Writing for all
Reading by all

A Plain Language Writing Guide

Based on the Plain Language Workshops offered by Literacy New Westminster

(This guide is written using Plain Language at about a 12 year old reading level)

"Readers see through dressing-up of the truth. If you want to hide the truth, don't tell a categorical inaccuracy, a counter-factual proposition, an inoperative statement, a strategic misrepresentation, or a terminological inexactitude – simply tell a lie"

Table of Contents

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What is Plain Language?

Plain language is a way of writing that makes it easy for your readers to understand your messages. It is also known as clear writing, clear language, readability and plain English. Plain language does not mean baby talk or "dumbing" down your message. It means writing clearly and effectively for your intended reader. Far from being childlike, it takes skill and hard work to use plain language well.

Plain language:

* reaches people who cannot read well
* reaches people who don't have time to read carefully
* helps all readers understand information
* avoids confusion and errors
* saves time
* gets the job done right the first time

Plain language is not just about using simple words and short sentences. Plain language involves many techniques for clear communication. They include planning the document, organizing it, forming sentences, choosing words, and testing documents with your readers.

Why Use Plain Language?

Canadian Life

* Almost 9 million Canadian adults have problems reading printed material.
* About 1 out of every 5 Canadians has the lowest level of literacy skills.
* 80% of seniors have low literacy skills
* Recent immigrants who do not speak English well have lower scores on literacy tests.

Workplace Concerns

Managers from many Canadian industries say that poor literacy causes serious workplace difficulties with new technology, product quality and productivity.

EXAMPLE: By revising its forms, a US bank reduced the time spent training staff by 50% and improved the accuracy of the information that staff gave to customers.

Safety

Plain language can save time, money and lives. Illiteracy costs Canadian businesses about $1.6 billion a year – for workplace accidents alone.

EXAMPLE: Badly worded instructions on an emergency box designed to cut power to a subway train's third rail may have contributed to the death of a Toronto man. The coroner said: 'The boxes could be more clearly worded for people in a panic state.'

Readers Prefer Plain Language

* Readers understand plain language. It doesn't make them feel unsure or put off.
* It's faster to read.
* Readers are more likely to read plain language documents.
* Readers are more likely to follow instructions written in plain language
* Plain language leads to fewer mistakes, fewer questions and complaints, and saves time and money — for your readers and for your company or agency.
* Using difficult language maintains an unequal relationship between the writer and reader.

Most readers just dismiss the message if it isn't written in words that they know and understand.

Plain Language Myths

"Using plain language will insult people who read well."

Plain language is respectful to everyone. People who read well can find what they want to know more quickly if material is written clearly, focused on main ideas, and well-designed.

"Using plain language will never work in our organization. It would cost too much, take too much time and will be too difficult to put in place."

Clear writing *saves* both time and money. Readers make fewer mistakes and are able to get the job done more quickly. Also, your staff will spend less time answering questions and dealing with complaints.

"We don't need to use plain language because our clients can read well."

Plain language is helpful for everyone. People who read well can more easily find the information they need, saving them time and making mistakes less likely. Also, it's not always easy to tell if someone can't read well.

"Plain language isn't good for legal and technical terms."

Plain language can be used with any document. You can define legal or technical terms so that people can understand and use the information.

What Makes Material Hard to Read and Understand?

This is not plain writing:

ΙΤ IS ΙΜΠΟΡΤΑΝΤ ΤΟ ΒΕ ΜΙΝDFUL ΤΗΑΤ ΤΗΕΡΕ IS ΝΟ ΕSCAΠΙΝG ΤΗΕ ΡΕΑLITY ΤΗΑΤ ΙΤ IS ΧΟΝSIDEΡED ΣΤΑΤΙΣΤΙCAL ΠΡΟ FΟΡΜΑ ΑΡΜS LENGTH STUDIES ΗΑΣΕ ΙΠSO FACTO GENERALLY IDENTIFIED THE ESSENTIALLY APPLICABLE FACT THAT ADDITIONAL APPROPRIATE NOCTURNAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN SITU COULD USUALLY ΒΕ SEEN ΤΟ ΚΕΕΡ JUVENILE ADOLESCENT MINORS ΕΤ AL OFF URBAN THOROUGHFARES AND BOULEVARDS DURING THE NIGHT HOURS, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED ΤΟ ΤΗΕ ΤΙΜΕ ΠΡΙΟΡ ΤΟ ΜΙDΝΙGΗΤ ΟΝ WEEKNIGHTS AND/OR 2 A.M. ΟΝ WEEKENDS."

