

# Plain Language: Making Everyday Documents Clear

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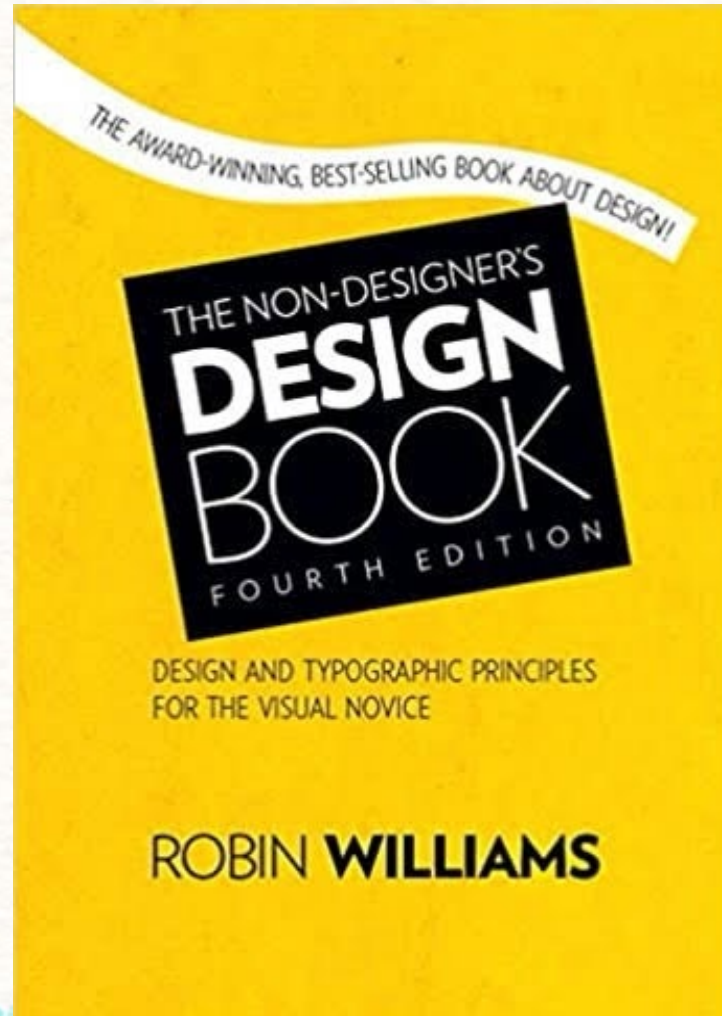
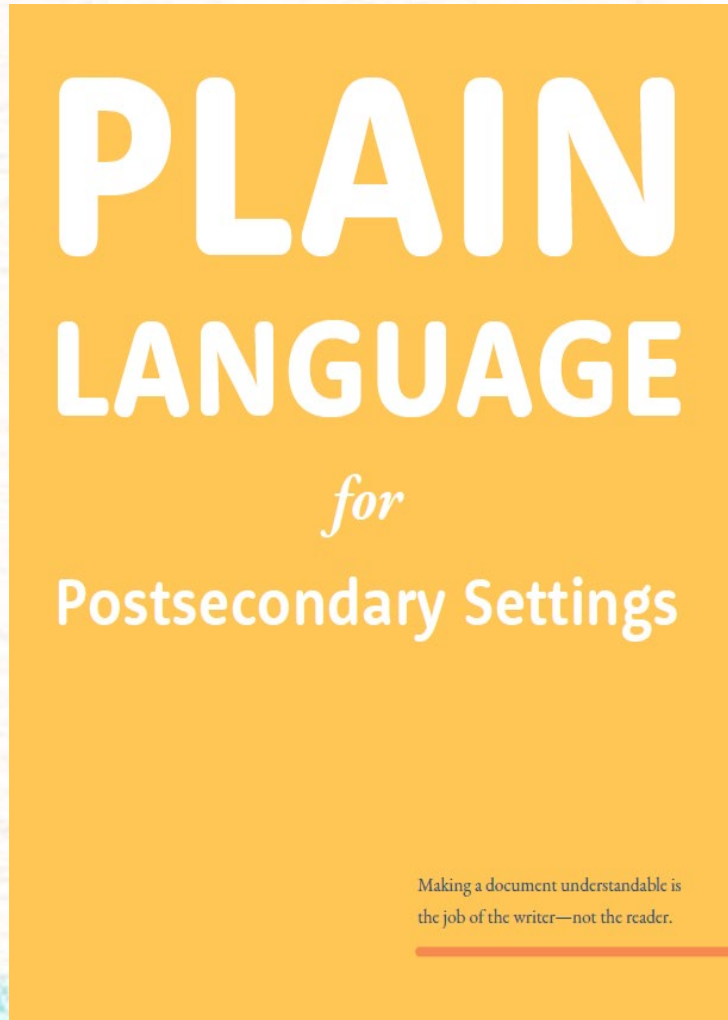
# Plain Language Introduction

