Strategy Overview: Plain Language

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What is it?

A strategy to make the wording, structure, and design of what you are writing so clear that the intended reader can easily find what they need, understand what they need, and use that information.

How does it help?

Writing using plain language increases the likelihood your co-workers, supervisors and customers will understand what you want to communicate the first time they read it. This prevents misunderstandings, improves customer service, and can save time and money.

About plain language:

- Plain language in writing is supported across different workplaces. Even the Government of Canada recommends the use of plain language in all its publications.
- Plain language focuses on what the **reader needs to know** instead of what the writer wants to say. It is important to know who the reader is.

Features of plain language writing include:

- Simple, short, common words.
- Sentences containing just one idea.
- Short paragraphs with the most important information in the first sentence.
- Lists and/or bullets (see the Strategy for Success: Bulleted Text for more information).
- Numbers in lists of instructions.
- A positive tone.
- An active voice (e.g., "Esa balanced the budget" not "The budget was balanced by Esa").

Plain language also:

- Avoids or explains technical terms and "jargon".
- Avoids double negatives (e.g., "They said something" not "They didn't say nothing").

Here are some suggestions to keep your writing language plain.

Instead of	Use
In the event of	If
Accomplish	Do
Utilize	Use
It is requested of you	Please
At the present time	Now
Due to the fact that	Because
Policy of the company	Company policy
The policy will not be ineffective	The policy will be effective

- Plain language includes the words you use and how you present them on the page.
- Using headings and subheadings, underlining, colour, and choice of font can all help make your writing easier to read. For more information on layout, see the *Strategy for Success: Formatting Clues.*

Example 1: Message to a co-worker

This recently introduced policy does not appear to be sufficiently understood by senior management dispersed across multiple territories, regardless of the fact that this group has a primary responsibility for implementation of said policy.

> **Plain language version** (uses fewer words, active voice)
> *The managers who are most responsible for carrying out this policy don't seem to understand how to apply it.*

Example 2: Company internet policy

Job-related uses of the internet include accessing external databases, libraries, newspapers, newsletters, magazines, bulletin boards or encyclopedias to obtain reference information or conduct research; corresponding with colleagues, government clients, and vendors; professional and career development; and provision of information to the public. Using the internet for any activities that are not job related (e.g., surfing or browsing for material of personal interest) is not acceptable.

> **Plain language version** (uses fewer words, bullets to cluster related ideas, positive tone)
> *Please use the internet to make your work more effective. This includes using it to:*
> - *Do research.*
> - *Correspond with colleagues, clients, or vendors.*
> - *Develop your career.*
> - *Provide public information.*

Please browse only for job-related purposes rather than personal interests

Example 3: Public notice

In the event of an unexpected flammable event, ensure that you are alone in the affected area before vacating, and most important, immediately activate the alarm by the laboratory's only door.

> **Plain language version** (uses fewer and simpler words, numbers the items in a list, puts most important information first)
>
> *IN CASE OF FIRE:*
> 1. *Pull the alarm by the door.*
> 2. *Check if others are in the lab.*
> 3. *Leave.*

Strategy Practice

Use the space below to answer the following question.

Look at the paragraph below taken from a medical study consent form. Rewrite it using a plain language approach. Write your version in the space provided.

"We greatly appreciate your assistance in providing information only about your own hospital experience, not the experiences of others. Following your agreement, you will be contacted by an interviewer to visit you in your home or another mutually convenient place. Any issues you consider to have been the most important to your feelings of satisfaction will be discussed. The interviewer will take notes which will be taken away to be put together with all the other information we collect which will all be anonymized. The second stage of the study will be to mail out the questionnaires for all of the volunteers to complete and then mail back to us within a specified period of time, likely one month. Your participation is essential to the continuous improvement of institutional operations and patient satisfaction."

Strategy Answer Key

Now check your answers using the answer key.

Below is an example of a plain language rewrite. Compare this response to your own. This is one example of how to use plain language. Exact answers may vary.

Thank you for agreeing to tell us about your hospital experience. Here is some information to help you prepare:

- *An interviewer will contact you to set up a time to talk.*
- *Interviews can be in person or by phone.*
- *Issues important to your feelings of satisfaction will be discussed.*
- *Notes from your interview will be combined with those from other participants.*
- *Your identity will not be revealed.*

One month after your interview, we will mail you a questionnaire to complete and send back to us.

Thank you again. Your help makes us better able to serve you.

References

Documents are not official versions and may have been modified or adapted for training purposes.

NWT Literacy Council. (2015, November 2). *Write for your Reader* [PDF]. Retrieved January 25th 2023 from:https://www.nwtliteracy.ca/sites/default/files/resources/write_for_your_reader_1_dec_2015.pdf

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