

Plain Language and Effective Communication



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Learning Objectives

1. What is plain language?
2. ADA effective communication and Language Access requirements
3. Inclusive language
4. Tips and tricks for writing in plain language
5. Navigating communication challenges

“The ability to seek out and understand information gives us all independence to make choices, to advocate for ourselves and to learn about our community and world.”

- LitWorld International, Inc.

What is Plain Language?

1. Visually inviting
2. Logically organized
3. Understandable on the first reading
4. Concise
5. Generally written at a 6th grade reading level

PlainLanguage.gov

Title II of the ADA & Effective Communication

1. Communication with people with disabilities is as effective as communication with people without disabilities.
2. Provide tools, supports, auxiliary aids, and services.
3. Support use of a person's preferred method(s) of communication
4. Support autonomy with direct communication wherever possible.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Executive Order 131666

1. Prohibits discrimination based on race, color, or national origin - this includes those with limited English proficiency in any program or activity that receives Federal funds or other Federal financial assistance.
2. Must take reasonable steps to provide meaningful access to City of Madison's programs, services, and activities for people with a primary language other than English.

Language Access and Language Justice

Language Access - providing services to remove barriers

Language Justice –

1. Recognizing language as a fundamental right
2. Building and sustaining multilingual spaces in our organizations so that everyone's voice and lived experience can be heard
3. Working to dismantle language barriers, equalize power dynamics, and build strong communities for social and racial justice.

Plain Language Benefits

1. Disrupt systemic power dynamics
2. Increase engagement
3. Foster inclusion
4. Increase the quality of translation and interpretation services
5. Reach a broader audience
6. More persuasive stronger writing

Before You Start...

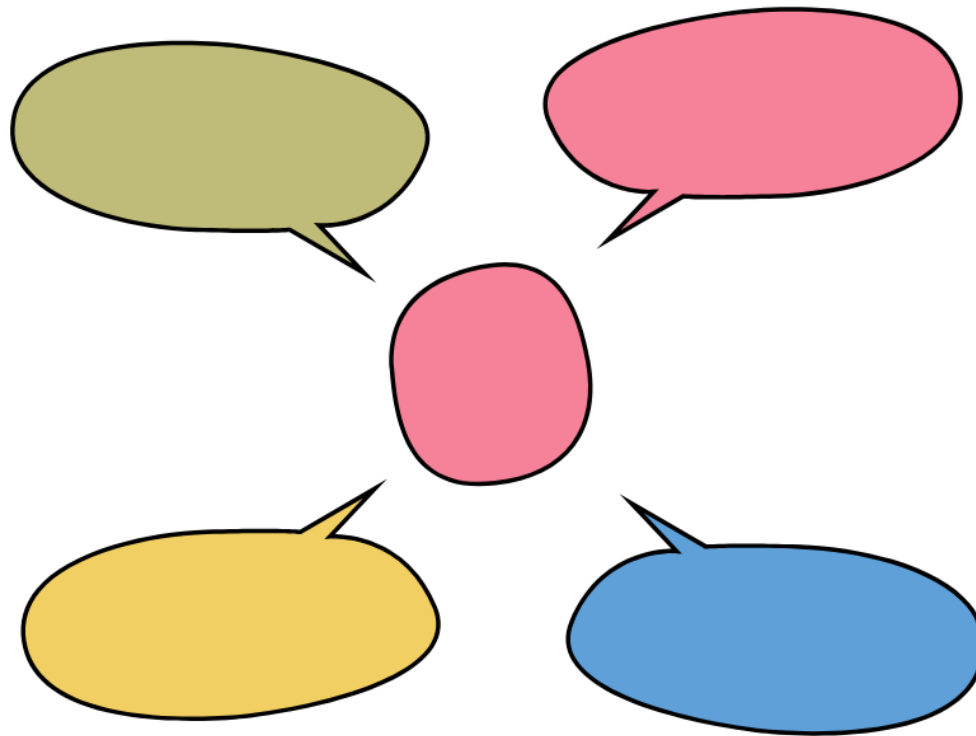
1. What is your message?
2. Key takeaways (no more than 5)
3. Who is your audience and what do they need to take action?

