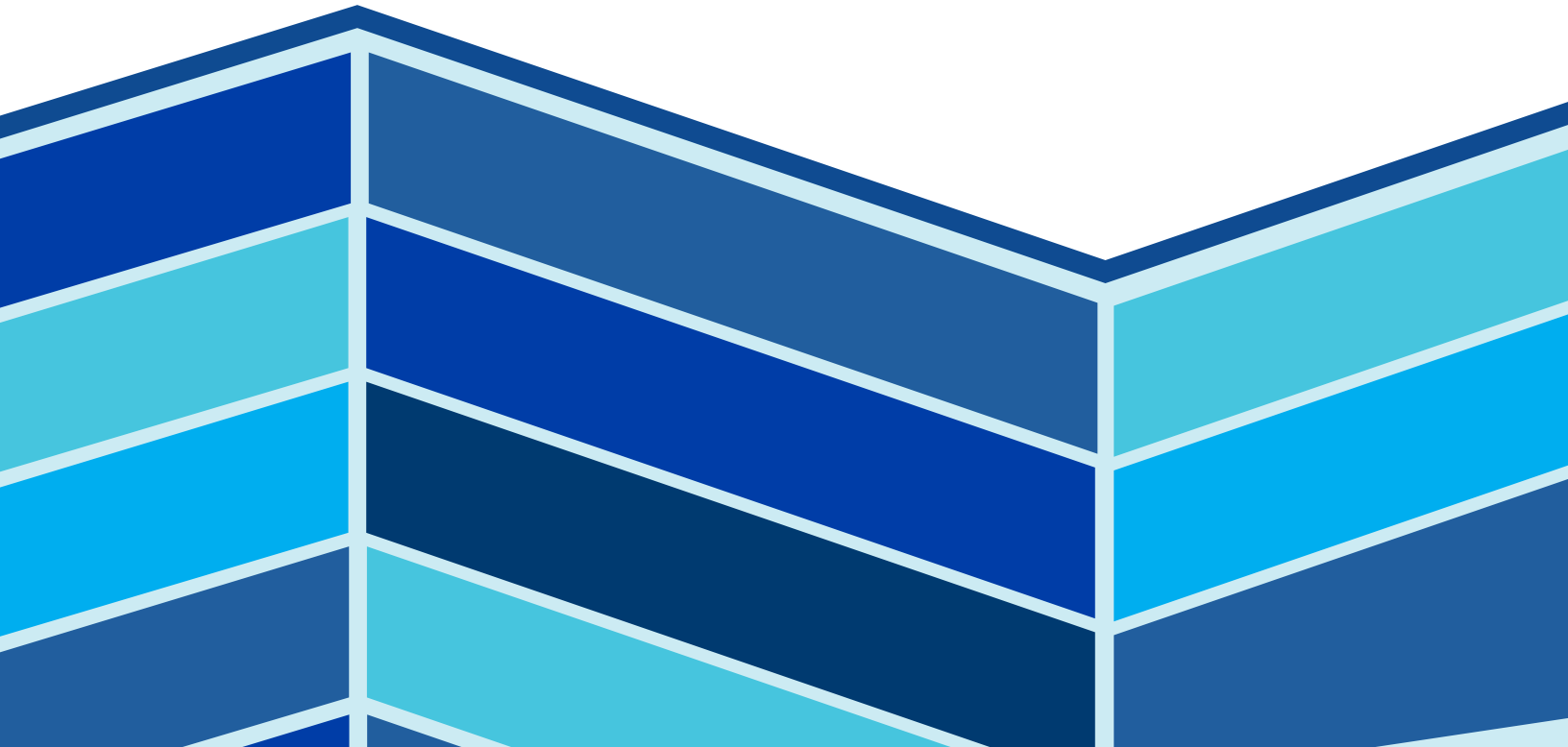
Plain Language Resource Guide

NOVA SCOTIA



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Nova Scotia Accessibility Directorate - Province of Nova Scotia
Plain Language Resource Guide

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Plain language and accessibility

Accessibility in all things — including communication — is a human right. Plain language is inclusive. Using it builds equity among citizens and users.

A commitment to accessibility means using plain language. It's also good to know that plain language benefits everyone. It helps us share information with each other inside our workplaces, and with the public we serve.

This resource guide is for anyone who wants to improve their writing for the public, including people working for the Government of Nova Scotia, municipalities, post-secondary institutions, and other organizations prescribed under the Accessibility Act. This guide gives you the basics of writing in plain language. It will get you started. You will find plenty of opportunity to practice the skills in your day-to-day work.

Some of the information is adapted from Plain Language: Clear and Simple, a publication from the Government of Canada.

The word **reader** in this guide means anyone who might use your documents. Some people might listen to, rather than read, the words you write. Using plain language is also important when we're speaking. This is why this guide also uses the word **listener**.

What is plain language?

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

This definition comes from the International Plain Language Federation and is the basis of an international standard for plain language, ISO 24495-0.

When it refers to **intended readers**, it means anyone who needs to use a written communication, like a brochure your organization has written. If someone is listening to a text your organization has written, they will also benefit from plain language.

Plain language includes:

- Knowledge of your readers and their needs.
- Understanding of the purpose of your writing.
- Simple and familiar words your reader or listener knows.
- Short, clear sentences and paragraphs.
- Clear and logical information your reader or listener needs and can use.

- A focus on the information your readers need most.
- Inclusive and unbiased words and ideas.
- Accessibility features that make documents and text usable for people with disabilities.
- Documents, websites, and social media posts that are easy to understand and use.

The words **document** and **text** refer to writing tasks. They include writing for any purpose, online or on paper.

One of the most common misunderstandings about plain language is that it oversimplifies information, or that readers will feel like we're talking down to them. In fact, readers prefer information written so that they can easily find what they need and use it. Compared to most people you likely know much more about your topic than the people you're writing to, but they don't need to know all that you know. Plain language writing shouldn't be boring or leave out key information. Readers find information more interesting when it's easier to read and they are more likely to trust it.

We all need help understanding some things some of the time. We can all miss out on services, opportunities, and community when we don't understand information.

Plain language is part of accessible communication

Accessible communication is clear, simple, easy to understand, and available in many formats so anyone can use it. It includes:

- **Plain language.** The organization and writing of documents, websites, social media posts, and other materials is easy to understand and use. This also applies to things you say, not just things you write.
- **Design.** How a document or website looks influences how easy it is to understand. Font style, font sizes, contrast levels, and colour choices are a few of the ways good design supports plain language.
- **Digital accessibility.** Technology and tools make websites and online documents accessible for all users. Examples include screen readers, videos with closed captioning, and alt text.
- **Different formats for different needs.** Information can be printed, posted online, video or audio recorded, and spoken out loud. It can also be available in Braille, ASL, and large print.

Communication is accessible when all these things are in place. This resource guide focuses on plain language.

Why use plain language?

Plain language can be a quick win when it comes to accessibility. With no renovations, policy change, or major decision-making, you can make a big impact on accessibility starting today! No matter what your role is, you can write more clearly. All it takes is a bit of knowledge and practice to make the information and services you provide much easier for everyone to find, use, and enjoy.

It's important to use plain language in websites, social media posts, signs and notices, forms, news releases, reports, emails and letters, job descriptions, agendas and meeting minutes, newsletters, and more.

Why?

