

Less Fluff, More Access: Plain Language Power Tools.

Sydney Badeau

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About Me

Advocacy and Outreach Specialist

Chair of BPDD

Many board and councils

Plain Language Expert



Goals for this session

- Learn about Plain Language
- How you can use it to advocate for families
- How you can put materials in Plain Language
- Learn how to make documents and emails easy to understand for everyone you work with.

Access Needs

- Plain Language
 - Use clear, familiar words and short sentences.
- Pauses and asking questions
 - Give people time to process and respond.
 - Invite questions and check for understanding.

What is Plain Language

Language people understand it the first time they read or hear it

Helps them:

- Find what they need
- Understand it
- Act on it



Plain Language History

- Gained momentum in government in 1970s; Plain Writing Act of 2010
 - Federal Plain language guidelines
 - ISO Plain Language Standard (2023)
- Makes it easier for the public to read, understand, and use government communication
- The goal is to “express” not “impress”

Know Your Audience

Before you write a single word, get clear on your reader:

1

Who are they?

Understand their role, background, and what brings them to your document.

2

What do they need?

Pinpoint the action they must take or the information they came looking for.

3

Their literacy level

Match your words and sentence length to how they read, not to how you write.

Why is Plain Language important?

- It helps people weather or not they have disabilities
- It saves people time by making information quick to understand
- It reduces mistakes and confusion when people follow instructions
- It builds trust between families and the organizations that serve them



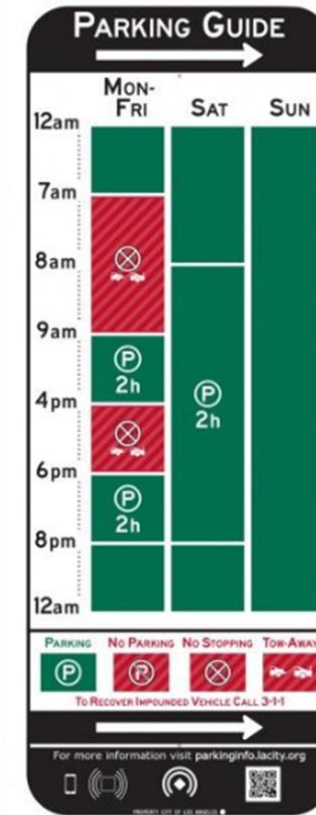
When you use plain language strategies...

- More people understand and remember your message
- People are motivated to act quickly and accurately.
- Everyone spends less time answering questions, explaining, and fixing mistakes
- We save time, money, energy, and even lives.

When plain language is used, people...

- Can understand better
- Know what is going on and what is expected of them
- Participate more in meetings and on teams
- Have more opportunities to be successful

When plain language isn't used...People get confused



Plain language gives people more power

- Lots of settings have power dynamics
- When we speak “at” people or “over” them, we maintain that power dynamic
- Using plain language reduces miscommunication and stress and builds trust
- “How we make our audience feel can be just as important as conveying a clear message.”

<https://www.wordrake.com/blog/power-dynamics-and-plain-language-in-healthcare>



When Plain Language Strategies Work

- People understand and remember your message
- They act faster and save time, money, and energy
- People with disabilities have their access needs met
- Fewer mistakes on forms and applications
- Less confusion leads to fewer follow-up calls and emails
- Builds trust between organizations and the people they serve

Real-World Example: The Veterans Benefits Administration rewrote one of their letters in plain language. The result? Call center questions about that letter dropped by over 50%.

Reflection

Where have you seen unclear language create barriers?

Plain Language Process

These 7 steps help you put things in Plain Language.

Plain Language Process in 7 Steps

1. Print the document if needed
2. Highlight or underline confusing parts
3. Look up difficult words in a dictionary or thesaurus
4. Replace confusing words with simpler alternatives
5. Write direct, action-focused sentences
6. Use bullet points and break up long text
7. Review your changes

Write to the Reader

Use “**you**” to include everyone and show clear actions.

Examples of using “You”

Instead of

Copies of medical records must be included.

Say:

You must include copies of your medical records.