“People have the right to understand the information in documents that is important to their daily lives”

-Cheryl Stephens, Plain  
Language in Plain English,  
2010

- Why Plain Language?
  - The Communication Philosophy
  
- How is Plain Language relevant to you?

# Plain Language & Design Resources



# What is Plain Language?

A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended audience can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.

Source: International Plain Language Federation

With plain language, a reader should be able to...



**find** the information they need, quickly and easily



**understand** that information the first time they read it



**use** that information to meet their needs

(Worfolk, 2022)

# Why is Plain Language Important

## Literacy Statistics:

- 49 % of Canadians struggle to understand complex text.
- 27% of Canadians with postsecondary education struggle to understand complex text.

(Worfolk, 2022)

## Keep in mind:

- Cognitive Capacity
- Reading Fatigue

# Literacy in British Columbia

**“More than 700,000 British Columbians have significant challenges with literacy.** (16% of British Columbians are at Level 1 literacy or below).

**45% of British Columbians aged 16 to 65 have difficulty** understanding newspapers, following instruction manuals, reading health information and other daily living tasks.

**52% of British Columbians aged 16 to 65 have difficulty** calculating interest on a car loan, using information on a graph, calculating medicine dosage and other daily living tasks.”

Source: [www.decoda.ca](http://www.decoda.ca)

# The Plain Language Focus

- Organizes information so that it makes sense to the **reader**.
- Speaks directly to the **reader**.
- Explains technical terms and uses examples that relate to the **reader's** experience.
- It uses design and layout appropriate to the content of the document and the needs of the **reader**.