- **Plain language helps people with disabilities.** Community members with physical, intellectual, learning, neurological, and other disabilities have better access to services and opportunities when communication is clear. And the audience nearly always includes people with disabilities.
- **Actually, it helps everybody.** We all need information that is easy to understand and use. Plain language is like a ramp on a building: Not everyone needs one, but it means everyone can get inside and take part. And like a ramp, plain language makes life a little easier for nearly everyone.
- **Many Canadians have low literacy skills.** According to a United for Literacy 2022 report, Statistics Canada says that nearly half of adults scored below high-school literacy levels, and nearly one in five scored in the lowest literacy level. The Conference Board of Canada reported in 2012 that half of all Canadian adults cannot read information their governments provide: most adults no longer read every day, and they lose reading skill.
- **Plain language is also important for specific groups within every audience.** These include:
    - new Canadians and people whose first language is not English or French.
    - older adults.
    - children and youth.
    - people who aren't comfortable using public services.
    - people with lower literacy skills.
- **Plain language helps people having a hard time.** When we are stressed or struggling with money, health, housing, or other basic needs, we have more trouble understanding complex information. Plain language helps us get the information we need.

- **Policies, bylaws, regulations, and legal documents use more complex language.** That language trickles down to other government writing. You can make some policies, bylaws, regulations and legal documents more accessible by writing plain language summaries.
- **Plain language is a good investment.** If you write new information clearly and edit old information to be plainer, you'll save time and money later. People will get the information they need more quickly and easily, and services will run more efficiently.

What are the benefits of using plain language?

- More access to information, goods, services, and opportunities.
- Information that is more accessible to people with disabilities.
- More informed clients, consumers, citizens, voters, and patients.
- Transparency about how things work and how people can get what they need.
- Saving time and money, because people can get what they need and want more quickly and easily.
- Healthier and more-inclusive communities.

Getting ready to write

Plain language puts the reader's needs and wants at the centre of communication. It also focuses on the writer's purpose—to persuade, inform, or ask for something.

Audience: Your reader or listener

Any time you write something, the first thing to think about is who will read or listen to it, why, and under what circumstances.

When you use plain language, you take into account who the information is for, what they need, and how you can make that information as easy to use as possible.

To find your audience, ask questions about who will be reading or hearing the information.

- Who needs to know this?
- Is it a group of people who share similar characteristics, or is it a group of people who may have some different backgrounds, experiences, etc., or is your audience the general public with a wide range of characteristics?
- How motivated are they?

- What do they need to do or know about this topic?
- How much do they already know about the subject matter?
- How will this information help them?
- How motivated are they to get information? Could they be distracted or upset while reading it?
- What accessibility needs do they have?
- Do they likely read every day?
- What is their level of education?
- How old are they?
- What is their gender? Culture? Background? Lived experience? Will they likely read this on their phone?
- What is the best way to communicate with them?

You will get the best information from asking some of those readers, but you may have to ask someone who knows the readers well. You may not learn all the answers, but asking the questions will help you create more readable texts.

If your readers are diverse in their use of English, their internet access, their physical or intellectual abilities, their reading skill levels, you may have to choose a part of the audience to focus on.

Ask yourself who most needs to be able to find, understand, and use your information. Get to know that part of the audience.

The rest of your audience will also get your message.

▶ **Example:**
Wastewater drain information

You must tell the public how to find out if a drain on their property is letting dirty water flow into the community's wastewater system. Your purpose is to persuade them to note if they have an illegal outside drain and to call the water utility to check it for them.

Who is your audience? And who should you plan to write for?
You have three main audiences:

- homeowners.
- contractors.
- home inspectors.

What do we know about their information and reading needs?

- Most homeowners know nothing about wastewater systems on or near their property. Home inspectors and contractors will know something about wastewater systems and terms related to the topic.
- Many readers will read your information in a second or third language.
- Many readers have a disability that could affect how they read your information.
- About half of homeowners and some contractors will not be comfortable reading, no matter what their first language is. The home inspectors likely write reports every day, so they are more comfortable reading.
- Homeowners prioritize their families and jobs over information about a possible problem they don't really understand. Contractors and home inspector juggle many tasks and may scan your text quickly for detail that tell them what they need to know.

Which audience do you write for?

- Homeowners are the biggest audience.
- Contractors and home inspectors can influence homeowners.
- Homeowners have the least information, and the lowest reading levels (as a group).
- Home inspectors and contractors need more technical detail.

How do you write to this audience?

- Organize information to persuade them they might need to contact the water utility.
- Put the most important information close to the top where readers will find it.
- Use everyday language and explain technical terms as they appear in text.
- Present ideas in digestible pieces using shorter sentences.
- Give contractors or home inspectors more information later in the document, separate from the rest of the text.

Purpose: What is this text for?

Ask yourself why you are writing. What do you need to achieve? What do you need your readers to do to achieve it?

Three common purposes for organizational writing are:

- to inform.
- to explain how to do something.
- to persuade.

Ask your readers or yourself:

- What is my goal? What do I want my reader to do?
- What does my reader need to know?
- What decisions does my reader have to make?
- What action should they take?

▶ **Example:**
What does a reader who wants to sign up for a course need?
They need a brief course description, an easy way to register, the cost, the location, and the time.

What do they likely not need?
A lot of information about the institution or organization.

Writing

The goal of plain language writing is to help readers and listeners get the information they need so they can make decisions and get what they need or want. You can accomplish this goal by organizing the text according to what your reader needs and writing in the style and tone your reader is used to.

This section will help you discover how.

Organizing and presenting the information

How you organize and present your text will depend on what you need your readers to do and what they need to do it.

Think about what you want the reader to use the text for:

- **To learn:** you might begin with general information and move to more specific information to build your reader's knowledge.
- **To follow instructions:** you might organize the steps in the order the reader will follow them.
- **To refer to later:** you might order pages or paragraphs according to how the reader might search or you might offer a search tool.
- **To give you information:** You might ask questions in a form or survey.
- **To take action or make a decision:** you may persuade by building an argument.

Most of the text you write will end up online, whether as information on a website or social media, in a document, or in an email.

When you thought about your readers or listeners, you likely learned whether they needed a particular format to meet their needs.

These questions could help to refine your ideas about formats:

- What accessibility needs do your readers have?
- Should your document be available in more than English and French?
- Would large print, photos, graphics, or other visuals be helpful?
- Would a video or voice recording of the content help users?
- Should it be available in hard copy?
- How will it be shared?

▶ **Example:**
You're making a social media post about a new museum exhibit. Your goal is to bring more people into the museum. Instead of taking text from your website, you move around some text to put the most important information near the top: the dates and times of the exhibit, and how to get to the museum. You add image descriptions and alt text to a photo of the exhibit, and a link to the accessibility features of your museum.

News you can use

Give your readers news they can use—the information they need and only that information.

Another idea from the media about organizing information is "Don't bury the lead." Journalists use this rule to make sure the most important information in a news story appears in the first couple of paragraphs. That's because many people don't read a news story past the first few lines.

If your reader comes away with only one or two bits of information, what do you want those to be? A good way to figure it out is to ask: What are the top three things the reader should know? And of those, which is the most important?

You can offer any extra information as a separate link, but don't make your reader read it to get to what they really need.

In a longer document, like a brochure or longer web page, use headings to help break up the text. The first few lines under each heading will be the most important and most-read information.