Another Reason to Write to the Reader Directly

- This is a good way to get rid of gendered pronouns, such as he and she, that leaves out trans or non-binary people.
- Use you as an inclusive pronoun that speaks directly to the reader.
- Using **you** helps the reader understand what they need to do.

When Should You Use Plain Language

- All the time
- At work, home, Doctors office, Dentist, at schools
- When you want things to be communicated clearly



Let's Look Together

Not Plain vs.
Plain

Spot the difference
in the next few
slides.

Is this Plain Language or NOT?

“When the process of freeing a vehicle that has been stuck results in ruts or holes, the operator will fill the rut or hole created by such activity before removing the car from the immediate area.”

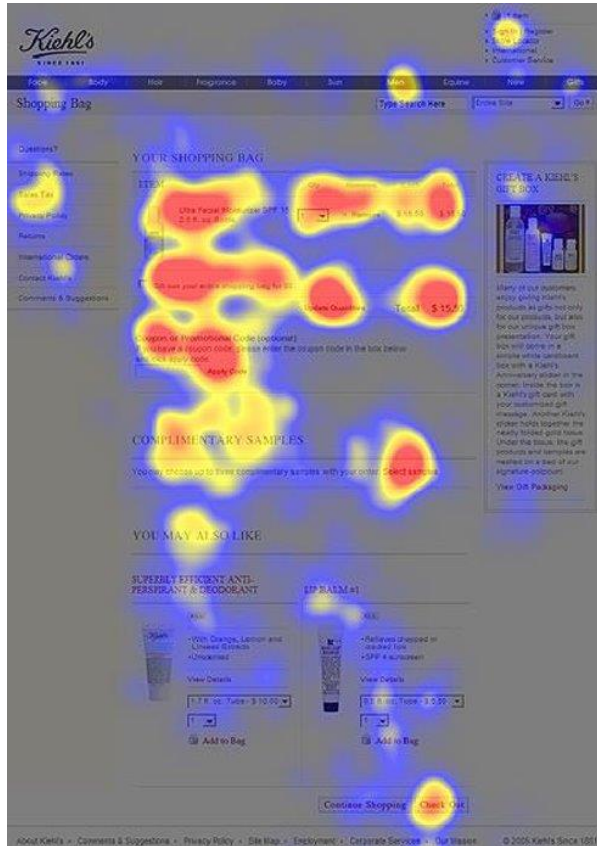
Is this Plain Language?

“If you make a hole while freeing a stuck vehicle, you must fill the hole before you drive away.”

Plain Language is also how you organize Information

Next few slides are examples

Start with the Most Important Information



- **How People Read:**
- Readers focus more at the start
- They tend to skim as they go
- They miss the most important information if you put it at the bottom.

An Example of How Not to Organize Information:

Dear Families,

We appreciate all of your support during this snowy winter season. Whenever the district has to make decisions about whether to cancel school because of weather, we consult with local meteorologists, city employees, transportation providers, and the police department. The safety of our students and staff is our main priority.

Please know that we do not take this decision lightly. Due to the upcoming winter storm, we are cancelling school and all extracurricular activities tomorrow.

Thank you for your ongoing support,
Superintendent



An Example of How to Organize Information:

Dear Families,

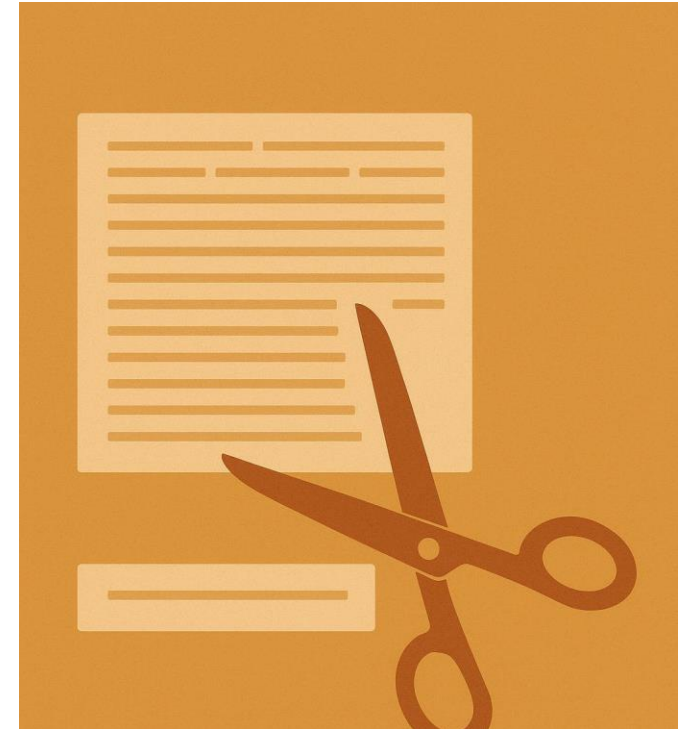
We are cancelling school and all after-school activities tomorrow because of the winter storm.