Writing Process

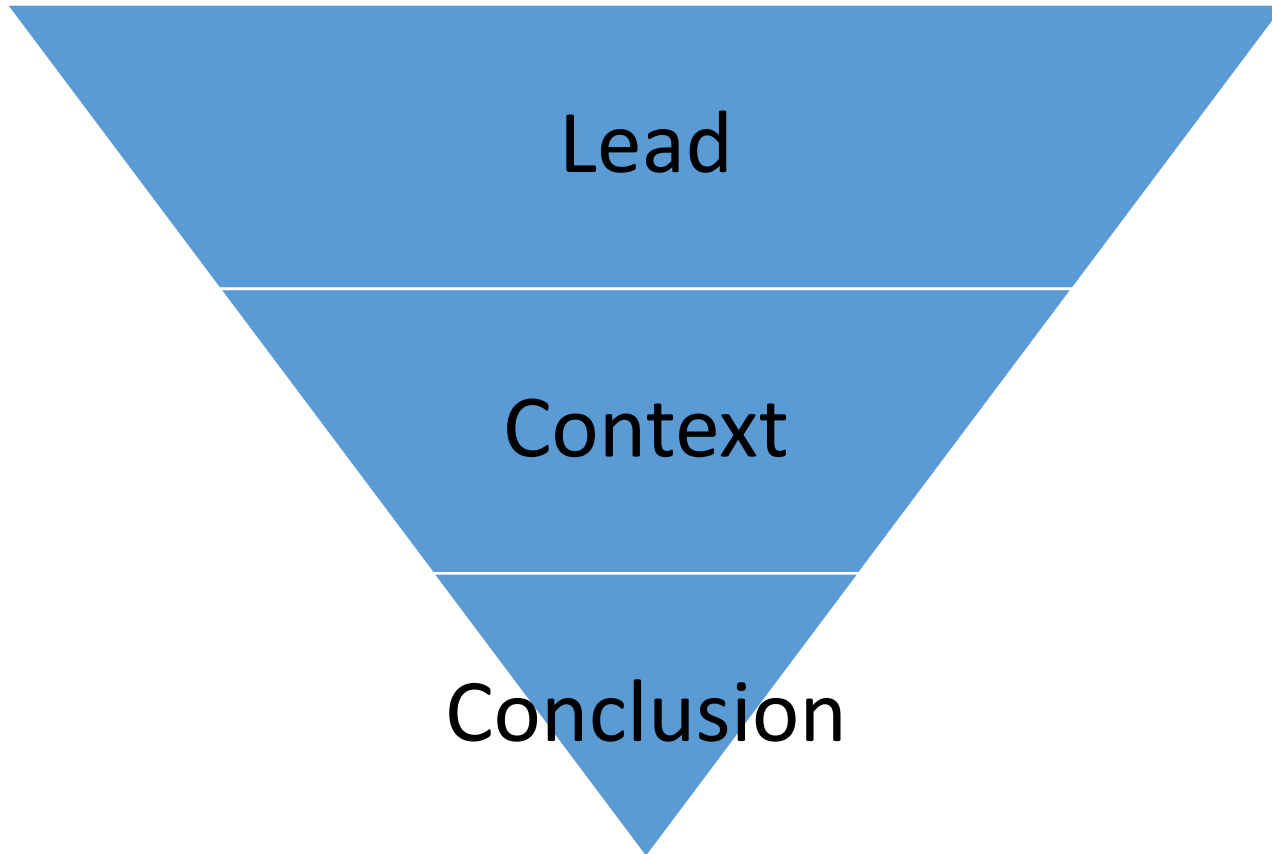
1. Creative*
2. Architect
3. Carpenter
4. Judge

