Cambridge Language Justice Initiative

Plain Language Writing Guide

Illustration: Aliya Alnehmi

Contents

Introduction

Language Justice is a person's right to communicate in the language and method they feel most comfortable. Writing in plain language is an important part of Language Justice. When we use plain language principles to create and format our content, we make our information easier to understand. Using plain language also improves translation accuracy when we translate materials from English to other languages.

This guide outlines how to use plain language when you create print and digital content. This will help make Cambridge's programs, services, and resources more accessible to everyone in our diverse and vibrant community.

The Language Justice Initiative is developing additional guides for how to create content that is accessible for people with disabilities who use assistive technologies to access information.

What is Plain Language?

Writing that is clear, concise, well-organized. Plain language helps your audience:

- Find the information they need.

- Understand what they find.

- Use what they find to meet their needs.

Plain language benefits:

- People who speak or read in languages other than English.

- People who are English language learners.

- People with different literacy levels (due to age or education).

- People with disabilities.

- Everyone in the community! (Clear, concise information is helpful to all.)

When to Use Plain Language

Always use plain language!

- Articles and blog posts
- Brochures
- Emails
- Flyers
- Handbooks
- Instructions
- Manuals
- Newsletters
- Posters
- Press releases
- Public service announcements (PSA)
- Registration forms
- Signs
- Social media
- Videos
- Website content

How to Use Plain Language in Your Writing

▶ Know Your Target Audience

Write so the person with the least amount of knowledge on your subject will understand.

Ask yourself:

- Can I write at a simpler literacy level so more readers will understand?
  Use the [Hemingway Editor](#) tool to gauge the reading level of your writing.

- What information do I want my readers to remember?

- How much background information do I need to provide?

- Do my readers speak, read, and write more comfortably in a language other than English?

- Will I need to translate the text into one or more languages?

- Am I communicating with a specific community or cultural group within Cambridge?

▶ Be Short and to the Point

- Write in clear, direct sentences.
- Remove unnecessary words and complex sentences.

Example

Instead of	Write
Perhaps more important than firefighting itself in many modern industrial countries is fire prevention.	Fire prevention is most important.

► Use Active Voice

Simple, direct sentences are the easiest to understand.

Examples

Instead of	Write
The bill **should be paid** by the property owner.	The property owner **pays** the bill.
We foster a community where differences and diversity **are understood** and celebrated, so that all residents can contribute to making Cambridge an equitable and peaceful community.	We celebrate and seek **to understand** differences and diversity with a goal to foster an equitable and peaceful community in Cambridge.
The purpose of the Ordinance is to ensure that housing information and resources **are widely disseminated** and that best practices **are implemented** at the start of and throughout tenancies in order to maintain housing stability for the City's residents, neighborhoods, and community.	The Ordinance **ensures** that tenants receive housing information and resources throughout the period they are renting an apartment to help them maintain housing stability in Cambridge.

▶ Use a Welcoming Tone

Speak directly to readers. Use a friendly and welcoming tone to establish trust between you and your reader. This will make people feel more comfortable accessing services, programs, and resources in Cambridge — especially people who are new to the community.

Examples

Instead of	Write
"the City"	**"we"** *Using **"we"** to refer to an agency makes your agency sound more approachable*

Instead of	Write
Third person terms like **"residents"** or **"applicants"**	**"you"** *Using **"you"** to communicate with your audience makes it more relevant to them.*

► What to Avoid

- **Legal and technical terminology, elevated language, jargon**

  These make your information confusing, unclear, and inaccessible to many readers. Remember we are writing to be inclusive of people with varying literacy levels.

  Note: Sometimes you might need to use legal and technical terms, jargon, or complex data in reports or publications. When this is the case, do the following:
  - Include a summary paragraph in plain language
  - Include a glossary defining terms

- **Multiple acronyms**

  An acronym is an abbreviation using the first letter of each word. The use of many acronyms in a document or report is confusing for readers.

  If you need to use an acronym, write out the full term and put the acronym in parentheses the first time you reference it. From then on, use the abbreviation. This provides clarity to your reader.

  ### Example

Instead of	Write
Staff from HRC and DHSP work together to support immigrants. HRC provides legal advice and housing information. DHSP offers English and Citizenship classes.	Staff from the Human Rights Commission (HRC) and the Department of Human Service Programs (DHSP) work together to support immigrants. HRC provides legal advice and housing information. DHSP offers English and Citizenship classes.

