

# PLAIN LANGUAGE

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### INTRODUCTION

Think back to a time when you received unclear directions. Maybe you took a wrong turn, ended up in a dead end or got lost completely. Frustrating, right?

In the public sector, we are charged with providing clear information, updates and directions to our constituents – they make up our roadmaps for navigating our programs and services. And when our citizens get muddled information or poor directions due to unclear language, everybody suffers.

That's where Plain Language comes in. It's an important tool in this effort to give constituents good information, and has shown substantial results in saving customers time, resources and most of all: headaches that result from confusion.

The process for implementing Plain Language in creating content is more than merely "dumbing it down." By putting yourself in your audience's position and being thoughtful

about the words you chose to communicate, you'll see an increase in value of your content to your readers who will be able to understand your messages the first time without confusion.

When we assume that our reader's time is valuable (and limited), we can make simple changes that can have a great impact. In some instances, words can even be replaced altogether with a meaningful picture.

In Granicus's brand-new Plain Language Playbook, we'll explore ways to apply Plain Language principles to public sector content that can reduce confusion and significantly improve the customer experience.

Washington's Department of Revenue is a prime example of how initiating Plain Language can help drive success in the public sector. In 2003, the agency launched a plain language initiative and rewrote 250 customer letters into plain language in one year. These changes yielded an additional \$5 million in taxes for the state the following year due to clearer directions and more easily-understood forms for taxpayers to submit to the department, according to PlainLanguage.gov.

### THE PROCESS FOR IMPLEMENTING PLAIN LANGUAGE IS SIMPLE:



#### PART 1: PLAN



#### PART 2: ORGANIZE



#### PART 3: WRITE



#### PART 4: REVIEW



#### PART 5: REPEAT

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### PART 1: PLAN

While planning may be the most important step in the Plain Language process, it is arguably the one we skip over the most. Rarely do we stop to ask ourselves the following question before creating something for our readers: Why am I writing this?

Understanding the purpose or mission of a piece of content is critical. Why are you creating it and what are your measurable goals?

Once you've identified the purpose of your content, use this flowchart to help you move on to the next phase.

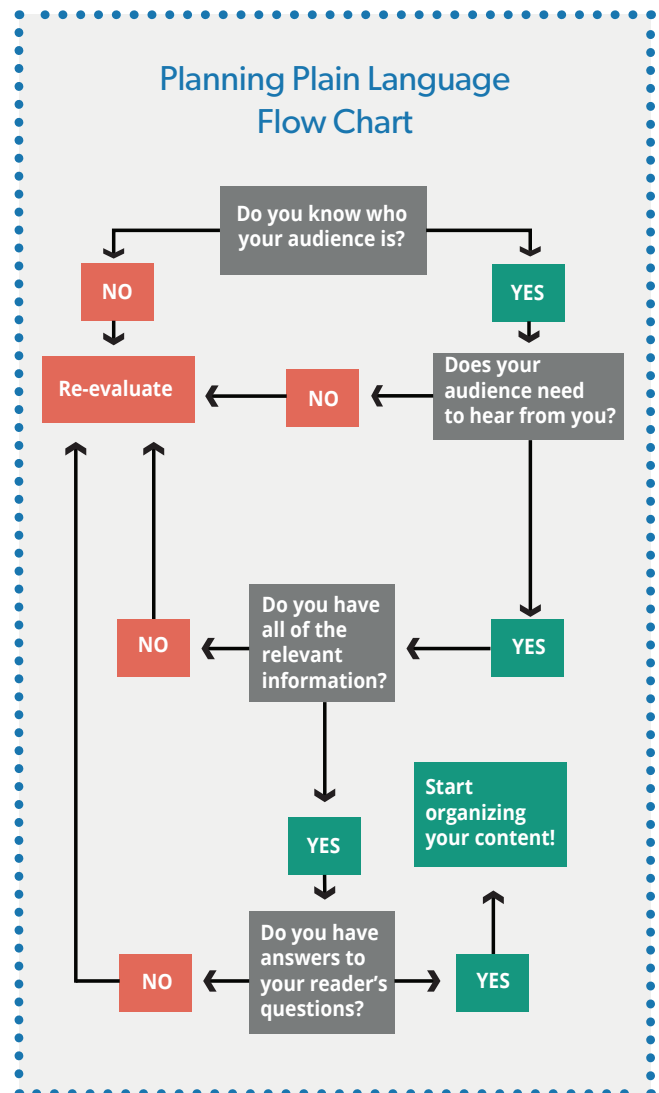
Knowing your audience is crucial to creating meaningful, valuable content. By putting yourself in your reader's shoes, you'll be able to determine what supporting details are necessary for them to know and what you might be able to leave out.

