**Plain Language Writing**

Creating a Powerful Message

Handout created by Christine Ackerley

What is Plain Language? 1

How to turn on readability statistics for Microsoft Word (PC & Mac) 2

Understanding Readability Scores 2

Substitution Page 3

Editing Checklist (a work in progress) 4

Workshop exercise 6

Resources & Endnotes 8

About Christine Ackerley 9

What is Plain Language? Reader-focused writing

*My favourite definition:*

- Plain language means using clear wording and design, so your intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.[[1]](#endnote-1)

*Other definitions that might speak to you:*

- Plain language (also called Plain English) is communication your audience can understand the first time they read or hear it. Language that is plain to one set of readers may not be plain to others.[[2]](#endnote-2)

- Plain language is a technique of organizing information in ways that make sense to the reader. Plain language is thinking about your reader first and foremost and using language that is appropriate for your audience's reading skills.[[3]](#endnote-3)

- Plain language uses straightforward, concrete, familiar words. You can use these techniques to adapt your message for the people who are likely to read your document. Plain language also involves using examples that relate to your reader's experience.[[4]](#endnote-4)

- Plain language is a variable, not an absolute... we can and should define it as language [our readers] can understand, language that gives readers the information they need... Insofar as our readers vary, so too will "plainness" vary.[[5]](#endnote-5)

How to turn on readability statistics for Microsoft Word (PC & Mac)

\*Note: These steps may differ depending on your version of MS Word software. Many other guides are available online.s

**PC:**

1. Click the **File** tab, and then click **Options**.
2. Click **Proofing**.
3. Under “**When correcting spelling and grammar in Word,”** make sure the **Check grammar with spelling** check box is selected.
4. Select **Show readability statistics**.[[6]](#endnote-6)

**Mac:**

1. Click “**Word**” in the top menu bar
2. Click **Preferences**
3. Select **Spelling & Grammar**
4. Under Grammar, check the box for “**Show Readability Statistics**”

After you enable this feature, open your file, and run a spell check. When Word finishes checking the spelling and grammar, it displays information about the reading level of the document.

Understanding Readability Scores

When writing, aim for the following measures:

- Grade Level: No higher than grade 9 (and lower is better)

- Passive Sentences: **0%** (and no more than 15%)

- Sentences per paragraph: **2.5 - 3.5**

Depending on the style of writing, this number might be higher. But ask yourself – why not break up that long paragraph? It makes your document more readable

- Words per sentence: **12-20** (and never more than 35)

- Characters per word: **4.4 - 4.6**

Each readability test uses the average number of syllables per word and words per sentence. Note that these ratings work better with texts at least 400 words long.

**- Flesch Reading Ease test**

This test rates text on a 100-point scale. The higher the score, the easier it is to understand the document. For most standard files, you want the score to be between **60 and 70**.[[7]](#endnote-7)

- **Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level test**

This test rates text on a U.S. school grade level. For example, a score of 8.0 means that an eighth grader can understand the document. For most documents, aim for a score of approximately **7.0 to 8.0**.

ALTERNATIVE: Use the online “Hemingway App” http://www.hemingwayapp.com/

Substitution Page [[8]](#endnote-8)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Instead of | Use |
| A greater degree of; a greater proportion of | More |
| A large proportion of | Many |
| A majority of | Most |
| Adequate number of; sufficient number of | Enough |
| Advance planning | Planning |
| After this is accomplished | Then |
| At a later date | Later |
| At all times | Always |
| At the time that | When |
| At this point in time; at the present time; at present | Now |
| By means of | By |
| Carry out an examination of | Examine |
| Effect an improvement to | Improve |
| Ensure maintenance of | Maintain |
| For the duration of | During; throughout |
| Give consideration to | Consider |
| In accordance with | According to |
| In advance of; prior to | Before |
| In connection with; concerning the matter of; with reference to; in regards to | About |
| In lieu of | Instead of |
| In order to; in an effort to; as a means to; for the purpose of | To |
| In spite of (the fact that) | Although; despite |
| In the absence of | Without |
| In the event that; in the event of; assuming that; provided that | If |
| Make an enquiry | Enquire |
| Make use of | Use |
| On the grounds that; as a result of; due to the fact that; in light of the fact that; by virtue of the fact that; owing to the fact that | Because |
| To begin by saying that | First, |

Editing Checklist [[9]](#endnote-9)

*Get rid of:*

* **Passive sentences:** if you can ask “by whom?” after a sentence, it’s probably passive.

*Engagement measures will be implemented to ensure commitment (by whom?)*

* **Passive “There are”:**

*Not:* ***There are*** *two hospitals in Ontario currently providing in-patient care.*

*But: Two hospitals in Ontario currently provide in-patient care.*

*Not:* ***There was*** *a school board meeting last night.*

*But: The school board met last night.*

* **Empty/passive “it”:** Using “it” as the actor effectively turns it into a passive verb, for example: ***It*** *has been said (*🡨*by whom?)*

*Not:* ***It*** *is not an important plan.*

*But:* *The plan is not important.*

* **Repeated words close together:** It usually sounds jarring to readers. For example: *There will be several dynamic sessions run by dynamic instructors.*
* **Unnecessary “that”:** Try todelete “that,” but only if the sentence reads well without it. Dropping “that” often makes for smoother reading, especially in shorter sentences.
* **Lazy verbs:** Make, do, take, have, had, give, gave, use, came and similar words can often be replaced with more active, descriptive verbs.

