

Literacy and Clear Language

Clear language and literacy work hand-in-hand to provide equal opportunity for people from diverse backgrounds to understand, participate and be heard in all aspects of society.

Clear language looks at the whole message from the reader's point of view.

It is not only about what we say but also how it will be received. Clear language involves thinking about our audience and consciously writing for that audience. It often includes unlearning old habits, because many of us have strong attachments to writing in the way we were taught. Clear language is not a simplified style of writing that reduces the message. Being clear is more impressive than complex and condescending language.

Clear language means no one is excluded. Accessible communications are fair, open and inclusive.

If it isn't understood, it isn't worth it! Being clear gets the message across for everyone. When readers are faced with written material that is too complex, the information may not sink in or the reader may get frustrated and give up. This happens a lot more than we realize and not just for those with less education or those who are reading in their second language. It is also an issue for many of us who learn differently, have difficulty with complicated written material or are just drowning in too much paper!




Clear language reduces errors and misunderstandings. Clear language helps improve service through clearer forms, documents and letters. Time and money are saved when people can communicate openly and honestly.

Complex or confusing information causes the reader to reject both the message and the source. The findings in a recent study by the Canada Information Office (2000) suggested that when citizens do not understand, they tend to think the writer is not listening to them. Unclear communications are perceived as being removed from the real needs and interests of the readers. The messages and the source are then discredited.

What can be done?

Stand up for clear language! Do a review of all the written materials you use. Are they appropriate for your audience? Use some of the many tips, guidelines and checklists listed below to review your written materials. Encourage others to be clear in their communications. Take note of both good and poor examples and make constructive suggestions.

Suggested *Clear Language* Resources

- ✓ **Canadian Labour Congress, Workplace Literacy Project** has prepared many useful resources and guides for clear language. They can also refer you to labour organizations across Canada that have developed clear language projects for the workplace. Contact tel: 613-531-3400 or www.clc-ctc.ca
- ✓ **Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA)** The National Literacy and Health Program has produced resources on plain language. Contact tel: 613-725-3769 or www.pls.cpha.ca
- ✓ **East End Literacy** in Toronto has an interactive **Clear Language and Design (CLAD)** website that lets you test your document's "reading effectiveness", search for simpler words, and see examples of clear communications, all online at:
www.eastendliteracy.on.ca/clearlanguageanddesign/start.htm
-  **Frontier College** has produced the **Clear Lines: How to Compose and Design Clear Language Documents for the Workplace**, part of which you can order through Grass Roots Press at 1-888-303-3213 at www.literacyservices.com.
-  **Government of Canada** has a publication called **Plain Language Clear and Simple** available for \$6.95 + shipping and handling. Contact tel: 819-956-4800 or 1-800-635-7943.
-  **Ontario Literacy Coalition** has produced **Clear Writing and Literacy**, now in its second edition. Contact tel: 416-963-5787 or www.on.literacy.ca
- ✓ **Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA)** publishes a fact sheet called **Clear Writing: What is it? How do you do it?** <http://www.gov.on.ca/OMAFRA/english/rural/facts/93-021.htm>
- ✓ **Plain Language Online Training** is available at www.web.net/~plain/PlainTrain



- indicates an item that is in Literacy BC's collection. Visit the collection on-line at <http://www2.literacy.bc.ca/catalogue/>

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