

Chapter 1

Plain Language

After studying this chapter, you will be aware of

- The difference between academic and business writing and
- The importance of writing in plain language.

BUSINESS COMMUNICATION VERSUS ACADEMIC WRITING

The Preface briefly discussed the formats we will learn in this book—correspondence, report formats, and the like—but also the importance of good writing within each format. If the writing in a report, say, is inferior, that report will fail no matter how well it’s formatted. So in Chapter 1 and 2 we’ll discuss how to develop strong writing, and Chapter 3 will be all about grammar.

To be a good communicator in business and the professions, you may have to unlearn some of the techniques that might have made you a good academic writer. Here is what happens in good academic writing.

- The information is often highly complex.
- The language is often highly specialized.
- Sentences tend to be long and complex, in keeping with the complex subject matter.
- Paragraphs are long enough to explore each complex idea deeply.
- The style is formal—it avoids “I” and “you,” although “we” is sometimes acceptable, and it doesn’t use contractions (e.g., you will write “does not” instead of “doesn’t”).

- Academic citation and works-cited styles, like APA, MLA, or other academic formats, are highly detailed and strictly followed.
- Grammar rules are strictly followed (e.g., the “Oxford” comma is preferred, colons are used after full sentences and before lists, and so on. We’ll discuss these rules in Chapter 3.).

Most professional, non-academic writing, on the other hand, is very different.

- Ideas are expressed as simply and concisely as possible.
- Specialized words and jargon are avoided if possible (it’s not always possible, and specialized language may be necessary for some audiences).
- Sentences have one main idea, with perhaps one or at most two supporting ideas.
- Paragraphs are short—four to eight lines would be typical.
- The style is more informal than in academic writing; first (“I,” “me,” “we”), second (“you”), and third person (“he,” “her,” “they,” etc.) are all allowed, as are contractions (“don’t” rather than “do not” is acceptable).
- Grammar rules are (slightly!) relaxed (for example, sentence fragments are sometimes allowed for rhetorical effect, but in moderation, comma use is not rigid, and so on).

Academic and business writing styles are different because they have different audiences. The academic writer and reader is a specialist in a particular discipline, and specialized language is part of that discipline. The audience for a business or professional document is more often a generalist, and this audience calls for a less specialized vocabulary and less complex set of concepts.

But, more importantly, the business or professional audience doesn’t want to spend a lot of time figuring out what the wording in a particular report or memo is trying to say—time is money! The meaning of professional writing should be immediately clear, unlike academic writing, which is sometimes obscure.

On the page, too, academic writing looks different from business and professional writing. An academic essay or published article may consist of page after page of print, in long, grey paragraphs, perhaps broken by the occasional picture, chart, or diagram. As a *visual* experience, an academic essay can be hard going; however, the hard going is, the academic writer hopes, rewarded by the essay’s stimulating intellectual content.

A business or professional document aims to be much more attractive, visually speaking. That means using white space, lists, pictures, charts and graphics, headings and subheadings, and many other techniques for easy readability that we will be discussing below in this chapter on plain language and in Chapter 5 on document design.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

Business, legal, government, and professional writing can, over time, sink into a morass of technical jargon and convoluted syntax that is almost unintelligible to the general public. In other words, this writing has become the communication of experts for other experts. This bureaucratese wouldn't be a problem if these documents didn't have to be read by non-experts, but that is often not the case.

For example, legal documents such as contracts, mortgages, and wills need to be both read and understood by people who aren't lawyers. Government communications often contain important information about laws and regulations on everything from legal business practices to the size and type of pipe fittings in a new house. If the business owners and tradespeople who have to follow building regulations, for example, can't understand the regulations—and they often can't—then there's a problem.

In short, hard-to-read texts cause more

- misunderstandings
- errors
- complaints
- enquiries
- staff time lost to problem solving.¹

Therefore, many businesses and governments around the world are moving to put their communications into what is called **plain language** or **plain English**.

Features of Plain Language

What is **plain English**? It has a number of features:

- It uses *concrete and specific examples* rather than abstractions to be as clear as possible.

¹ Plain Language Online Training Program, "Introducing Plain Language," *PlainTrain*, <http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/plaintrain/IntroducingPlainLanguage.html>. The *PlainTrain* website is an excellent resource on plain language and its application. The British passport office and Royal Mail examples come from an article at www.plainenglish.co.uk entitled "Chrissie speaks out for women in plain English."