To find out how a simple statement like "**"More night jobs would keep youths off the streets"** became something unreadable like this, see the section called *Just for Fun* on page 14.

What Does Plain Language Look Like?

This guide is written using plain language. Materials that use plain language (clear writing and design):

* focus on the information that readers want or need to know
* respect the reader's background and intelligence
* use a familiar language and a straightforward writing style
* include photos or other graphics
* avoid small type, dense text and other layout choices that can confuse the reader
* make it easy for the reader to find out what is important and what must be done
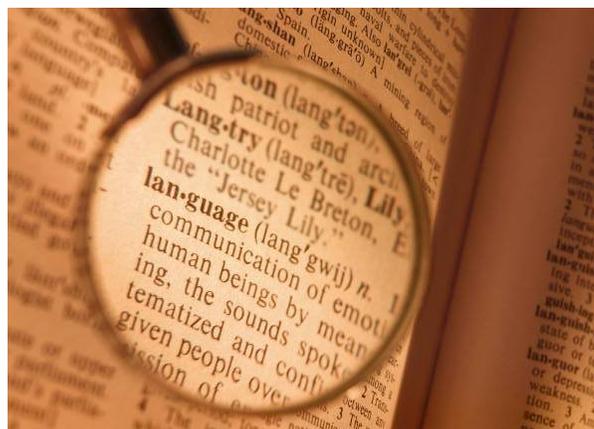
Using Plain Language

Step 1: Think about your readers

* Who are they and what do you know about them? (age, gender, education level, culture, etc)
* What do they need or expect?
* What is their knowledge of English and what is their reading level?
* What knowledge and experience do they already have?
* Do they have any biases or challenges?
* How much other written information do they have to read?
* What would you like to tell them?

> ACTIVITY: See page 16 for a **Creating an Audience Profile** worksheet

Step 2: Make a plan

* What you want to say?
* What your readers need to know?
* How will you say it (will your tone be friendly, formal or funny)?
* Make an outline
  * Put the most important information first OR
  * Start with general information that all your readers need, then list any information about special cases OR
  * Give your reader information in the order they will use it
* Only include things your reader needs. Leave out any extras
* Choose titles and section headings that are clear, make sense and make it easy for your readers to find what they need.

> ACTIVITY: See page 17 for a **Creating an Outline** worksheet

Step 3: Choose the right words

* Use short, simple, clear words (use "do" instead of "accomplish")
* Use words your readers already know (use "pay" instead of "remuneration")
* Use words that your readers would use when they are talking about the topic
* Leave out extra words that add no meaning (e.g. "it is important to note that")
* Explain unfamiliar terms and acronyms (does "PCB" mean "printed circuit board" or "polychlorinated biphenyl" or "Panama City Beach"?)
* Avoid jargon and technical words (instead of "dyspnea" use "difficulty breathing")
* Avoid using words from other languages (de facto, ex officio, in camera)

ACTIVITY: See page 18 for a **Word Choice** worksheet

Step 4: Write Clear Sentences

A clear message requires clear sentences.

* Only have one idea in each sentence. (instead of "The program is for parents with young child and it includes a snack" use "The program is for parents with young children. We provide snacks.")
* Keep sentences short and simple.
* Use active sentences (instead of "The work was done" say "He did the work")
* Make sure your sentences are clearly focused.
* Keep it positive (instead of "Don't run" use "Walk")
* Avoid double negatives (instead of "She was not absent" use "She was here")

ACTIVITY: See page 19 for a **Simple Sentence** worksheet

Step 5: Use Simple Paragraphs

* Keep them short (no more than four or five sentences)
* But, the clearest isn't always the shortest
* Leave space between paragraphs

* Try using a question-and-answer format
* Or a point form list (like this one)
* Use clear headings that tell your reader what the paragraph is about
* Makes sure important information like dates, times and places stand out. Don't hide them inside a paragraph

Step 6: Think About the Design

The way you present your message on the page is just as important as the words and sentences you use. A well written document can be hard to read if it is poorly laid out.

Print clearly

* Choose a solid, plain typeface which is easy to read (Times New Roman for the text body and Arial for headings are good safe choices).
* Don't combine more than three different typefaces on the same page
* Twelve point is a good size for most writing
* Avoid ALL CAPITALS, fancy fonts and underlining which can all be hard to read.

