wisconsin literacy
health · workforce · community

Plain Language Opens Doors

Kimberly Wild and Shannon Mason Young
Wisconsin Literacy

About Wisconsin Literacy

Leading Literacy Forward

Mission
Changing lives by strengthening literacy statewide.

Vision
All people in Wisconsin have the literacy skills to reach their full potential.

wisconsin literacy
health · workforce · community

Training Competencies

- ❑ Explain the benefits of using plain language in your workplace.
- ❑ Review writing samples and use plain language strategies to improve readability.
- ❑ Use plain language strategies in formatting, word choice, and grammar to create effective and easy to read documents.

Plain Language is

- communication your audience understands **the first time** they read or hear it

- defined by results: your audience can
  - ✓find what they need
  - ✓understand what they find
  - ✓use what they find to meet their needs

wisconsin literacy
health · workforce · community

What communication challenges do you face at work?

- ❑ Miscommunications sometimes lead to interoffice conflict.
- ❑ I often have to fix mistakes when people don't act on my requests.
- ❑ I don’t get requested information by the date I need it.
- ❑ I often send multiple reminders for my requests.

Know Your Audience

- Who is your audience?
- Why is this message important to your audience?
- What does your audience need to do?

Plain Language: Respectful & Empowering

"According to the fasting plasma glucose test, the levels of glucose in your blood are elevated. Individuals that are diagnosed with type 2 diabetes do not naturally produce enough insulin to allow proper function of the body."

Plain Language: Respectful & Empowering

"You have type 2 diabetes, so your body is not working the way it should. You can do a lot of things to help your body work better."

Benefits of Plain Language

- ✓ Save time and money by getting your message across faster.
- ✓ Spend less time explaining, prompting, and fixing mistakes.
- ✓ Motivate your readers to act quickly and accurately.
- ✓ Improve translated documents.