On a website, you can try to organize the information so your readers can find what they need using as few clicks as possible.

If you don't know what your readers need or want, ask them or someone who knows them well. This can be as simple as having a few informal conversations with people who might use the document or asking your colleagues what questions people ask about the topic.

- **Example:**
  You're sending an email home to parents and caregivers of elementary school students about your school's plans for the December holiday season. You want to cover the holiday concert, the school attendance policy (a lot of students seem to arrive late in December!), happy holidays from the staff, end-of-term testing, the school lunch program for January, and your school's plans for an inclusive holiday for all students.

  That's a lot! What is the best way to organize the email? Even though you might think it's best to send only one email home, this is likely too much information and most readers will either not read it all or will not absorb it. Decide what is most important for families to know.

Here's a suggestion:

> To: **Parents and caregivers**
> Re: **The holidays at Nova Scotia Elementary School**
>
> Happy holidays from the staff and administration at Nova Scotia Elementary School!
>
> We have lots of fun holiday activities for all students this year. Our goal is for each child to feel included in this winter celebration. We'll be enjoying games, food, and fun from many places and traditions. If you would like to volunteer or share your own traditions, email us at school@school.com.
>
> The holiday concert is on Wednesday, December 10 at 6:30pm. See you there!

The rest of the information can go in a separate email with a title like: Important information about tests, lunches, and attendance. Readers then know what to expect, and why they should read each email.

Write the way you speak

Plain language writing is often conversational. It uses everyday, familiar words and phrases that most people can understand. It also uses a more relaxed tone of voice.

Written language often uses a more formal tone, but the way you are used to writing for professional or academic purposes is not plain to most people.

Here are some tips for making your writing less formal, no matter who your readers are:

- Write directly to your reader whenever you can, and use "you" and "we" instead of "students," "residents," or "patients," or other descriptive terms for your readers. Make sure it's clear who "you" and "we" are.
- Use common examples readers can relate to.
- Explain ideas or processes out loud to someone who can take notes. You can also record yourself. Use this as a jumping-off point for your writing.
- Read what you've written out loud to yourself or to someone else. Does it sound like something you would actually say, assuming a conversational tone is appropriate?

- **Example:**
  Make the tone of website text less formal. Make links clearer by using a word or phrase that describes the link.

  Instead of:[1]
  Guidelines for school and/or bus cancellations due to weather.

  HRCE takes great care when making the decision to alter the normal operations of schools and school buses due to weather. You can find more information below or by viewing (and printing) our guidelines, here.

  If you wish to share your thoughts about school cancellations, click here.

  Try:
  About HRCE schools and buses when the weather is bad.

  When the weather is bad, we make careful decisions about changing the school day or cancelling schools and buses. You can find more information below or by reading and printing our cancellation guidelines.

  Share your thoughts about school cancellations.

Use simple, direct sentences

Readers understand new information best when you share ideas one at a time. Short sentences and paragraphs are best.

Each sentence should contain one idea. You can make a related point in a new sentence. Overall, your sentences should average 20 to 25 words. You can write some sentences that are shorter than 20 words and some that are longer than 25 words. Sentences shouldn't be longer than 40 words – working memory begins to burn out at that point. There is no minimum sentence length.

[1] Halifax Centre for Education: Cancellations

- **Example:**
  Break up long sentences.

  Instead of: [2]
  Nova Scotia Businesses of Diversity are growing their revenues and forging new partnerships with the help of Invest Nova Scotia through participation in Supplier Diversity procurement programs.

  Try this:
  Nova Scotia Businesses of Diversity are growing revenues and forging new partnerships. Invest Nova Scotia helps by offering procurement programs dedicated to suppliers.

  One way to keep sentences focused is to build them using a "who-does-what" structure. Writers call these the "subject," "the verb," and "the object" of the sentence.

- **Example:**
  Make clear who does what in the sentences.

  Instead of:
  Changes were implemented to the procedure.

  Try this:
  The team made changes to the procedure.

  Instead of:
  Forms will be collected next week.

  Try this:
  The clerk will collect your forms next week.

Another way to focus a sentence is to keep its subject, verb and object close together, without other phrases interrupting your thoughts.

[2] Invest Nova Scotia: Businesses of Diversity

Offer one main idea in each paragraph

Each paragraph should contain one main idea and a couple of supporting ideas. This groups the ideas and makes it easier for readers to remember them before moving on.

Occasionally a complex idea will call for a longer paragraph. An occasional long paragraph is fine if it's clear.

But you can also break up a complex idea by using a word or phrase to link two related paragraphs together. This lets your readers understand your message even if they are scanning your text.

- **Example 1:**
  Simplify paragraphs breaking them up into shorter paragraphs.

  Before:
  (This paragraph is long because it contains two ideas: one about why wild spaces are important and one about the benefits of protecting wild spaces):

  Our wild spaces give us clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, and opportunities for both adventure and quiet reflection. They allow animals and plants to thrive in their natural habitats. They also have a direct role to play in responding to climate change by capturing and storing carbon dioxide and producing oxygen. When we protect our land in a system of parks and protected areas, we keep it natural: free from development, houses, factories, or farms. The trees are left to grow, die, and feed the forest in a natural life cycle. Protecting our landbase also ensures that many of the province's most spectacular areas will be available to Nova Scotians and visitors to our province now and in the future.

  After:
  (Breaking the paragraph in the middle shows the two ideas more clearly, allowing the reader to remember the two different ideas better):

  Our wild spaces give us clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, and opportunities for both adventure and quiet reflection. They allow animals and plants to thrive in their natural habitats. They also have a direct role to play in responding to climate change by capturing and storing carbon dioxide and producing oxygen.

  When we protect our land in a system of parks and protected areas, we keep it natural: free from development, houses, factories, or farms. The trees are left to grow, die, and feed the forest in a natural life cycle. Protecting our landbase also ensures that many of the province's most spectacular areas will be available to Nova Scotians and visitors to our province now and in the future.

Example 2:
Simplify paragraphs of instructions by breaking them up into bulleted lists.

Before:
To pay your parking ticket, begin by carefully reading the citation for the exact fine amount and due date. Next, determine your payment method: online payment portal, mail-in option, or in-person payment at a designated location. For online payments, visit our official website specified on the ticket and follow the prompts to enter your citation number and payment information. If mailing your payment, ensure the cheque or money order is made out to the appropriate agency and include your citation number on the payment. For in-person payments, visit the designated office during business hours and present your citation along with the payment. Be prepared to pay any additional fees or late penalties if the payment is past due. After completing the payment, retain the receipt or confirmation number for your records.

After:
To pay your parking ticket:

1. Read the ticket to find out how much you owe and when the payment is due.
2. Decide how you will pay:
    - Online.
    - By mail.
    - In person.
3. To pay online, click on our Online Payment Portal.
4. To pay by mail, send a cheque or money order to PO Box 123, Anytown, NS L1L 1L1. Make sure to include your ticket number.
5. To pay in person, visit our offices at 123 Anystreet, Anytown, NS from 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday.
6. Include a late fee of $20 if your payment is late.
7. Keep your receipt or confirmation number for your records.

Questions? Call us at 902-123-4567

Choose simple words and common language

Word choice can feel tricky because it's hard to remember that words used within an organization are not used outside of it. Using words that are familiar to your readers will make it easier for them to understand your message and will even build their trust.

