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ABSTRACT

Drawn from the experience of various ministries and departments in governments across Canada, this guide is meant to be a practical guide in implementing plain language for managers in the Ontario (Canada) government. The guide describes how to use plain language in planning, writing, designing, and editing forms and documents, and how to set up and manage plain language projects. Sections of the guide are: (1) What Plain Language Can Do for Your Ministry; (2) What Is Plain Language?; (3) Barriers to Implementing Plain Language; (4) Organizing the Plain Language Project (including audience analysis, matching needs, document design, testing, revisions, and evaluation); (5) Managing Your Resources; (6) Long-Range Planning for Plain Language; and (7) For More Information. Appendixes present a sample plain language project outline and a sample plain language training plan. (RS)

Ontario

Implementing Plain Language

A Manager's Guide

IMPLEMENTING PLAIN LANGUAGE

A MANAGER'S GUIDE

Produced by:
Literacy Branch
Ministry of Education
June, 1992

This is a practical guide to help managers implement plain language. It was produced by the Literacy Branch, Ministry of Education.

✍ About This Guide

This guide is meant to be a practical guide for managers in the Ontario government. It is intended to help managers implement "plain language". The guide describes how to use plain language in planning, writing, designing and editing forms and documents, and how to set up and manage plain language projects. Many initiatives in the Government of Ontario during the past few years have shown the effectiveness of plain language. The tips and advice in this guide are drawn from the experience of various ministries and departments in governments across Canada that are improving their communications by using a plain language approach.

The guide is divided into seven parts. It is organized so that you can read only those parts you are interested in or need information about.

- Part 1 explains the advantages of plain language.
- Part 2 answers some of the practical questions you may have about plain language and addresses some of the typical reactions you may get to using plain language.
- Part 3 shows you what plain language is and is not.
- Part 4 presents tips on organizing a plain language project -- from beginning to end.
- Part 5 talks about what resources will be needed to apply plain language techniques to your documents.
- Part 6 discusses long term planning for plain language -- how to move from the individual project to changing the way your branch or unit communicates with the public.
- Part 7 is a list of organizations and resources that you can contact for further information and assistance.

✍ Table Of Contents

✍ 1. What Plain Language Can Do for Your Ministry

Governments today are committed to improving the services and programs they offer to the public. But this commitment comes at a time of budget restraint -- and at a time of escalating costs. It often falls to the branch or section managers to deal with these conflicting pressures as best they can.

Organizations in both the private and public sectors have found that using plain language to improve the forms, letters, and other documents has helped improve their services. At the same time, many of these organizations have saved time and money. Here are some examples.

It can save you money

Clearly written government documents and forms:

- reduce errors,
- reduce the costly, time-consuming process of litigation or arbitration as a result of errors,
- save staff time answering questions, and
- save time in processing.

By using plain language, your ministry can benefit from the associated reduction in costs.

In Britain

Fifty thousand travellers every year fill out a Customs and Excise (C&E) form to claim lost luggage. The C&E form had an error rate of 55 percent. Redesigning it brought the error rate down to 3 percent, saving staff 3,700 hours in processing. It cost the department about $3,500 to rewrite the form, but saved about $45,000 a year in processing costs.

In Ontario

The Ontario Human Rights Commission used to hand out copies of the Ontario Human Rights Code when anyone asked how to make a complaint. Then they produced plain language documents about the complaints process and basic information about the Human Rights Code. They estimate that they now save $15,000 per year in printing costs alone.

It can save you staff time

In Ontario

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities redesigned the application for the Ontario Student Assistance Program. The program has been able to accomplish other work and improve customer service to students because of the staff time saved in processing the forms.

It can improve customer service

Increase public understanding of your work

Formal, "officious" writing often gives people the impression that government is distant and impersonal. Complex, technical writing confuses and intimidates people and makes them feel removed from government.

Plain language can promote open and honest communications that encourage the public to use government services and to understand the work of government on their behalf.

Improve access to services you offer

By using plain language, you can make sure that the greatest number of people are able to read and understand your forms, correspondence, policies, instructions, and information about your services.

