs the word shape.)
- Using too many graphics, colours, and images that distract the reader away from the document’s message

Remember, information design should make it easier for your reader to locate, understand, and act. It is not meant to make the document look more attractive.

How do I know if my document is written plainly?

Testing your document is an important step to ensure it meets the plain language criteria. Can the reader locate, understand, and act easily using the information presented?

Peer Review

Ask people who are part of the target audience to read through the document. Ask the readers to provide the following feedback:

- Were they able to locate, understand, and act on the information presented?
- How many times did they read through the document before understanding its message?
- Do they have any unanswered questions after reading the information?

Readability tests

There are many grammar and readability tools available, such as the SMOG readability formula (SMOG: Simple Measure of Gobbledygook) or the Flesch-Kincaid grade level index which is available with some word processing software packages (i.e., Microsoft Word).

Be mindful when using a readability test. Readability tools are based on algorithms that measure items such as word length, long sentences, passive voice, and acronyms. While helpful, readability tools cannot determine if the audience will find the content easy to understand and use.

Where can I find more information about plain language?

For more information on writing in plain language, please see the following resources*.

- CCOHS's "[Spell It Out](#)"
- Canada.ca's [Content Style Guide](#)
- World Health Organization [Use plain language](#)

(*We have mentioned these organizations as a means of providing a potentially useful referral. You should contact the organization(s) directly for more information about their services. Please note that mention of these organizations does not represent a recommendation or endorsement by CCOHS of these organizations over others of which you may be aware.)

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