



Clear Language Policy Template

Introduction

Some adults who come to community agencies may have difficulties with English language or literacies. Using clear language can enhance communication and widen access to agency services. You are welcome to use or adapt this policy template for your agency.

Purpose

(Agency Name) recognizes that over 40% of Canadians have everyday difficulties with reading, writing, math, oral communication and problem solving. Our agency is committed to using clear and straightforward language in all our communication with the community we serve. Clear language includes written communication about our agency's services and programs, signage and website information. It also includes verbal communication between staff and with community members.¹

Principles

(Agency Name) will:

- Use clear, concise and easily understood language in all
- of our service and program provision. This will help us to reduce literacy barriers for all community members that visit our agency.
- Use clear language when communicating with community members, other agency staff, and with other agencies.
- Provide new staff with guidance on the use of clear language.
- Support and encourage on-going development of clear language skills by staff members.
- Use clear language templates for brochures, newsletters, calendars, posters and forms to ensure consistency of font, format and design. At the same time, we will respect the importance of creativity.
- Make sure that all our printed materials and signage follow clear language principles so that community members can read them with ease.
- Review all print-based materials before publication. When reviewing and preparing information for publication, our agency will use the guidelines outlined on the following pages.

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Widening Access for
Adult Literacies
Project.
<http://www.wideningaccessforliteracies.ca>



¹ “Community members” may refer to agency clients, participants or customers.

Clear language guidelines for print-based documents

Follow the five 'readability' points for writing and reviewing material for publication:

1. Organization of print-based materials
2. Overall appearance - layout and design
3. Use of language
4. Sentence length and structure
5. Tone — how you speak to the reader

1. Organization of print-based materials

- Divide the document into sections of related information.
- Create a table of contents for longer documents and groups of documents.
- Use headings that summarize the text.
- Use clear and consistent headings, subheadings and numbering systems.
- Break large chunks of information into smaller chunks with subheadings.
- Provide information in a logical sequence.
- Highlight critical pieces of information by setting them apart from text.
- Use a question and answer approach that responds to reader questions.
- Limit to one idea per sentence and one topic per paragraph.
- List information using bullet points where appropriate.

2. Overall appearance - Layout and design

- Align text to the left; leave right margin unaligned.
- Use an easily readable font size, e.g. 11–12 for text; never less than 10.
- Use a plain, non-cursive font, e.g. a serif font (with hooks) for the body of the text and a non-serif font for headings.
- Use white space effectively. (White space is the space between and surrounding text and graphics.)
- Use illustrations that help readers understand the text.
- Have a definite contrast between background colours and printed words.
- Use uppercase and lowercase letters for headings. Do not use uppercase for entire words.
- Emphasize headings and subheadings so they stand out, e.g. larger or different fonts than the body of text, or bold.

3. Language use

- Use simple, everyday words that are easy to understand.
- Avoid or explain jargon, e.g. in-house or agency specific term).
- Use language that is bias-free and inclusive.
- Apply verb tenses consistently.
- Set up and use Microsoft Word Readability Tool to check readability of documents (see Appendix 1).
- Aim for Flesch/Kincaid readability level of 3–5 if audience has low-level literacy.
- Aim for Flesch/Kincaid readability level of 7+ if audience has good level of literacy.
- Aim for a Flesch Reading Ease score of 65 or above.

4. Sentence length and structure

- Use simple sentence structures.
- Place the subject and verb close together in a sentence.
- Write sentences of twenty words or less.
- Use subject, verb, object order wherever possible.

5. Tone — How you speak to the reader

- Use simple sentence structures.
- Avoid passive sentence structures wherever possible (see Appendix 2).
- Write in the active voice (see Appendix 2).
- Adopt informal tone that speaks directly to readers.
- Use “you,” “we” and “us” where appropriate.
- Make it clear what action you want readers to take.
- Use a positive, friendly tone where appropriate.

Follow the five-step writing and review process

Step 1: Plan your document

- Ask questions about your audience. (Who will read the document? Do they speak English? Do they have low-level literacy? What do they already know? What do they need to know? What is the most effective way to inform them?)
- Identify the purpose for your document.
- Research and gather information for your document.
- Organize and order the document content.
- Think about the finished document –How will it look?

Step 2: Write your document

- Write the first draft following the points steps in Step 1.