The safety of our students and staff is our main priority. We made this difficult decision after talking with local experts.

Thank you for your ongoing support,
Superintendent

Keep It Short

- Use only the words you need.
- Cut unnecessary modifiers.
- One idea per sentence.
- Keep sentences under 20 words.
- See PlainLanguage.gov for tips.



The Look of Your Message Matters

- Use white space
- Use 14pt+ font
- Use bullets or checklists
- Use these fonts: Verdana, Arial, Tahoma, Times New Roman, Helvetica, Calibri
 - Other fonts can be used in Canva if researched to check for accessibility
- Use **bold** for key info (not ALL CAPS)

Use Familiar Words

Find an everyday way to say it

Instead of: There are no vacancies at this point in time.

Try: We don't have any open positions now.

It's okay to use contractions

Instead of: We will email you once we have received your application.

Try: We'll email you once we've gotten your application.

Don't use jargon or acronyms

Instead of: You need to sign the IPE.

Try: You need to sign the Individualized Plan for Employment.

Accessibility on Social Media

- Camel Case Hashtags
 - #Puppyslaughter vs #PuppysLaughter
- Color Contrast:
 - People need to be able to read graphics and materials
 - Dark Background ---> Use White Font
 - Light Background ---> Use Black Font
 - Use contrast checker



Are My Strategies Working?

- Do people seem to understand or are they looking at their phones?
- Check in for understanding
- Are people taking action after reading the document or materials?
- Fewer follow-up questions about your materials
- Fewer errors on forms and applications
- People respond faster to emails and requests
- Ask someone to repeat back what they read
- Use readability tools to check your writing level

AI and Plain Language

- Take time to put things in Plain Language yourself
- Ask AI Tools such as Co-Pilot, ChatGPT or Gemini to check your work
- Have 2-5 self-advocates check it over and provide feedback
- For long documents, you can have AI summarize the most important points and put them in plain language
 - EX: Bills or laws
- Always review AI output for accuracy
- You can use it to put co-workers' emails in plain language to make less confusing and pull-out action steps

What Can We Do to Advocate for Plain Language

- Share Resources
- Speak Up in meetings and workplaces
- Ask for Plain Language in documents you receive
- Offer to help rewrite confusing materials
- Lead by example in your own writing

Indirect	Direct
"Maybe We could think about adjusting the font?"	"The font is too small to be accessible. Let's increase it to 18pt."
"This slide might be a little too busy."	"This slide needs more white space so people can follow it."
"The email is confusing."	"Can you please list out the action steps I need to take."

Your Turn: Practice Rewriting

Rewrite this sentence in Plain Language:

"Individuals who are in need of assistance with the completion of documentation should direct inquiries to the appropriate departmental representative during normal business hours."

Think about:

- ✓ Who is the reader?
- ✓ What action do they need to take?
- ✓ Can you use "you" to make it direct?

