

Readable Writing: Reaching out with plain language

by Cheryl Stephens

Guidelines for Readable Writing

Writing process

Create a working outline
Write a first draft with a focus on content
Edit your draft with the reader in mind
Add layout and design early in the project
Test the material before reworking it

Users and purpose

Write for a specific reader and make topics relevant to reader
Consider reader's background knowledge and information needs
Determine your own purpose and what information you *must* include
Know the conditions in which readers will use the document
Consider using a different format:
*audiotape, videotape, personal demonstrations, computer displays,
mock-ups, photographs, and sketches*

Vocabulary

Use language and tone that respects your reader's sensibilities
Use every-day words consistent with their common meanings
Avoid words that are technical, foreign or jargon:
reactivity extreme, apropro, brainstorm
Define any unusual words you must use:
A warranty is a promise to a buyer.

Word Pictures

Use concrete words that create images
Use examples from reader's life experience, not requiring inferences
Use scenarios, analogies, metaphors; for multicultural use,
be sure of a common context: *All the world is a stage. We are but actors.*

Personal Words

Write from first or second person perspective: *I* or *We* and *You*

Use personal pronouns or names:

It is said that people can... or ... They say that one can...

According to economic experts, you can...

Make a direct statement to the reader or engage in dialogue:

Subhead: *What materials will I need?*

Text: *You will need to bring along your*

Using Pronouns

Avoid using too many pronouns because references become unclear

Replace some pronouns with the original noun they refer to

Compensate for distance between noun and pronoun

Use *they* as a singular pronoun to avoid using the combined "*he or she*"

Sentences

A single sentence should express one full thought in less than 35 words

Write simple sentences with an average length of 15-25 words

Don't place information between the subject and verb

(called *embedding*)

Choose active voice where the subject does the action

Put conditions and qualifiers at the end of sentence

Use positive constructions, not negative

The importance of high fiber intake is not to be underestimated.

It is important to eat foods with lots of fiber.

Paragraphs

Paragraphs develop a single idea through example, elaboration, detail

Keep paragraphs short: no more than 5-6 lines of text

Use bulleted or numbered lists and check for parallel grammar

Organization: Concepts

Organize to suit your topic and purpose

Develop a logical and consistent sequence or pattern

Consider using Statement-Example-Restatement method

Use signal words to link and show the logical flow:

connections: *so, also, besides, and then, next, still*

differences: *unless, but then, on the other hand*

summary: *finally, in brief, in short, to put it differently, in other words*

Maintain cohesion through use of transitions, repeating key words and phrases, using pronoun references, and using parallel form:

Did you know that.....?

These are the facts:

Given this situation,.....

But this problem can arise....

These steps may solve the problem:

1. *You can try*

2. *You can develop*

3. *You might suggest*

Organization: Structure

Can you consolidate or restructure several documents?

Use summaries in introduction and closing:

Tell them what you're going to tell them; tell them; tell them what you've told them

Use headings and graphics to show your overall, organizing pattern

Use a table of contents, in prose or a list for shorter documents:

In this chapter, we will discuss

** getting organized*

** managing time*

** fulfilling responsibilities*

Graphic design

Use graphics to visually display the most important information:

bar charts, line graphs, pie charts, diagrams, line-drawings, maps, clip-art

Use design to emphasize and aid understanding, not to decorate

Use adequate white margins for readability and comfort

Use fewer than 7 and more than 2 items in lists

Number a list of items only if it shows steps, priorities, or values

Try-outs and test runs

Try out both old and new versions of writing on a sample reader

Confirm comprehension in a sample reader

For expensive printing projects, do 3 successive try-outs

Rework the material based on feedback

Web URLs for Literacy and Plain Language

More plain language materials by Cheryl Stephens

[Http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/stephens/index.html](http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/stephens/index.html)

Plain Language Online Training

[Http://plainlanguagenetwork.org/PlainTrain](http://plainlanguagenetwork.org/PlainTrain)

National Literacy Secretariat

[Http://www.nald.ca/nls.htm](http://www.nald.ca/nls.htm)

Lawyers for Literacy Info Kit

[Http://plainlanguagenetwork.org/LawyersForLiteracy/index.html](http://plainlanguagenetwork.org/LawyersForLiteracy/index.html)

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Cheryl Stephens is a trainer and coach in inter-personal and communications skills and

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Cheryl authored **Plain Language Legal Writing**, from ASAP Legal Publishing

Edward Fry is the creator of the Fry Graph, the most widely-used readability test. Fry sets out a "Writeability Checklist" in the article "Writeability: The Principles of Writing for Increased Comprehension", appearing in **Readability: Its Past, Present and Future**. These guidelines are inspired by that material.