Leave lots of space on the page

* Leave lots of white space. Don't print on every inch of space.
* Leave space between paragraphs.
* Leave wide margins.
* Use left justified (straight) and right ragged margins.
* Use bullets or point form lists instead of full paragraphs

Highlight important details

* Use text boxes to separate key information from the rest of your writing.
* Use *italics* or "quotes" to emphasize a phrase or word.
* Make titles and headings clear (**bold**, larger, different font etc).
* Be careful with colour and shading as they can be hard to read. They can also make photocopies unclear.

Make it easy for your readers to find what they need

* Divide long passages into shorter sections with clear headings.

* Make your headings and titles easy to see

* Have a table of contents for long documents.

Use Graphics Carefully

Be careful when you are choosing graphics. They can make your writing easier to understand, but they can also be confusing and make your document look cluttered.

* Just like your words, graphics should be simple, clear and make sense

* All graphics and pictures should be placed close to the text they are about

* Don't use too many graphics – Limit Clip Art!

* Beware of charts. People with poor math skills can find them hard to understand

* Not all documents need graphics. For example, they are rarely used in letters.

Step 7: Check, Revise, Test, Revise

* Read over your material and ask someone else to read it to see if it makes sense.

* Use a "readability test" to measure the reading level of your material (see page 22 for some examples)

* Make any changes that you need

* Ask people you are writing for to read your material and tell you if they can understand it. Ask if they like and understand any graphics that you have used.

* Make more changes based on their feedback.

* Get feedback and make changes until you are happy that your readers will easily understand your message.

Your readers should be able to make sense of what you've written the first time they read it.

Additional Resources

Want to quickly check that your materials use plain language? Save the handy checklist on page 23 and refer to it often!

Plain Language Websites

Plain Train: Online Plain Language training tool:
http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/plaintrain/

Plain Language Network (lots of great links, resources, samples etc.)
http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/

Clear Language and Design: Interactive Readability Tool
http://www.eastendliteracy.on.ca/clearlanguageanddesign/readingeffectivenesstool/

SMOG Calculator: Interactive Readability Calculator
http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/campaign/SMOG.html

How to Cut the Gobbledegook: An Introduction to Plain Language Writing and Clear
Design – Extremely good Plain Language Manual
http://lrnpei.ca/files/PLain%20language%20manual.pdf

The Plain Language Movement (tons of resources and examples)
http://www.plainlanguage.gov/index.cfm

The Northwest Territories Literacy Council
http://www.nwt.literacy.ca/resources/plainlang/whatis.htm

SMOG Readability Calculator: http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/campaign/SMOG.html

Plain Language Wizardry – Website of Vancouver based Plain Language Consultant
http://plainlanguage.com/

Just for Fun: Ten Easy Steps to Create Long, Complicated, Confusing Sentences

Adapted from http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/humor/9easysteps.cfm

"More night jobs would keep youths off the streets"

Step 1: Begin to lengthen your statement by referring to studies, even if you're not aware of any studies. After all, who really cares? And if anyone challenges you, you can protect yourself by weaseling (see Step 5).

"Studies have found that more night jobs would keep youths off the streets."

Step 2: Replace simple words like more, jobs, night, youths, and streets with multi-syllable words of Latin or Greek origin.

"Studies have found that additional nocturnal employment would keep adolescents off thoroughfares."

Step 3: Use sophisticated verbs, the more vague the better.

"Studies have identified the fact that additional nocturnal employment would keep adolescents off thoroughfares."

Step 4: Rely on meaningless adjectives like *available*, *applicable*, and *appropriate* to lengthen sentences without changing or adding any content. If possible, use *various*, one of the most meaningless of all the meaningless modifiers.

"Available studies have identified the applicable fact that additional appropriate nocturnal employment would keep adolescents off various thoroughfares."

Step 5: Use weasel words as often as possible.

"A number of available studies have generally identified the applicable fact that additional appropriate nocturnal employment could usually be seen to keep adolescents off thoroughfares."

Step 6: Sprinkle your sentences with classic redundancies.

"A number of previously available statistical studies have generally identified the essentially applicable fact that additional appropriate nocturnal employment opportunities could usually be seen to keep juvenile adolescent minors off urban thoroughfares"

Step 7: Add meaningless "it is" and "there is/are" expressions, not only to lengthen your sentences but also to give them a scholarly ring.

