Clear Language
(plain language)

1. Clear Language: An Overview

Many more people will understand and be able to use your information if it is written in Clear Language. When a document is unclear, people lose interest, get frustrated and give up. Worse, if a reader misunderstands a document the result can sometimes be a costly or tragic error.

Clear Language encompasses the document's text, layout and design. Clearly written text is direct, inclusive and focuses on the needs of the reader. Good layout and design support and enhance the meaning of the text, make the document easy to navigate, and help show connections between the ideas.

2. Standards Used for Review

Documents are reviewed for Clear Language and readability using Clear Language Guidelines, the Fry Readability Formula, and Flesch/Flesch-Kincade Readability Assessments.

The Clear Language Guidelines used were:

Content Clarity
Your content has clarity when your message is clear and easy to understand.

- Present ideas in their logical order: important information should come first
- Give instructions in the order they should be completed
- Use personal pronouns
- Include only the information that is essential and relevant to the purpose

- Define technical terms and acronyms when first introduced
- Define difficult or unfamiliar words in their context
- Use verbs for action words instead of nouns
- Avoid chains of nouns
- Use simplest synonyms
- Be consistent in what you call something

Tone and Style

The **tone** of your content sets the emotional response a reader has when reading your content. The **style** of the content is made up of the content features that have to do with the form rather than the content of the thought expressed. Features include word and phrase usage, punctuation, spelling and arrangement.

- Write in strong, active voice: speak directly to the reader wherever possible
- Use a positive tone, except where it's obviously inappropriate
- Apply tenses consistently
- Place the subject and verb close together in a sentence
- Use simple, everyday words that are easy to understand
- Use language that is bias-free and inclusive
- Construct short, uncomplicated sentences that are, on average, 20 to 25 words long and no more than 4 or 5 sentences per paragraph
- Limit yourself to one idea per sentence and one topic per paragraph
- Keep sentence structure parallel: make the link between ideas obvious

Organization

Information is organized clearly when it is grouped and structured logically and a reader can easily navigate from beginning to end and to all points in between.

- Create a table of contents for longer documents and groups of documents
- Choose headings, subheadings and numbering systems that are clear and consistent
- Use headings that summarize the text
- Group or 'chunk' information logically.
- Prioritize information: in each section, put the main idea close to the beginning
- Construct sentences, paragraphs and ideas using parallel structure
- Divide your document into sections of related information
- Provide a summary statement at the beginning of a document when it is appropriate to do so
- Use bullet points or lists appropriately: use only one idea per bullet or item.
- Number each item in a step-by-step procedure
- Highlight critical pieces of information by setting them apart from text

Appearance

Clear language layout presents the all elements of information using visual patterns and styles that are simple, consistent and logical.

- Use whitespace effectively. Whitespace is the space between and surrounding text and graphics. It acts as a frame and as the place where the reader's eye can rest between blocks of text or graphics

- Set text so that left margin is justified and right margin is ragged. Set the space between margins to 1.2" or larger
- Use 12 point type for body text. Choose a Serif (with hooks) font for body text
- Use graphics and other design features to break up the text and make the meaning clearer
- Highlight headings and subheadings differently from body text so they stand out. Examples of this are larger letters, different fonts, or bold for emphasis. To avoid confusion, use no more than two highlighting methods in a document.
- Place headings and titles close to text
- Use a mix of uppercase/lowercase letters for headings. (Do not use uppercase for entire words.)
- Construct graphics, charts and tables that present information simply and clearly
- Place labels and text close to the graphics they define
- For lists:
  - use bullets or numbers
  - indent
  - all items in the list should begin with a lower case letter, and
  - try to put entire list on one page

There are a wide variety of document assessment tests available to measure a document's readability level. Some also measure the level of literacy or education needed to effectively read a document. A few of those are Dale-Chall, Fry, Flesch Grade Level, Flesch Reading Ease, FOG, SMOG, FORCAST, Powers-Somner-Kearl, and Spache.

The following is a brief explanation of four of these tests – Fry, Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, Flesch Reading Ease, and Microsoft Word© Passive Sentences Count.

Fry Readability Formula
The Fry Readability Formula (or Fry Readability Graph) is a readability metric for English texts, developed by Dr. Edward Fry.

The grade reading level (or reading difficulty level) is calculated by the average number of sentences and syllables per hundred words. These averages are plotted onto a specific graph; the intersection of the average number of sentences and the average number of syllables determines the reading level of the content.

The formula and graph are often used to provide a common standard by which the readability of documents can be measured. It is sometimes used for regulatory purposes, such as in healthcare, to ensure publications have a level of readability that is understandable and accessible by a wider portion of the population.

