



## **ACCESSIBILITY** CONFIDENT EMPLOYERS

### **Tip Sheet: Plain Language**

#### **What is plain language?**

“A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.” – *International Plain Language Federation*

When a document is in plain language, we can easily read, understand and use the information in it. Clear communication is everyone’s job.

#### **Everyone benefits from plain language.**

We all need documents that are easy to understand and use. Plain language is just like a ramp on a building: Not everyone needs one, but having a ramp means everyone can get inside and take part — together.

#### **Plain language includes:**

- Using clear and simple words that your audience knows
- Writing short, clear sentences and paragraphs
- Designing documents and websites that are easy to understand and use
- Giving information clearly and logically
- Sticking to the information your audience needs
- Writing that is inclusive and unbiased
- Accessibility features that make text useable for people with disabilities

#### **Plain language is important for:**

- websites
- reports
- emails and letters
- agendas and meeting minutes
- policies and by-laws
- signs and notices
- press releases
- social media posts
- forms
- job descriptions
- newsletters
- ... and more!

#### **Specific groups who might benefit from plain language:**

- People with lower literacy skills ([almost half the adult population in Canada](#))
- Persons with physical, intellectual, learning, neurological and other disabilities
- New Canadians or people whose first language is not English or French
- Older adults
- People who aren’t used to engaging with public service

## Why is it important to use plain language?

Using plain language is an issue of equity. It helps ensure that everyone is included.

When we use plain language, we consider who the information is for, what their needs are, and how we can make that information as accessible and easy to use as possible. Accessibility in all things — including communication — is a human right.

### The benefits of using plain language include:

- More equitable access to information, goods, and services
- Healthier and more inclusive communities
- More informed voters and consumers
- Cost savings because people need less help to complete tasks
- More transparency about how municipalities work and how citizens can participate

## How plain language relates to the Nova Scotia Accessibility Act

The Nova Scotia Accessibility Act includes the **Information and communication standard: ensuring all people can receive, understand, and share the information they need**. This standard is still being developed, but building an understanding of plain language now means we will be well prepared to meet the standard soon.

**Communication is at the centre of everything.** “Ensuring all people can receive, understand and share the information they need” is a principal that reaches out and touches ALL other Nova Scotia accessibility standards.

## Sources

[Plain language, accessibility, and inclusive communications International Plain Language Federation](#)  
[Accessibility Act: compliance overview](#)  
[Canada.ca Content Style Guide](#)

## Readability Tools

**Flesch Reading Ease and the Flesch Kincaid Grade Level.** Flesch readability scores are the most popular and the most widely tested and used. Microsoft Word gives Flesch scores for your document under the Review tab > Spelling & Grammar.

- Flesch Reading Ease scores a text between 1 and 100, with 100 being the highest readability (easiest to read) score. A score of 70 to 80 is about a grade 8 reading level. This means text should be fairly easy for the average adult to read.
- The Flesch Kincaid Grade Level assesses the approximate grade level of a text.

**Readable.** This online toolkit helps writers improve their readability and bring their audience closer. You can test the readability of your text and find other ways to improve your writing.

**Microsoft Word** has a readability tool that can be found under the Review tab > Spelling & Grammar. You may have to click on Word > Preferences > Spelling and Grammar to enable the readability function. The tool gives:

- Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level scores
- average sentences per paragraph and words per sentence
- percentage of passive sentences

Microsoft Word also has a **Check Accessibility tool** under the Review tab that checks documents for features like alt text, image descriptions, contrast, and more.

**Hemingway Editor App.** This free online app highlights problem areas and helps make your writing clearer. You can paste in text or compose in the app.

**Grammarly.** This online app has a free version that uses AI to help improve your writing and tailor it to different audiences.

