A brief introduction

Plain Language

July 2020

Agenda

1. **What is plain language?**
2. **Why should you use it?**
3. **How do you use it?**
4. **How do you review it?**

Definition

Plain language is communication your audience can understand the first time they read or hear it.

plainlanguage.gov

Definition

Plain language is communication your audience can understand *and use the first time they read or hear it.

Definition

Plain language is communication your audience can understand and use the first time they read or hear it.

* The use of proven writing and design strategies that make it easy for your audience to understand and use your information.

- The Plain Language Group

Officialese, bureaucratese, or **governmentese** is language that sounds official. Officialese is characterized by a preference for wordy, long sentences; a preference for complex words, code words or buzzwords over simple, traditional ones; a preference for vagueness over directness and a preference for passive over active voice...Officialese is meant to impress the listener (or reader) and increase the authority (more than the social status) of the user, making them appear more professional.

Plain Language Is for Everyone, Even Experts

Summary: Professionals want clear, concise information devoid of unnecessary jargon or complex terms. Plain language benefits both consumers and organizations.

By Hoa Loranger on October 8, 2017
Topics: Writing for the Web

Nielson Norman Group

Consequences of Erudite Vernacular Utilized Irrespective of Necessity: Problems with Using Long Words Needlessly

DANIEL M. OPPENHEIMER*

Princeton University, USA

Applied Cognitive Psychology

It's not dumbing down

it's opening up

GOV.UK

52%

of adults in the US at basic or below-basic literacy levels

23%

of NYC population is Limited English Proficient (speaks English less than "very well")

43%

of adults with lowest literacy skills in NY State live in poverty

Studies show that on an average page on the web, users tend to read about **20%** of the text.

Studies that on average

web users read

20%

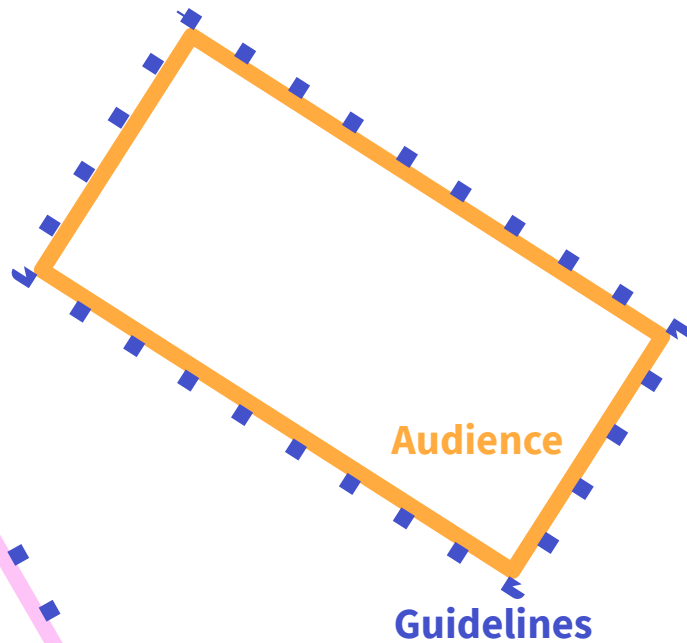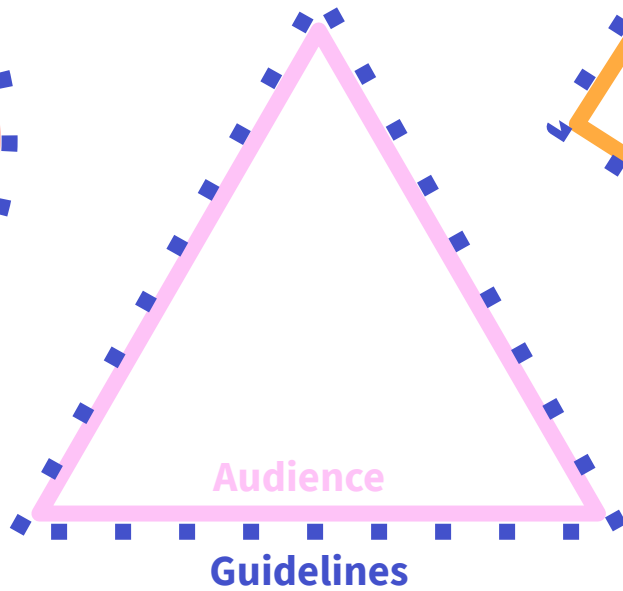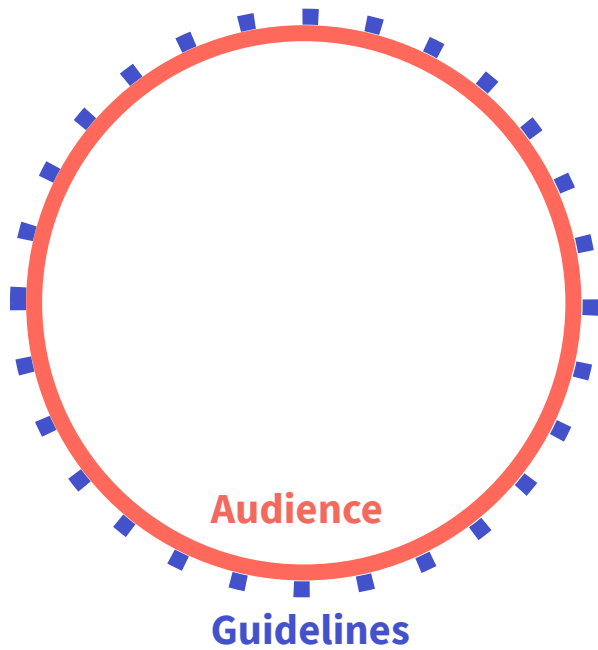officialese ❌