You can replace many complicated words with simpler ones. Sometimes, there's a simpler version of the same word. The examples in this list show everyday equivalents for words and phrases that are common in governments and universities, but not for most people.

- approximately — about.
- facilitate — help.
- currently — now.
- utilize — use.
- submit an application — apply.
- make changes to — change.

Know that your readers will appreciate your choice of simpler, more-common words. These are the words they use every day. They will especially appreciate your efforts if they must read information that is technical or emotionally difficult. Those more-familiar words give readers a break while they take in more challenging information.

▶ **Example:**

Before:
Nova Scotians should make preparations for the upcoming weather event by engaging in emergency preparedness activities, including:

- acquiring adequate drinking water and food supplies,
- purchasing batteries,
- having an emergency evacuation plan, and
- utilizing the emergency measures website.

After:
You can get ready for the storm by doing these things.

- Make sure you have enough food and water to last several days.
- Buy batteries for flashlights and radios.

- Plan for an emergency, like having to leave your home in a hurry.
- Use the Emergency Management website to find information.

This example also shows how to break up a long sentence to make it easier for readers to use.

Jargon, technical terms, and acronyms

Jargon is special words or expressions used by a profession, group, or sector. It includes technical terms as well as specific vocabulary. People in a group use it because it saves them time. One example that most people are familiar with is legal jargon.

Jargon is insider language that is difficult for others to understand. It keeps readers out instead of inviting them in. When you use it, people may miss out on services, choices, and opportunities.

Most of us feel a little uncomfortable when we don't understand something. We might feel silly asking questions. Using jargon creates this problem for your readers.

Here are some tips:

- Use familiar words and phrases instead of jargon.
- If you must use technical or special words, explain them clearly in the text where they appear.
- Spell out acronyms except those that are used as commonly as their full terms, like RCMP.
- Don't assume people will understand words that you use every day.
- Test your document on people who will be reading and using it.

▶ **Example 1:**
Replace jargon and technical terms with more familiar words.

Before:
For your comfort and convenience, please remain inside the terminal building until the announcement is made for embarkation. Passengers travelling with young children are asked to present themselves to the agent located at the vessel gate.

After:
Please stay in the building until we call for you to board the boat. If you have young children, please come to the gate to speak with us.

- **Example 2:**
  Sometimes, you need a few more words to make your meaning clear.

  Before:
  Many startups rely on bootstrapping and sweat equity to get into the marketplace, but pitching your deck to an angel investor can assist in refining your value prop and help you get the support you require to enhance your market penetration. This is especially true for SaaS products targeting B2B.

  After:
  Many new businesses depend on hard work and investment from owners to get going. Making a slide deck you can show to potential investors helps you figure out what you offer that no one else does. This can help you get the support you need to sell more of your products. This is especially true for software as a service (SaaS) products aimed at business customers.

Stay positive

Readers are more likely to welcome information when it's written positively. Positive words and sentences encourage readers to read on. Negative words and sentences can make readers feel judged.

- **Example:**

  Instead of:
  If you do not submit your application by the deadline, you will lose your place on the waiting list.

  Try:
  When you submit your application by the deadline, you keep your place on the waiting list.

Replace double negatives

Writers sometimes use two negative words together to make a sort of positive statement. It adds variety and isn't exactly the same as the positive statement. However, when you do this, you make the reader's brain think twice because we never think this way. You make the reader work harder than if you used the positive equivalent. Whenever you can, replace two negative words their positive equivalent.

- **Examples:**

  Instead of: He was not absent.

  Try: He was there.

  Instead of: The system is not without problems.

  Try: There are problems with the system.

  Instead of: These kinds of events will never be unpopular.

  Try: These events will always be popular.

Is it ever okay to use negative words or phrases? Yes. Keep this language for dangerous situations, legal matters, or other serious warnings. You can also use negative language to help people with fears or dispel myths.

- **Examples:**

  Warning: Do not lean over the subway platform.

  Danger: Do not enter.

  HIV does not spread through casual physical contact.

Designing and formatting your document

The way your document or text looks is as important as the words you use. Formatting can highlight the most important information and links, make connections, and organize ideas. It lets readers who scan text get the most out of your writing. And because a formatted text looks easier to read, it encourages readers to keep reading.

For readers who look at documents, visual appeal is important. A visually appealing text has:

- lots of white space.
- fonts that are comfortable to read.
- images that add to the meaning.

Sticking to some basic rules will make your document or online text pleasant to look at and easy to use. The CNIB Clear Print Accessibility Guidelines offer excellent guidance on fonts, font size and type, colour, and formatting.

Some people listen to documents using a screen reader. Screen reader software helps people with disabilities use computers. Screen readers use Text-To-Speech software (TTS) to translate text into speech so people can listen to it. It's important that documents are screen-reader friendly. These websites provide info for Word documents:

- Abilitynet.org
- Microsoft

Tables of contents, headings, and sub-headings

Tables of contents, headings, and subheadings improve organization is two ways:

- they help you organize your text when you start writing.
- they help readers find what they need.

Tables of contents are for long documents like books or booklets. Most of your writing will not need a table of contents. On a website, the menus and site maps act as tables of contents.

Headings are useful for text of any length, even an email. Headings and sub-headings let readers scan a text for the information they want. Most readers do not read an entire text: they nearly always scan over the words looking for something useful. Headings and sub-headings guide readers to information. They show readers how the information fits together. And they break up a text visually, making it look easier to read. In all these ways, headings help readers.

Headings and sub-headings work best when they are clear and consistent.

Use Styles in Microsoft Word to format different levels of headings and sub-headings into your documents. This will allow screen readers to read a document in its separate sections rather than as a single long section.

Websites also need clear and consistent headings and sub-headings.

Example:[3]

Garbage, Recycling, & Green Cart

Home > Home & Property > Garbage, Recycling, & Green Cart > Collection Schedules and What Goes Where > Improperly placed curbside waste

Improperly placed curbside waste

Curbside collection of garbage and recyclable material is one of the many conveniences enjoyed by most residents of the region. To prevent this service from creating an issue in our neighbourhoods, property owners are required to abide by curbside solid waste regulations.

What are my responsibilities as a property owner?

Property owners are responsible for the condition of their property at all times. Property owners must:

- Keep the curbside free of debris.
- Place organic green cart, collectible garbage, and recyclables at the curbside no earlier than 7:00 p.m. the evening before the scheduled collection day and no later than 7:00 a.m. the morning of the scheduled collection day (green cart, collectible garbage, and recyclables).
- If high winds are forecasted, residents are asked to secure their solid waste when placing curbside for collection. Residents may choose to stack heavier bags on top of lighter bags if possible. Residents may choose to place bags out on the morning of collection, before 7:00 a.m., instead of the night before. Collection can start as early as 7:00 am.

In Garbage, Recycling, & Green Cart

Service Updates +

Waste Facility Hours and Rates +

Collection Schedules and What Goes Where +

Sorting Guides

Improperly placed curbside waste

Events +

Garbage Collection +

Recycling +

This example of a website offers clear, easy-to-scan headings. The navigation panel on the right shows visitors where they are on the site and where to find related information.

[3] Halifax Garbage, Recycling and Green Cart

Bulleted and numbered lists

Lists making your text easier to read in three ways:

- More white space around the words means tells readers they have less to read.
- The extra space makes the text stand out more.
- Lists let readers scan down quickly.