Other things to Consider:

- Color Contrast
- All CAPS
- Font colors and Font
- Camelcase Hashtags
 - #puppyslaughter vs #PuppysLaughter



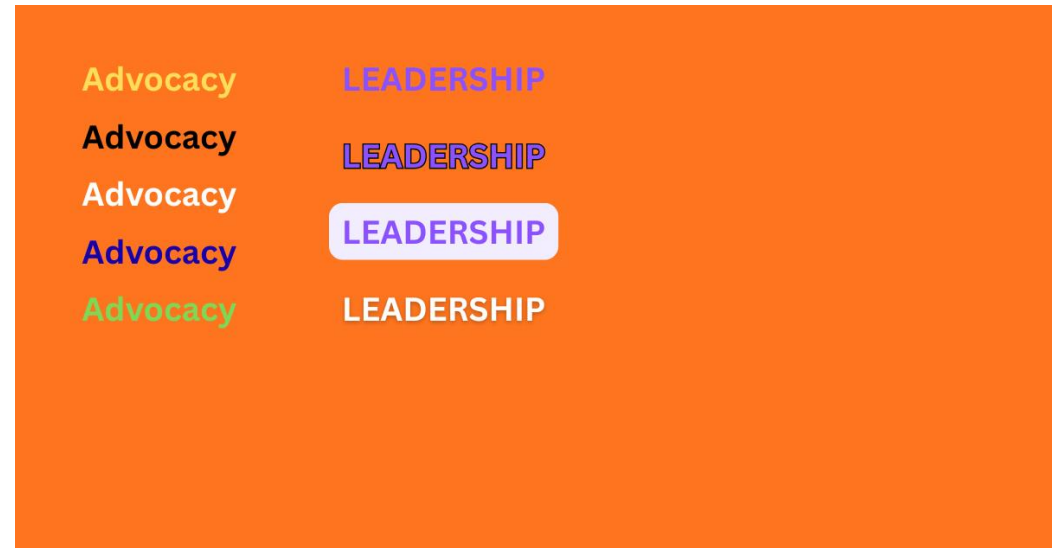
The infographic is titled "The Accessible Legend Checklist" and features a small photo of a man in a black t-shirt with the text "Disabled by Society!" in the top right corner. It is organized into six sections, each with an icon and a list of guidelines:

- MESSAGE BODY** (speech bubble icon):
 - Be sure your message is clear.
 - Uses headings, bullet points or paragraphs to structure content.
 - Avoid acronyms and Jargon.
- IMAGES** (camera icon):
 - Add ALT Text – a short description of the image.
 - Add Image Description – a more descriptive description of the image, add to the message body or pinned comment.
- COLOUR CONTRAST** (color wheel icon):
 - Be sure the text in images is readable
 - Use a colour contrast checker to ensure the colour ratio is accessible, such as Webaim's contrast checker or similar.
- VIDEOS** (video camera icon with "REC" text):
 - Add Captions to every video and always manually edit.
 - Use Accessible font and colours for captions.
 - Don't have captions appearing one word at a time or scattered over the screen
- EMOJIS** (laughing face emoji icon):
 - Don't replace words with emojis.
 - Don't overuse emojis or use lots grouped together.
 - Do use them at the start and end of sentences
- HASHTAGS** (camel icon):
 - Use camelCase or PascalCase Hashtags.
 - #likeThis OR #LikeThis
 - It's easier to read for everyone, remember Susan Boyle's fiasco.

At the bottom right, it says "Linked in [Shieldsjamie](#)".

Look out for “Designer” slides

- Lack color contrast
- Small fonts
- Often use Smart Art. Screen readers treat Smart Art as a graphic. This means it can’t read the embedded text.
- Make sure to run the “Check Accessibility” feature on your program.



What is one
change you
will make?



Key Takeaways

- ✓ Plain Language means people understand it the first time
- ✓ Use "you" to speak directly to the reader
- ✓ Put the most important information first
- ✓ Keep sentences short and use familiar words
- ✓ Formatting matters: use white space, bullets, and bold
- ✓ Advocate for Plain Language in your organization



Resources

- [Plain Language.gov](#)
- UW Madison tip sheets:
 - [Plain Language Tips](#)
 - [Learn More About Plain Language – Topics include legal, health literacy, and accessibility](#)
- [Plain Language and Easy Read Resources \(including icons/graphic links\)](#)
- [WebAim Accessibility Trainings](#)

Thank You!

sbadeau@arcfdl.org

