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Plain Language
Playbook

Introduction

Getting unclear directions can lead to taking a wrong turn, and resulting in a dead end. Frustrating, right? Here's why plain language is important.

Providing clear information is vital in the public sector. It's how organizations help their communities navigate programs and services. When users get muddled information or poor directions due to unclear language, everybody suffers.

That's where Plain Language comes in. This important tool gives audiences good information, and has shown substantial results in saving customers time, resources, and, most of all, headaches that result from confusion.

Implementing Plain Language in content creation requires more than merely "dumbing it down." By considering the audience's point of view and taking a thoughtful approach to the words used, communicators will see an increase in the value of their content, helping readers better understand messages the first time and with less confusion. With the assumption that the reader's time is valuable (and limited), it becomes easy to make simple changes that can have a great impact. In some instances, words can even be replaced altogether with images.

This playbook explores ways to apply Plain Language principles to public sector content that can reduce confusion and significantly improve the customer experience.

THE PROCESS FOR IMPLEMENTING PLAIN LANGUAGE IS SIMPLE:

Part 1: Plan

Part 2: Organize

Part 3: Write

Part 4: Review

Part 5: Repeat

Part 1: Plan

While planning may be the most important step in the Plain Language process, it is arguably the one most overlooked. It's important to ask this question: Why does this need to be written?
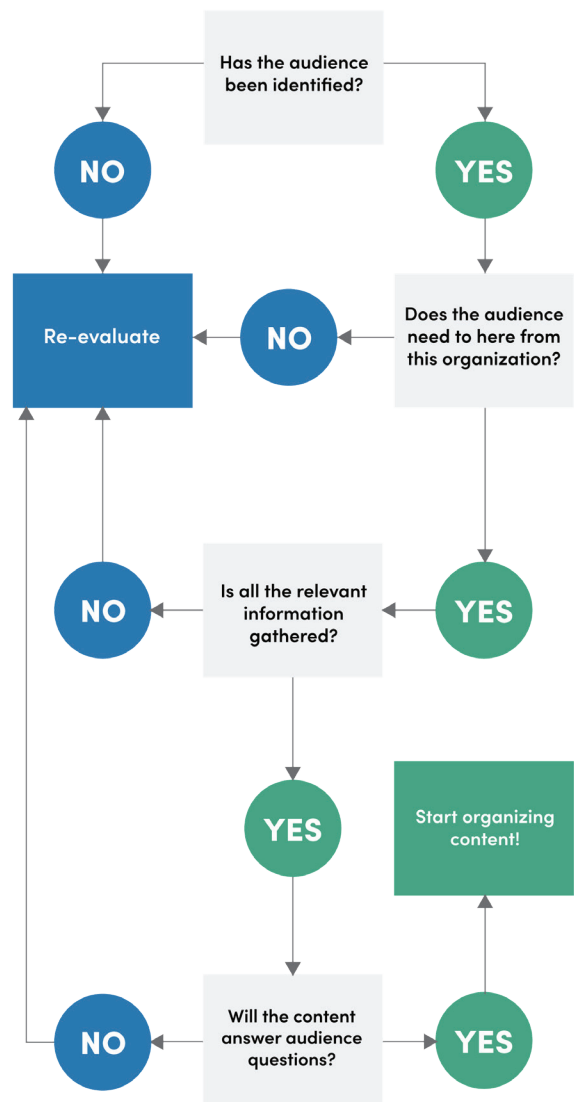
Understanding the purpose or mission of a piece of content is critical, as well as identifying measurable performance goals.

After determining the purpose of the content, this flowchart can help communicators move to the next phase. Knowing the audience is crucial to creating meaningful, valuable content. Stepping into the reader's shoes can offer insight into which supporting details are most necessary and, equally important, which to leave out.

Understanding the audience will also influence content's tone and structure, allowing a stronger appeal of the intended message to the reader. One way to save readers time is by preemptively answering questions they might have, such as:

- Where to find more information

- Who to call with questions

- What next steps are necessary, if any

- Can they expect to hear more on this topic?

Planning a piece of content in the Plain Language process is about asking key questions that will later help identify what information is relevant and how it should be organized.

Has the audience been identified?

NO → Re-evaluate

YES

Does the audience need to here from this organization?

NO → Re-evaluate

YES

Is all the relevant information gathered?

NO

YES

Start organizing content!

Will the content answer audience questions?

NO

YES

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Part 2: Organize

In the planning phase, communicators 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. It starts with identifying the needed information , arranging it in a logical order, then filling in the gaps.

