

The plain language edit:

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# When client expectations clash with reality

Editors Canada conference

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Gilford Room

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# Agenda


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- Plain language
  - Managing client expectations
  - Dealing with rejection
  - Arguing for plain language
  - Role of the editor
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# Plain language


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What is plain language?

- clear communication
  - reader-centred writing and design
  - clear organization and layout
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# Plain language

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- Use the active voice.
  - Write directly to your reader.
  - Use short words and simple sentences.
  - Use common words instead of jargon.
  - Use lists.
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# Plain language


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- Watch alignment.
  - Use lots of white space and short paras.
  - Keep lines of text short.
  - Use meaningful titles and headings.
  - Use minimal emphasis (bold, all caps, italics, colour).
  - Choose an appropriate font.
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# Managing client expectations

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Ask the client about:

- what they want
  - their understanding of plain language
  - why they want plain language
  - their audience
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# Managing client expectations

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Find out:

- who is involved in the project
- how different plain language is from their normal publications
- who may need to be influenced



# Managing client expectations

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Educate the client:

- Explain what plain language really is.
- Show examples of plain text.
- Show examples of a plain language edit.



# Sample for client

## Before

243 words  
9th grade reading level

### Original Text

#### Tips Before Entering a Shelter

If you are outside when the alert is given, try to remove clothing and shoes and place them in a plastic bag before entering the house. During severe weather, such as extreme cold, remove at least the outer layer of clothes before entering the home to avoid bringing radioactive material into your shelter. Leave clothing and shoes outside. Shower and wash your body with soap and water. Removing clothing will eliminate 90% of radioactive contamination. By taking this simple step, you will reduce the time that you are exposed and also your risk of injury from the radiation.

Before entering the shelter, turn off fans, air conditioners, and forced-air heating units that bring air in from the outside. Close and lock all windows and doors, and close fireplace dampers.

When you move to your shelter, use duct tape and plastic sheeting to seal any doors, windows, or vents for a short period of time in case a radiation plume is passing over (listen to your radio for instructions). Within a few hours, you should remove the plastic and duct tape and ventilate the room. Suffocation could occur if you keep the shelter tightly sealed for more than a few hours.

Keep your radio tuned to an emergency response network at all times for updates on the situation. The announcers will provide information about when you may leave your shelter and whether you need to take other emergency measures

## After

173 words  
4th grade reading level

### Transcend Plain Language - DRAFT

#### How to enter the shelter after an alert

If you were outside when the alert was given:

- Take off your clothes and shoes. This gets rid of 90% of the radioactive contamination and lowers your chance of getting sick.
- If it is very cold, just take off your outer clothes and shoes.
- Put your clothes and shoes in a plastic bag. Leave the bag outside.
- Take a shower and wash with soap.
- Turn off all fans, air conditioners and heaters that bring the outside air in.
- Close and lock all doors and windows. Close fireplace dampers.

#### Go into your shelter

Seal doors, windows or vents with plastic sheeting and duct tape. This protects you from radiation outside.

After a few hours, remove the plastic and duct tape. If the shelter is sealed for too long, **you can suffocate**.

#### Tune in

Tune your radio to an Emergency Response station. The announcers will say when it is safe to leave your shelter. They will also tell you if there are other things you should do.

CLOSE X

# Managing client expectations

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Go over:

- the plain language checklist and ask the client to sign off
- how the edit may differ from their house style

# The edit

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Check in with client:

- Send a sample of the first few pages before continuing.
  - Communicate any changes to style sheet or checklist that might be alarming.
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# Dealing with rejection

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## Rejection!

- The client sends back the file with changes rejected.
- The client tells you they won't be accepting the changes.

# Dealing with rejection

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Possible scenarios:

- The project is no longer in your hands.
  - You have a second chance to edit according to client's style.
  - You have a chance to argue for plain language.
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# Arguing for plain language

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- Talk about who the reader is.
- Explain readability.
- Show evidence/research about plain language.
- Give examples of the consequences of not using plain language.