Improve customer service and your work environment

Documents that are difficult to read make it difficult for public servants to do their job. Clearly written communications – both external and internal -- make it easier for employees to communicate with customers. If internal memos, policies and procedures are clearly written, government employees find it easier to understand their jobs and the government's goals.

While plain language projects do require an initial investment, they can be justified on the basis of these goals. For example, in British Columbia, the Ministry of

Attorney General implemented plain language in the administration of Small Claims Court on the basis of improving access to the court. In Saskatchewan, government departments are implementing plain language to improve customer service. In Ontario, the Ministry of Housing has simplified its forms in order to reduce errors and improve service to tenants and landlords.

2. What Is Plain Language?

Plain language is a way of presenting information so that it is easy to read and understand. It is an approach to communication that pays special attention to the person who is reading the document or filling out the form. It considers what the reader needs to know as well as what the writer wants to say.

It uses a simple, direct style of writing that makes it easy for the reader to understand important information. Here are some examples.

Before:	**After:**
Remission is granted to a taxpayer who is a Status Indian for income tax payable on pension income.	Status Indians do not have to pay tax on pension income.
Before:	**After:**
Should you have the occasion to know of someone whose background configuration approximates the position specification above, we would welcome a recommendation from you or directly from the exploring individual.	If you know someone who qualifies for this job, please let us know or have that person contact us.

Before:	After:
A cheque or money order payable to the Treasurer of Ontario in the amount prescribed must accompany this registration.	Please attach a cheque or money order made out to the Treasurer of Ontario for the prescribed amount.

Before:	After:
A thorough <u>inspection</u> of your forest home or summer cottage, and the surrounding property for obvious fire hazards is the first step in fire <u>protection</u>.	You can <u>protect</u> your forest home or summer cottage from fire by <u>inspecting</u> your land and buildings for fire hazards.

Before:	After:
Prior to completing the application the applicants should determine if the proposed corporate name is available.	Before you complete this application, you should see whether any other company is using the name you have chosen.

In short, plain language is clear, effective communication. It is not writing "down" to the audience or the inaccurate presentation of technical or legal language.

Because plain language is concerned with effective communication, it focuses on the whole message ... not just the words that are used. A plain language approach is guided by the principles of good communication and writing. These principles include:

1. being aware of the needs of your audience and matching the vocabulary and style to the needs of the intended reader;

2. using a direct, simple style, and using familiar words in familiar ways in all printed material;

3. giving information in a well-organized and logical sequence so that the reader can find important information easily and know what they are expected to do;

4. using layout, graphics, charts and appropriate type style and type size so that material is inviting as well as easy to follow;

5. using a tone that speaks directly to the reader without sounding bureaucratic or negative.

Plain Language Techniques

Because plain language is guided by the principles of good communication, there are no "rules". However, there are many techniques that are the result of research into how people read and understand information. These techniques help make a document easier to read and easier to understand. For further information about plain language writing techniques, consult the writing guides listed under Section 7 later in this booklet.

✍ 3. Barriers To Implementing Plain Language

Implementing plain language means ensuring that your audience can access your programs and services. Along the way, issues will come up. This section lists some common reactions to plain language. Anticipating these issues can make it easier to manage the process of implementing plain language.

"We're already doing plain language ..."

Plain language is an approach. It is a means, not an end. The fact is that many documents and forms are difficult to read and to understand. Letters go out that ask for action and nothing happens. Forms get filled out incorrectly. Brochures and other information items don't get read because they are difficult to read.

For those ministries that think they are doing plain language, the test is whether the audience can read the ministries' documents and how easily they can fill out their forms. Only by assessing the forms and documents on a regular basis can a ministry be sure that the audience will understand the message.

"How do I get people to buy in ..."

Plain language can make everyone's job easier. If memos, letters and forms are written clearly, staff will spend less time reading and responding to these communications. If public information is presented clearly, then staff will spend less time answering complaints and other inquiries from the public.

As a manager, you will be encouraged by the extent of support from staff who have had an introduction to plain writing. A recent survey of Ontario government staff who had attended plain language workshops found the staff anticipated resistance not from peers, but from managers and supervisors.