Having an understanding of who your readers are will also influence tone and structure of a document, and can help you better appeal to how they need to hear what you have to say.

One of the best ways to save your readers time is by preemptively answering questions they might have, like:

- Where can they go to get more information?
- Who can they call if they have questions?
- What are next steps, if any?
- Can they expect to hear from you again on this topic?

Planning a piece of content in the Plain Language process is more about asking yourself key questions that will help you later as you identify what information is relevant and how it should be organized. We'll get into that next!





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### PART 2: ORGANIZE

In the planning phase, the writer should mostly be thinking about the reader: determining their possible questions or challenges and beginning to develop a plan for how to address them in a content piece. The goal of the organizing phase is to draft an outline, and it starts with identifying the information you need, arranging it in a logical order and then filling in the gaps.

#### CHOOSE WHAT'S NECESSARY

It might help to first identify your key message: What is your main point? From there, only choose the content that supports that point. Consider what your reader absolutely needs to know. If it is necessary, keep it! If not, ditch it. You'll be surprised how much information you thought you needed that will be eliminated by putting yourself in your reader's shoes.

Here is an example from [PlainLanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov) of a recommendation from a Department of Health and Human Services:

**BEFORE:** The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends a half hour or more of moderate physical activity on most days, preferably every day. The activity can include brisk walking, calisthenics, home care, gardening, moderate sports exercise, and dancing.

**AFTER:** Do at least 30 minutes of exercise, like brisk walking, most days of the week.

This example highlights how information that might seem relevant can be cut out of the final draft and still convey the same key message. The writer asked the following questions:

Do my readers need multiple examples of moderate physical activity to get my message across, or would brisk walking be enough?

If you're drafting an email message, consider that according to a recent Boomerang study, "Emails between 50 and 125 words have the best response rates at just above 50 percent."

Short and direct emails resonated best with prospects and earned a response."

#### ARRANGE IN A LOGICAL ORDER

With all content we create, it is important to bring your key message to the very top: captivate your reader right away and let them know why they should continue reading. Then, list out the related groups of information to determine the best and most logical order.

Consider your conclusion: Is it a call to action ("send this form to the address listed below")? Or a statement of what your reader should expect ("we will be contacting you in the next 10 business days")? Or, is it an open ending with a contact if necessary ("contact our main office with any questions")?

#### FILL IN THE GAPS

Once you've completed your outline, there might be holes in the information you have before you can start writing. Determine where you can find this information and identify a reasonable deadline.

Now you have a great starting point: a draft outline. It is important to remember that your outline can change, and that creating a second, third or even fourth draft is okay - even encouraged! The more we refine our drafts, the better our end result will be.

From here, you're set up to begin writing your first draft with the Plain Language process.

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### PART 3: WRITE

Before drafting a piece of content, you must have a solid understanding of your readers, have all of the necessary information including the key message, and be able to proactively answer your readers' questions. While Plain Language is considered a writing process, there are a number of writing tips that can help your reader understand what you are trying to say the first time.

#### USE PERSONAL PRONOUNS

Help readers see themselves in the text. Use words like "I, me, we, our, ours, you and yours."

#### USE ACTIVE VOICE

By using active voice, the attention is on the doer of an action rather than the receiver of the action. Example: "Bob mailed the letter" (active) vs. "The letter was mailed by Bob" (passive).