Type size and style

Use fonts that are clear and easy to read. There is no one best font. Some readers prefer serif fonts and some prefer sans serif fonts.

- **Serif fonts** small curls on each letter. Examples with good readability include Times New Roman, Georgia, and Lucida Grande.
- **Sans serif fonts** look plainer. Examples with good readability include Aptos, Arial, Helvetica, Verdana, and Futura.

It's best to choose fonts that are simple and available in your word processing program. Use up to two fonts in one document if that helps make the document easier to read. Using one font for headings and another for text can make the difference more obvious.

Choose font sizes of 12 to 18 points for the main text, and larger fonts for titles and headings.

Emphasis

Choosing words and word order in sentences is the best way to emphasize important information. Bold type can be useful if you use it only for emphasis and if you use it sparingly.

Other ways to emphasize text are:

- **Highlighting** — Use only light highlight colours on black or dark type.
- **Italics** — Limit them to fonts that are still easy to read in italics. For example, Arial works well, but Times New Roman may be difficult for some readers.
- **Colour** — Black type on a white or light background is best. Some colours are difficult to read.

Use these tactics sparingly. You should also know that some screen readers may not tell their users text is in bold, highlighted, italicized or in colour.

We don't recommend:

- All capital letters (ALL CAPS). It's more difficult to read because the letters are more uniform in shape.
- Underlining. It's inaccessible to screen readers.

Justification of margins

Align text and images to the left margin. This is called left justification, or ragged right margin, and it is the easiest format to read and it's better for screen readers.

Why align to the left only? Text that is aligned (or justified) on both sides is difficult to read. The inconsistent spacing within words and sentences is tiring to read, especially for people who have lower literacy skills. Full justification causes uneven spaces between words and letters within words. It can also create a lot of hyphenated words, which can also be hard to read.

▶ **Examples:**

Left justification, or ragged right margin (like this Resource Guide):
The Town of Truro is pleased to provide an update on the ongoing repairs and renovations at the Colchester Legion Stadium following the extensive damage caused by Hurricane Fiona. We recognize the importance of this facility to our community and greatly appreciate the public's continued patience as work progresses.

Full justification:
The Town of Truro is pleased to provide an update on the ongoing repairs and renovations at the Colchester Legion Stadium following the extensive damage caused by Hurricane Fiona. We recognize the importance of this facility to our community and greatly appreciate the public's continued patience as work progresses.

Spacing

An important design rule is to leave lots of white space in your document or website. White space is space between paragraphs and sections and around a text so the text. This makes the text look easier to read.

Avoid walls of text. Long blocks of text can feel difficult to read and may discourage some readers. Try using:

- bulleted lists.
- short blocks of text, with no more than four or five sentences.
- generous margins.
- headings.

▶ **Example:**[4]

After Hours Clinics

TOPICS:

Family Medicine and Primary Care

This clinic, program or service is not administered by Nova Scotia Health. Information may be out of date. Please confirm details with the clinic, program, or service provider.

What to bring

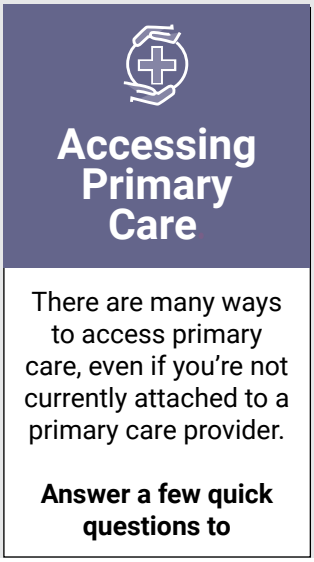
When attending the After Hours Clinic please remember your health card, a list of medications along with dosages and any allergies you may have.

Fees

If you do not have a valid health card or are not a resident of Canada there is a cost associated with your visit. Please check with the clinic when you register.

On This Page

→ ACCESSING THIS CLINIC, PROGRAM OR SERVICE



This health website uses spacing between lines of text, sections and elements on a page to make it easier for readers to follow the information they need. At the same time, readers can easily recognize that other related information is also available.

[4] Nova Scotia Health After Hours Clinics

Colours

The colours you use in a document or online can have a big effect on readability.

Here are some tips:

- Use dark type on a light background. Black type on a white background is best.
- Use light or white backgrounds only.
- Use colours and visuals with strong contrast, like blue and yellow, orange and purple. Red and green are unclear for people with colour blindness.
- Make sure text boxes are readable by screen readers.
- Don’t use shaded boxes or colour gradients.
- Don’t colour-code documents to organize information.

Visual elements

Visual elements can make your document or website more appealing. Illustrations, graphics, photographs, diagrams, charts, infographics, graphs, lines, and symbols can also add meaning and help readers remember what they’ve read.

Visual elements should:

- add meaning and help readers understand the text.
- be easy for readers to interpret.
- be next to the text they refer to, without blocking the text.
- include alt text or visual descriptions for online use and screen readers.

Make sure visuals mean the same thing to readers as they do to you. Vague illustrations or symbols can be confusing. If you're not sure, ask readers what they think:

- Are symbols, illustrations, and photos easy to recognize?
- Are they appropriate for your readers?
- Do lines, arrows, or diagrams help guide the reader?

Alt text or alternative text is a description that appears when you hold your mouse over an image online. It can be read by screen readers. Alt text should be simple and brief and say what is in the image.

Image descriptions are different from alt text. They are longer and more descriptive than alt text. They describe aspects of a visual element that may be overlooked. They go in the body of your writing, like a social media post or comment. Anyone can read them.

Include image descriptions and alt text for anything that is not text.

Examples:
Below is a photo with examples of alt text and an image description.

Alt text:
Two wheelchair users wheel side-by-side down the wide sidewalk of a town's main street.

Image description:
Two older adults laugh as they wheel beside one another in manual wheelchairs down a wide, concrete sidewalk. They pass colourful local businesses outfitted with winter festive décor on a town's main street. Both wear warm jackets, gloves, and glasses. The concrete sidewalk has been added to a much older, narrow sidewalk in order to widen it. Cars are parked along the street on the other side of the sidewalk.

Graphs, charts, tables, and infographics can also add visual interest and explain information. However, readers who are new to a subject may find them difficult to understand. Ask:

- Can readers understand them quickly?
- Do they add information?
- Are they accurate and relevant?

Format tables so screen readers can read them aloud one by one from left to right and top to bottom.

Links

Useful links help readers find what they need in a document. Sighted readers often scan pages for links to help them find what they're looking for. People who use screen readers can hear a list of all the links on a page.

Embed links in a word or phrase that makes it clear what the link is for.

If you only use the words "click here", then people using screen readers will hear a list of "click here, click here, click here, click here".

▶ **Example:**
You can find more information about accessible online content here.

Forms

You want your readers to get the information and resources they need to access services and opportunities. Forms — both online and on paper — can be a special challenge. They are often quite difficult for readers with lower literacy to understand and complete.

Here are a few tips:

- Make sure the form follows general plain language rules. All the guidelines in this Resource Guide apply to forms as well.
- Keep forms as simple and brief as possible, while still collecting the information you need.
- Design forms logically. Don't make form-fillers give you the same information more than once.
- Allow enough space in forms for people to fill in their information.
- Provide forms on paper, online, and in accessible formats like large print.
- Include clear, step-by-step instructions for filling out the form.
- Include contact information for help filling in the form. A phone number is best.
- Test your form on people who will use it. Based on their feedback, make it more user-friendly.

