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Say it Simply

Plain Language Strategies for Verbal Communication

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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.

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Agenda

- Recognize verbal communication barriers
- Learn plain language strategies
- Practice the strategies
- Apply a self-check technique

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What Makes Conversations Difficult?

- Too much information at once
- Unfamiliar words, acronyms, or program names
- The action step is unclear
- The speaker is stressed, rushed, or distracted
- We assume the listener knows how the system works

Plain Language is...

Communication your audience can understand the first time they read it or hear it:

- Understand
- Find what matters
- Act

Know Your Audience

- What is the most important message?
- What does this person need right now?
- What action, if any, does the person need to take next?
- What might be unfamiliar about the service or process?
- Is language or accessibility support needed?

Why Verbal Plain Language Matters

When communication is clear:

- The main message stands out
- Next steps are clear

Plain language invites questions and participation

Lead With What Matters



“Before we can determine whether you qualify, there are several requirements we need to review…”



“The first step is to complete an application. I can explain what you’ll need.”

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Use Familiar Words

Eligibility	➢who can get the service
Documentation	➢papers or information we need
Verification	➢proof / information that confirms
Recertification	➢apply again / renew
Household composition	➢people who live in your home

Chunk Information

1–3 key points → **pause** → **next step**

- Focus on what the client needs to do first
- Use short explanations
- Pause between chunks
- Reinforce the key point before moving on
- Share next steps

Slow the Pace

- Pause after important information
- Give the listener space to ask a question
- Allow for silence
- Repeat the key action and use consistent words
- Don't rush

Use a Respectful, Conversational Tone

"You failed to provide…"

"You should have…"

"As I already explained…"

"That's our policy."

- "We still need…"
- "Here's what you can do next."
- "Let me explain that another way."
- "Here's what the policy requires."

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Make the Next Step Specific

- Who needs to take action?
- What do they need to do?
- When do they need to do it?
- How should they do it?

Case Study 1: Utility Assistance

A community member says: “My electric bill is overdue. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

Staff response: “You will need to contact our Energy Assistance Program to determine whether you meet the eligibility requirements. Before completing the application process, you will need to provide verification of household income and documentation regarding your utility account.”

Case Study 1: Utility Assistance

- What would you **say** instead?
- What should come first?
- Which words would you change or explain?
- What program specific facts would you verify before giving instructions?

Case Study 1: One Clearer Approach

“There may be a program that can help with your utility bill. The first step is to find out how to apply. I can help you check the current requirements and what information you’ll need.”

You can call me with questions:_____

Clarify the Need

- “What are you hoping to get help with today?”
- “What have you already been told?”
- “Which part would be most helpful to go over first?”
- “What would make this process easier for you?”

Invite the Right Questions

- “What questions do you have?”
- “We covered a lot. What would you like me to go over again?”
- “Do you have questions about X or Y?

Reinforce Key Points

- Repeat the key action at the end
- Use the same term consistently
- Write down dates, phone numbers, addresses, or steps when helpful
- Use a simple picture or model when it clarifies the message
- Tell the person where to get help if they get stuck

When Someone Has Several Needs

- Acknowledge the immediate concern
- Ask which issue feels most urgent
- Choose a manageable starting point together
- Separate “today” from “later”
- Give information for the next step first

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Case Study 2: Multiple Needs

Carol recently lost her job. She is worried about groceries, health coverage, and next month's rent. Your organization can connect her with several different resources. A staff member begins explaining every program, website, possible document, and application step at once.

Case Study 2: Multiple Needs

- What would you say first to Carol?
- What would you ask before explaining more?
- What information would you hold for later?
- What is one clear next step?
- How would you close the conversation?

Case Study 2: A Possible Flow

1. Acknowledge – “You have several things to manage right now.”
2. Ask - “Which of these feels most urgent?”
3. Prioritize - Start with one resource or action
4. Explain - Give only what is needed for that next step
5. Close - Repeat the action and invite questions

Clarity Creates Inclusion

- Avoid assumptions
- Explain unfamiliar processes
- Speak with respect
- Repeat and restate as needed
- Provide language and accessibility support

A 30-Second Self-Check

- Did I lead with what matters?
- Did I use familiar words—or explain unfamiliar ones?
- Did I limit the amount of information at one time?
- Is the next step specific and accurate?
- Did I invite questions?
- Did I reinforce anything that will be hard to remember?

Practice: Make It Verbal

Choose one explanation you give often at work.

- What is the most important message?
- What jargon can you replace or explain?
- How can you divide the explanation into 1–3 key points?
- What exact next step should the listener hear?
- What open-ended question could invite participation?

Strategies to Take With You

- Lead with what matters
- Use familiar words
- Limit information
- Slow the pace
- Use respectful tone
- Make the next step specific

Remember the Goal

People need to understand what matters

and know what to do next.

- Use Clear words
- Specify next steps
- Confirm the plan

Plain Language Resources

- **Fed Govt**: Plain language guide series | Digital.gov
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):**Plain Language Materials & Resources | Health Literacy | CDC
- **Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ):** AHRQ Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit Third Edition
- **World Health Organization (WHO)-** Use plain language

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Thank you!

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