## **Resources and tools**

[Canada.ca Content Style Guide](#)

[CNIB Print Guidelines](#)

[Disability Inclusive Language Guidelines — United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy Guide on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Terminology](#)

[Inclusive Language in Media](#)

[Inclusive Writing Glossary](#)

[Plain Language Audit Tool](#)

[Plain Language Checklist](#)

[Plain Language: Clear and Simple](#)

[Plain language word list](#)

[Preparing Plain Language Summaries](#)

[Research Impact Canada Plain Language Writing Checklist](#)

[Resources of the Language Portal of Canada](#)

[Writing resources—Plain language — Government of Canada](#)

[Youth-Friendly Accessible Language](#)

**A project of Sea Change CoLab with funding from the Government of Canada.**



# Plain language checklist:

## Write for readability, accessibility, and inclusivity

### 1. Get to know your audience.

- Find out what your readers/users need. Ask them!
- If you're re-writing a document, find out what works well and what could be improved.
- Ask for feedback from people who are not familiar with the subject matter.
- Will the text help your audience do, learn, or access what they need?

### 2. Write as simply and directly as possible.

- Put the most important information first and leave out information you don't need.
- Use the active voice. ("The secretary took notes", NOT "Notes were taken.")
- Use a direct and conversational tone.
- Make sure your language is inclusive and free of gender and other biases. For example, instead of "men and women", use "people." Instead of "he/she", use the gender-neutral "they."
- Avoid jargon and insider language and explain any acronyms or abbreviations.
- Use short sentences and paragraphs.
- Check the reading level. Find links to readability tools in the **Learn More** doc.

### 3. Organize your document logically.

- Use bulleted and numbered lists.
- Make sure titles and headings are useful, clear, and consistent. Use Styles in MSWord to make sure these levels are coded into your document.
- Place the most important information where it's easiest to find.
- If there are instructions, make sure they are clear and don't skip any steps.

### 4. Pay attention to the design and format of your document.

- Use fonts that are clear and easy to read — no more than 2 per document!
- Align text on the left, but not the right. This is called left justification, or "ragged right margin."
- Leave lots of white space and avoid "walls of text".
- Use a simple table of contents to help people quickly find what they need.

### 5. Make sure your document is welcoming.

- Use images if they help understanding.
- Print on white or light paper and use white backgrounds online.
- Use alternative (alt) text and written descriptions of images.
- If you use charts or tables, make sure they are easy to understand. Tables are hard for screen readers to interpret.

### 6. Test your document on your intended audience before you publish it.

- Do people understand it?
- Does it do what you need it to do?
- Is it useful?
- Is it available in accessible formats?

## Ideas to start using plain language today

### Look at the signs in your building.

- Are they clear?
- Do they give enough information?
- Can most readers understand them?

### Think about any forms you're using.

- Do people have trouble filling them out?
- Do you get a lot of phone calls from people asking questions about them?
- Are people who are supposed to be completing these forms NOT filling them out? If so, ask users where they're getting stuck and what could change.

### Brainstorm a list of the top five questions people ask.

- Are the answers easy to find from the front page of your website?
- Is the information written clearly and simply?
- Are you offering the information in different formats: on your website, in newsletters and other printed material, in ads, in meetings?
- Is the information accessible to persons with a range of disabilities, whose first language is not French or English, and who don't use the internet?

### Look at the policies in your business or organization.

- Can you find them easily?
- How easy are they to understand?
- Would readers benefit from a plain-language summary?
- What is the most important thing about each policy that readers need to know?

### Review newsletters or emails for:

- Readability — Aim for a junior high school level or lower. Complicated writing is not better writing.
- Fonts — Keep it to one to two fonts that are easy to read.
- Clear layout — Make it easy for readers to find what they need.
- Appeal — People want to read a document that looks nice.
- Brief information — Focus on “need to know” over “nice to know.”
- Accessibility — Can it be accessed in print and online, and by a screen-reader?

### Look at your social media.

- Are the About details up to date for the account?
- Is the information in posts timely and useful?
- Is the text easy to understand?
- Can people easily find times, dates, and instructions for events?
- Are the images described in the text or using alt text?