- Betty S. Flowers, *Roles and the Writing Process*

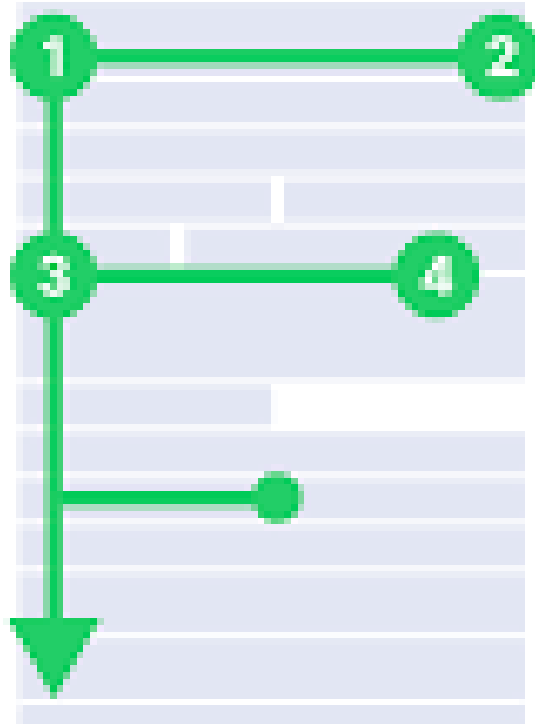
Mind Map



Inverted Pyramid



F pattern vs. Z pattern



Headings



Audience and Tone

1. Conversational
2. Write in the second person: “you” “we”
3. Don’t assume expertise
4. Write for connection, not to impress
5. Write for your audience, not yourself

Inclusive Language

1. Gender neutral language.
2. Avoid slangs, jargon, acronyms, and idioms.
3. Remove ableist metaphors such as crazy, insane, lame, suffers from/with, high or low functioning, duh, spaz, and many more from our speech and writing.
4. Do not use phrases and expressions with racist origins.

Word Choice and Translations

These do not translate into other languages:

1. Rhyming
2. Alliteration
3. Acronyms that spell out a word
4. Cultural references

People-First Language

The People-First movement began in the 1970's. It literally puts the person first - "person with a disability," "employee who is bi-polar."

This language is rooted in the idea that people with disabilities are not defined by their disabilities. They are people first.

Identity-First Language

Identity-First language is rooted in the social model of disability.

‘Disabled’ is a political term used to emphasize the social cause and nature of the exclusion and discrimination faced as people with impairments. It uses the term “Disabled” to mean disabled by society.

Tips for Writing in Plain Language

1. Sort sentences
2. Define terms of art
3. Avoid clauses
4. Use lists
5. Be direct
6. Active voice
7. Word Choice

Example: Long Complex Sentence

We must receive your completed application form on or before the 15th day of the second month following the month you are reporting if you do not submit your application electronically or the 25th day of the second month following the month you are reporting if you submit your application electronically.

Example: Short Phrases

If you submit your form:

We must receive it by:


Electronically

25th of the second month

Not electronically

15th of the second month

Defining Terms of Art




Engineering

[City of Madison](#) / [Engineering](#) / [Streets&Paths](#) / [Education](#) / [Terraces](#)

Terraces

A terrace is the space of land in between the roadway and a property line. A typical City street may have a terrace anywhere from 5 feet to 20 feet wide. Most terraces include a space for grass lawn, trees and a 5 foot sidewalk. A wide terrace can be an important safety feature in rights of way to help to as a buffer between the pedestrians on the sidewalk and motorists on the road.



What is Bus Rapid Transit?

Cities around the country are launching BRT systems to improve transit reliability, shorten travel times, reduce congestion, and support economic development.

A Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system is a high-quality bus-based transit system that delivers fast, comfortable, and cost-effective service with a high-level of capacity.

This is done through the use of specialized lanes, dedicated boarding stations, off-board fare collection, and fast and frequent operations.

How to Avoid Clauses

1. Remove the clause if it does not add anything.

Example:

Dolores, ~~whose favorite color is yellow,~~ will be joining the meeting this afternoon.

How to Avoid Clauses

2. Separate thoughts into two or more sentences

Example:

The City of Hoyt values diversity and freedom of expression and we think everyone should be able to have pineapple on their pizza if they want to.

The City of Hoyt values diversity and freedom of expression.
You can have pineapple on your pizza if you want to.