> **"It is important to be mindful that here is no escaping the reality that it is considered vitally important to note that a number of previously available statistical studies have generally identified the essentially applicable fact that additional appropriate nocturnal employment opportunities could usually be seen to keep juvenile adolescent minors off urban thoroughfares."**

Step 8: For the precision that all good writing deserves, use legalisms, the more redundant the better.

> **"It is important to be mindful that there is no escaping the reality that it is considered vitally important to note that a number of previously available statistical studies have generally identified the essentially applicable fact that additional appropriate nocturnal employment opportunities could usually be seen to keep juvenile adolescent minors off urban thoroughfares, including but not limited to the time prior to midnight on weeknights and/or 2 a.m. on weekends."**

Step 9: Use foreign words and phrases to lengthen and enliven your sentences

> **"It is important to be mindful that there is no escaping the reality that it is considered vitally important to note that a number of previously available statistical pro forma arms length studies have ipso facto generally identified the essentially applicable fact that additional appropriate nocturnal employment opportunities in situ could usually be seen to keep juvenile adolescent minors et al off urban thoroughfares and boulevards during the night hours, including but not limited to the time prior to midnight on weeknights and/or 2 a.m. on weekends."**

Step 10: Just for fun, use all CAPITAL letters, a "sans serif" font (sans serif fonts do not have little tails on the ends of the letters; serif fonts have little tails and are easier to read in print), or a fancy font, a small font size, or all of the above. Use right and left "justified" margins, so that the type lines up in a straight line on both sides.

"IT IS IMPORTANT TO BE MINDFUL THAT THERE IS NO ESCAPING THE REALITY THAT IT IS CONSIDERED VITALLY IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT A NUMBER OF PREVIOUSLY AVAILABLE STATISTICAL PRO FORMA ARMS LENGTH STUDIES HAVE IPSO FACTO GENERALLY IDENTIFIED THE ESSENTIALLY APPLICABLE FACT THAT ADDITIONAL APPROPRIATE NOCTURNAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN SITU COULD USUALLY BE SEEN TO KEEP JUVENILE ADOLESCENT MINORS ET AL OFF URBAN THOROUGHFARES AND BOULEVARDS DURING THE NIGHT HOURS, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO THE TIME PRIOR TO MIDNIGHT ON WEEKNIGHTS AND/OR 2 A.M. ON WEEKENDS."

Creating an Audience Profile

Who is your audience? (age, gender, location, lifestyle, challenges, disabilities…)
What is their general understanding of English? What are their reading abilities?
What do they already know about the topic? What do they need to know?
What motivates them and what are their biases?
Cultural factors?
Socioeconomic factors?
General education level?
Family structure?
Other notes?

Creating an Outline

Purpose – what are you trying to express and what does your reader need to know?
What "tone" will you use? Will it be friendly, formal, funny or ?
How will you organize your content? (most important point first; general information first, exceptions and special cases afterwards; in the order your reader will use the information)
Title – What will you call the document?
What are the main points you will cover?   1. First Point (Heading:)
2. Second Point (Heading:)
3. Third Point (Heading:)
4. Additional Points (Headings:)

Writing for all, Reading by all

Word Choice

Fill in the blank spaces below with a simpler or shorter word (one or two syllables) with the same meaning as the word on the left. (You can find a long list of suggestions at http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/wordsuggestions/simplewords.cfm)

Instead of	Use
advantageous	helpful
allocate	divide
commence	
designate	choose
consequently	
eliminate	cut, drop, end
equitable	
establish	set up
evident	clear
expeditious	
finalize	
inception	start
indicate	show, write down
methodology	
necessitate	
parameters	
prioritize	
proficiency	
relocate	
remuneration	
subsequent	
terminate	
validate	
warrant	call for, permit
witness	

Literacy New Westminster   **18**

Simple Sentences – Worksheet

Rewrite the following sentences using plain language guidelines

> **Sentence Guidelines**
> * Only have one idea in each sentence. (Instead of "The program is for parents with young child and it includes a snack" use "The program is for parents with young children. We provide snacks.")
> * Keep sentences short and simple.
> * Use active sentences (instead of "The work was done" say "He did the work")
> * Make sure your sentences are clearly focused.
> * Keep it positive (instead of "Don't run" use "Walk")
> * Avoid double negatives (instead of "She was not absent" use "She was here")

Example: If there are any points that require explanation or further particulars we shall be glad to furnish such additional details as may be required by telephone.

