PLAIN LANGUAGE
PLAYBOOK

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INTRODUCTION

Think back to a time when you received unclear directions. Maybe you took a wrong turn, ended up at a dead end or got lost completely. Frustrating, right?

In the public sector, we are charged with providing clear information, updates and directions to our constituents – they make up our roadmaps for navigating our programmes and services. And when our citizens get muddled information or poor directions due to unclear language, everybody suffers.

That's where plain language comes in. It's an important tool in this effort to give constituents good information, and has shown substantial results in saving customers time, resources and most of all: headaches that result from confusion.

The process for using plain language to create content is more than merely "dumbing it down".

By putting yourself in your audience's position and being thoughtful about the words you choose to communicate, you'll see an increase in the value of your content to your readers - who will be able to understand your messages the first time without confusion.

When we assume that our readers' time is valuable (and limited), we can make simple changes that can have a great impact. In some instances, words can be replaced altogether by a picture.

In Granicus' new Plain Language Playbook, we'll explore ways to apply plain language principles to public sector content. Conveying information in simple terms can reduce confusion, increase understanding, and significantly improve the "citizen experience".

> A recent report looked at 191 local authorities' websites and found that 82% of the information checked was "confusing readers by failing to use plain English". Only two of the websites had no more than 5% of sentences with more than 25 words - a key part of the government's "mandatory" plain language guidelines.
>
> **Plain English Campaign**

THE PROCESS FOR IMPLEMENTING PLAIN LANGUAGE IS SIMPLE:

PART 1: PLAN

PART 2: ORGANISE

PART 3: WRITE

PART 4: REVIEW

PART 5: REPEAT

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PART 1: PLAN

While planning may be the most important step in the plain language process, it is arguably the one we skip over the most. Sometimes, we forget to ask ourselves the following question before creating something for readers: Why am I writing this?

Understanding the purpose or mission of a piece of content is critical. Why are you creating it and what are your measures of "success"?

Once you've identified the purpose of your content, use this flowchart to help you move on to the next phase.

Knowing your audience is crucial to creating meaningful, valuable content. By putting yourself in your readers' shoes, you'll be able to determine what information they need to know and what you can leave out.

Having an understanding of who your readers are will also influence the tone and structure of your document, and can help you better appeal to your audience's needs.

One of the best ways to save your readers time is by giving preemptive answers to questions they might have, like:

• Where can they go to get more information?

• Who can they call if they have questions?

• What are the next steps, if any?

• Can they expect to hear from you again on this topic?

Planning a piece of content in the plain language process is about asking yourself key questions that will help you later as you identify what information is relevant and how it should be organised. We'll get into that next!

Planning Plain Language Flow Chart

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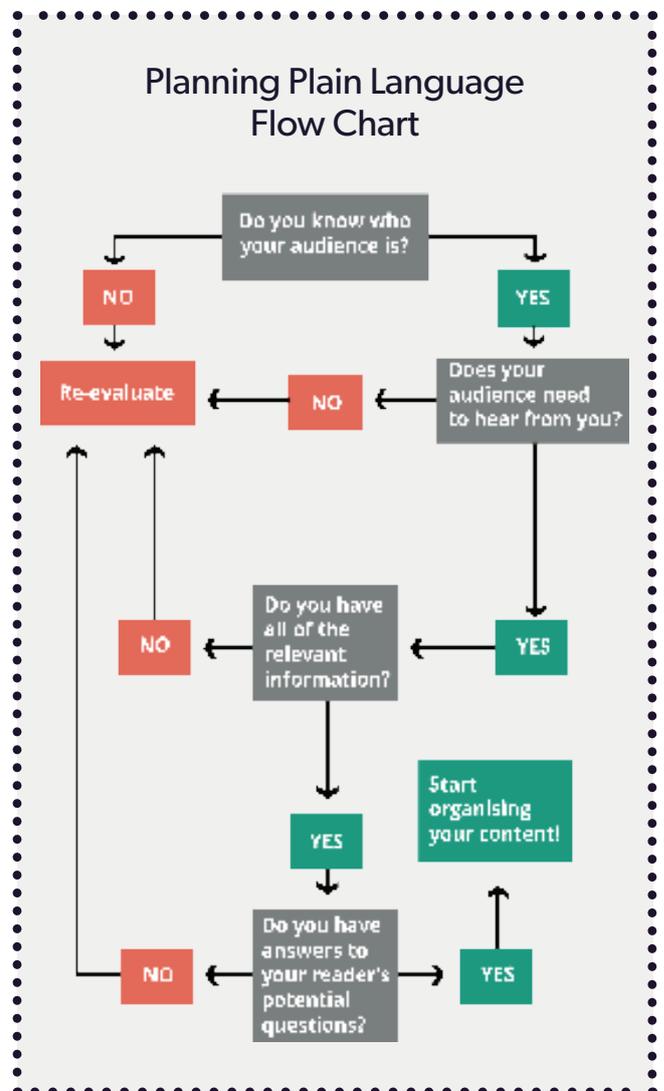
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In the planning phase, the writer should mostly be thinking about the reader: determining their possible questions or challenges, and beginning to develop a plan for how they will address them in the communication. The goal of the organisation phase is to draft an outline, and it starts with identifying the information you need, arranging it in a logical order and then filling in the gaps.