wisconsin literacy
health · workforce · community

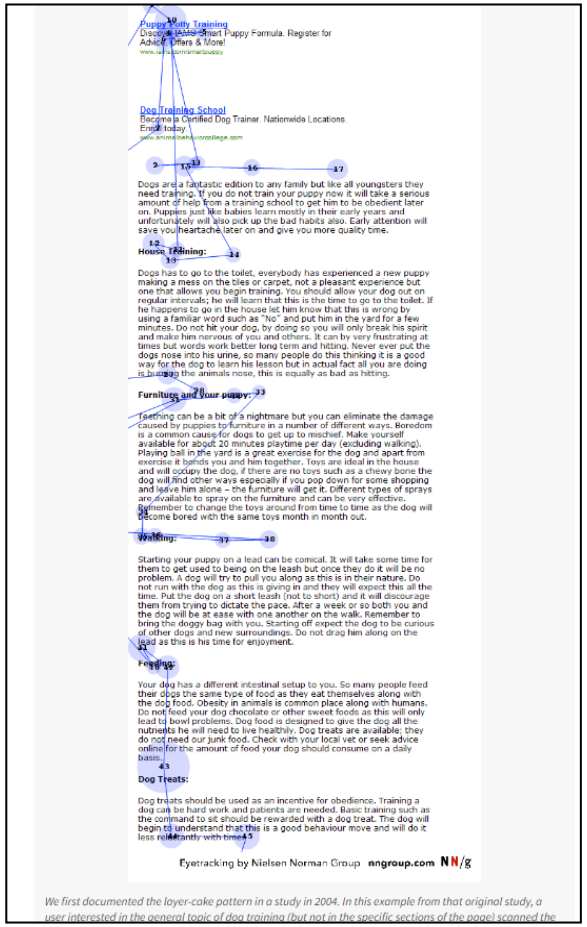
Plain Language Goals

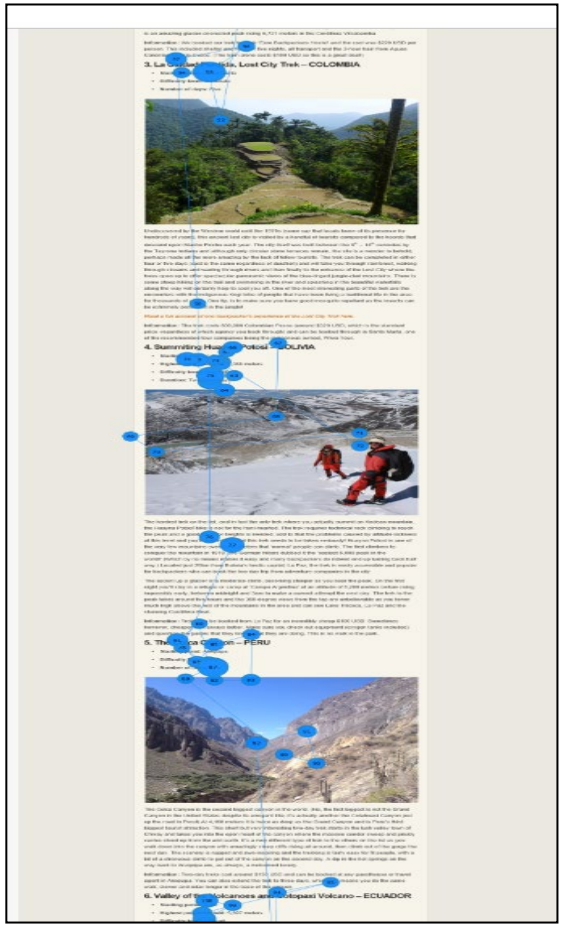
Your audience can understand the message the first time.

Your message motivates your audience to:

1. read or listen.
2. act.

Most Important Information First





Nielson Norman Group

wisconsin literacy
health · workforce · community

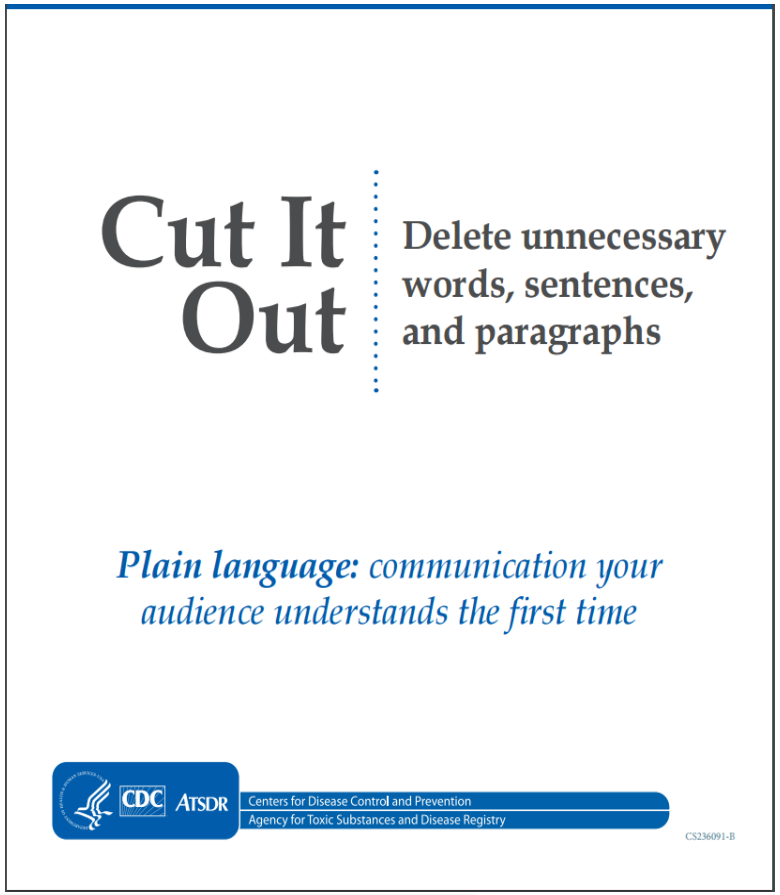
Simplify

- **Challenge every word**
- **Cut out excess modifiers**
  absolutely, actually, completely, really, quite, totally, very
- **Take out words that are redundant**
  guidance and assistance, end result
- **Free your hidden verbs**

Simplify

It has come to our attention that it will be necessary for you to provide further documentation verifying your address.

Please send proof of your address.



wisconsin literacy
health · workforce · community

Avoid Nominalization

Give a description of → **Describe**

Some schools raised the question as to whether the proposed schedule change would be agreed to by the district.

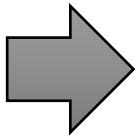
Some schools asked if the district would agree to the proposed schedule change.

Free Your Hidden Verb

Give a description of		**Describe**
Reach a decision		**Decide**
Took into consideration		Considered
Make an announcement		**Announce**
Make a choice		Choose
Caused disruptions		**Disrupted**

Simplify Phrases

Watch out for “of,” “to,” “on,” and other prepositions

a number of		**several, many**
at this point in time		now
is able to		**can**
on a monthly basis		monthly
an amount of X		**X**
be responsible for		must
in order to		**to**

https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/words/use-simple-words-phrases/

wisconsin literacy
health · workforce · community

Avoid Fillers

It is your engagement coach who will contact you to schedule a mid-year conference.