Step 3: Edit your document

- Use MS Word readability tool to check reading levels.
- Make changes and revisions to your document for clarity, tone and style.
- Proofread for spelling, grammar and readability.

Step 4: Design your document

- Determine the best layout, style and format for your document.
- Add text according to style and formatting guidelines.
- Add graphics that support the text .

Step 5: Review and revise your document

- Review your document, edit and make corrections.
- Ask work colleagues for comments and feedback on your document.
- Test your document with participants or community members.
- Gather feedback and make changes as necessary.

Appendix 1. Checking readability

How to set grammar/spelling/style and readability in MS Word 2003

- Open Tools. Select Options. Select Spelling and Grammar.
- Check: Spelling, Suggest corrections, Grammar, Grammar with spelling, Show readability statistics.
- Go to Writing Style (either Standard or Grammar and Style).
- Open Settings. Check everything under Grammar except Numbers. Check everything under style except Use of First Person.
- Click on OK in both Option menus.

Checking part of a document

- Highlight the section of the document you want to check.
- Open Tools. Click on Spelling and Grammar.
- Change or ignore each item that the Spelling and Grammar checker mentions (either red or green underline).
- A box will come up saying: 'Word finished checking the selection. Do you want to continue checking the rest of the document?'
- Select No. Readability Statistics will appear.

Checking a whole document

- Open Tools. Click on Spelling and Grammar
- Change or ignore each item that the Spelling and Grammar checker mentions (red or green underline).
- When complete, Readability Statistics will appear.

How to set grammar/spelling/style and readability in MS Word 2007

- Click on the round button with the Windows logo at the upper left to bring up a menu.
- At the bottom of the menu, click on the button that says Word Options.
- A new window will pop up with a menu at the left. Click on Proofing.
- Under the heading "When Correcting Spelling in Microsoft Office Programs", check:
 - Ignore words that contain numbers.
 - Ignore Internet and file addresses.
 - Flag repeated words.
- At the bottom of the menu, click on the button that says Word Options.
- Under the heading "When Correcting Spelling and Grammar in Word", check all the options.
- Underneath those options, next to Writing Style, select Grammar and Style from the drop-down box. Then click Settings.
- Check all boxes except Use of First Person.
- Click OK at the bottom right to save your settings and close the box.

Checking a completed piece of writing

To check a whole document:

- Near the top of the window, to the right of the word Home, click Review.
- Click on the Spelling and Grammar icon in the panel that appears below.
- Change or ignore each item the program mentions.
- The Readability Statistics appear at the end.

To check part of a document:

- Click and drag the cursor to highlight the section you want to check.
- Near the top of the window, to the right of the word Home, click Review.
- Click on the Spelling and Grammar icon in the panel that appears below.
- Change or ignore each item the program mentions.
- A box saying, "Word finished checking the selection. Do you want to continue checking the remainder of the document?" will appear. Click No.
- The Readability Statistics appear at the end.

Readability Statistics

- Words per Sentence should be 20 or below.
- Passive Sentences should be close to 0%.
- Flesch Reading Ease should be as high as possible, at least between 65 – 75%.
- Flesch/Kincaid readability level should be between 3–5 if audience has low-level literacy and 7+ if audience has good level of literacy.

Appendix 2. Using Active Voice

Avoid the passive voice

Passive sentences lack vigour and clarity.

Passive sentences do not follow the structure of subject, verb, and object. Often they don't even have a subject. Readers don't know who took the action. For example:

Mistakes were made.
It has been decided that Christmas is cancelled this year.
The children were warned not to touch the food on the table.

Sometimes passive sentences do have a subject but the subject doesn't appear in the usual place. For example:

Mistakes were made by everyone involved.
It has been decided by the committee that Christmas is cancelled this year.
The children were warned by their parents not to touch the food on the table.

Write in active voice

You can change a passive sentence into an active one by changing the sentence structure to subject, verb, and object. For example:

Everyone involved made mistakes.
The committee decided that Christmas would be cancelled this year.
The parents warned the children not to touch the food on the table.

You will notice that when you restructure the sentence the verb becomes active, no longer consisting of the verb "to be" plus a past participle (a verb ending in "ed" or another form of the past tense).

Sentences with active verbs are easier to read and to understand. They are usually shorter too.