Plain Language and Effective Communication

Rebecca Hoyt, Disability Rights Specialist

Department of Civil Rights – Equity and Social Justice Division

Learning Objectives

1. What is plain language?
2. ADA effective communication and Language Access requirements
3. Inclusive language
4. Tips and tricks for writing in plain language
5. Navigating communication challenges

"The ability to seek out and understand information gives us all independence to make choices, to advocate for ourselves and to learn about our community and world."

- LitWorld International, Inc.

What is Plain Language?

1. Visually inviting
2. Logically organized
3. Understandable on the first reading
4. Concise
5. Generally written at a 6th grade reading level

PlainLanguage.gov

Title II of the ADA & Effective Communication

1. Communication with people with these disabilities is as effective as communication with people without disabilities.

2. Provide tools, supports, auxiliary aids, and services.

3. Support use of a person's preferred method(s) of communication

4. Support autonomy with direct communication wherever possible.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Executive Order 131666

1. Prohibits discrimination based on race, color, or national origin - this includes those with limited English proficiency in any program or activity that receives Federal funds or other Federal financial assistance.

2. Must take reasonable steps to provide meaningful access to City of Madison's programs, services, and activities for people with a primary language other than English.

Language Access and Language Justice

Language Access - providing services to remove barriers

Language Justice –

1. Recognizing language as a fundamental right

2. Building and sustaining multilingual spaces in our organizations so that everyone's voice and lived experience can be heard

3. Working to dismantle language barriers, equalize power dynamics, and build strong communities for social and racial justice.

Plain Language Benefits

1. Disrupt systemic power dynamics
2. Increase engagement
3. Foster inclusion
4. Increase the quality of translation and interpretation services
5. Reach a broader audience
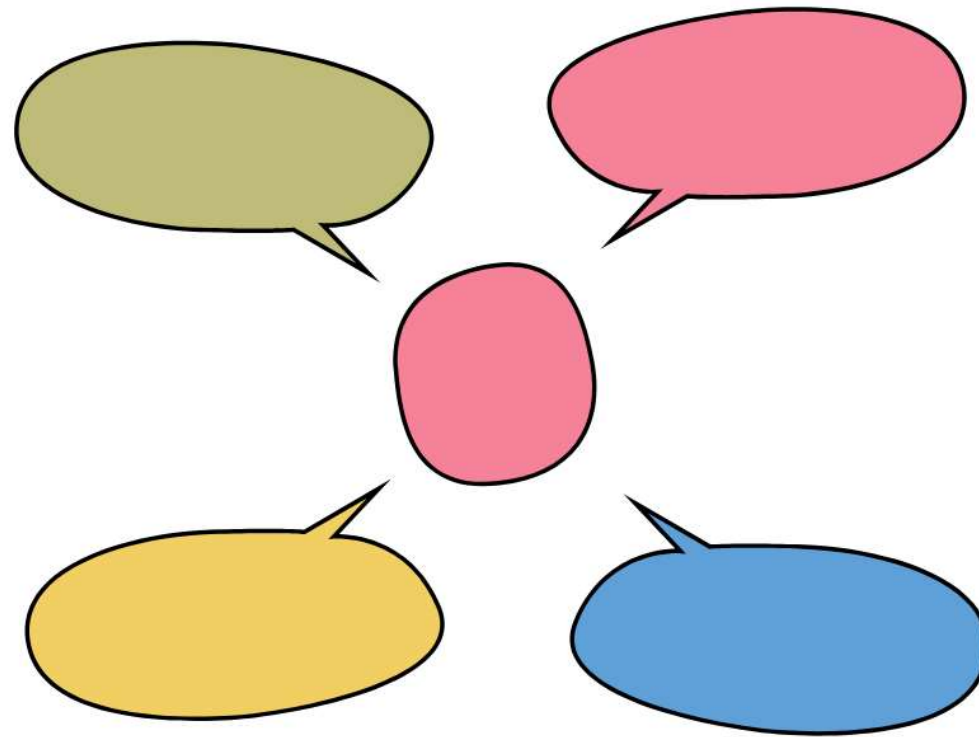6. More persuasive stronger writing

Before You Start...