Plain: If you have questions, please call us for help.

1. Adult education policies do not appear to be well understood by front line college instructors, even though this group has primary responsibility for the implementation of these policies.
   Hint: Readers can only take in so much new information at one time – keep it short.

2. The driver of the gold cart passing by told the officer in the cruiser that the car he saw hit the little girl in the intersection was red.
   Hint: Link your ideas – don't shorten sentences by leaving out words such as that, which and who.

3. If you fail to replace your divots, the course marshall will not admit you to the putting green.
   Hint: Emphasize the positive: Positive sentences are inviting and encourage people to read on.

Plain Language Writing Samples

Example 1: From a life insurance application form (submitted by Ron Scheer, www.saywhatyoumean.com):

Before:

If you fail to comply with your duty of disclosure and we would not have entered into the contract on any terms if the failure had not occurred, we may void the contract within three years of entering into it. If your non- disclosure is fraudulent, we may void the contract at any time. Where we are entitled to void a contract of life insurance we may, within three years of entering into it, elect not to void it but to reduce the sum that you have been insured for in accordance with a formula that takes into account the premium that would have been payable if you had disclosed all relevant matters to us.

After:

You must tell us about any matter that you know about that is related to this contract. If you do not tell us about something that would have made us deny you insurance, we might, within three year:

> (1) void (cancel) the contract or
>
> (2) reduce the amount of your insurance.

If you fail to tell us about something on purpose (fraud), we may void (cancel) the contract at any time.

Example 2:

Before:

I give my Agent the power to exercise or perform any act, power, duty, right, or obligation whatsoever that I have or may hereafter acquire, relating to any person, matter, transaction, or property, real or personal, tangible or intangible, now owned or hereafter acquired by me, including, without limitation, the following specifically enumerated powers. I grant to my Agent full power and authority to do everything necessary in exercising any of the powers herein granted as fully as I might or could do if personally present, with full power of substitution or revocation, hereby ratifying and confirming all that my Agent shall lawfully do or cause to be done by virtue of this Power of Attorney and the powers herein granted.

After:

I give my agent the power to do anything that I have a right or duty to do, now or in the future.

Measuring Readability

Readability is an attempt to match the reading level of written material to the "reading with understanding" level of the reader. Testing material on the readability scale should only be ONE part of your analysis (need to also look at flow, logic, complexity etc.). It is much better to look at any material from the targeted reader's point of view to identify strengths and weaknesses.

SMOG Readability - simplified

SMOG (Simple Measure Of Gobbledegook) is a way of testing readability. It was developed by librarians to help them choose books more easily for learners.

Calculating the SMOG level of a text

1. Select a page of text
2. Count 10 sentences
3. Count the number of words which have three or more syllables
4. Look up the SMOG number in the table below to find the approximate grade level for your text.

SMOG number	1 - 2	3 - 4	5 - 6	7 - 10	11 - 12	13 - 18	19 - 24	25+
Grade Level (+1.5 Grades)	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12+

Fry Readability Graph

This is one of the easiest tests to use. It can be applied to text that has as few as 100 words.The graph will give an estimate of the grade level of education required to read the text with ease.

There are some things that the graph will not tell you:

* How complex the ideas are
* Whether the content is in logical order
* Whether the material makes sense
* Whether the grammar is correct