Worth Knowing

The British passport office found that 52 per cent of passport applicants couldn't complete the form properly. When the form was rewritten in plain English, 97 per cent of applicants were able to fill it out correctly, for a saving of 370,000 hours of administration time per year. Similarly, the UK's Royal Mail used mail-forwarding forms that had an 87 per cent error rate among users and cost £10,000 a week for corrections. When the forms were rewritten the error rate fell and the Royal Mail saved £500,000 in only nine months.

Additional Resources

The following websites offer useful information on plain language:

1. US federal government writing guidelines: <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/index.cfm>

2. *PlainTrain*, a Canadian government website teaching plain language: <http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/plaintrain/index.html>

3. George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language" on the need for plain language: http://wikilivres.ca/wiki/Politics_and_the_English_Language

4. Centre for Literacy: <http://www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca/node/188>

- *It avoids unfamiliar words and technical jargon.* For example, it prefers “know” to the jargonistic “fully cognizant.”
- It uses *active rather than passive verbs* for clarity, directness, and conciseness. Active verbs use fewer words: “The man ate the sandwich” (five words) versus “The sandwich was eaten by the man” (seven words).
- *It avoids wordy expressions* (“in order to do business” = “to do business”; “at the present time” = “now”).
- *It avoids repetitiveness* (“will be an extremely lucrative endeavour” = “will be lucrative” or just “will make money”).
- *It avoids nominalizations*—verbs used as nouns. So, instead of “He gave an introduction to the next speaker,” you would write “He introduced the next speaker.” In the first example sentence, “introduction” is a nominalization. Chapter 2 has more on nominalizations.

Plain language also aims to make text as easy to read as possible by

- using *white space* to make documents more readable;
- making *document-design elements easy to read*;
- using *headings and well-labelled graphics*, if appropriate; and
- using *easy-to-read lists, tables, and indexes* whenever possible.

In the next section we’ll look at examples of how plain language can make communication clearer.

Examples of Plain Language

The government of British Columbia has for several years been rewriting cumbersome worded and sometimes incomprehensible legislation into language the average person can understand. The result? The government saves time and money because civil servants don’t have to field so many calls and letters asking what the laws and regulations mean.

Here’s how the BC government described this effort:

Why is it important to use plain language? . . . It is more efficient, more effective, and better public relations. Less time is needed to find and understand the information, less time is needed to deal with people who did not understand the information, and fewer errors are made.

Plain language

- Improves compliance, which reduces enforcement costs.
- Expresses thoughts clearly, which reduces the likelihood of a legal challenge.
- Responds to the needs of the audience—people don't feel their time is unnecessarily wasted.
- Ultimately reduces costs for the public.²

The American government's website on plain language states the benefits of plain language as follows:

- fewer calls from customers (by about 80%),
- less time for users to solve a problem (about half the time),
- fewer errors by customers (from 40% to 20%), and
- higher rates of compliance with government regulations (more than twice as high).³

For example, a 1992 Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) report originally read like this:

Economic espionage may be defined as the illegal or clandestine acquisition of critical Canadian economic information and technology by foreign governments or their surrogates.

Here is this sentence rewritten in plain English:

Economic espionage means foreign governments or their agents illegally obtaining critical Canadian economic and technological secrets.⁴

Here is another example, from a last will and testament. The first version is in legalese; the second version is in plain language.⁵ Which is easier to understand?

2 Government of British Columbia, "Key elements of plain language," <http://www.regulatoryreform.gov.bc.ca/resources/toolkit2.htm>. This URL is no longer accessible, but it has been quoted in this presentation: Minnesota Hospital Association, *Plain Language Emergency Overhead Paging: Implementation Toolkit* (St. Paul MN: Minnesota Hospital Association, November 2011), 22.

3 See Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN). "Plain Language: The Bottom Line," *Plain Language.gov: Improving Communication from the Federal Government to the Public*, <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/whyPL/benefits/bottomline.cfm>.

4 Plain Language Online Training Program, "Using appropriate words," *PlainTrain*, <http://www.plainlanguage.network.org/plaintrain/UsingAppropriateWords.html>.