Some examples of barriers identified by staff are . . .

"There are other branches involved ..."

Most government documents are produced by teams of people representing different branches or sections of a ministry. For example, a form can have implications for systems, legal services, policy, communications as well as the unit responsible for delivering the program.

If plain language is to work, all of these interests should be involved in plain language projects. During the process, they will all begin to take ownership in the product ... and the benefits.

"It can't be done because of the statute or regulations ..."

This issue most often arises when trying to change the words on a form or in a document that are taken from the regulations or statute. First, in many cases there is no need to use the words in the regulation or statute. These words have been used out of habit. Secondly, plain language involves much more than vocabulary. A plain language approach does not eliminate the use of technical or legal terms when they must be used. However, when these words are used, they should be explained to the reader.

"We can't do this because senior management doesn't want it ..."

In the long run, plain language won't work unless senior management is behind it. Senior management can be convinced by the successes of pilot projects. Small projects that result in cost savings and improved services will show that plain language works.

"I don't have time for this ..."

Plain language takes time. But it does not mean redoing all forms and documents at one time. It is about changing your approach to communications. For example, letters can be reviewed to see if they communicate the most important information first. Or, the next time a brochure needs to be developed, test it with the target audience to see if they understand it. Plain language projects can be small or very large. The manager is in a good position to set priorities and assess what can be realistically accomplished this year or next year within available resources.

"How do we develop this expertise ..."

In the beginning, you will probably need to use limited outside expertise to train staff in using a plain language writing style. The resource section of this manual can help you locate this outside expertise.

Resource materials on how to use plain language, good practices, and cost savings achieved are available.

As staff in your unit receive training they will begin to develop in-house expertise. It doesn't take long before your staff is thinking "plain language".

"How do we begin ..."

The first step in plain language is to assess publications, forms, or other written material to make sure that the target audience can understand them. When one of these documents needs to be updated, a plain language review should be part of the process. If you are developing a new form or publication, it can be set up as a plain language pilot project. The next section of this manual discusses how to do that.

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4. Organizing the Plain Language Project

The goal for the plain language project is to create a document that can be understood the first time by the intended reader. Often, the decision to use plain language begins with a problem document. For example, one organization was using a form that had a 97 percent error rate. An enormous amount of staff time was being spent calling or writing to clients to correct errors.

In another case, the problem was with form letters being used. People were not doing what the letters asked. The manager of the unit wanted to correct the problem.

This section will serve as a guide to planning and organizing the plain language project. If you plan to use outside expertise, this section can be useful in planning and preparing the Request for Proposal.

Plain language projects vary in scope and cost. A project that focuses on a few letters or a small brochure will take less time and resources than a project to redesign forms and program guidelines. The process that is described here is general and can be applied to all types of plain language projects.

Organizing The Project

The plain language process can be broken down into six steps:

Step 1: Audience analysis
Step 2: Matching needs
Step 3: Document design
Step 4: Testing the new document
Step 5: Revisions
Step 6: Evaluation

Audience Analysis

The first step is to know who is receiving the message. The focus is not on the audience as a group, but as individuals. For example, who is going to read this document or fill out this form? Where are they going to be when they do this? Is the situation filled with stress or is the document likely to be intimidating?

It is helpful to get input from the audience at the beginning of the project. For example, if you are developing a publication for new readers or unskilled readers, it may be useful to consult early on with a learners' group in the community. This can help you determine what they need to know **rather than what you may think they need to know.**

Another way to get input from your readers is to test your current publication with the audience before redesigning and re-writing. Some techniques for testing are discussed later in this section.

FIVE QUESTIONS TO HELP ANALYZE THE AUDIENCE

1. What types of individuals will be reading this document (filling out this form)?
2. What do they know about the subject?
3. What beliefs and attitudes do they have on the subject?
4. What are their purposes? Why will they be reading this? Why will they be filling out this form?
5. What is the context in which they are receiving this message? Are they at an office? Are they at home?