1. What is your message?
2. Key takeaways (no more than 5)
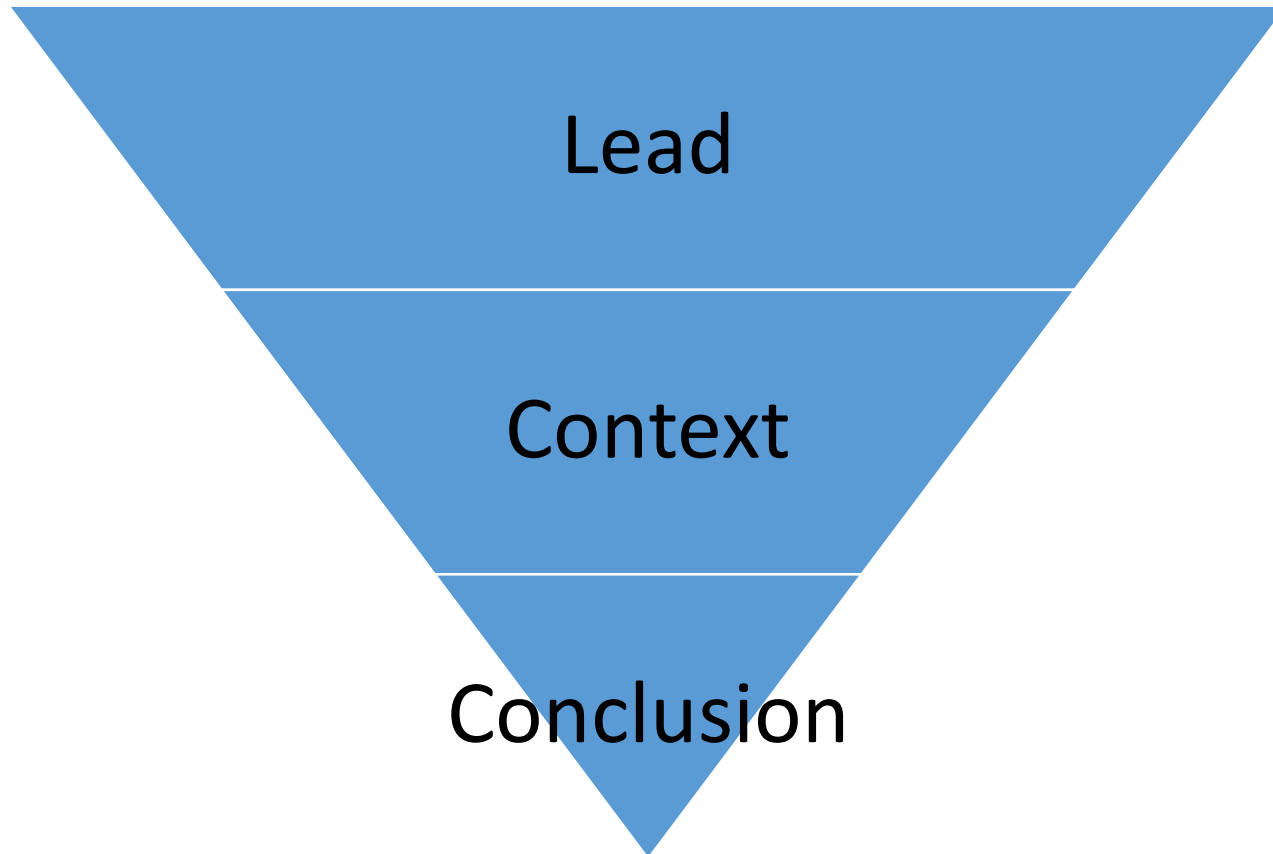3. Who is your audience and what do they need to take action?

Writing Process

1. Creative*
2. Architect
3. Carpenter
4. Judge

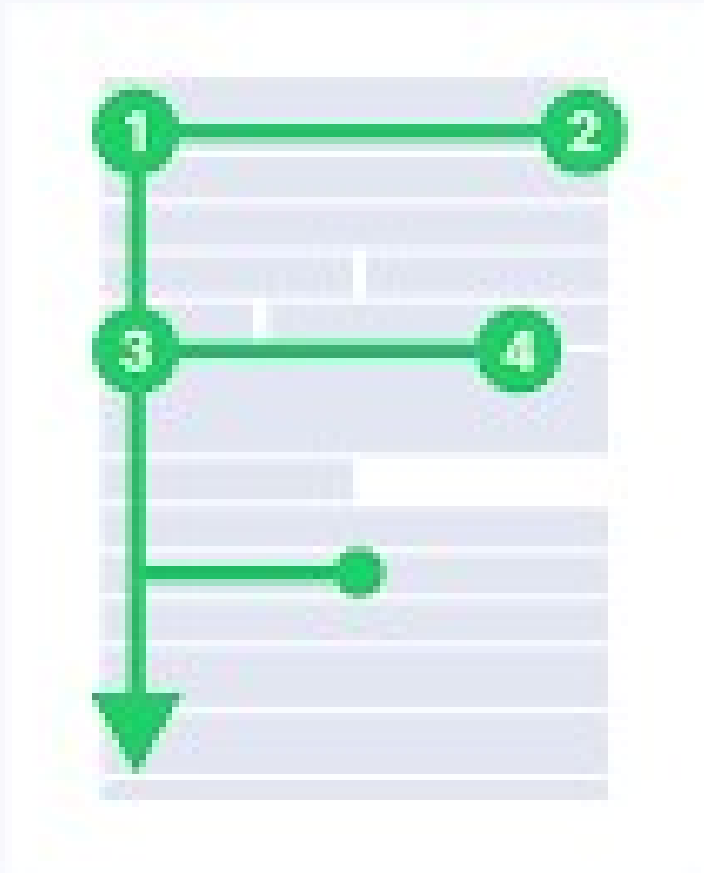- Betty S. Flowers, *Roles and the Writing Process*