CHOOSE WHAT'S NECESSARY

First, identify your key message: What is your main point? From here on, only choose the content that supports that point. Consider what your reader absolutely needs to know. If it is necessary, keep it! If not, ditch it. You'll be surprised how much information you'll end up eliminating when you put yourself in your readers' shoes.

Former education secretary, Michael Gove, has urged civil servants to use plain language to make government communication more comprehensible. Here is one of his examples of making things simpler:

BEFORE: "The policy that we are introducing is intended to drive a change in behaviours on the part of teachers with respect to the poorest and most disadvantaged children and young people."

AFTER: "The policy will change how teachers behave towards poorer students."

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 the following questions:

Do my readers need to read multiple adjectives to understand who I'm talking about? Can I cut words out by using a more direct statement?

If you're drafting an email message, consider that according to a recent Boomerang study, "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 we create, it is important to bring your key message to the very top: captivate your reader right away and let them know why they should continue reading. Then, list the related groups of information to determine the most logical order to present them.

Consider your conclusion: Is it a call to action ("send this form to this address listed below")? Or a statement of what your reader should expect ("we will be contacting you in the next 10 business days")? Or, is it an open ending with contact info if required ("contact our main office with any questions")?

FILL IN THE GAPS

Once you've completed your outline, you might need to fill in some gaps in information before you can start writing. Determine where you can find the missing info and identify a reasonable deadline.

Now you have a great starting point: a draft outline. It is important to remember that your outline can change, and that creating a second, third or even fourth draft is okay - even encouraged! The more we refine our drafts, the better our end result will be.

From here, you're set to begin writing your first draft with the plain language process.

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PART 3: WRITE

Before drafting a piece of content, you must have a solid understanding of your readers, have all of the necessary information including the key message, and be able to preempt and answer your readers' questions. While plain language is considered a writing process, you can follow some basic writing tips which will help your reader understand what you are trying to say the first time they read your message.

USE PERSONAL PRONOUNS

Help readers see themselves in the text. Use words like "I, me, we, our, ours, you and yours".

USE THE ACTIVE VOICE

By using the active voice, the attention is on the doer of an action rather than the receiver of the action. Example: "Harry posted the letter" (active) vs. "The letter was posted by Harry" (passive).

USE SHORT SENTENCES

Strive for 10-25 words per sentence, and keep each sentence to one thought or two tightly connected thoughts. Keep in mind that paragraphs can be one sentence.

USE YOUR READERS' WORDS

Avoid using complex language or government jargon. They are barriers to understanding and limit the impact of your message.

TIPS FOR WRITING WEB CONTENT
Here are some things you should consider:

1 READING PATTERN

People follow an F-shaped reading pattern when scanning content on the web. It's important you put your main message and call to action in the title, summary and first paragraph of your body copy.

2 MEANINGFUL TITLE

Think about the search terms people will be using and use that language. Make sure your title is front-loaded with key words; Google uses the first 65 characters for its search algorithms.

3 MORE INFORMATION

Make sure you clearly direct your reader to more resources when appropriate. Consider including call to action buttons using the imperative. For example: "Register now >", "Submit your vote >", "Contact us >".

For more tips on creating digital content, check out the Government Digital Service's style guide.