Testing documents

You can make your text more relevant for your readers by testing it. This is the best way to make sure that the final version will be successful. It's also not hard to do; it just takes a bit of planning and time.

Two testing methods –paraphrase testing and task testing — are quite manageable. You conduct them in one-on-one sessions in person or online. You simply need a space or to book an online meeting.

Having five or six people test your document is most useful, however, even one tester can help you improve your text.

Paraphrase testing

Paraphrase testing will tell you how well your audience might understand a short document, website text or survey questions. It helps you find out if readers interpret the message as you intended.

Before the session, choose the section of text you want to test. Give each participant the text at the beginning of their test session.

1. Ask the participant to read a part of the text you want to test. It could be a sentence or a paragraph. Then go on to other parts.
2. As the participant has read each part, ask them to tell you in their own words what that part means.
3. Take notes, writing down the explanation in the participant's words. Do not correct them.
4. Also ask specific questions about what works well for them and what does not.
5. When you review your notes later, plan to fix the text wherever participants misunderstood the message.
6. Fix the problems and retest if you can.

Task testing

Task testing can show you if a document or website helps people find information or complete a task.

1. Give each participant the text to read just before the test session.
2. Ask them questions that they should be able to answer from reading the text.
3. Watch them look for the information.
4. When you review your notes later, plan to fix the text wherever participants misunderstood the message.
5. Fix the problems and retest if you can.

Potential readers are your best testers, but feedback from other people can also be useful. Other potential testers are:

- people familiar with your audience.
- people who have nothing to do with your document.

Testing documents internally while you're writing is also useful. It can be the most effective and efficient way to test and should work for lower-stakes documents: website content, a letter to the public about a fairly routine topic.

Who not to use:

- people who know the information in the document.
- people who actually took part in any earlier phases of creating the document.

People in these two groups will know too much about the topic to help you find out what's missing or badly organized.

Readability tools

Readability tools are software, online platforms or other technology that evaluate written text. The tools analyze word choice, sentence length and structure to provide a readability score or grade level. Some tools also provide suggestions to make your text easier to understand, such as recommending simpler word choices and shorter sentences.

Readability tools can help a writer to find out if their text is getting easier to read. But they can't replace having human readers check or test your writing.

Readability tools are based on algorithms, and they cannot do some things that are important to your readers.

They can't identify jargon and technical terms.

They can't tell you if you are giving your readers the right information.

They can't tell you if you have included enough information.

They can't tell you if you are giving information in a logical order for your readers.

The readability tools listed here can help while you're developing a text.

Microsoft Word has a readability tool under the Review tab > Spelling & Grammar. You may have to click on Word > Preferences > Spelling and Grammar to enable the readability function. The tool gives:

- Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level scores.
- average sentences per paragraph and words per sentence.
- percentage of passive sentences.

Microsoft Word also has a **Check Accessibility** tool under the Review tab that checks documents for features like alt text, image descriptions, contrast, and more.

Readable This paid online toolkit helps writers improve their readability and bring their audience closer. You can test the readability of your text and find other ways to improve your writing.

Hemingway Editor App This online app and its free version highlight problems and help make your writing clearer. You can paste in text or compose in the app, and it tells you where your sentences are hard to read and where you have used a word with a simpler alternative.

Grammarly This online app has a free version that checks grammar and spelling, and makes suggestions to improve your writing.

Artificial intelligence tools

Artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) refers to the ability of machines to do tasks that usually require human intelligence, such as learning, reasoning, or solving problems. Generative AI-powered tools such as Microsoft Copilot, ChatGPT, and Grammarly can support plain language writing by helping you draft, revise, and simplify content using natural language prompts.

Using AI tools effectively

AI tools can be powerful writing partners. To use them well:

Understand what AI can and can't do
AI helps with grammar, sentence and document structure, tone, and clarity, but it only works with the information it has access to and may miss the deeper context or intent.

Tip: Use it as a starting point, not a final product.

Check for bias and errors
AI may reflect bias or generate inaccurate information.

Tip: Be extra careful with sensitive, specialized (e.g., medical), or technical topics.

Protect privacy
Some tools may store or learn from the content you provide in your prompts or that they can access. That means they could collect and share private or confidential information.

Tip: Follow your organization's AI guidance. Be thoughtful and learn how the tool works. If unsure about your use of the tool, ask your manager.

Writing better prompts

Whether using an AI tool to draft or revise content, start with a strong prompt to get useful results. Try different approaches and refine as needed.

Tell the AI who your audience is

To help the AI tailor tone, content, and structure to suit your readers, tell it who you are writing for.

> **Prompt example:** "Re-write the following for busy parents of five-year-olds."

Be clear about your goal

Tell the AI what you want to communicate and what the reader should take away or do.

> **Prompt example:** "Explain how to prepare their child for the first day of school, including helpful tips."

Set the tone and format

Choose a tone (e.g. friendly, formal) and structure (e.g. bullets, paragraphs).

> **Prompt example:** "Use a friendly tone with short sentences and bulleted points."

Give accurate input

AI doesn't fact-check. To get reliable results, provide correct and trustworthy information.

> **Example:** Provide the AI with the correct steps for registering a child for school.

Review and edit

Always check the AI's output for clarity, accuracy, and tone.

> **Example:** Adjust the wording of the results to better fit your audience and fix any errors.

Test with real readers

Ask someone from your audience if the content works.

> **Example:** Ask readers if the instructions make sense, if there is anything missing or confusing.

Example: Revising with AI

We asked an AI tool to rewrite a technical paragraph in plain language. Our goal was to make the content easier to understand for a general audience while keeping it respectful and accurate. We applied the tips above to guide our prompts and revisions. Here's how the process unfolded:

Original:
"Eggs are a nutrient-dense food source, providing high-quality protein, essential fatty acids, and a range of vitamins and minerals. However, dietary cholesterol found in egg yolks has historically raised concerns regarding cardiovascular health, although recent studies suggest the relationship may be more nuanced."

We started with this prompt:
"Rewrite the paragraph in plain language for a general audience. Use a friendly tone, a clear heading, and a Grade 6 reading level."

The AI's first response:
Are Eggs Healthy?
Eggs are good for you. They give your body protein, healthy fats, and lots of vitamins and minerals. Some people used to worry about the cholesterol in egg yolks. They thought it might be bad for your heart. But new research shows the story is more complicated. Eggs might not be as harmful as people once thought.

Our follow-up prompt:
"This version feels oversimplified, and the phrase 'some people' is vague and may come across as condescending. Revise to be more specific and respectful, while keeping the tone friendly and the language accessible."

The AI's revised response:
Are Eggs Healthy?
Eggs are full of nutrients. They give your body protein, healthy fats, and important vitamins and minerals. In the past, health advice often warned that the cholesterol in egg yolks could be bad for your heart. But newer research shows the link between eggs and heart health is more complex than we once thought.

We preferred this revised version. It's clearer, more respectful, and still easy to read. But remember, only real readers can tell you if the message truly works. People are the best judges of clarity and impact.

Quick references

Accessible documents best practices

Accessible documents

For a document to be considered accessible, all text and other elements must be in an accessible format, so everyone can access the information. People with disabilities often use assistive technologies, like screen readers. A screen reader uses Text-To-Speech (TTS) to read text aloud to users who can't see it.