plain language ✅

How to write in plain language

Audience

Crisis Services Programs offer emergency shelter for runaway and homeless youth up to the age of 21. These voluntary, short-term residential programs provide emergency shelter and crisis intervention services aimed at reuniting youth with their families or, if family reunification is not possible, arranging appropriate transitional and long-term placements.

For more information, call Youth Connect at 800-246-4646.

Crisis Services Programs offer emergency shelter for runaway and homeless youth up to the age of 21. These voluntary, short-term residential programs provide emergency shelter and crisis intervention services aimed at reuniting youth with their families or, if family reunification is not possible, arranging appropriate transitional and long-term placements.

For more information, call Youth Connect at 800-246-4646.

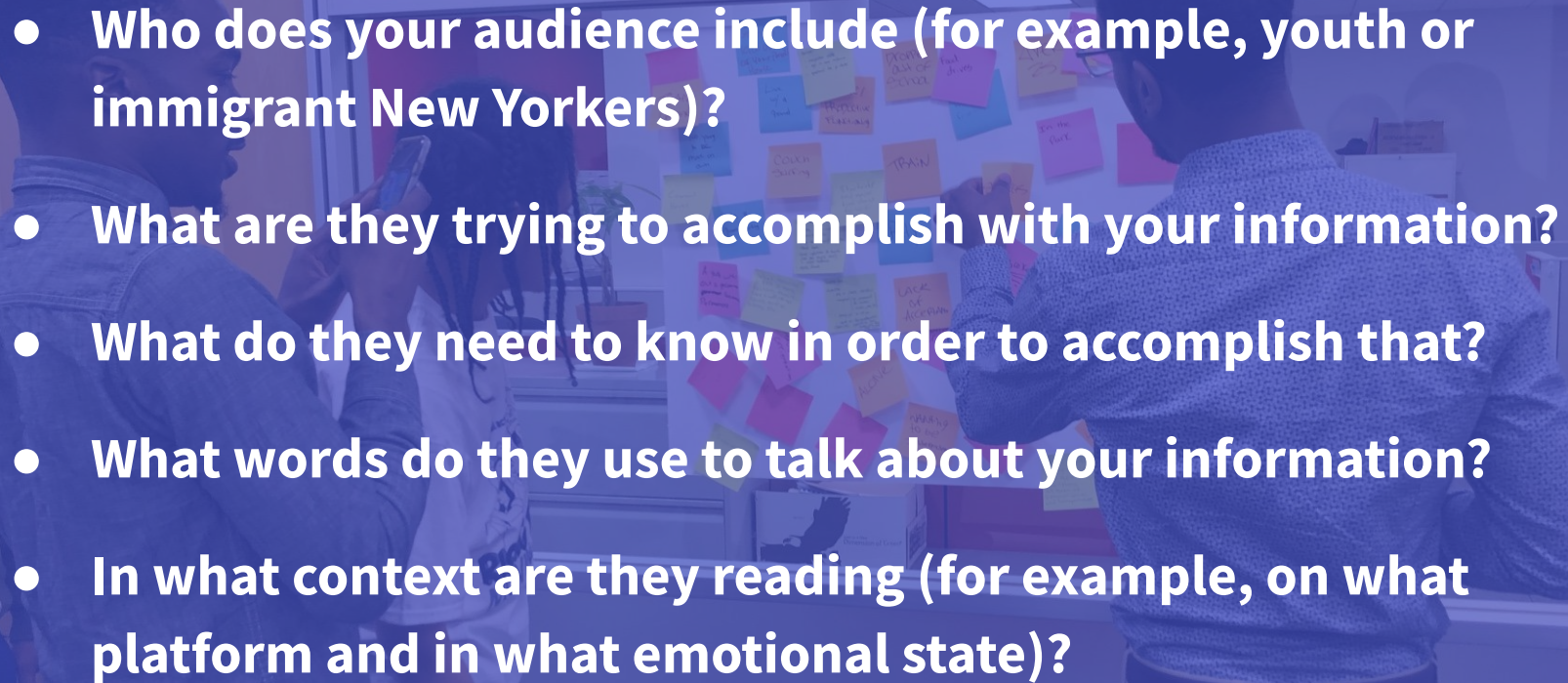Jargon

Unclear

Unnecessary

Unhelpful

Crisis Services Programs offer emergency shelter for runaway and homeless youth up to the age of 21. These voluntary, short-term residential programs provide emergency shelter and crisis intervention services aimed at reuniting youth with their families or, if family reunification is not possible, arranging appropriate transitional and long-term placements.

For more information, call Youth Connect at 800-246-4646.

Youth ages 16–20 who need a safe place to stay may find shelter and support services at Crisis Services Programs for up to 120 days. To get connected, most youth visit a [drop-in center](#) and ask for a referral or call [311](#).

Get to know
your audience.

- **Who does your audience include (for example, youth or immigrant New Yorkers)?**

- **What are they trying to accomplish with your information?**

- **What do they need to know in order to accomplish that?**

- **What words do they use to talk about your information?**

- **In what context are they reading (for example, on what platform and in what emotional state)?**

Guidelines

Reading level

Aim for 8th grade or below

Length

Keep it short

Common words

Choose simple words and avoid jargon

Casual tone

Use "you," "we," and contractions

Tense

Stay in the present

Active voice

Make your subjects act

Structure

Break info into digestible chunks

Prioritizing

Put the most important information first

Reading level