How to Avoid Clauses

3. Reorder the sentence so the main clause comes first.

Example:

Depending on the severity of the storm and weather conditions, it will take longer for the forestry department to clear the roads.

It will take the Forestry Department longer to clear the roads if the storm is severe.

Be Direct / Active Voice

Example:

Grant funds must be used between June 1, 2024 and May 31, 2025.

You must use grant funds between June 1, 2024 and May 31, 2025.

Example:

Applicants who are receiving other cash funding from the City of Madison for the proposed project are not eligible for the grant.

You are not eligible for the grant if your project will get other funding from the City of Madison.

Use Lists

Example: Email Survey

The City of Madison wants to hear your thoughts on the draft Plan. This plan will help the City advance equity through its policies, programs, and projects. Taking this quick survey to help ensure the plan is in line with your vision for a sustainable City of Madison. Participate in the community survey to share feedback with the City of Madison, Madison Committee, and the project team. Your input will inform future investments, decision-making, and equity throughout Madison!

Thank you for your time and valuable feedback! Also, ten lucky winners will receive a \$20 gift card to The Chocolate Shoppe Ice Cream!

Use Lists

The City of Madison wants to hear from you! Take this short [Survey](#).

We want your input on the Madison Plan.

Taking this quick survey will:

- Help ensure our work is in line with the community's vision for an equitable City of Madison.
- Inform future investments, decision-making, and equity throughout Madison.
- Help the City advance equity through its policies, programs, and projects
- Enter you to win a **\$20 gift card to The Chocolate Shoppe Ice Cream!**

Your feedback will go to the City of Madison, Madison Committee, and the project team.

Thank you for your time and valuable feedback!

Word Choice

Provide = give

Receive = get

Shall = should/must

Individual = person/you

Assistance = help

Entity = business/employer/school

Accommodation = different way of performing a task

Financial burden = too expensive/costs too much

Communication Challenges

1. Wait for folks to finish their thoughts
2. Ask questions
 - Open-ended
 - Yes/No
3. Repeat back what you understood and confirm
4. Ask for a re-cap
5. Would you like me to write it down?
6. Explore language access services

Example 1:

“The Frances Street side of the State Street Campus Garage will remain open during construction, though space will be limited due to the capacity reduction with the Lake garage closure. We encourage customers to use the City’s [real-time garage availability tracker](#) prior to visiting this location or use alternate garages for the duration of this closure. You can locate the City operated garages and rates nearest to your destination by visiting Parking’s [Garages and Lots webpage](#).”

Example 1:

The Frances Street side of the State Street Campus Garage is open during construction. Space is limited. Use the City's [real-time garage availability tracker](#) to find available parking. Find the nearest garage and rates at the [Garages and Lots webpage](#).

Example 2:

Neighborhood plans serve as a guide for actions and changes to strengthen Madison's established neighborhoods and how to best accommodate anticipated growth. Plan topics include land use, zoning, mobility, housing, community services, economic development, historic preservation, urban design, open space, health, safety, and infrastructure.

Example 2:

A neighborhood plan is a decision-making guide. It helps neighborhoods plan for growth.

Plans guide:

- How land is used
- What gets built and where
- How people travel
- Housing
- Community services
- Businesses
- Historic places
- Open spaces
- Health and safety

Example 3:

Vision Zero -

The projects funded focus on low-cost, high-impact strategies that are proven safety countermeasures to prevent fatalities and serious injury crashes for people walking, biking and accessing transit.

Example 3:

Vision Zero -

The goal of this project is to prevent car accidents that cause death or injury to people who walk, roll or bike. It funds effective low-cost ways to make streets safer.

Resources

[Legal Writing in Plain English](#), Bryan A. Garner

[PlainLanguage.gov](#)

[Plain Language Association International](#)

[Center for Plain Language](#)

[Open Government - Plain Writing at the National Archives](#)

Tools:

- [Microsoft Readability Statistics](#)
- [Hemingway App](#)

Questions

Email lap@cityofmadison.com for plain language consultation

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