#### USE SHORT SENTENCES

Strive for 10-20 words per sentence, and keep each sentence to one thought or two tightly connected thoughts. Keep in mind that paragraphs can be one sentence.

#### USE YOUR READER'S WORDS

While long, legal words may be commonly used in statutes or formal documents, they tend to distract from a point instead of supporting it.

#### USE AN OUTLINE

With all of these writing tips in mind, it's time to draft your content. Use your outline to draft your information in the most logical order:

- Subject Line
- Key Message (even if it's bad news)
- Provide Context, in logical order: What does the reader need to do?

- Provide an Overview (especially if your content piece is long)
- End: Where can your reader go for more information?

Here is an example of what writing in plain language looks like

Dear addressee:

**SUBJECT LINE**

We wrote you on [date], for information to help us with your claim [benefits]. We've closed your file for now because we haven't received the information.

What We Needed

**KEY MESSAGE**

We asked you to send us:

- A certified copy of your marriage license [example only]
- A certified copy of Ronnie's birth certificate [example only]
- Mary's and Ronnie's Social Security numbers [example only]

Time Limit

**SPECIFICS**

We've closed your file for now, but you still have time to send in the information we need. We may be able to [paybenefits/raise your benefits] back to [date], if we receive this information by [date].

If You Think We're Wrong

**OVERVIEW**

If you think we shouldn't have turned down your claim, you should write and tell us. We've attached a form which explains your rights.

If you have any questions, you may call us toll-free by dialing 1-800-827-1000. Our TDD number for the hearing impaired is 1-800-829-4833. If you call, please have this letter with you.

Sincerely,

Enclosures:  
VAF 1-4107

**CONTACT INFO**

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### PART 4: REVIEW

Once you've put your content in the best possible order, have answered your readers' questions and have remembered to write in short, precise sentences, you're ready to edit and review your content to ensure it's clear and easily understood.

### LET THE REVIEW PROCESS WORK FOR YOU

When drafting an important piece of content for your audience, the review process is important for ensuring you have all the right messages. It is not uncommon to overthink or overanalyze information, so it could be helpful to take a break and step away from what you're writing for some period of time. Reviewing something you wrote with fresh eyes can help you spot things you missed, or items you may be able to remove.

Another option is to let a colleague or friend review your piece and provide feedback. If your organization has a communications office that is available for review purposes, utilize them!

When you're ready, test your content - have a representative reader test your readability and identify the main purpose of your communications piece.

### CONSIDER DESIGN ELEMENTS

In addition to using Plain Language in text, document design principles and the use of graphics can help communicate a message more clearly. When enhanced with straight formatting, viable white space, and the right balance of colors and images, a message can be more easily readable to your audience.

The example to the right shows how the U.S. Department of Agriculture used a balance of white space, graphics and plain text to their communication updates.

Tip: Remember that formatting can be an important aspect of whether a reader is able to follow along. Use bullets and clean formatting with straight alignment to help break up large pieces of content.

**USDA**  
United States Department of Agriculture

### USDA INVESTS IN OHIO

At the U.S. Department of Agriculture, we work with thousands of farmers, ranchers and rural communities every day and we know that there is no limit to the economic potential of rural America. Over the past seven years, USDA has invested more than \$36.8 billion (fiscal year 2009-2015) in Ohio. In 2016, we will continue to build on that investment to support the farmers, ranchers and growers who are driving the rural economy forward, carry out record conservation efforts, facilitate groundbreaking research, promote new markets for rural products, and provide a safe, affordable and nutritious food supply for Ohio families.