In general, aim to write at an 8th-grade reading level or below. Tools such as Hemingway App offer a great starting point to gauge the complexity of text.

Reading level

New York City residents who are seeking assistance in the process of completing and submitting their application may contact the agency at the telephone number listed below.

✕

Reading level

New York City residents who are seeking assistance in the process of completing and submitting their application may contact the agency at the telephone number listed below.

❌

If you need help with your application, you can call the agency using the number below.

✔️

Length

Keep sentences, paragraphs, and sections short. In general, aim for:

- Sentences with 15–20 words and only one idea
- Paragraphs of 150 words and five sentences or fewer
- Sections of a few paragraphs or fewer introduced by headers

Length

An individual who is eligible to recertify is defined as one whose application was accepted by the program within the previous three years, unless the acceptance was deemed conditional, which requires a separate application to be submitted.

✕

Length

An individual who is eligible to recertify is defined as one whose application was accepted by the program within the previous three years, <u>unless</u> the acceptance was deemed conditional, <u>which</u> requires a separate application to be submitted.

❌

You can renew if the program accepted your application in the last three years. If your acceptance was conditional, you need to submit a separate application.

✔️

Common words

Choose simple and informal words over complex and formal ones. The [list of word substitutes](#) from plainlanguage.gov can help. Avoid jargon, but if you need to use technical language, make sure to define it quickly.

Common words

Refer to the Rules page for additional information regarding your right to a timely determination and your right to appeal a determination if you disagree.

✕

Common words

Refer to the Rules page for additional information regarding your right to a timely determination and your right to appeal a determination if you disagree.

❌

Visit the Rules page for more information about your rights to a quick decision and to try to change the decision if you disagree.

✔️

Prioritizing

Lead with the most important information. Start with the main idea, then follow up with details or exceptions.