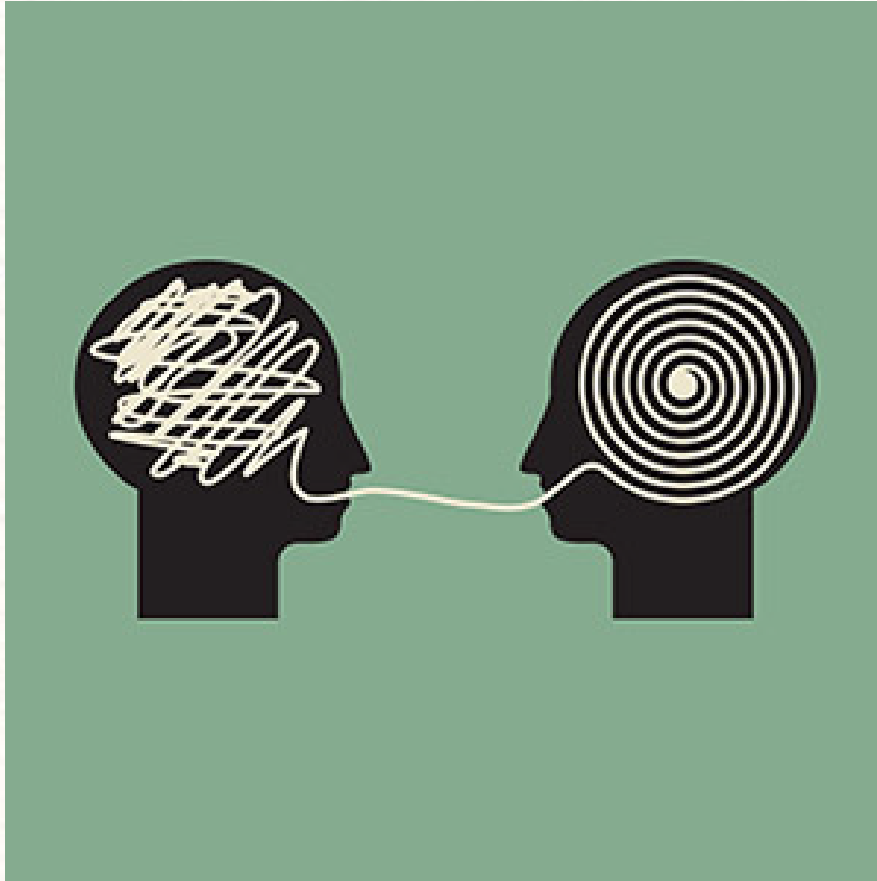
Key Word: **READER**

# Plain Language Myths

1. Plain language is simple-minded and talks down to people.
2. Plain language is just condensing text.
3. Plain language takes too long and costs too much.
4. Plain language isn't necessary for people who read well.
5. You can't write in plain language because you need to use technical terms.



# The Plain Language Process – 5 Principals to Consider



Source: [www.plainlanguagenetwork.org](http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org)

1. Audience and Purpose

2. Structure

3. Design

- CARP

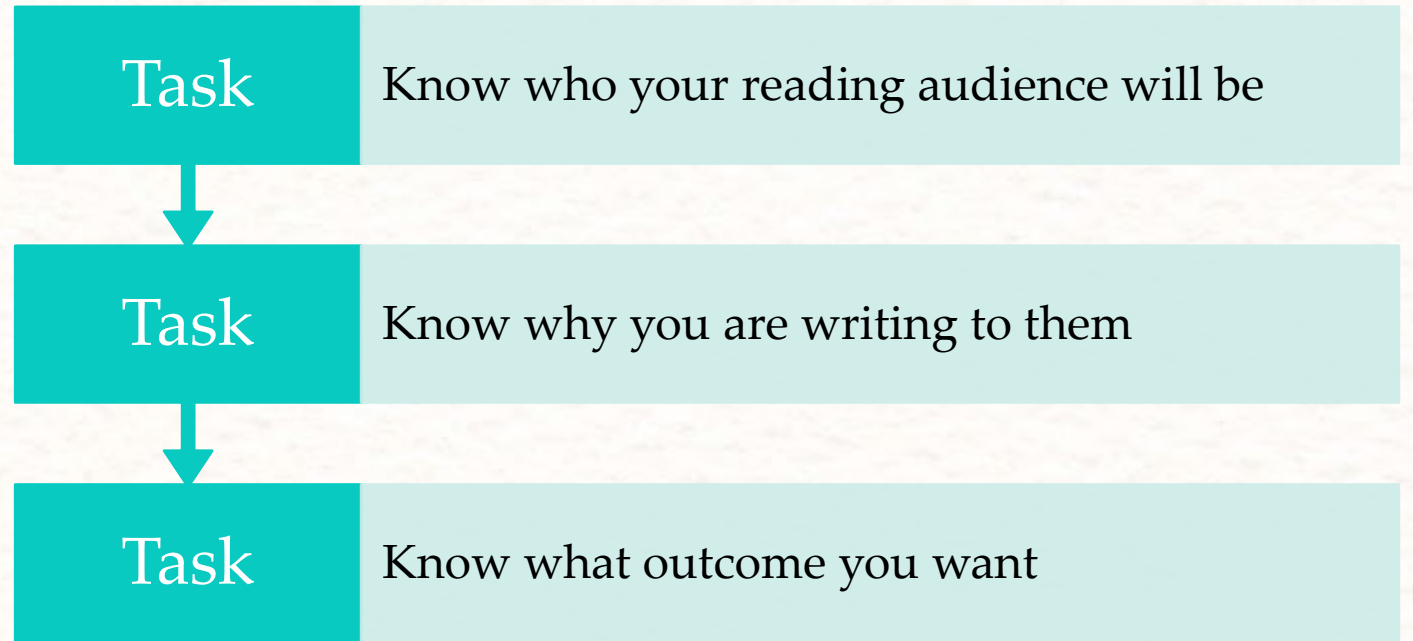
4. Expression

5. Evaluation

The Plain  
Language  
Process

Audience &  
Purpose

Start with a Strong Base



# Audience Research

## Audience Questions to Ask Yourself:

- How many audiences are there?
- What is their reading level?
- Is English their first language?
- How much do they know about my topic?

# How to Focus on the Reader

Do not focus on:

- What do I want to say?
- How can I protect my interests?
- What can I do to impress you?