The links below lead to information about creating accessible documents.

Creating an accessible Word document:

- Authoring accessible text in Windows.

Converting accessible Word documents to accessible PDF documents:

- Mac users.
- PC users.

Accessible websites

Web accessibility means that websites, tools, and technologies are designed and developed so that people with disabilities can use them. Users can:

- perceive, understand, navigate, and interact with the site.
- contribute to the site.

Learn more about web accessibility.

Accessible social media

Social media accessibility means designing and developing social media content and posts that include everyone. Accessible Social is a free resource and education hub that shares best practices for creating accessible and inclusive social media content. It also offers an Accessible Social Checklist.

Alt text

Alt text (alternative text) describes the meaning and context of a visual item in a digital document or setting like a website, app, or email. When screen readers see content with alt text, the alt text is read aloud so people can understand what's on the screen.

Learn more about alt text in Microsoft applications.

General and sector-specific tips

You've already learned the basics of plain language. Here are some extra tips for specific sectors.

General plain language tips

- Audit your documents, websites, and social media for clarity.
- Look at your signs. Are they clear and easy to read? Do they use simple and familiar words?
- Review your website. Can people find what they need within a couple of clicks?
- Check your paper and online forms. Are they as simple to use as possible, while still collecting the right information? Do you get a lot of complaints about them? Do people actually fill them out?
- Ask for feedback about your social media. How useful is it? How well are you responding to comments and questions? Is it updated regularly with timely information?
- Promote an organizational culture of clear communication and recognize good examples of plain language.
- Test your materials on a broad audience to make sure the public understands it.

Primary to grade 12 education

- Think about who will be reading letters, emails, and report cards that go home with students. Parents and caregivers come from many backgrounds. Some may not speak English or French as a first language. Some may be stressed. Some may have negative associations with school. Use common, familiar language.
- Use the same words for the same ideas throughout your document. For example, if you're talking about students, write "students" every time. Don't switch to "pupils" or "kids."

- Watch for jargon that is specific to education or school. Don't assume readers will understand words like "pedagogy," "inquiry," or "scaffolding."
- Test your materials on a broad audience to make sure the public understands it.
- Test your writing on people who will actually use it. Do they understand it? Is all the information there? Can they use it?

Post-secondary education

The tips above also apply to post-secondary education settings. You can also remember these things about your readers:

- The transition to post-secondary education can be difficult, and many students report stress and mental health challenges. Stress reduces reading skill.
- Students come from many different backgrounds and use many different languages.
- Get to know the accessibility services at your institution to understand more about accessible communication.
- Documents for staff should also be in plain language. People who work at colleges or universities come from all educational backgrounds, not just higher education. As well, they may use a language other than English as their first language.
- Test your materials on a broad audience to make sure the public understands it.

Public libraries

People who work at libraries can use plain language principles to guide the way they speak to people.

- Library procedures are for everyone and should be easy to understand and follow.
- Communicate clearly about programs and events in libraries. Encourage people who host events in your space to communicate clearly as well.
- People often need more information, not less. Finding something in a library system can be intimidating. Use clear and simple words when helping someone, and watch people's reactions as you speak to see if they understand you.
- Test your marketing materials on a broad audience to make sure the public understands it.

Municipalities, crown corporations, and cultural institutions

- Provide plain language versions of regulations, policies, and bylaws. You might not be able to re-write legal or technical text, but you can provide plain language descriptions to make it easier for more people to understand and use.
- Provide clear emergency instructions during severe weather events or other public emergencies. An example is “Be safe. Stay home.”
- Avoid jargon such as “service disruptions” and say exactly what you mean. For example, “buses and ferries are cancelled.”
- If your readers need to know special terms, jargon, or acronyms, define those words where they first appear in the text. In a printed text, use a separate sentence (“This means…”). In website text, you could use a popup box for the definition.
- Use plain language when creating educational information and guidebooks.
- Create documents and interpretive panels using plain language principles. Many adults benefit from simpler versions of more complex texts.
- Test your materials on a broad audience to make sure the public understands what you offer and how they can benefit.

Health

The health sector relies heavily on complex words and jargon, and health care workers serve patients best when giving health information people can understand and act on.

- Any information for patients or clients should be written and designed in plain language, and tested to make sure readers can understand it.
- When people are sick or worried, they lose some ability to understand written information. Use clear and simple words when helping people.
- Don’t overload your reader or listener, especially in a stressful situation. Give them clear information about what they need right now. Allow people time to process health information and ask questions.
- Give step-by-step instructions for procedures, preparations, and appointments.
- Update handouts and brochures often. Health information changes quickly.
- Offer health information in different formats and repeat it. For example, verbally go over a handout with a patient and give them time to ask questions. Show them where they can find more information online. If possible, email the handout as well.
- Test your materials on a broad audience to make sure the public understands the information.

Plain language checklist

Get to know your audience.

- [ ] Find out what your readers or listeners need. Ask them!
- [ ] Rewriting a document? Ask readers what works well and what could be improved.
- [ ] Ask for feedback from people who are not familiar with the subject matter.
- [ ] Ask a reader if the text will help them do, learn, or access what they need.
- [ ] Know exactly what you want your reader to do with what they read.

Write as simply and directly as possible.

- [ ] Use who-does-what sentences, or the active voice.
- [ ] Use a direct and conversational tone.
- [ ] Make sure your language is free of biases.
- [ ] Avoid jargon and explain any acronyms or abbreviations.
- [ ] Use familiar, common words.
- [ ] Use short sentences that contain one idea.
- [ ] Restrict paragraphs to one main idea.
- [ ] Ask a reader questions to find out if they understand important information.

Organize your document logically.

- [ ] Put the most important information first. Leave out information readers don't need.
- [ ] Use bulleted and numbered lists.
- [ ] Make sure titles and headings are useful, clear, and consistent. Use Styles in Microsoft Word to make sure these levels are formatted into your document.
- [ ] Make sure any instructions are clear and don't skip any steps.

Pay attention to the design and format of your document.

- [ ] Use fonts that are clear and easy to read — no more than two fonts per document.
- [ ] Align text on the left, but not the right.
- [ ] Limit the use of bold and italics to make text stand out, and don't underline.
- [ ] Leave lots of white space and avoid walls of text.
- [ ] Use a simple table of contents to help people find what they need quickly.

Make sure your document looks welcoming.

- [ ] Use images and other visuals if they help understanding.
- [ ] Print on white or light paper and use white backgrounds online.
- [ ] Use alt text and written descriptions of images.
- [ ] If you use charts or tables, make sure they are easy to understand. Tables should only be used to display data.

Test your document on your intended audience before you publish it.

- [ ] Ask specific questions, not whether they understand.
- [ ] Ask what your reader would do based on what they have read.
- [ ] Ask them if it's useful?
- [ ] Is it available in accessible formats?

Plain language and culture shift

Many of us have been taught in school that good writing means using fancy words and fancy sentence structures. Then, when we go to work, we learn the words and phrases for our sector or field. Being able to speak and write in these insider languages can be a way to fit in and show our abilities. It can save time for people who work together. But it also excludes people and concentrates power and privilege where they already exist.

Adopting plain language is a culture shift. This shift moves us away from ways of writing and communicating that exclude many people and groups. It moves us toward writing and communicating in ways that include others and help them to understand.