Mind Map

F pattern vs. Z pattern

Headings

Audience and Tone

1. Conversational
2. Write in the second person: "you" "we"
3. Don't assume expertise
4. Write for connection, not to impress
5. Write for your audience, not yourself

Inclusive Language

1. Gender neutral language

2. Avoid metaphors, acronyms, slangs, or idioms

3. Remove ableist metaphors such as crazy, insane, lame, suffers from/with, high or low functioning, duh, spaz, and many more from our speech.

4. "Accessible feature" vs. "Accommodation"

Disability is Not a Bad Word

Much of the language people with disabilities use is rooted in different social movements.

People with disabilities may describe themselves in a variety of ways. Allies should only use person-first or identity-first language unless a person has expressed another preference.

People-First Language

The People-First movement began in the 1970's. It literally puts the person first - "person with a disability," "employee who is bi-polar."

This language is rooted in the idea that people with disabilities are not defined by their disabilities. They are people first.

Identity-First Language

Identity-First language is rooted in the social model of disability.

'Disabled' is a political term used to emphasize the social cause and nature of the exclusion and discrimination faced as people with impairments. It uses the term "Disabled" to mean disabled by society.

Tips for Writing in Plain Language

1. Sort sentences
2. Avoid clauses
3. Define terms of art
4. Use lists
5. Be direct
6. Active voice

Word Choice

Provide = give

Receive = get

Shall = should/must

Individual = person/you

Assistance = help

Entity = business/employer/school

Accommodation = different way of performing a task

Financial burden = too expensive

Word Choice and Translations

These do not translate into other languages:

1. Rhyming
2. Alliteration
3. Acronyms that spell out a word
4. Cultural references

Communication Challenges

1. Wait for folks to finish their thoughts
2. Ask questions
   - Open-ended
   - Yes/No
3. Repeat back what you understood and confirm
4. Ask for a re-cap
5. Would you like me to write it down?
6. Explore language access services

Example 1:

"The Frances Street side of the State Street Campus Garage will remain open during construction, though space will be limited due to the capacity reduction with the Lake garage closure. We encourage customers to use the City's [real-time garage availability tracker](#) prior to visiting this location or use alternate garages for the duration of this closure. You can locate the City operated garages and rates nearest to your destination by visiting Parking's [Garages and Lots webpage](#)."

Example 1:

The Frances Street side of the State Street Campus Garage is open during construction. Space is limited. Use the City's [real-time garage availability tracker](#) to find available parking. Find the nearest garage and rates at the [Garages and Lots webpage](#).

Example 2:

Neighborhood plans serve as a guide for actions and changes to strengthen Madison's established neighborhoods and how to best accommodate anticipated growth. Plan topics include land use, zoning, mobility, housing, community services, economic development, historic preservation, urban design, open space, health, safety, and infrastructure.

Example 2:

A neighborhood plan is a decision-making guide. It helps neighborhoods plan for growth.

Plans guide:

- How land is used
- What gets built and where
- How people travel
- Housing
- Community services
- Businesses
- Historic places
- Open spaces
- Health and safety

Example 3:

Vision Zero -

The projects funded focus on low-cost, high-impact strategies that are proven safety countermeasures to prevent fatalities and serious injury crashes for people walking, biking and accessing transit.

Example 3:

Vision Zero -

The goal of this project is to prevent car accidents that cause death or injury to people who walk, roll or bike. It funds effective low-cost ways to make streets safer.

Resources

Legal Writing in Plain English, Bryan A. Garner

PlainLanguage.gov

Plain Language Association International

Center for Plain Language

Open Government - Plain Writing at the National Archives

Tools:

- Microsoft Readability Statistics
- Hemingway App

Questions

Email lap@cityofmadison.com for plain language consultation

Rebecca Hoyt

Disability Rights and Services Specialist

Department of Civil Rights – Equity and Social Justice Division

(608) 266-6511

RHoyt@cityofmadison.com