Focus on:

- What does the audience need to know?
- How can I serve the audiences interest?
- What can I clearly express to the audience?

# Purpose

## **Questions to Consider:**

Why are you writing?

Who will use this document?

What do you want this document to achieve?

## **Writing Goals:**

To persuade

To inform

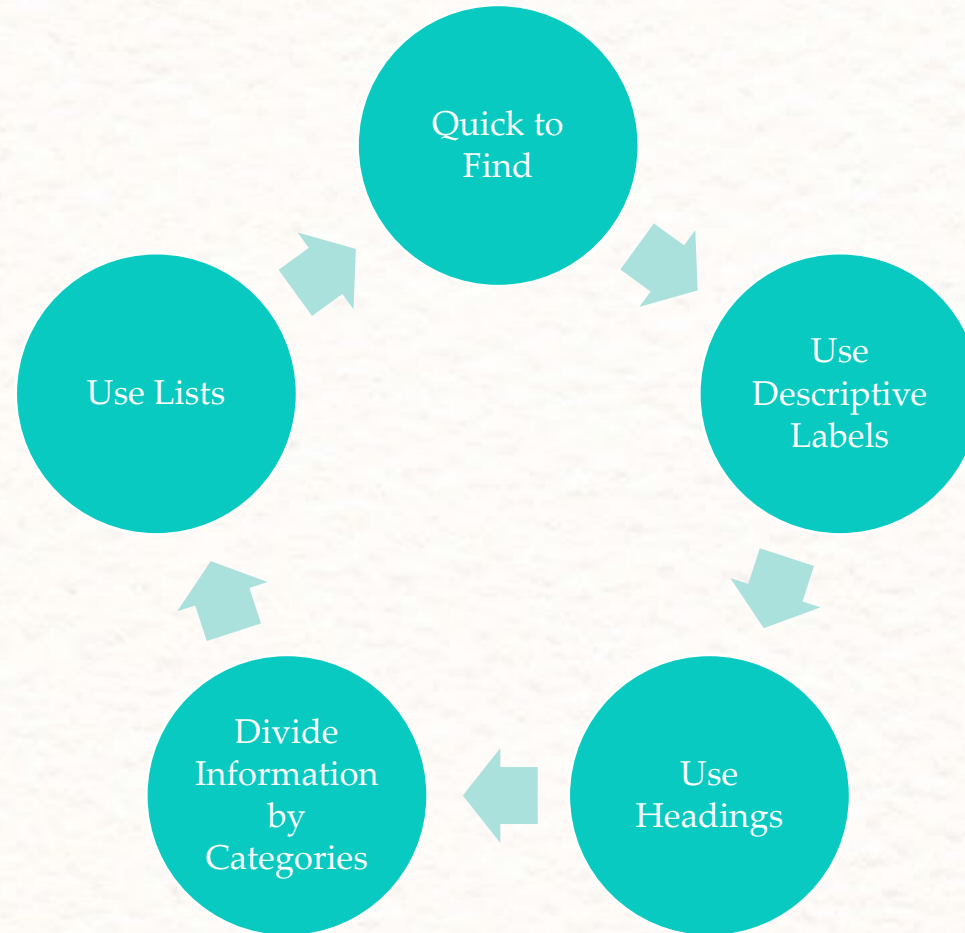
To gather information

# The Plain Language Process

## Structure

### Structure Goals

Organize Information Logically  
&  
Answer Readers' Questions



The Plain  
Language  
Process

Expression

## **Key Areas to Consider Include:**

- **Tone**
- **Word Choice**
- **Jargon**
- **Sentences**
- **Verbs**

# Hidden Verbs

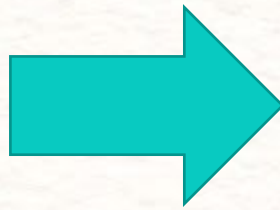
- Conduct an analysis

- Present a report

- Do an assessment

- Provide assistance

- Came to the conclusion of



- Analyze

- Report

- Assess

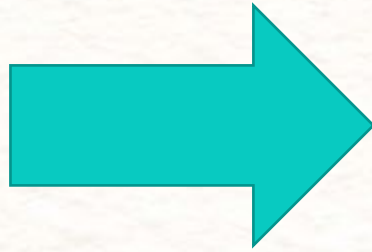
- Help

- Concluded



# Use Everyday Words

- anticipate
- attempt
- commence
- demonstrate
- implement
- in the event that
- submit
- terminate



- expect
- try
- begin, start
- show, prove
- start
- if
- send, give
- end, cancel

logo and heading are misaligned



COTN

College of the North

Photograph Waiver / Release

logo is intrusive here and needs to be moved

misaligned, should not be centred, should have more contrast in size of heading text

Why is this in italics?