Culture shifts bring challenges you can learn to handle.

Learning to write or speak plainly is like learning a new language: it takes practice.

Your colleagues might question your expertise or suggest that you aren't qualified to write something, but your expertise goes beyond the words you use.

Colleagues and managers might worry that the public will not understand your topic deeply enough, but usually organizations overwhelm their readers with information.

Managers might worry that your writing no longer sounds official or authoritative, but formal writing builds barriers between writers (and organizations) and their readers.

It's a shift, but these are changes readers want you to make.

Accessibility in Nova Scotia

The Nova Scotia Accessibility Act became law in September 2017.

The Act recognizes accessibility as a human right. It sets out that accessibility will be achieved by preventing and removing barriers that prevent people with disabilities from participating fully in society.

Nearly 38 per cent of Nova Scotians over the age of 15 report having a disability (Canadian Survey on Disability, 2022). This number will grow as our population ages.

Plain language and Nova Scotia's accessibility standards

We need accessibility standards to improve accessibility across Nova Scotia.

Accessibility standards are laws that government, public sector organizations, businesses, non-profit organizations need to follow to become more accessible.

The Government of Nova Scotia is developing six accessibility standards. Building plain language skills will help us meet one of them — the standard for information and communication. It will also help us communicate clearly about the other five accessibility standards.

The six standards are listed and described below.

- **Information and communication:** ensuring all people can receive, understand, and share the information they need.
- **Built environment:** making the inside and outside of buildings and outdoor spaces such as trails, parks, and beaches accessible.
- **Employment:** making workplaces accessible and supporting people with disabilities to find meaningful employment.
- **Education:** making the education system accessible to all students from early childhood to the post-secondary years.
- **Goods and services:** ensuring that people with disabilities have equitable access to goods and services.
- **Transportation:** making it easier for everyone to get where they need to go.

Under the Accessibility Act, the Government of Nova Scotia made it mandatory for specific public sector bodies to meet certain requirements. These organizations are called "prescribed public sector bodies". Prescribed public sector bodies represent a wide range of sectors, such as health, education, arts, and municipal government.

Prescribed public sector bodies are important partners in helping Nova Scotia achieve our accessibility goals. Their work developing and implementing accessibility plans makes a significant different to ensure all Nova Scotians can fully participate in everyday life at work, school or at play.

Learn more about accessibility standards.
https://novascotia.ca/accessibility/

Sources

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Adult Literacy Skills for Success: Annual Report 202 — United for Literacy

Adults with Inadequate Literacy Skills — Conference Board of Canada

Cognitively Accessible Language (Why we should care)

International Plain Language Federation

Nearly half of adult Canadians struggle with literacy — and that's bad for the economy

Plain language, accessibility, and inclusive communications — Government of Canada

Plain Language in the College Classroom: Find, Understand, Use.

Simple English Wikipedia

Summary of the Accessible Canada Act

Termium Plus (Government of Canada)

Workplace Literacy

Resources and tools

Canada.ca Content Style Guide

CNIB Print Guidelines

Disability Inclusive Language Guidelines — United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy

Guide on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Terminology

Inclusive Language in Media

Inclusive Writing Glossary

Plain Language Audit Tool

Plain Language Checklist

Plain Language: Clear and Simple

Plain Canada Clair

Plain language word list

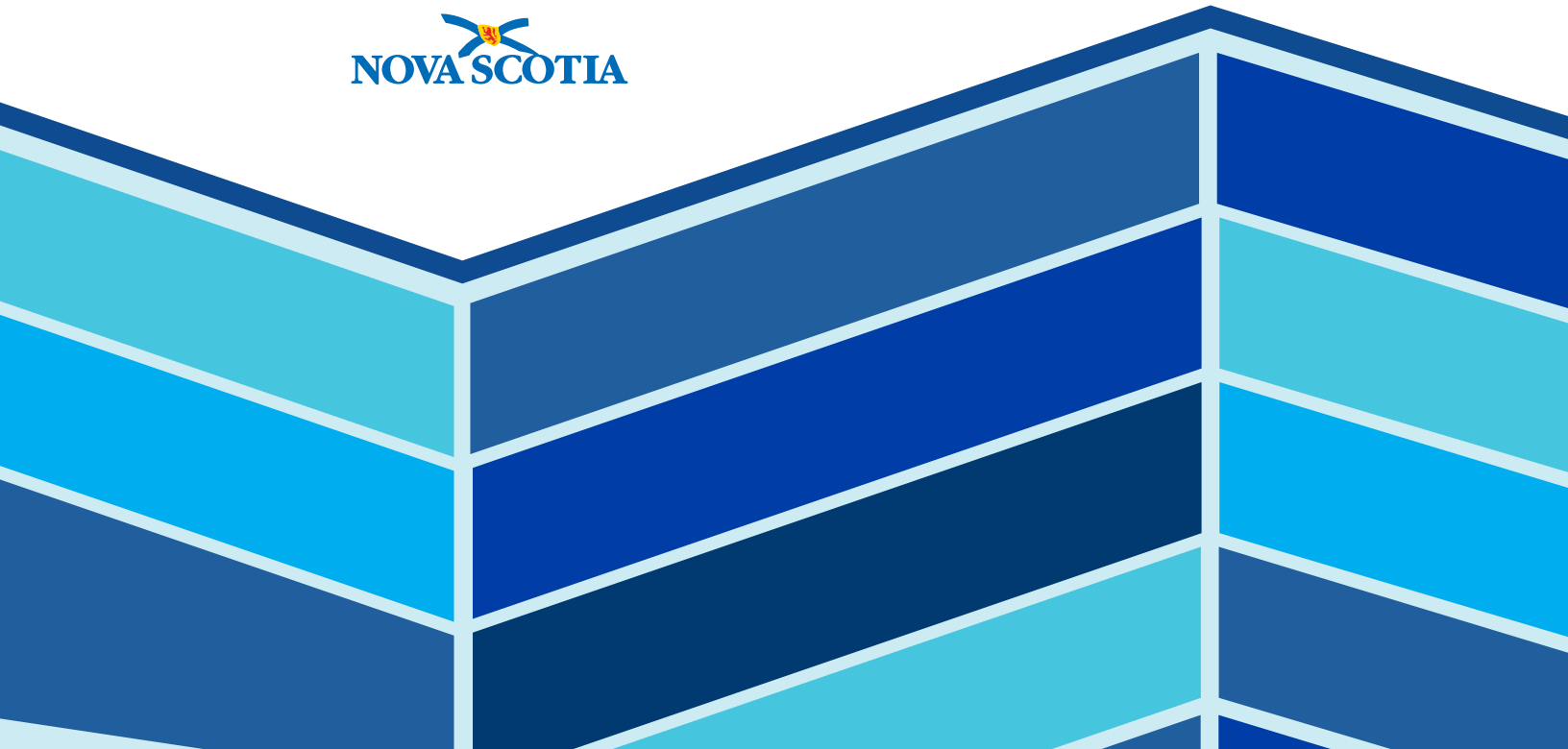
Preparing Plain Language Summaries

Research Impact Canada Plain Language Writing Checklist

Resources of the Language Portal of Canada

Writing resources—Plain language — Government of Canada

Youth-Friendly Accessible Language

Plain Language Resource Guide

NOVA SCOTIA