Flesch Reading Ease Test
In the Flesch Reading Ease test, higher scores indicate material that is easier to read; lower numbers mark harder-to-read passages. The formula for the Flesch Reading Ease Score (FRES) test is

$$206.835 - 1.015 \left(\frac{\text{total words}}{\text{total sentences}} \right) - 84.6 \left(\frac{\text{total syllables}}{\text{total words}} \right)$$

where total syllables/total words = average number of syllables per word (ASW) and total words/total sentences = average sentence length (ASL).

As a rule of thumb, scores of 90.0-100.0 are considered easily understandable by an average 5th grader. 8th and 9th grade students could easily understand passages with a score of 60-70, and passages with results of 0-30 are best understood by college graduates. *Reader's Digest* magazine has a readability index of about 65, Time magazine scores about 52, and the *Harvard Law Review* has a general readability score in the low 30s. Most insurance forms are designed to score 40-50 on the test.

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Formula

An American-based test, the Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level Formula translates the 0-100 score to a U.S. grade level, making it easier for teachers, parents, librarians, and others to judge the readability level of various books and texts.

It can also mean the number of years of education generally required to understand this text, relevant when the formula results in a number greater than 12. The grade level is calculated with the following formula:

$$0.39 \left(\frac{\text{total words}}{\text{total sentences}} \right) + 11.8 \left(\frac{\text{total syllables}}{\text{total words}} \right) - 15.59$$

The result is a number that corresponds with a grade level. For example, a score of 8.2 would indicate that the text is expected to be understandable by an average student in 8th grade.

Passive Sentences Count

Microsoft explains that Word© measures the passivity of sentences by "performing a text analysis at a syntactical level and at a deeper, logical, level to understand the relationship between the actions and the people, or things, doing those actions."

Another way of explaining what the software does would be to:

1. Identify the **subject** of the sentence.
2. Identify the **action** that the sentence identifies.
3. Examine the **relationship** between the subject and verb.
   - Does the subject perform the action of the verb? (If so, the sentence is active.)
   - Does the subject sit there while something else – named or unnamed – performs an action on it? (If so, the sentence is passive.)

When writing for Clear Language, the active voice is used because active sentences are generally shorter, more efficient, and more powerful than passive sentences.

3. Moving Forward

A process for Clear language document creation involves working out a plan for a writing project, preparing a draft under the plan, and verifying the effectiveness of your draft through evaluation methods that use the intended audience.

The question becomes, then, whether or not there is enough shared meaning between the writer and the reader. This definition of Clear Language is "reader-based" and not "text-based" analysis of a writing style.

Ultimately, the best measurement of the readability of your document comes from testing it on representative samples of your audience. A critical feature of Clear Language is testing the writing to determine if it adequately conveys the writer's intentions to the targeted reader.

The following are a suggested draft writing process and training areas.

Clear Language Writing Process
Step 1: Plan
- identify the purpose (What is the need?)
- analyze the task / research or gather information
- determine requirements / parameters
- identify audience (Who are we writing to?)
- determine the procedure to be used
- organize and order content
- visualize final product

Step 2: Write
- write first draft following Clear Language Guidelines

Step 3: Edit
- review / test draft document
- revise for clarity, tone and style
- edit for spelling, grammar, etc.
- organize document structure

Step 4: Design
- determine the lay-out style
- add the text according to the style
- add graphics (if appropriate)

Step 5: Review / Evaluate / Revise
- review and evaluate document (writer)
- edit and test document (peers)
- test document and gather feedback through focus groups and individual interviews (intended audience)
- revise as necessary

Adapted from An Introduction to Plain Language by Cheryl Stephens • www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/stephens/intro.html

Training Implications: Suggestions for Training

DOCUMENT USE
- Company-specific document task requirements (i.e. sign-off)
- Technical vocabulary and acronyms
- Document navigation
  - understanding document organization and structure
  - using document navigation features (i.e. table of contents, numbering systems, headings and sub-headings, lists, etc.)
  - identifying key words, making predictions and cycling through documents
  - skimming and scanning
  - finding information in graphics, charts and tables
  - comprehending and confirming

CREATING CLEAR LANGUAGE TECHNICAL DOCUMENTS
- Clear language definitions and guidelines
- Clear language writing process
  - planning
  - writing
  - editing
  - designing
  - evaluating
- Document organization and structure
  - Incorporating document navigation features (i.e. table of contents, numbering systems, headings and sub-headings, lists, etc.)
  - constructing graphics, charts and tables
- Document appearance