*The College of the North (COTN) asks for your permission to take one or more photographs of you and to use and reproduce such photographs. By signing this photograph waiver/release you are agreeing to this on the terms set out in this document.*

This big block of text should be broken up.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, acknowledge and agree to permit the College of the North to take one or more photographs of me and to use and reproduce such images, whether in photographic, digital, electronic or any other form, without payment or other compensation to me, for any purposes deemed reasonable by the College of the North. Such purposes may include using my image(s) in College of the North publications, posters, website or other media, for promotional, educational, research, and archival purposes. I understand that my image(s) could possibly be seen worldwide. I AGREE NOT TO SUE THE COLLEGE OF THE NORTH OR ITS EMPLOYEES, VOLUNTEERS, OR REPRESENTATIVES, OR BRING DEMANDS OR CLAIMS OF ANY NATURE AGAINST ANY OF THESE INDIVIDUALS OR GROUPS IN CONNECTION WITH ANY OF THE MATTERS REFERRED TO IN THIS WAIVER/RELEASE INCLUDING, WITHOUT LIMITATION, THE USE OR REPRODUCTION OF MY IMAGE(S).

Lists should be in bullet form.

All capitals is hard to read and hostile

Justified text has resulted in gaps between words

I also agree to the inclusion of my name in connection with any of these matters herein:  Yes

No "Yes" and "No" checkboxes should not be on separate lines

Personal contact information will be treated as confidential, subject to any statutory requirements or lawful orders or directives, unless you consent in writing to a further request for its release.

lines and texts are misaligned and centred for no good reason

Participant's Name (please print)

Signature

Date

Email

Phone Number

(For College of the North Office Use Only)

Activity/Event & Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Photo Description (of person): \_\_\_\_\_

Photographer Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Photo Title or Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Location in (S:) Drive: \_\_\_\_\_

move this box so participants do not accidentally fill it in



## College of the North Photograph Waiver and Release

The College of the North (COTN) is asking you for permission to

- 1) take photos of you
- 2) use these photos in any COTN publication worldwide, including
  - website
  - posters
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- 3) use these photos for a variety of purposes, including
  - promotion
  - education and research
  - archives
- 4) use the photos without limitations and without paying or compensating you.

If you sign below, it means you are agreeing to the above conditions. You are also agreeing not to sue or make claims against COTN or its employees, volunteers, representatives, or contractors for using these photos of you.

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Your name (please print):	
Signature:	Date:
Phone:	Email:
Do you agree to having your name published with these photographs? (Check one.) <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	

**COTN Staff: Please fill out the back of this form.**

(Worfolk, 2022)

# Plain Language Process

## Design

The objectives of plain design (like plain language) are:



to present information in a clear, organized way



to improve readability (how easily a document can be understood)



to increase or support the reader's understanding of the text

(Worfolk, 2022)

Plain Language  
Process

Design

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**C** ontrast

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**A** lignment

---

**R** epetition

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**P** roximity

# Contrast

**Principal of Contrast:** The difference in visual properties that makes an object (or its representation in an image) distinguishable from other objects and the background.