Matching Needs

Before the design of a document can begin, it will be necessary to analyze the needs of your organization as well as the needs of the audience. The new document must be readable, and meet your systems, policy, and operation requirements.

Gathering data on the current forms or documents will help you assess the amount of time and effort to be spent on the project. For example, for forms, the problem can be assessed by analyzing the number and types of errors on forms that are processed, or the time it takes to process the form. As well, documenting the number and types of inquiries about the document or form will be useful. The number of copies printed will also help. These statistics are kept by most organizations. They are helpful in understanding current problems or issues, and they can be very useful in evaluating the cost/benefits of plain language when the project is completed.

WHAT KIND OF BASELINE DATE TO COLLECT

- average production, development, and distribution costs
- average form completion and processing time
- average counter staff time spent explaining or filling in forms
- number and types of errors
- cost of error corrections
- number of inquiries and complaints

Document Design

The third part of the plain language project will be the design of the message. After analyzing the audience, you will have a better understanding of who is receiving the message and their needs. The next step is to analyze the purpose of the document and how to best communicate the message. It is likely that this stage of the project will be the most time consuming. Successive drafts of the document must be reviewed and discussed. One of the most difficult parts of organizing plain language projects is to allow enough time for the design of the document or form, while realizing that any document or form can be improved through another draft. Often, the resource constraints and program schedule will dictate how much time is available for document design.

SOME SIMPLE PLAIN LANGUAGE TECHNIQUES

Language

- Write clear straightforward sentences
- Shorter sentences are easier to read
- Use words that are familiar to the reader
- Avoid jargon, technical language, "legalese"

Organization

- Put the most important information first
- Use lists and point form to make the document easier to read
- Use headings to help guide the reader

Design

- Use a type style that is clear and easy to read
- Use a type size that is large enough to be easy to read
- Use upper and lower case
- Use appropriate line lengths, margins and spacing for the text

Tone

- Use a positive tone
- Speak directly to the reader -- personal pronouns help

You can find more information on plain language techniques in the writing guides listed in Part 7.

Testing

An important part of plain language is testing your document with the intended audience. After you think that you have designed an appropriate message, you will want to test that message to make sure it works. Testing helps ensure that the document meets both your needs and the needs of the audience.

There are many ways to test a document or form. These range from very informal methods to more formal statistical tests.

Informal methods

One simple and inexpensive method is to read the document aloud. Or, give the document to colleagues and ask them to read it. Often, having someone else read the document will highlight areas that are not clear or problems with getting the main point of the message across.

Many computer software packages can also be used to evaluate written material. Two that are available are RightWriter and Grammatik. These software packages evaluate your writing for clarity. People who use them regularly say that over time their writing does become clearer. However, be aware that just because a document is written at a grade eight reading level does not mean that it is accessible. The organization and design can still make the document difficult to read and use. However, these software tools can be helpful in making the language of the document clear and straightforward.

A simple way to get feedback from the public is to give the document to some members of the intended audience or to groups that represent the user and ask them what they think.

These informal testing methods are easy to do and cost very little money. They can be very useful when beginning to use plain language and can help the writer make sure the message is clear and understood by the intended audience.

Formal methods

On forms and documents that are used by the general public, informal methods are often not adequate. Considering the costs of writing, design, typesetting, production, and the cost associated with errors, it is better to use a more rigorous testing method.

The rest of this section outlines the process for a more rigorous test that would be appropriate for large public use forms and documents. The method involves the following steps:

1. **Identify what is most important**

   The variables that you identify will depend on the type and purpose of the document. For example, if it is a form, then the number of errors is important, or whether the user misses important information.

For a document, variables might include general impressions, the image of the service that is presented by the document, the ease with which information can be found, and comprehension of specific items of information. After you have identified the variables, then you can decide on the best way to measure them (see #3 below).

2. **Identify test group(s)**

You will want to test the document or form with members of the audience. Whether you test it with one group or many groups will depend on how many different "audiences" you have for the document. Usually there will be many audience segments that you identify because of their different characteristics. The number of segments will help you decide how many groups to test. For example, if 50% of your audience is urban and 50% is rural, you will want to set up the groups so that 50% are urban and 50% are rural. This is called stratifying the groups. If a segment of the audience has special needs (e.g., low reading skills) then you may want to sample more among this audience to make sure that their needs are met.