* If there is any bias

* Whether the format and style is easy to read

How to use the Fry Graph

1. Count out 100 words starting at the beginning of a sentence

2. Count the number of sentences in those 100 words

3. Count the number of syllables

4. Using the chart, graph the number of sentences (y-axis) and syllables (top)

5. The intersection gives the approximate reading age of your document.

Fry Graph for estimating Reading Ages (in years)
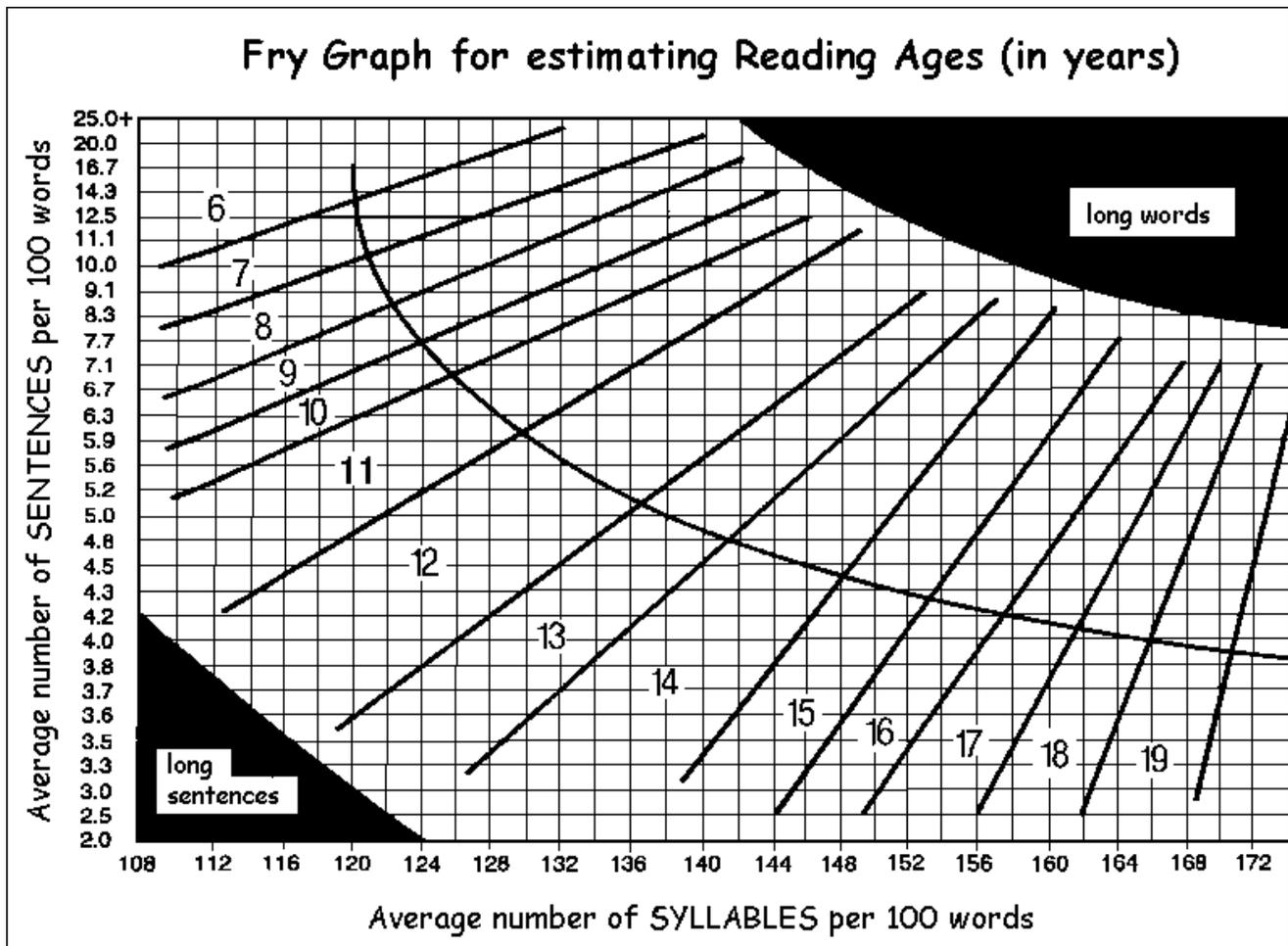
Do Your Materials Use Plain Language?

Make sure your writing is easy to read. Keep this checklist handy and use it to review your written materials.

* Use short words : mostly 1 or 2 syllables,
* Avoid jargon and leave out extra words that do not add meaning
* Write clear, short sentences with only one idea in each sentence.
* Keep paragraphs simple and short (up to four or five sentences)
    o Use point form lists or a question-and-answer format
    o Make sure important information like dates, times and places stand out
* Graphics should be simple, clear and make sense.
* Proofread!
* Have someone else look at your material to see how easy it is to read
* Design and Layout Tips
    o Use a font that is easy to read: Times New Roman and Arial are safe choices.
    o Twelve point is a good font size.
    o Highlight words, titles and headings by using *italics*, "quotes", **bold**, larger, or a different font
    o Use text boxes to separate key information from the rest of your writing.
    o Fancy fonts, ALL CAPITALS and underlining, colour and shading can be hard to read. They can also make photocopies unclear.
    o Divide long passages into shorter sections with clear headings
    o Leave lots of white space on the page – wide margins, space between paragraphs etc.
    o Use straight left margins and ragged right margins.