**In Plain Language:** Things which look different from one another.



# Contrast Continued...

## **Two Goals of Contrast:**

1. Create Interest on the Page
2. Organize Information

## **Contrast Through:**

Typography

Colour

Size

Line Thickness

Shape

Position

Format

Space

## **Key Takeaway:**

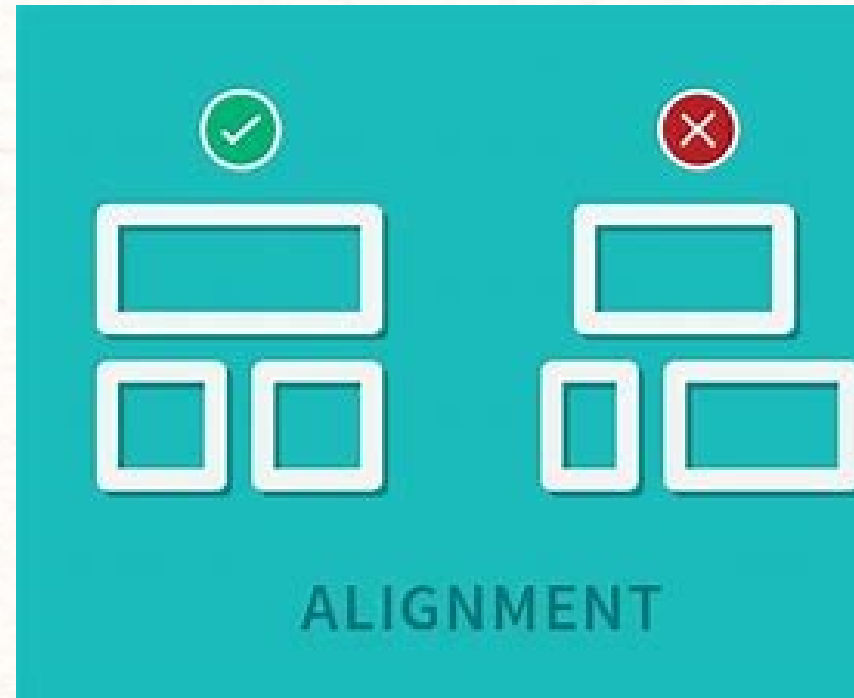
If items are not exactly the same, make them different!

# Alignment

## Principal of Alignment:

Nothing should be placed on the page arbitrarily. Every item should have a visual connection with something else on the page.

**In Plain Language:** Unify and Organize the Page

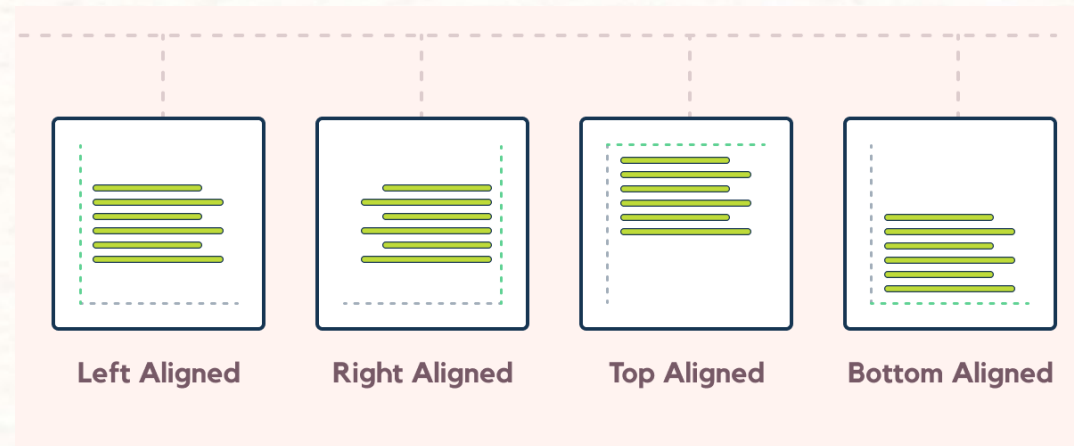




# Alignment Continued...

## Key Points:

- Create a Visual Connection
- Create Unity
- Avoid using more than one text alignment on a page.



(Williams, 2015)

**Key Takeaway:** Be conscious of where you place elements.

# The Plain Language Process

## Repetition

### **Principal of Repetition:**

Repeating some element of the design throughout the entire piece.

### **Repetitive Element May Be:**

- Bold Font
- A Certain Bullet
- Colour
- Format
- Spatial Relationships
- Headlines
- Etc..

Anything a reader will visually recognize!

# Repetition Continued...

## Gulls Honor Wrote

Heresy rheumatic starry offer former's dodder, Violate Huskings, an wart hoppings darn honor form.

Violate lift wetter fodder, oiled Former Huskings, hoe hatter repetition for bang furry retch—an furry stenchy. Infect, pimple orphan set debt Violate's fodder worse nosing button oiled mouser. Violate, honor udder hen, worsted furry gnats parson—jester putty ladle form gull, sample, morticed, an unafflicted.