*Not: He* ***makes*** *money. Not: She* ***made*** *a cup of coffee.*

*But: He* ***earns*** *money. But: She* ***brewed*** *a cup of coffee.*

*Not: I will* ***take action****. Not: I haven’t* ***given*** *it consideration.*

*But: I will* ***act.*** *But: I haven’t* ***considered it.***

* **Weak “–ing” words:** Words that end in **“**–ing” are usually weaker than strong, direct verbs.

*Not: He is* ***facing*** *life in prison*

*But: He* ***faces*** *life in prison.*

*Not:* ***Reducing*** *mission creep would minimize police use of force.*

*But: Police must* ***reduce*** *mission creep to minimize the use of force.*

* **Uncommon acronyms:**

*Not: The* ***EDFO*** *is trying to open up a transition home for adults.*

*But: The* ***organization*** *is trying to open up a transition home for adults.*

* **Capitalization:** Don’t capitalize words unless they are a name or proper noun (this is my pet peeve). *Ottawa, the ~~City~~* ***city****, is in crisis. The ~~Big Fish~~* ***big fish*** *on Wall Street.*

Add your own reminders:

* **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**
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Practice exercise

* + - 1. *Pick one or more of these samples below (or use your own), and rewrite in plain language.*
      2. *Your reader is the person next to you.*
      3. *It doesn’t have to be perfect or beautiful – explore the editing checklist and look for ways to simply!*

**a)** The majority of proponents of community-based learning have argued that students will be more interested in the subjects and concepts being taught, and they will be more inspired to learn, in the event that academic study is connected to concepts, issues, and contexts that are more familiar. It has been argued by advocates that teachers can improve the knowledge retention of students if they can be given more opportunities apply learning in practical, real-life settings. (Grade 12 reading level, 37.5 words per sentence, 5.3 characters per word)

**b)** Once a situation or event is terminated, it is a good business practice to regroup key staff and stakeholders as soon as possible after the event concludes to identify areas for improvement of the event and to identify key lessons learned. A report will be created, giving consideration to how its recommendations could be implemented in future events. The report is to be shared nationally and on a constructive basis to enhance the Department’s emergency management capabilities. (Grade 12 reading level, 18 words per sentence, 5.6 characters per word)

**c)** The purpose of the Citizen Engagement (CE) Framework is to help guide the Institute in developing a cohesive and consistent approach to engaging citizens in its research processes. The term 'citizen engagement' has been adopted because the essence of "engagement" is far more active than traditionally passive public consultation in its recognition of the capacity of citizens to discuss and generate options independently. (Grade 12 reading level, 31.5 words per sentence, 5.6 characters per word)

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Resources & Endnotes

* + - * *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction* by William Zinsser
      * *The Sense Of Style: The Thinking Person’s Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*By Steven Pinker
      * *Writing with Style*by John R. Trimble
      * *Writing for the Information Age* by Bruce Ross-Larson
      * Hemmingway App <http://www.hemingwayapp.com/>

About Christine Ackerley

Christine wants to live in a world where everyone does what they love and we harness the power of research to drive meaningful change. As a graduate of Carleton University’s journalism program, she’s spent the last four years asking questions and listening to people’s stories.

Fuelled by love of learning and lots of coffee, Christine has been recognized with many scholarships and awards for work both on and off campus. When she’s not in the library surrounded by precarious piles of books, you can find Christine planning her next travel adventure or listening to TED Talks.

Christine’s diverse interests are tied together by her fascination with communication. This year, Christine worked as a “knowledge mobilization” research assistant at Carleton. In this role, she strove to strengthen connections between campus and community groups. She’s also worked with the Centre for Women in Politics and Public Leadership, and supported the research communication and courses. Her other extracurricular passions include mentoring junior journalism students, debating, volunteering with Fall Orientation week, and ski instructing.

This fall, Christine is pursuing her master’s degree in communications at Simon Fraser University. She’s excited to focus her research on communications problems around health and technology.

Please feel free to get in touch!

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1. Adapted from the International Plain Language Working Group’s definition in *Links from Plain Language and Knowledge Mobilization Lunch and Learn* by**Peter Levesque** <http://www.knowledgemobilization.net/archives/7591> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN) <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/site/about.cfm> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. From *An Introduction to Plain Language* By **Cheryl Stephens** <http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/stephens/whatisplain.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. From *Plain Language: Clear and Simple* by The Office of the Minister of Multiculturalism and Citizenship of Canada [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. From **Coe, Richard M**. (1992) "Three Approaches to 'Plain Language': Better, Best and Better than Nothing", In *Proceedings*: Just Language Conference 1992. (pp. 99-109) Vancouver, BC: The Plain Language Institute [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. <https://support.office.com/en-us/article/Test-your-documents-readability-85b4969e-e80a-4777-8dd3-f7fc3c8b3fd2> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. <https://support.office.com/en-us/article/Test-your-documents-readability-85b4969e-e80a-4777-8dd3-f7fc3c8b3fd2> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Adapted from <http://centerforplainlanguage.org/an-instant-way-to-shorten-your-sentences/> , On writing well, <http://www.btb.termiumplus.gc.ca/tcdnstyl-chap?lang=eng&lettr=chapsect13&info0=13> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Inspired by and adapted from courses and resources created by **Dr. John Kelly** at Carleton University [↑](#endnote-ref-9)