▶ What to Avoid (continued)

- **Adverbs**

  An adverb is a word that describes a verb. They are generally unnecessary for getting your point across.

  Example

Instead of	Write
Using plain language is *really* important.	Using plain language is important.

- **Figurative Language (cliches, idioms, metaphors), regional terms, or slang**

  Figurative language and regional terms are difficult to translate into other languages and can cause translation errors.

  Figurative language, regional terms, and slang can be confusing for all readers.

  Examples

  Phrases like **"a steep learning curve"** and **"pave the way for"** would be difficult to translate accurately. This could lead to a message that confuses readers or gives them incorrect information.

  "Let your voice be heard" in English is often used and understood as a metaphor for voting or civic engagement. In some languages, the phrase might literally mean **"yelling."**

Organizing Your Information: Formatting and Layout

The way you organize your content is an important part of making it easy to understand for all readers. The way you format your content will help you simplify your message and guide the reader through the information.

Remember that you are communicating with people who have a range of visual, hearing, physical, learning, and cognitive abilities. Following the formatting and layout guidelines in this section will also make your documents more accessible to people with disabilities.

▶ Break Up Your Content

Organize your content into relevant sections separated by headers that clearly state each section's topic or focus. Start each section with a main point so readers can scan and find key information. This practice is also helpful for people using assistive technologies such as screen readers to access your information.

▶ Formatting Best Practices

- **Headers**
  - Indicate specific topics or points.
  - Aim for less than 11 words.
  - Bold your header text.
  - Avoid ALL-CAPITAL LETTERS and underlining (these styles are difficult to read for many English language learners and for people with low vision or visual disabilities).
  - Follow a consistent style.

- **Paragraphs**
  - Limit to one topic unless you are linking related topics.
  - Aim for a paragraph length of 2 to 3 sentences and no more than 7 printed lines.
  - If you are designing a document, make sure there is white space between paragraphs.
  - If you are designing a document, avoid using white text on a dark background (this is difficult for people with low vision or visual disabilities to read).

► Formatting Best Practices (continued)

- **Sentences**
  - Aim for no more than 15 words.
  - Use fonts that are easy to read. Sans serif fonts like Arial or Calibri are recommended.
  - Use size 12- or 14-point font at minimum.
  - Use **bold**, color, or a larger font strategically to highlight important information.

- **Vertical lists (bullets or numbers)**
  - Vertical lists bring attention to important points or steps.
  - They help readers skim and find information they need.
  - Use bullets when list items are equally important.
  - Use numbers when presenting a list in a specific order.

► Formatting Best Practices (continued)

Example

Instead of

With the implementation of the Department's newly created Procedural Justice Office, believed to be the first of its kind in the country, the Cambridge Police Department is committed to increasing transparency, accountability, and introspection. Procedural Justice is based on four central principles: treating people with dignity and respect; giving community members a voice during encounters; being neutral in decision making; and conveying trustworthy motives. Procedurally just policing is essential to the development of goodwill between police and communities.

Write

The Procedural Justice Office of the Cambridge Police Department is the first of its kind in the country. We aim to increase transparency, accountability, and introspection.

Procedural Justice is based on four central principles:
1. Treating people with dignity and respect.
2. Giving community members a voice during encounters.
3. Being neutral in decision making.
4. Conveying trustworthy motives.

Use Imagery to Explain Content

▶ Use Photos, Illustrations, and Graphics to:

- Visualize what you are explaining.

- Provide context, including for users struggling with reading comprehension.

- Keep readers' attention if they are skimming for takeaways.

- Humanize your content and promote trust between you and your audience.

▶ Use Charts, Tables and Graphs to:

- Organize and compare related information.

- Visualize data.

▶ Add Alternative Text (alt text) to All Images

- Alt text helps describe the image within the context of your message.

- Alt text is read aloud to users by screen reader software and is indexed by search engines.

- This ensures your digital content is accessible to people who use assistive technologies.

Use Imagery to Explain Content (continued)

Example

Write and Use Imagery

Cambridge is a diverse and vibrant city. In Cambridge Public Schools (CPS), over 2,000 students speak a language other than English at home. The most common languages spoken at home besides English are Spanish, Amharic, Bengali, Arabic, Haitian Creole, and Chinese. However, 849 CPS students speak additional languages at home, including Portuguese, Somali, Japanese, Russian, Hindi, German, and more. It is important to make sure that families who do not speak English in their households can access information about important community resources.