Prioritizing

New Resource NYC is a City program created on April 1, 2020 by this agency. It helps low-income New Yorkers find resources.

✕

Prioritizing

New Resource NYC is a City program created on April 1, 2020 by this agency. It helps low-income New Yorkers find resources.

❌

New Resource NYC helps low-income New Yorkers find resources.

✔️

Structure

Use headers to organize information into digestible chunks and help the user scan content. In general, headers should be:

- Representative of the content below them
- In a consistent format, for example, all nouns or noun phrases and in title case ("Eligibility Rules," "Applying for the Program")
- Structured using a consistent hierarchy of header styles (H1 for the main page topic, H2 for subsections, and so on)

Organize steps in a process, requirements, or other series of information in a bullet-point list. If the series has a clear order, use a numbered list.

Structure

Services

Alternative services will be provided by the agency. These include assistance over email and scheduled interviews over the telephone, as well as limited drop-in hours for those in need of immediate help.

✕

Structure

Services

Alternative services will be provided by the agency. These include assistance over email and scheduled interviews over the telephone, as well as limited drop-in hours for those in need of immediate help.

❌

Changes in Services

The agency will provide alternative services. These include:

- Help over email
- Scheduled phone interviews
- Some drop-in hours for those who need immediate help

✔️

Tone

Keep it casual. Address users as "you" and the content owners as "we." Use contractions, such as "you're" for "you are" and "don't" for "do not."

Tone

New York City residents who are seeking assistance in the process of completing and submitting their application may contact the agency at the telephone number listed below.

✕

Tone

New York City residents who are seeking assistance in the process of completing and submitting their application may contact the agency at the telephone number listed below.

✖

If you need help with your application, you can call the agency using the number below.

✔

Tense

The present tense is clearer and more direct than the past or future.

Tense

For example, applying for multiple
programs may be permissible when
programs would be administered
by different agencies.

❌

Tense

For example, applying for multiple programs may be permissible when programs <u>would be administered</u> by different agencies.

❌

For example, applying for multiple programs may be allowed if the programs come from different agencies.

✔️

Active voice

In the active voice, subjects *act on something*. In passive voice, subjects *are acted upon*. The active voice is clearer and stronger.

Active voice

Many programs and courses are delivered virtually on the agency's website.

✕

Active voice

Many programs and courses <u>are delivered</u> virtually on the agency's website.

The agency delivers many programs and activities virtually on its website.

❌

✔️

Other considerations

- **Accessibility**

- **Translation**

- **SEO**

Reviewing text

- Read the content over once. Do you understand it? Would your reader?

- If you're stuck, take a step back and ask yourself what the content is trying to say at a basic level.

- Make sure the most important information is first.

- Make sure each sentence focuses on a single idea.

- Convert any lists or instructions to bullet points.

- Review and shorten words and sentences.

  - Pull up thesaurus.com to help identify shorter words.

  - Look out for "fluff," anything that your reader doesn't need to understand the content.

- Plug paragraphs or sentences that might be too complex into Hemingway App to test reading level, sentence structure, and word choice.

- Remove acronyms and jargon and define any necessary technical language.

- Change passive voice to active.

- Change to present tense when possible.

- Make sure calls to action begin with action words (for example "read more about the data" instead of "more information about the data").

- Copyedit for consistency in title structures, word choices, tense, etc.

- Plug in "you" and "we" when possible.

- Convert phrases to contractions when possible, for example, "you are" → "you're."

- Consider how certain words will translate. For instance, use "lower" instead of "cut."

Tools + resources

Tools

Hemingway App

Online tool that scores writing for grade level based on word density, length of words, use of adverbs, and more. While imperfect, it's a useful starting place.

Thesaurus.com

Online thesaurus to find simpler alternatives for difficult or jargon-y words.

Grammarly

Chrome plugin that corrects text for grammar and clarity.

Resources

[Plainlanguage.gov](#)

[Digital Blueprint](#)

[18F Content Guide](#)

[Conscious Style Guide](#)

[Mailchimp Content Style Guide](#)

[*Content Design*, Sarah Richards](#)

If you're into this, here's some good reading

"**Words as Material**," Nicole Fenton

"**Garbage Language**," Molly Young

"**An Interactive Guide to Ambiguous Grammar,**" Vijith Assar

"**Elements of Bureaucratic Style**," Colin Dickey