CHOOSE WHAT'S NECESSARY

Start with a key message: What is the main point being communicated to the audience? From there, only choose the content that supports that point. Consider what the reader must know to take the proper next action. By taking this perspective, much of the information once thought important may no longer appear that way.

Here is an example from *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:

Do readers need multiple examples of moderate physical activity to understand the message, or would "brisk walking" be enough?

When drafting an email message, consider that a recent Boomerang study showed that 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 created, bringing the key message front and center is important. It means captivating readers right away and letting them know why they should continue reading.

From there, list out the related groups of information to determine the best and most logical order.

Consider the intended conclusion. Is it a call to action, such as sending a form, or setting reader expectations, such as notice of future contact by the organization? Some conclusions may be open-ended asking the reader to contact an office with any questions.

FILL IN THE GAPS

After completing the outline there might be holes in gathered information that need to be filled before continuing the content creation. Identify missing information and set a reasonable deadline for completion.

It is important to remember that outlines can change, and that creating a second, third, or even fourth draft is not only normal, it's encouraged. The more drafts an outline receives, the better the end result.

Part 3: Write

Before drafting a piece of content, communicators should have all of the necessary information, including the key message, and be able to proactively answer questions. While Plain Language is considered a writing process, there are a number of writing tips that can help audiences understand the intended message the first time.

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 to 20 words per sentence. Keep each sentence to one thought or two tightly connected thoughts. Remember that paragraphs can be one sentence long.

USE WORDS COMMON TO READERS
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 these writing tips in mind, it's time to draft content. Use the previously created outline to draft 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 the content piece is long)
- End: Where can readers 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 Need   **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 [pay benefits/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 qestions, you may call us toll-free by dialing 1–800–827–1000
Our TDD number for the hearing impaired is 1–800–829–4833.

Sincerly,

Encloseres: **CONTACT INFO**
VAF 1–4107

Part 4: Review

Once put into the best possible order, with short, precise sentences that answer reader questions, communicators can edit and review the content to ensure clarity and understanding.

THE POWER OF THE REVIEW PROCESS

When drafting an important piece of content, the review process helps ensure delivery of the right messages. Overthinking or overanalyzing information can be common. So stepping away from content creation can be helpful during the review process. Bringing fresh eyes can help spot missed information or highlight items to remove.

Asking a colleague or friend to review content and provide feedback also offers a fresh perspective. If the organization has a communications office, utilize it!

When ready, test the content by having a representative reader review content for readability and see if they can identify the main purpose of the 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 read by the audience.

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.
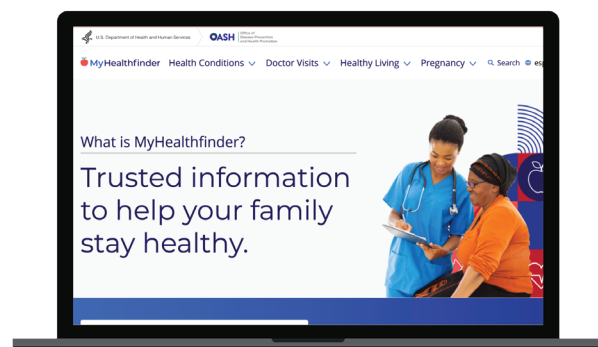
The U.S. Department of Health Services used a balance of white space, graphics, and plain text in their communication updates.

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Part 5: Repeat

With over 6,000 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.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

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."

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.

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.

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

Keep this Essential Checklist for Plain Language in the Public Sector by your desk for future reference.

Part 1: Plan

- Why is the content being created? Explain the purpose, along with intended outcomes from the content's creation.

- Understand the audience and their needs.

- What challenges or opportunities are readers facing?

- Determine what readers want to hear and try to preemptively answer their questions.

Part 2: Organize

- Gather relevant information.

  Identify key messages, but only keep what is absolutely necessary.

Part 3: Write

- Develop a subject line that grabs the reader's attention and is a short summary of the content.

- Arrange information in a logical order and determine the proper sequence.

Part 4: Review

- Have a friend or colleague read the content piece and provide.

- Check to make sure that potential audience questions have been answered.

Part 5: Repeat

- Be consistent with this process to create content that generates positive results in the form of less confusion, saved time, and improved customer service.

About Us

Granicus is the global leader in government technology and services partnering with more than 6,000 government organizations and serving 300 million people, helping transform the way government services the public and their constituents. With comprehensive cloud-based solutions for communications, government website design, meeting and agenda management software, records management, and digital services, Granicus empowers stronger relationships between government and residents across the U.S., U.K., Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. By simplifying interactions with residents, while disseminating critical information, Granicus brings governments closer to the people they serve—driving meaningful change for communities around the globe.

Need assistance developing a communication plan for the constituent journey?

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