When testing documents or forms, you do not need a large number of people in the groups. Data analysis will seldom include statistical tests for differences, so scientific sampling is seldom used for testing plain language documents. When testing a form, for example, a group of about 40-50 people will be sufficient.

3. Choose an appropriate way to test

Each of the following methods has its strengths and weaknesses. In this section we give a brief outline of three methods that can be used. In some situations, such as those having both forms and information brochures, you will want to use more than one method.

Remember, the purpose of testing is to see how the document or form is used. This means testing the document as it will really look by printing a small number of the final form or document. It also means using a method or setting that re-creates (as closely as possible) how the document will be used. For example, an information brochure is often meant to be scanned or picked up on impulse from a rack. In this case, a focus group method would be appropriate. Forms, on the other hand, require more in-depth analysis of how the individual completes the form. Individual testing would be appropriate in this case.

Focus Group Testing - Focus group testing is a process of getting 8-10 people from the audience together. The moderator of the group leads the discussion of the document. This discussion focuses the group on such things as:

- first impressions
- impact of the document
- how the document can be used
- locating information.

This type of testing is very effective for general information brochures or overviews of programs and services. It is not a very useful method when testing for comprehension or reading and acting on information. Also, it is not an appropriate method for testing forms.

Scenario Testing - This method tests the document or form with individuals, one at a time. It involves setting up a "scenario" that the target audience might use. Using this scenario, each individual is asked to fill out the form or read the document. The participant is observed during this process so that any problem areas on the form or in the document can be corrected. In very sophisticated testing, video cameras record the event for later analysis. Then, a series of questions is asked of the respondent about the exercise. These questions can cover general variables such as what the respondent thought about the form or document or specific questions about whether the respondent understood specific words, directions and other parts of the form.

Field Interviews - Where focus group testing or scenario testing would not work, it is often useful to test the document through individual interviews. For example, it is often difficult to recruit focus groups among professionals. In this case, the document or form may be sent to a sample of individuals. Then, a time to interview them is set up. The interviewer can then ask questions about the document such as the impact the document had, whether it was easy to read, or whether there were parts of the document that were not clear.

4. **Data Analysis**

Data gathered during the test will point to areas in the document design that need changes. It will be important to discuss these changes to make sure that by improving the document you are still matching the needs of the reader with your organization's needs.

Revisions

After analyzing the test results, revisions based on these results can be made to the document or form. If there are major changes at this stage, it may be necessary to re-test after the revisions are completed.

Evaluation

The last stage of the plain language approach is the evaluation. It is important to know whether the project was successful. The first step is to identify the criteria that will be used to judge the effectiveness of the project.

After the documents or forms are in use, it will be important to measure those variables that were measured at the beginning. In this way, a comparison can be made on enquiries, complaints, errors, increase in use, and other variables before the plain language project and after. This comparison can be used in documenting the costs and benefits of the project. The information will, of course, be very useful for the planning and organization of future plain language projects.

✍ 5. Managing Your Resources

Plain language projects need resources. Like any major change in an organization some staff and budget resources will be necessary to make the project successful. However, because the size and scope of plain language projects will vary, it is difficult to give clear guidelines on resource allocation. In this section, we discuss budgeting and allocating staff resources for a large plain language project.

Time, like other resources, must also be managed properly if the project is going to be successful. At the end of this section, we discuss what a reasonable time frame would be for a plain language project.

Budgeting for Plain Language

If you decide that your organization does not have sufficient resources to carry out the project, you may need to hire an outside consultant with expertise in creating plain language documents. The budgeting in this section is to help you assess the cost of the project if an outside consultant is used.

The costs for the project can be broken down into three categories:

1. **Research and Testing**

   Research and testing does not need to involve hiring an outside consultant or research firm unless it is a large project.

2. **Drafting and Design**

   The most difficult part of estimating this cost is the time it will take to complete the drafting and design. One thing is certain, a first draft is never the last draft. Be prepared to budget for at least three drafts – two before testing the prototype and one after testing the prototype.