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Once you've put your content in the best possible order, have answered your readers' questions and have remembered to write in short, precise sentences, you're ready to edit and review your content to ensure it's clear and easily understood.

LET THE REVIEW PROCESS WORK FOR YOU

When drafting an important piece of content for your audience, the review process is important for ensuring you have all the right messages. It is not uncommon to overthink or overanalyse information, so it could be helpful to take a break and step away from what you're writing for some period of time. Reviewing something you wrote with "fresh eyes" can help you spot things you missed, or items you may be able to remove.

Another option is to let a colleague or friend review your piece and provide feedback. See if your organisation's communications team can help review your content.

When you're ready, test your content. Ask someone to read it and explain what the main message is. You can also use free online tools like Grammarly to monitor readability, spelling and grammar as you write.

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. Use straight formatting, a good amount of white space and the right balance of colour and imagery to get your message across immediately.

The example to the right shows how Kirklees Council uses consistent formatting and placement of imagery and text to help readers follow the content of its email bulletins.

Tip: Remember that formatting can help a reader understand your message and easily follow your content. Use bullet points and clean formatting with straight alignment to help break up large pieces of content.
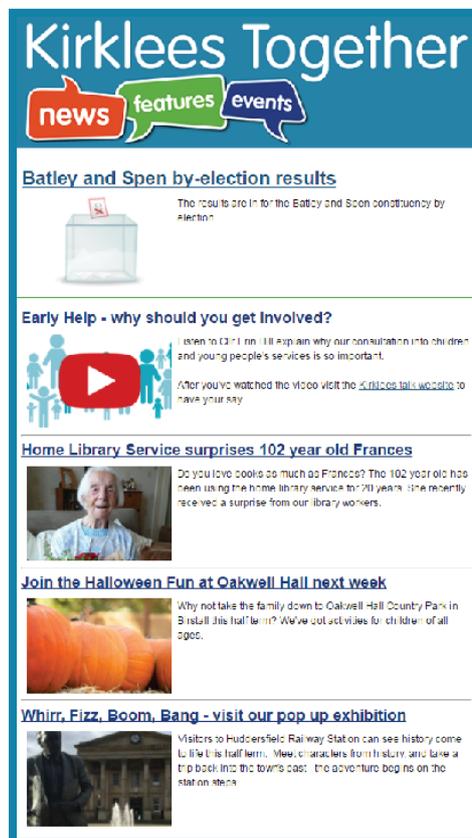
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PART 5: REPEAT

With over 3,000 government organisations using Granicus to send billions of communications a year, we know that plain language can contribute to metrics like open rates, engagement rates and click rates. The clearer your message, the more likely you are to engage an audience and make an impact in their lives.

A FEW IMPORTANT THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND AS YOU USE PLAIN LANGUAGE IN YOUR COMMUNICATIONS

1

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 George Orwell put it: "Good prose should be transparent - like a window pane".

2

Plain language isn't always enough

It's all well and good mastering your use of plain language, but without the right tools to engage your target audience, you won't achieve much. Make sure you are communicating on the channels and devices your audience is using.

3

Put plain language to the test

The best way to find out if plain language works for your audience is to test documents with usability testing. Try A/B testing different headlines based on plain language principles and see what leads to the best engagement rates.

Good luck on your plain language journey! 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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Here is a summary of the steps you can take to produce impactful communications using plain language principles.

PART 1: PLAN

☐ Ask yourself: Why am I writing this? Explain your purpose, and be specific on the mission of your content.

☐ Understand your readers: Who are you trying to engage?

☐ Put yourself in their shoes: What challenges or opportunities are they facing?

☐ Determine what your readers want to hear: Try to preempt and answer your readers' questions.

PART 2: ORGANISE

☐ Gather the relevant information you need.

☐ Identify key messages, and only keep what is absolutely necessary.

PART 3: WRITE

☐ Develop a headline that will grab the reader's attention but which stays true to your main message.

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

PART 4: REVIEW

☐ Have a friend or colleague read your content and ask for feedback.

☐ Empathise with your reader: Have you answered their likely questions?

PART 5: REPEAT

☐ Keep testing your messaging to see what works best. It's okay to continually refine or change what you're doing to get better and better results over time.