# Your readers are diverse

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- literacy
- language and culture
- disability and access
- situation and context

# Canadian literacy statistics

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- 42% of adult Canadians have low literacy. <sup>1</sup>
- More than 15 million Canadians will have low literacy by 2031, up 25% from 2001. <sup>2</sup>
- 20% of adult Canadians have high literacy skills.<sup>3</sup>

1 Canadian Literacy and Learning Network

2 Adult Literacy & Life Skills Survey (2003) published 2007 by Canadian Council on Learning

3 Conference Board of Canada, 2013



# Canadian diversity <sup>1</sup>

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- 21% of the Canadian population are immigrants (Philippines, China, India).
- Only 58% of Canadians have English as their mother tongue (22% French, then Chinese languages, Tagalog, Punjabi).
- There are over 200 mother tongue languages in Canada.

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada 2015 (census 2011)



# Other factors affecting literacy

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- situation and context
    - reading on small laptops, tablets, cell phones
    - multi-tasking
    - stress and anxiety
  - disability: visual, cognitive
  - technological and other barriers
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# Explaining readability

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- Readability is the measure of complexity in the words and sentence structure of a piece of text.
- Text is readable if it is easy to understand.
- Readability can be partially measured using reading formulas.

# Readability formulas

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- SMOG, or Simplified Measure of Gobbledygook
  - Fry Readability Formula
  - Gunning-Fog Index
  - Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level
  - New Dale–Chall Readability Formula
  - [readability-score.com](http://readability-score.com)
  - specially designed software, e.g. Readability Calculations, Readability Plus, Readability Studio
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# Benefits of reading formulas

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- They're objective and easy to use.
- The scores get attention.
- They show improvements that result from editing.

# Examples of reading levels of other organizations


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<b>Organization</b>	<b>Reading level standard or aim</b>
Canadian Cancer Society <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• prevention information</li><li>• information about cancer</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Grade 6</li><li>• Grade 6 to 8</li></ul>
Health Canada patient medication information on products	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Grade 6 to 8</li></ul>
Medline Easy to Read health materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Grade 7 or 8</li></ul>
National Institutes of Health (NIH) patient education material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Grade 4 to 6</li></ul>
Plain Language Quality and Productivity Commission <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• for general public</li><li>• for health, medicine and safety</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Grade 7</li><li>• Grade 5</li></ul>
Readers Digest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Grade 8 to 9</li></ul>

# Arguing for plain language

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What the client says:

- It doesn't sound professional or formal. We don't sound smart. It's not sophisticated.
  - It's been dumbed down.
  - It's not polite enough.
  - It's insulting to our readers.
  - Our audience is highly educated and will understand this.
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Arguing for plain language

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This is too easy to read  
and understand.

– said no one ever





Arguing for plain language

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I don't have to read this.

– every reader\*

\*some exceptions apply



# Arguing for plain language

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Readers want and need information:

- they can read and understand the first time
- they can remember and act on
- that doesn't waste their time
- they can trust (credibility)



# People prefer plain language

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In study of the use of language in legal documents:

- 80% preferred sentences written in clear English and the more complex the issue, the greater the preference.
- Frustrated readers stopped reading.
- The more educated the person, the more specialist their knowledge, the greater their preference for plain English.

Reference: Trudeau, Christopher R., *The Public Speaks: An Empirical Study of Legal Communication* (May 20, 2012). 14 *Scribes J. Leg. Writing* 121 (2011-2012).

# Easy to read is easy to like

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In a study that asked participants to rate the writer's intelligence:

- People who read the simple version of the text thought its author was smarter.
- Readers given the simple version were more likely to say they thought the applicant should be admitted into a course.

Reference: DM Oppenheimer (2006) 'Consequences of Erudite Vernacular Utilized Irrespective of Necessity: Problems with Using Long Words Needlessly', *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 20: 139–16.

# Plain language is good for business

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- higher customer compliance
  - fewer customer errors
  - saves staff time – fewer calls, fewer questions, less duplicated work
  - less likely to deal with litigation
  - greater customer reach
  - good for reputation and brand
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# Plain language is the least you can do

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Plain language is considered best practice for

- business communications
- journalism
- web writing
- health communications (universal precaution)
- government services
- legal drafting?

# Consequences of not using plain language

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- health care – medical errors
- legal contracts – ambiguity
- financial documents – big headaches

# Advocating for the reader vs letting go


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- What is our role as editor?
- What is our responsibility?
- How far do we go?



# Conclusion

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- Avoid rejection – manage client's expectations of the plain language edit.
  - If rejected, advocate for the reader by arguing for plain language.
  - Understand/accept your role.
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# Questions?

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