



Ink Matters

Communicating clearly in today's marketplace

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Plain English: What is it?

Do you know that...

- ⇒ Most adults read at an 8th grade level?
- ⇒ 90 million people in this country have low literacy skills?
- ⇒ About 1 in 5 adults read at a 5th grade level or below?

Statistics like these are driving the Plain English movement in the U.S. and other countries. Industries and organizations are revising their publications so the information is more accessible to the average reader. Health care professionals, lawyers, gov-

ernment agencies, insurance companies, and banks are revising patient handouts, legal documents, consent forms, credit card agreements, and insurance forms.

Why the push? Because writing in clear, simple language saves time, money, and lives. But it doesn't mean dumbing down your message. What it does mean is writing information so it's understood *the first time it's read*. It means clear presentation of complex information. And it means pro-

viding the reader with the information they need to know to take action.

Everyone appreciates easy-to-read information. Who has time to sift through gobbledygook? Better yet, who wants to?

Take a look at your printed materials, and use the "Quick Steps" to start simplifying your message.

Writing in plain English will improve the way your organization does business.

Quick Steps to Easy to Read

1. **Use simple words.** (three-syllable words trip many readers)
2. **Use the active voice.**
3. **Use a conversational tone.**
4. **Use short sentences.** (15 words, one concept)

Down with Dull Memos

Do you wonder if your staff really reads in-house publications? How about those reports you labor over? Or meeting minutes? You spend time flushing out great ideas spawned during meetings, but sense that few people are reading the results.

Next time try this: Add a twist to something a staffer said and bury it in the text. Use humor. Exaggerate.

Dress up dull facts with the absurd. Play with words and bring new meaning to old ideas. Then, sit back and watch.

Someone will catch on, and before you know it, staff will eagerly read what they previously neglected.

We all have too much to read. So bring a little fun into the traditionally dull memo and lighten everyone's reading load.

"The golden rule is that Plain English should be used in any information that ordinary people rely on when they make decisions."

—Plain English Campaign (www.plainenglish.co.uk)

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Kristina Anderson has been in the freelance writing and editing business since 1990. Her wide range of experience includes managing retail stores, volunteers, and nonprofit programs. She works with health promotion publishers, health providers, nonprofit organizations, literacy organizations, marketing agencies, educational institutions, technical companies, corporations, book publishers, and authors. Her expertise includes writing for low-literacy and limited English-speaking audiences and assessing readability and literacy levels of printed materials.

Kristina works at home in the Central District. She lives with two dogs, one cat, and her wonderful, entertaining teenage son, Pepper. She's a voracious reader, book award juror, community volunteer, and not a master gardener, but she loves it anyway.

"Write with a specific person in mind. When writing Berkshire Hathaway's annual report, I pretend I'm talking to my sisters. Though highly intelligent, they are not experts in accounting or finance. My goal is simply to give them the information I would want from them if our positions were reversed."

—Warren E. Buffett on writing effectively

The Last Laugh: Headlines

"Police Begin Campaign to Run Down Jaywalkers"

"Panda Mating Fails. Veterinarian Takes Over"

"New Study of Obesity Looks for Larger Test Group"

"Two Sisters Reunited after 18 Years in Checkout Counter"

(Courtesy of the Plain English Network <http://204.254.113.225>)

Cultural Awareness in the Marketplace

Look closely at the population chart to the right. These figures from the Economic Development Council of Seattle and King County tell a story. While the white and Native American population dropped between 1990 and 2000, all other categories increased. The most astounding is the "Other" category. It quadrupled.

Visit a clinic at Harborview Medical Center, and you'll think you're in the United Nations. Over 50 languages are spoken by patients, the top three being Somali, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

With approximately 50% of the American public reading at or

below the 8th grade level, and the population becoming evermore diverse linguistically and culturally, communicating effectively has become an even greater challenge.

The Health Care industry is leading the way in cultural competency. But it isn't alone. Research shows that high performing leaders and organizations are ones who view diversity as an asset and make it a business imperative.

Greater cultural awareness reduces disparities and helps businesses gain a competitive edge in the marketplace. It broadens understanding and appreciation of

audience.

Our cultural backgrounds are important to all of us. Our beliefs, traditions and history make us who we are. Understanding culture is the key to success in today's marketplace.

(EDC Web site is www.edc-sea.org.)

King Co. pop.	1990	2000
White	1,278,532	1,275,127
Asian Pacific	118,784	195,352
African Amer.	76,289	91,798
Hispanic	44,337	95,242
Native Amer.	17,305	14,278
Other	14,844	65,237