#### INVESTMENT HIGHLIGHTS FY09-15

- ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**  
USDA invested nearly \$4.2 billion to support affordable housing, create jobs and promote economic opportunity for those who live, work and raise their families in rural Ohio.
- FARMING AND RANCHING**  
Farmers and ranchers are the backbone of America's vibrant agricultural economy. USDA has helped support the ongoing success of Ohio farmers and ranchers by investing more than \$5 billion in programs that provide access to credit, support a strong farm safety net, and promote new markets for farm and ranch products.
- CONSERVATION**  
Conservation helps farmers and ranchers keep land in production while improving the condition of natural resources. USDA invested nearly \$250 million in efforts to conserve and protect Ohio's land, water and air resources.
- INFRASTRUCTURE**  
Robust infrastructure development, including electricity, broadband and telecommunications, water and wastewater, and construction of community facilities like fire stations and libraries, is the foundation for rural America's viability. In Ohio, USDA has invested more than \$952 million in infrastructure development.
- RESEARCH**  
From adapting to the effects of climate change to ensuring global food security, the challenges facing American agriculture are immense. USDA has invested more than \$275.5 million in Ohio to support research that will secure and improve our food, agricultural and natural resources systems.
- TRADE**  
In 2014, exports of farm and ranch products contributed nearly \$4.45 billion to the Ohio economy. USDA continues to pursue strong new trade deals that will expand exports and help Ohio's farm and ranch businesses grow and create jobs.

#### ABOUT RURAL OHIO

USDA works each day to strengthen Ohio agriculture. Rural Ohio is home to 75,462 farms across nearly 14 million acres. Ohio's top agricultural products include soybeans, corn, dairy products, hogs and cattle. All told, sales of farm and ranch products contributed \$10 billion to Ohio's economy in 2012.

Ohio agriculture contributes to a sector that nationwide supports one in 11 jobs, provides American consumers with more than 80 percent of the food we consume, ensures that Americans spend less of their paychecks at the grocery store than most people in other countries, and supports markets for homegrown renewable energy and materials.

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### PART 5: REPEAT

With over 3,000 government organizations utilizing Granicus to send billions of communications pieces per year, we know that Plain Language can contribute to metrics like open rates, engagement rates and click rates. We hope you found it helpful as you develop your communications.

### A FEW IMPORTANT THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND AS YOU USE PLAIN LANGUAGE IN YOUR COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES

1

#### **Plain Language is not “dumbing down”**

While it may seem anti-intellectual, Plain Language has to do with clear and effective communication - not dumbing things down. As Plain Language expert Bryan Garner explains: “Plain words are eternally fresh and fit...capable of great power and dignity.”

2

#### **Plain Language isn’t always enough**

To ensure that content is helpful for users, communicators must know how to reach their audiences. Writing in Plain Language is a critical step for achieving this goal, but there can be additional barriers like communications platform or timing that can impact your readers’ ability to receive your message.

3

#### **Put Plain Language to the test**

The best way to find out if Plain Language works for your audiences is to test documents with usability testing. Try A/B testing different headlines based on Plain Language principles and see what works better.

Good luck on your Plain Language journey! Remember, Plain Language is a powerful tool that the public sector can use to reduce confusion, significantly improve customer service, and save valuable time and resources.



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### PRINT THE ESSENTIAL CHECKLIST

To help you in your Plain Language journey, check out our Essential Checklist for Plain Language in the Public Sector that is easily printable and shareable. Keep it by your desk and refer back to it whenever you need.

#### **PART 1: PLAN**

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- ☐ Ask yourself: Why am I writing this? Explain your purpose, and be specific on the mission of your content.
- ☐ Understand your readers: To whom is your content speaking?
- ☐ Put yourself in their shoes: What challenges or opportunities are they facing?
- ☐ Determine what your readers want to hear: Try to preemptively answer your readers' questions.

#### **PART 2: ORGANIZE**

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- ☐ Gather the relevant information you'll need.
- ☐ Identify key messages, but only keep what is absolutely necessary.

#### **PART 3: WRITE**

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- ☐ Develop a subject line that grabs the reader's attention and is a short summary of your content.
- ☐ Arrange information in a logical order and determine the proper sequence.

#### **PART 4: REVIEW**

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- ☐ Have a friend or colleague read your piece and ask for feedback.
- ☐ Think back to your conversation questions: Have you answered your readers' questions?

#### **PART 5: REPEAT**

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- ☐ Once this process becomes second nature for creating content, you will notice positive results in the form of less confusion, saved time and improved customer service.





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