3. **Production**

   The primary cost here is the printing of the final prototype of each form or document for testing. The colour, how the information is packaged, the size of the page and how the document looks are important to the message. Thus, the final prototype is the one to test.

Staff Resources

Staff will be heavily involved in the plain language project. Even if outside consultants are used, it is important to have staff work closely with the consultants.

Here are a series of questions to ask to help allocate staff resources:

WHO TO INVOLVE

1. Who will manage the project?

2. How will senior management be involved in the project?

3. What units should be involved in the Work Group?
   a) Policy
   b) Legal
   c) Systems
   d) Operations
   e) Communications
   f) Administration
   g) Forms Management Unit

4. Who will provide plain language expertise?
   a) In-house editor
   b) Corporate communications director
   c) Other staff
   d) Consultant

5. Who will have final approval for the project?

How long will it take?

As you can see from this discussion, the plain language project cannot be rushed. Some projects, for example a single letter, may take only a few minutes. However, forms and longer documents take several weeks or months to complete.

In addition to the time it takes to draft the documents, you and your staff will need time to review and discuss each draft. Testing will also be time-consuming. Generally, drafting of forms and longer documents takes place over a period of several weeks or months. Testing will consume another month in order to allow for proper analysis of the results and re-drafting.

✍ 6. Long-Range Planning For Plain Language

Plain language changes the way an organization communicates. This change takes time.

So far, this guide has discussed plain language projects. This section briefly looks at the dynamics of changing the way an organization communicates. It discusses the long-term goals of plain language and how to plan for effective change in your organization.

The Plan

Each organization is different, depending on its function and goals. However, the following six ideas will help you create an effective plain language plan for your organization.

1. **Ongoing assessment of communications**

   Set up a system to help you "audit" the effectiveness of selected correspondence, forms, and other documents. It will be easier if these documents come up for review regularly (e.g., quarterly, semi-annually, annually).

2. **Set priorities**

   Plain language will not happen overnight. No doubt you will have limited resources. So, set your priorities. Which documents are creating the most problems (inquiries, errors, inaction, etc.)? Once priorities are set, it will be easier to develop plain language projects that have an impact on your organization.

3. **Training and ongoing learning**

An important part of change is providing staff with sufficient training. This training can be part of your overall training program. You will also want to make sure that staff learn from their early experiences with plain language.

4. **Plain language working group**

One way to help implement plain language is to set up a working group of people from different units to promote and direct plain language initiatives. This group can often see larger issues and work for change throughout the organization.

5. **In-house specialists**

Your organization will certainly want to develop in-house support for plain language. Often this support can be found in communication branches, human resource departments and in line branches.

A word of caution is important here. This guide has emphasized that plain language is an approach and an attitude towards written material, rather than a set of rules. If an in-house group of specialists is developed, it is important that this group not become "plain language police". If this happens, then branches will write to "pass" the test given by this group and pay less attention to the target audience.

However, if developed as a general resource, then in-house specialists can assist in the process of long-term change.

6. In-house guidelines

One way to support staff is to adopt guidelines for some forms of communication like letters, briefs, or memos. The guidelines could consist of suggestions for page layout, typesize, typestyle and length. Regular correspondence with wider margins and better type style will make it easy for everyone to notice the change. The guidelines will also help writers to improve the way they communicate. This is a very easy way to show change immediately.

7. For More Information

There are many resources available to give you additional information. In this section, organizations, additional guides, newsletters, and reference materials are highlighted.