Your engagement coach will contact you to schedule a mid-year conference.

There are 3 assistants who will help out in the community room.

Three assistants will help out in the community room.

Sample Text

In order to process your recent application for enrollment, it is important that we have all required documentation to verify address, income, and general eligibility requirements.

It has come to our attention that we cannot process your application because it is incomplete, missing proof of current address. Our office must verify your address with a current lease, utility bill or medical bill in order to move forward with the application verification process and finalize your enrollment. So that we may assist you promptly, please fax necessary documentation to the number listed below the signature line as soon as you are able.

Sample Text

Please fax proof of your address to 111-222-3333.

You can fax a:

- lease,
- utility bill, or
- medical bill

After you fax proof of your address, we can complete your application.

Motivate Individual Readers

What does your reader need to do?

- Start with the action, not the justification

Use the active voice

- A subject performs and action

Talk directly to your reader

- Say “I,” “you” and “we”

Use a positive, conversational tone

- Focus on what your audience can do

Passive to Active

by zombies

The sealed envelope must then be sent via express mail to the address below.

Send the sealed envelope to: _____. Use express mail.

Sentences

Word order matters:

- **subject** → **verb** → **object**
- Keep subjects and objects close to their verbs

Sentences

If any member of the board retires, the company, at the discretion of the board, and after notice from the chairman of the board to all the members of the board at least 30 days before executing this option, may buy, and the retiring member must sell, the member's interest in the company.

The company may buy a retiring member's interest.

https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/concise/keep-the-subject-verb-and-object-close-together/

Word Choice

- Use words and numbers your audience knows
- Don’t use acronyms
- Teach terminology
- Use the command form or the word “must” for requirements

Word Choice

Reducing sodium intake to fewer than 1500 mg is essential in order to manage hypertension.

You must eat less salt if you have hypertension (high blood pressure). Eat less than 2/3 teaspoon (1500mg) of salt. Sodium is another word for salt.

Attempt	**Try**
Comply	Follow
Determine	**Decide**
Discontinue	Stop
Failed to	**Didn't**
Initial	First
Notify	**Tell**
Submit	Give, Send
Prior to	**Before**
In the event of	If

https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/words/use-simple-words-phrases/

wisconsin literacy
health · workforce · community

Word Choice

Prior to		**Before**
In the event of	→	If
Due to the fact that		**Because**

Use simple conjunctions: **and, but, or**

https://plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/words/use-simple-words-phrases/

Make Numbers Meaningful

- Limit numbers.
- Explain numbers.
- Do the math.
- Use frequencies instead of percentages.
- Frame outcomes in both positive and negative terms.
- Use everyday words.
- Show pictures.

The SHARE Approach AHRQ, Rockville, MD.
https://www.ahrq.gov/health-literacy/professional-training/shared-decision/tool/resource-5.html

wisconsin literacy
health · workforce · community

Small Group Discussion

- Who is the audience?
- What is the most important information for your audience?
- Why is this message important to your audience?
- Where is it located?
- What does your audience need to do after this message?

wisconsin literacy
health · workforce · community

Subject: School Protocol to Protect Employee and Client Information

Dear Colleagues,

Our office is home to documents containing highly sensitive client and employee information, and it is essential that we work to protect the privacy of all staff and clientele. One way to safeguard employee and client information is to ensure that the office door is locked outside of normal business hours. It appears that the office door was left unlocked last night. Those staff members who leave last are asked to please ensure that the suite doors are locked before leaving for the night.

Subject: Please Lock the Door

Dear Colleagues,

Please lock the door if you are the last person to leave the office**.** You help protect the privacy of all clients and staff.

Format for Readability

- ✓ Use mixed case
- ✓ Use the same font throughout (Arial, 12pt)
- ✓ Don't use *cursive fonts*, ALL CAPS, and *italics*
- ✓ Only underline headings.
- ✓ **Bold** text to highlight important information

wisconsin literacy
health · workforce · community

Format for Readability

- ✓ Small chunks of text (1-3 lines) with meaningful headings
- ✓ Keep sentences short and sweet
- ✓ 40-50% white space
- ✓ No images or patterns in the background
- ✓ Ragged right margins, left justify

wisconsin literacy
health · workforce · community

Use Images Appropriately

A picture is worth a thousand words. Use images to help clarify your content.