Cambridge Public Schools
Languages Spoken at Home (2021-22)
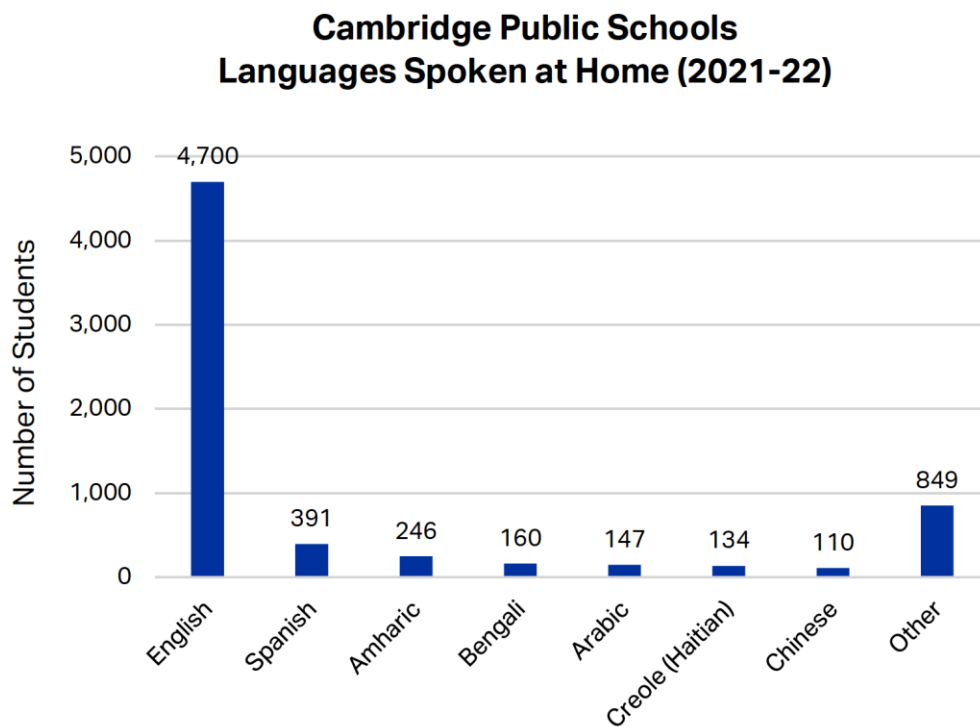
Source: Cambridge Open Data Public Schools Language Spoken at Home 2014 - 2021

Plain Language Checklist

My Audience

☐ Am I writing to the person with the least amount of knowledge on my subject?

☐ Will my readers understand?

☐ Will my readers know what to do with my information?

My Message

☐ Is it clear, concise, and direct?

☐ Do I cut unnecessary words?

☐ Is the information presented logically?

☐ Will my readers find the main points easily?

My Content

☐ Does each paragraph have only 1 topic?

☐ Are paragraphs 2 – 3 sentences in length?

☐ Are sentences less than 15 words?

☐ Do I avoid unnecessary use of acronyms, cliches, idioms, metaphors, regional words, or slang?

My Layout and Format

☐ Do I use headers and vertical lists when appropriate?

☐ Will my readers find the main points easily?

☐ Do my headings follow a consistent style and hierarchy?

☐ Do I use imagery to help explain the content?

☐ Is the layout simple, with sufficient white spaces?

☐ Do I use alt text for all images, graphs, and charts?

Additional Plain Language Resources

▶ [City of Boston's Plain English Word List](#)

The City of Boston put together a list of commonly used words and their plain language alternatives. (Credit: City of Boston)

▶ [Federal Plain Language Guidelines](#)

Official guidelines supporting the Plain Writing Act of 2010. This website explains plain language and includes a link to the Federal Plain Language Guide, which you can download as a PDF or Word document.

▶ [Grammarly](#)

Grammarly's AI (Artificial Intelligence)-powered writing assistant helps writers compose bold, clear, mistake-free writing.

▶ [Hemingway Editor](#)

A great tool to help you gauge and adjust the literacy level of your writing. Paste your content onto the web page. On the right, the Hemingway Editor will rank the grade level of your writing based on your text's readability, use of adverbs and passive voice, and difficulty level of each sentence.

Acknowledgments

The following resources informed the creation of the Cambridge Plain Language Writing Guide:

▶ [City of Boston Writing Guide](#)

▶ [Federal Plain Language Guidelines](#)

▶ [King County Plain Language Writing Guide](#)

▶ [Plain Writing Act of 2010](#)

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