Organizations

There are a growing number of organizations in Ontario that focus on plain language drafting, design and training. Here are some:

- Information Management and Economics (IME)
  Mark E. Vale, Principal
  220 Richmond Street West, Suite 200
  Toronto, Ontario
  M5V 1V9
  Tel: (416) 979-7259
  Fax: (416) 979-3832

- Learning Communications Inc.
  (Rose Grotsky)
  561 Markham Street
  Toronto, Ontario
  M6G 2L6
  Tel: (416) 588-4646
  Fax: (416) 534-3686

- Ruth Baldwin
  Plain Writing Services
  893 Watson Street
  Ottawa, Ontario
  K2B 6B8
  (613) 726-0553

- Business Forms Management Association, Inc.
  Forms and Graphic Management Group
  Supply and Services Canada
  Ottawa, Ontario
  (819) 956-3145

- Frontier College
  35 Jackes Avenue
  Toronto, Ontario
  M4T 1H2
  (416) 923-3591

- Simplified Communications Group
  11 Bishop Street
  Toronto, Ontario
  M5R 1N3
  Tel: (416) 963-9220
  Fax: (416) 963-9351

- Lois Browne
  Researcher, Writer, Editor
  227 Rusholme Road
  Toronto, Ontario
  (416) 538-8131

- Society for Technical Communication
  - Ontario Chapter
  Box 1816, Station C
  Kitchener, Ontario
  N2G 4R3

Plain Writing Guides

Clear Writing and Literacy, Ontario Literacy Coalition. This guide was produced by Ruth Baldwin. It discusses how to recognize clear writing, how to use it, and how to convince others to use it. The guide is available from the Ontario Literacy Coalition, 365 Bloor St. E., Suite #1003, Toronto, Ontario, M4W 3M7. $15.00

Clear Language in the Saskatchewan Government. This brief guide was produced by the Department of Consumer and Commercial Affairs. It explains the principles of plain language and presents techniques to use when writing in Clear Language. It is available from the Saskatchewan Property Management Corporation, 110 Henderson Dr., Regina, Saskatchewan, S4P 3V7. $2.00

Writing Clearly – A Contemporary Approach, by Edward P. Bailey Jr. This guide is available from the publisher, Charles E. Merrill, Columbus, Ohio.

Clear Lines: How to Compose and Design Clear Language Documents for the Workplace, by Gordon W.E. Nore. This guide presents techniques for improving the quality of writing in the workplace. Both the author and Frontier College are known for their work in the area of literacy. The guide is available from Frontier College, 35 Jackes Avenue, Toronto, M4T 1H2. There is also a videotape that accompanies the guide, entitled "The Clear Writer's Hit Squad."

Newsletters

Simply Stated. Washington, D.C.:
Document Design Center
American Institutes for Research
3333 K Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20007

General Resource Materials

Barnett, Robert. Forms for the General Public: Do They Really Work? Background paper prepared for the Symposium on Information Resource Management Association. Toronto: May 1988.

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Appendix I

✍ A Sumple Plain Language Project

A ministry wants to improve the usability of eight forms. The work plan or organization of the project might look something like this.

There are four phases to the project:

Phase I:	Analysis, Review and Evaluation of Current Forms and Information Needs
Phase II:	Design and Development of Simplified Forms
Phase III:	Testing of Revised Forms
Phase IV:	Changes to Forms Based on Test Results

Specific tasks to be accomplished in each phase are discussed below.

Phase I: Analysis/Review/Evaluation

A. Creation of Work Group

At the outset of the project, a work group is established with representatives from systems, operations, legal, and forms control and design. The purpose of the work group is to make sure that key areas of the organization affected by the form or document are involved in the process.

B. Orientation Meeting

An orientation meeting will be held to introduce work group members to the goals and objectives of the project.

C. On-site Needs Assessment

Needs will be identified by:

- observing the current systems, operation, and distribution procedures;
- viewing actual development, generation, processing and auditing of forms;
- identifying problems, needs, and opportunities for improvement.

Data will be gathered to analyze areas that result in errors, delays, and complaints.

D. Research Review

Research information is critical to develop a benchmark for the cost/benefit analysis at the end of the project.

We will choose five or six key variables and obtain benchmark data for these variables. Variables might include:

- average production, development, and distribution costs

- average form completion and processing time

- average counter staff time spent explaining or filling in forms

- mean error rates

- cost of error corrections

- number of inquiries and complaints.

E. **Public testing of current forms**

The eight forms will be tested with the public using scenario testing. Fifty people will be tested.