Images should:

- illustrate a single message.
- be next to the appropriate text.
- reinforce your message (not distract from it).
- speak to your reader.
- be relevant and culturally appropriate.

Wash Your Hands

How to Wash Your Hands

- Wet your hands with water.
- Use enough soap to cover your hands and wrists.
- Rub your hands together for at least 20 seconds.
- Clean in between your fingers.
- Rinse your hands with clean water.

wisconsin literacy
health · workforce · community

Wash Your Hands

How to Wash Your Hands

- Wet your hands with water.
- Use enough soap to cover your hands and wrists.
- Rub your hands together for at least 20 seconds.
- Clean in between your fingers.
- Rinse your hands with clean water.

wisconsin literacy
health · workforce · community

Simplify Phrases

When you write lists:

- explain your list with an introductory sentence
- remove “a,” “the,” and repetitive words
- keep grammar consistent
- use checkboxes to motivate specific actions
- use numbered lists for steps in a sequence
- aim for single line list items

Lists

Written documents are used to convey both informative and motivating messages for audiences. Those writing a message can miss the opportunity to connect with an audience if said document isn't engaging. A crucial and shared attribute of *effectively* written documents is the *appearance*. The document should be pleasing to the eye of the intended viewer and should contain imagery that is culturally fitting and germane to said viewer. A successful document should pose the most important information FIRST. The intended audience should detect the call to action with *little to no* effort.

Lists

The “look” of your document is important.

Make sure the…

- ❑ most important information is first.
- ❑ action steps are easy to find, read and understand.
- ❑ document is interesting to look at.
- ❑ images and examples are important to your readers.

Tables

Situation	How a Table Helps
complex information; dense wordy document	Tables use fewer words and make documents easier on the eye.
several situations with corresponding possibilities	“If-then tables” illustrate relationships.
different consequences for different situations	Short, clear headings help readers quickly find information that applies to them.

Simplify Phrases

If an action or decision on your request was made by an Agency Superintendent, you should appeal to the Area Director. If an action or decision on your request was made by an Area Director, you should appeal to the Commissioner. If an action or decision on your request was made by the Commissioner, the action or decision is final and you may not appeal.

Simplify Phrases

If you do not agree with a decision from our office, sometimes you can appeal (or ask for a different decision).

Who made the decision?	To appeal, contact the:
Agency Superintendent	Area Director
Area Director	Commissioner
Commissioner	You cannot appeal. The decision is final.

Dear addressee,

This letter concerns your recent claim for Department of Veterans Affairs benefits.
Before final action could be taken on your claim, we needed (**Evidence**). This evidence was requested in our letter dated (**Date**). Our records do not show we have received this evidence, therefore, we have disallowed your claim.

This disallowance does not mean that you cannot submit the requested evidence. You can do so at any time. However, if the evidence is not received before (**Date**), which is one year from the date of our first letter, benefits, if entitlement is established, cannot be paid before the date of receipt of the evidence.

If you disagree with this disallowance and believe the evidence now of record is sufficient for us to award you benefits, please refer to the enclosed VA Form 1-4107, Notice of Procedural and Appellate Rights, which explains your rights to appeal.

Dear [name],

We wrote to you on [date] for information to help us with your claim for benefits. **We closed your file because we didn't receive the information from you.**

What We Needed

We asked you to send us:
- A certified copy of your marriage license
- A certified copy of Ronnie's birth certificate
- Mary's and Ronnie's Social Security numbers

Time Limit

You still have time to send in the information we need. We may be able to pay benefits back to [**date**], if we receive this information by [date].

If You Think We're Wrong

If you think we shouldn't have turned down your claim, you should write and tell us. Read the attached form to learn about your rights.

Questions

Call us at 1-800-827-1000. Please have this letter with you when you call.

Sincerely,

Verbal Communication

- Don’t rush
- Simplify – use fewer words and shorter sentences
- Give information in short chunks. Pause between chunks.
- Use visuals and write it down
- Start and end with the most important information
- Check comprehension

Make Sure it Works

Remember your goal

- Your audience can understand the message the first time.
- Your message motivates your audience to:
  1. read
  2. act

Test, Revise, Repeat

Ask for feedback from your audience

Thank you!

Great free resource:
https://plainlanguage.gov/

Questions:
Shannon@WisconsinLiteracy.org
Kimberly@WisconsinLiteracy.org

wisconsin literacy
health · workforce · community