Wan moaning Former Huskings nudist haze dodder setting honor cheer, during nosing.



► *Water rheumatic form!*

## Nor symphony

VIOLATE! sorted dole former, Watcher setting darn fur? Yore canned gat retch setting darn during nosing? Germ pup otter debt cheer!

Arm tarred, Fodder, resplendent Violate warily. Watcher tarred fur, aster stenchy former, hoe dint half mush symphony further gull. Are badger dint doe mush woke disk moaning. Ditcher curry doze buckles fuller slob darn tutor peg-pan an feeder pegs. Daze worsted furry gnats parson wit fairy knifely dependable twos. Nosing during et oil marks neigh cents.

## Vestibule guardings

Yap, Fodder. Are fetter pegs. Ditcher mail-car caws an swoop otter caw staple? Off curse, Fodder. Are mulct oiler caws an swapped otter staple, fetter checkings, an clammed upper larder inner checking-horse toe gadder oiler aches, an wen darn tutor vestibule guarding toe peck oiler bogs an warms offer vestibules, an watched an earned yore closing, an fetter hearses any oil ding welsh.

Ditcher warder oiler hearses, toe? enter-ruptured oiled Huskings. Nor, Fodder, are dint. Dint warder mar hearses. Wire nut?

4

Page numbers are in the same place and in the same typeface on each page.

Consistent double rule on the tops of all pages.

Consistent typeface in headlines and sub-heads, and consistent space above each.

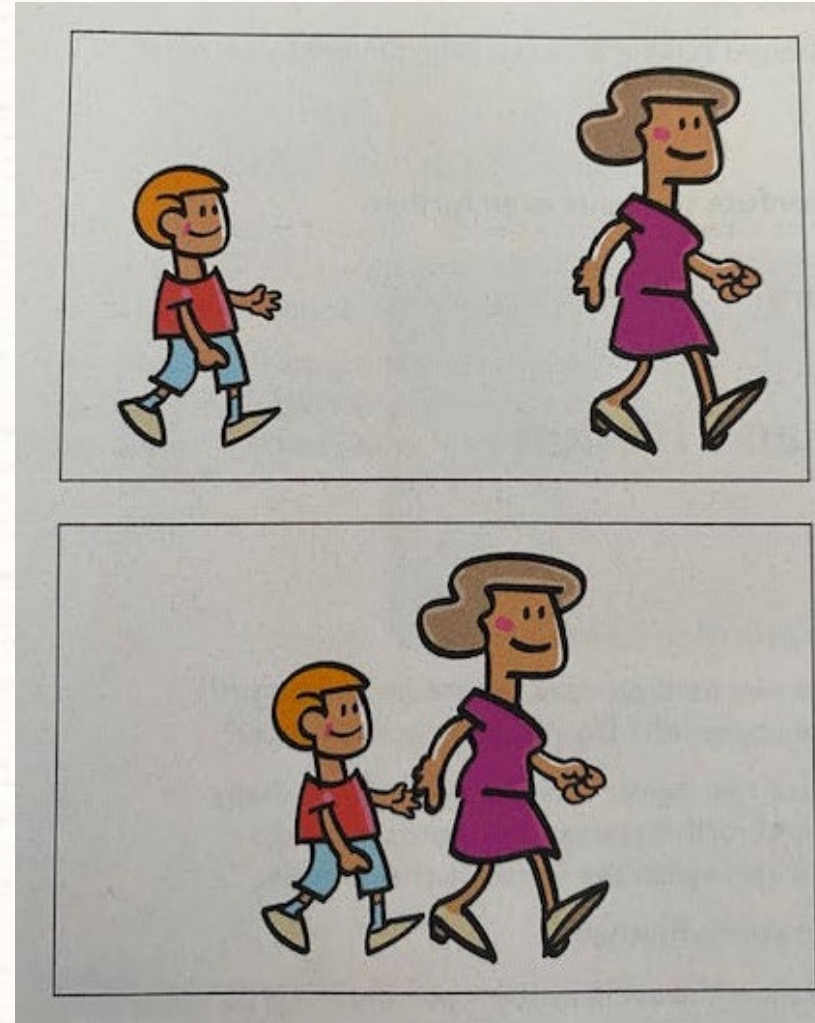
This single rule repeats across the bottom of each page.