Phase II: Development of New Forms

A. **Concept and Structure**

Based on the information gathered in the analysis and testing, recommendations for the structure of the revised forms will be created. These recommendations will include:

- recommended sizes and formats,

- consolidated information,

- logical sequence and organization of information,

- design grid, and

- samples of plain language text.

B. Development of Prototypes

Once the concepts have been approved, prototype forms will be developed.

The prototypes will be submitted to the work group for review and a round of changes made based upon comments and suggestions.

Phase III: Testing of Revised Forms

Scenario Testing

The prototype forms will be tested on target users to ensure understandability and to discover any hidden problems. A sample of fifty will be used.

Phase IV: Revisions Based on Tests

After the test, additional revisions will be made to the forms based on the test results.

Appendix II

✍ A Sample Plain Language Training Plan

LITERACY BRANCH
Plain Language Implementation Plan
1992/93

The Interministerial Committee recommended that plain language become the common language used throughout the Ontario Government.

All staff in the Literacy Branch are committed to developing the skills necessary to change our behaviour in the way we communicate.

Our implementation plan is intended to achieve practical results which will reflect our commitment to plain language.

This plan has been developed in light of policy, objectives and implementation strategies recommended by the Interministerial Committee.

Objective:

To help Literacy Branch staff to:

- apply plain language and design to all written materials
- improve customer service and the work environment
- increase efficiency and reduce waste.

Focus of Action:

INTERNAL:

1. **Definition of Needs and Staff Training**
   - plain language training
   - resource material and tools
   - follow-up support
2. **Resource Material Development**
3. **Planning and Review**
   - build plain language review into annual planning process for new and existing materials

4. **Development/Revision of Materials**

- high priority items compiled by managers in an annual plan
- revise existing materials and forms
- new materials

5. **Monitoring and Evaluation**

- follow up on progress and need for support

EXTERNAL

Advocacy

- stakeholders in literacy community
- other branches/ministries
- translators
- consultants

1. **Definition of Needs and Staff Training**

- 1 1/2 day plain language workshop run by outside expert for all staff and incorporate into orientation session for new staff.
- Individual training sessions for staff as required.

- Follow-up with plain language consultant, as required, for individual training and/or specific projects.

- Provide reference/resource material for branch and individuals:
  - reference manuals on plain writing
  - clear and simple style guidelines for layout, length, design and type for memos, letters, briefing notes, and background papers based on maximum use of WordPerfect software.

- Other professional development:
  - presentations from staff on completed projects in branch
  - outside training/refresher courses i.e. training in desk top publishing layout, design and style.

2. Resource Material Development

- Branch to produce a two part resource:
  Part 1 - Managers' Guide on Implementation
  Part 2 - User's Guide
  As well as a training and resource guide to be given to each staff on style, rules and protocols for the branch's writing style.

3. Planning and Review

- Identify plain language as a communications skill in the job descriptions for all new staff.

- Identify plain language as priority for staff training and commit the required time and budget.

- Establish the amount of time required to develop a document and ensure staff time is committed.

- Develop a plain language review process for all new materials, ensuring there is enough time for consultation, testing and feedback.

- Negotiate required preparation time in line with deadlines.

- Ensure on-going consultation with literacy community re plain language policy and development of materials.

- Identify material for testing/consultation; develop a schedule for revision of existing material.

- Develop guidelines for the use of a plain language writing style by all outside consultants - ensure a clause exists in all consulting contracts.

- Identify lead position in the branch to co-ordinate overall implementation of the plan with regular progress reports to branch management.

4. **Development/Revision of Materials**

The following are the projects in priority order for revision:

- Labour Adjustment grant application
- MIS User's Manual
- Minister's correspondence, briefings and letters
- OCL grant applications
- OBS grant applications
- OBSW

The first project will serve as a pilot project to demonstrate the benefits of plain language.

5. **Monitoring and Evaluation**

- Collect samples of revised material and new material using plain language for specific refresher training with consultant.
- Review/test revised/new material - build into branch review process.
- Branch evaluation after six months on progress, best practices, experiences, cost/benefits.
- On-going consultation with literacy community re plain language policy and development of materials.
- Identify need for further staff training/support.

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