5 Adapted slightly from David C. Elliott, "Writing Wills in Plain Language" (paper, Canadian Bar Association, Alberta Branch, Wills and Trusts Section, June 1990).

Version 1

- (d) if my spouse should predecease me or should survive me but die within a period of thirty days after my death:
 - (i) subject to the rights under the *Exemptions Act*, to pay out of the capital of my general estate my legally enforceable debts, funeral and all expenses in connection with the administration of my estate and the trusts created by my Will charging first the residue, then specific bequests, then devises. My Trustee shall also pay all estate, income, inheritance and succession duties or taxes whether imposed by Alberta or Canadian law or by any other jurisdiction that may be payable in connection with any property passing or deemed to pass by any governing law on my death or in connection with any insurance of my life or any gift or benefit given or created by my Will conferred by me either during my lifetime or by survivorship or by this Will and whether such duties or taxes be payable in respect of estates or interests which fall into possession at my death or at any subsequent time. Such payments shall be made at such time and in such manner and subject to such security as my Trustee in my Trustee's discretion determines.

Version 2

If Mary dies before or within 30 days after I do, I want John to

- (a) pay out of the capital of my general estate
 - (i) my legally enforceable debts,
 - (ii) my funeral expenses,
 - (iii) the expenses incurred in administering my estate,
 - (iv) the trusts created by this Will (charging first the residue then specific bequests, then devises) and
- (b) pay any tax or duties which my estate is liable to pay.

Businesses, too, are finding that contracts and documents in plain English save them time and money and their customers and clients time and hassle. For example, an insurance company announcement used to read as follows:

We have recently implemented an enhancement to our computer system that will enable us to provide better service to our valued customers. This has resulted in a slight delay in the processing of your renewal. The difference you will notice is in the payment schedule. Your annual policy premium has been divided over 11 (eleven) months, and as a result your monthly payment will have increased due to the reduced number of monthly instalments.

Here it is in plain language:

We are a little late in sending your renewal documents because we have made a change in our computer system in order to provide better service. Your annual premium will now be divided over 11 months instead of 12, so the monthly payment will increase slightly.⁶

The first sentence of the announcement could be even more concise: “Your renewal documents are slightly delayed because we have changed our computer system to provide better service.”

As you can see, in all cases the plain language version is both more concise and much more readable. All of these elements of plain language—both the writing and the presentation—should be part of any business or professional communicator’s toolkit.

How to employ this toolkit is discussed further in Chapter 2 on the [seven Cs](#).

Meanwhile, here’s a rule of thumb for plain language: If your reader has to read what you’ve written twice to get the meaning, it’s not plain language.

Quick Tip

If your reader has to read what you’ve written more than once to get the meaning, it’s not plain language.

⁶ Plain Language Association International, “Samples of Plain Language rewrites and organizational change,” <http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/Samples>.

Exercises

1. Look at the example of the will, above. What are the key differences between the original will and the rewritten version?
2. Rewrite the following paragraphs into plain English.⁷ Rewritten versions are available in “Appendix A: Answers,” but don’t peek until you’ve tried the exercise.
 - a. When in the process of freeing a vehicle that has been stuck results in ruts or holes, the operator will fill the rut or hole created by such activity before removing the vehicle from the immediate area.
 - b. After notification of NMFS, this final rule requires all CA/OR DGN vessel operators to have attended one Skipper Education Workshop after all workshops have been convened by NMFS in September 1997. CA/OR DGN vessel operators are required to attend Skipper Education Workshops at annual intervals thereafter, unless that requirement is waived by NMFS. NMFS will provide sufficient advance notice to vessel operators by mail prior to convening workshops.
 - c. Investigators at the contractor will review the facts in your case and decide the most appropriate course of action. The first step taken with most Medicare health care providers is to re-educate them about Medicare regulations and policies. If the practice continues, the contractor may conduct special audits of the provider’s medical records. Often, the contractor recovers overpayments to health care providers this way. If there is sufficient evidence to show that the provider is consistently violating Medicare policies, the contractor will document the violations and ask the Office of the Inspector General to prosecute the case. This can lead to expulsion from the Medicare program, civil monetary penalties, and imprisonment.

⁷ These examples come from *PlainLanguage.gov*. See Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN). “Before-and-After Comparisons,” *Plain Language.gov: Improving Communication from the Federal Government to the Public*, http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/before_after/index.cfm.