(Williams, 2015)

# The Plain Language Process

## Proximity

- **Principal of Proximity:** Group related items together. Physical closeness implies a relationship.



# Proximity Continued...

## Quick Exercise:

Squint your eyes slightly and **count** the number of visual elements on the first business card and count the number of times your eye stops.



(Williams, 2015)

# Proximity Continued...

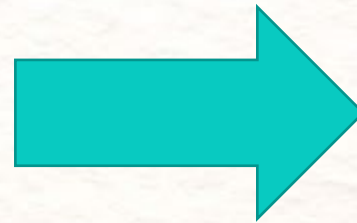
## **Be Conscious of:**

- Where do you start looking?
- What path do you follow?
- Where do you end up?
- After you've read everything...where does your eye go next?

**Logical Progression:** The reader should be able to determine a definite beginning and a definite end.

**Key Takeaway:** Group related items in close proximity. (Think of a restaurant menu)

# Pictures Can Be Key



# The Write Checklist for Document Layout



## Contrast

1. Fonts are easy to read in print or on screen
2. Headings stand out clearly from the body text, and from each other
3. White space makes the document feel open and reader-friendly — ideally with as much white space as text
4. Bold, italics, and capitals in body text show emphasis, but limit or avoid them if you can
5. Colours have a strong contrast between text and background, especially when text is in white or light colours

## Alignment

6. Text aligns to the left whenever possible, with a ragged-right margin
7. Visual and text elements are aligned on the page vertically and horizontally to maintain clean and consistent lines
8. Indented text is used minimally to help readers see structure or hierarchy

## Repetition

9. Elements are repeated to create unity and cohesion — for example, the same font for the same type of information, consistent colours, and icons to signal similar types of information

## Proximity

10. Page margins are generous — at least 2.5cm in print documents
11. Headings link visually to the text they relate to with more space above them than below
12. Related content is grouped together and spacing makes the relationship obvious
13. Line spacing is adequate and keeps related content close together



# The Plain Language Process

## Evaluation

- Cloze Test
  - Replace every 5<sup>th</sup> word with a blank
  
- Flesch Reading Easy Score
  - Use Words built-in-editor to “show readability statistics”
  
- Use a checklist

# Plain Language Headline Exercise

Below is a jumbled paragraph about a common North American breakfast food.

Try to unscramble the information and draft an outline of appropriate headings that could help to structure this information in a more logical and helpful way.

Toast is most commonly eaten with butter or margarine spread over it, and may be served with preserves, spreads, or other toppings in addition to or instead of butter. You may need more slices because it is so good. Later, simple devices were created to toast bread in the fire, such as wire frames to cook the toast more evenly. Some sandwiches, such as the BLT, call for toast to be used rather than bread. The practice of toasting bread became popular in the Roman Empire. Toast with jam or marmalade is popular. The word “toast” actually comes from the Latin “tostum,” which means “to burn or scorch.” You will need a toaster and a slice of bread. Toast is considered by many to be delicious! The first breads were likely toasted by laying them in front of the fire on a hot stone. Toast is a common breakfast food.

Source: [Plain language exercises - Province of British Columbia \(gov.bc.ca\)](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/skills/learning/reading/reading_skills/plain_language_exercises)

# Headline Options

- What is Toast?
- How to make Toast
- History of Toast

# Exercise - Rewrite this statement in Plain Language

Once the candidate's goals are established, one or more potential employers are identified. A preliminary proposal for presentation to the employer is developed. The proposal is presented to an employer who agrees to negotiate an individualized job that meets the employment needs of the applicant and real business needs of the employer.

- 1. Identify the main purpose and a primary audience**
- 2. What is the key message?**

## Revised in Plain Language

- Once the candidate's goals are established, one or more potential employers are identified. A preliminary proposal for presentation to the employer is developed. The proposal is presented to an employer who agrees to negotiate an individualized job that meets the employment needs of the applicant and real business needs of the employer.



- Once **we** establish **your** goals, **we** identify one or more potential employers. **We** prepare a preliminary proposal to present to an employer who agrees to negotiate a job that meets both **his** and **your** employment needs.

**We eliminated:** the passive voice, hidden verbs, and redundancies.

# Final Thoughts / Discussion

What next?

- How will it affect your work & organization if you do not write in plain language?
- Make your message stand out.

# Questions?

## Contact

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