



Plain Language






Best practices for writing clearly and effectively

By Content Matters

Agenda

Today's goal is to equip you with the skills to communicate clearly and effectively. You will leave today's session with the knowledge and tools to become a plain language champion.

Introduction

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|  Activity 1 - Know Your Audience | 10 min |
|  Activity 2 - Break up Long Text | 5 min |
|  Activity 3 - Watch Your Words | 5 min |
|  Activity 4 - Use Active Voice | 5 min |
|  Activity 5 - Bringing It All Together | 20 min |





Activity 1 – Know Your Audience – Sample

Who is your target audience? Identify their persona.

Think about how this person engages with your department.

(website visits, email communication, social media engagement, council meeting/event attendance)

<p>NAME NINA/ NEW RESIDENT</p> <p>AGE 38</p> <p>LOCATION NORTH DURHAM</p> <p>OCCUPATION HR MANAGER</p> <p>MARITAL STATUS MARRIED</p> <p>KIDS 2; A FIVE- YEAR-OLD AND AN EIGHT- YEAR-OLD</p> <p>ANNUAL INCOME HHI: \$275,000</p>	<p>BACKGROUND</p>	<p>Provide a brief background story.</p> <p>Nina recently moved to Durham with her husband and two kids (5 and 8) after living in Boston for fifteen years. She is curious about the town and passionate about getting involved but has yet to engage in the local community.</p>
	<p>MOTIVATIONS</p>	<p>What drives this persona to engage with the City of Durham?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eager to enroll kids in local activities and stay in the know about family-friendly events Wants to get involved in the local community through volunteerism, especially public education and environmental initiatives
	<p>CHALLENGES</p>	<p>What are the common challenges or pain points this persona faces when communicating with the city?</p> <p>A busy season of life, filled with family responsibilities and a full-time job</p>
	<p>GOALS</p>	<p>What is the main goals and secondary goal this persona want to accomplish when engaging with the city?</p> <p>Primary Goal: Stay in the know (events/voting/town services)</p> <p>Secondary Goal: Engage to build a local network</p>
	<p>BEHAVIORS</p>	<p>How does this persona typically interact and communicate with the City of Durham? Which channels do they use most frequently?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spends hours online every day; uses Gmail, newsletters, Instagram, and Facebook Expects websites to be mobile -first, intuitive and easy to use/make her life easier



Activity 1 – Know Your Audience – Sample

Who is your target audience? Identify their persona.

Think about how this person engages with your department.

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NAME AGE LOCATION OCCUPATION MARITAL STATUS KIDS ANNUAL INCOME	BACKGROUND Provide a brief background story.	
	MOTIVATIONS What drives them to engage with the City?	
	CHALLENGES What are common challenges or pain points when communicating with the City?	
	GOALS What do they want to accomplish when engaging with the City?	
	BEHAVIORS How do they typically interact or communicate with the City? Which channels do they use most frequently?	

Never assume you know your audience. Your audience isn't you. What makes them different?



Activity 2 – Break Up Long Text

Being clear includes being brief. Long, complex sentences and paragraphs are confusing to your reader. Keeping sentences and paragraphs focused on a single idea will help your reader understand the information quickly and correctly.

Keep it Brief

- **One idea per sentence (20–25 words)**
- **One topic per paragraph**
- **Short paragraphs (150–250 words; 3–8 sentences)**

Use your space to help your reader digest the information. People are less likely to read dense pages with lengthy paragraphs.

Use Your Space to Simplify

- **Separate sentences with many parts into separate sentences.**
- **Break apart long passages.**
- **Use transitions to connect ideas, sentences, paragraphs, or sections**

Give It A Try:

Below is a long, complicated paragraph. What edits would you make to simplify the content while preserving the original message? Remember to keep it brief. Use your space to separate sentences and break apart long passages. Edit the paragraph directly or capture your edits in the space provided.

Project Timeline Delays

The project has experienced some delays in the timeline originally provided. The primary reason has been the Phase 2 – Soil Removal. Phase 1 of the project was the demolition of the existing building (completed). The soil removal for Phase 2 requires the removal/reuse of about 50,000 cubic yards of soil. We are currently coordinating with other City departments (Water Management and Solid Waste Management) on other City projects to reuse the soil and minimize hauling and disposal costs. Additional time was also needed to work with the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality (NCDEQ) to get approval for the soil reuse strategy while the soil reuse legislative rule was undergoing changes. The Phase 2 Soil Removal phase of this project will be bid this summer and Phase 3 – Construction of the Wetland will follow in 2022.



Activity 3 – Watch Your Words

Remember the reader is not an expert in the specific field you are. Don't complicate your communication by using jargon, technical terms, or abbreviations that your reader won't understand.

Imagine the information you are communicating needs to be understood by someone who knows nothing about the topic.

Quick Tips:

- **Delete jargon**
- **Define technical terms**
- **Don't over-formalize simple words; write "use" instead of "utilize"**

Give It A Try:

- The paragraph in the box below includes ten words and/or phrases that can be simplified.
- Can you identify and circle ten examples of jargon, technical terms, and over-formalized words?
- Now let's look at the sentence structure. Which two sentences would you recommend making shorter? Circle those sentences.

WHAT DID WE FIND ON STREAM WALKS?

Field teams divided the 45 miles of streams assessed in the New Hope and Little Creek watersheds into 115 stream sections to evaluate stream health and assign stream quality ratings. These ratings of excellent, good, fair, and poor are based on scores assigned to each stream based on its general health conditions. This scoring was based on visual assessments of stream bed and banks, general water quality, type of vegetation within 100 feet of the streams, and presence of fish or other aquatic species. Streams in our region of North Carolina (called the Triassic Basin) tend to have fewer types of aquatic insects because of the area's unique geology. This characteristic can result in lower stream quality ratings for Durham streams. Field teams also documented the presence of dead woody material along streams. This material reduces stream temperature through shading, stabilizes stream flows, and creates a diverse aquatic habitat.

Activity 4 - Use Active Voice

Active voice is more direct. And it makes it clear who's supposed to do what.

What's the difference between active and passive voice?

In an **active voice**, the subject performs the action directly on the object.
For example, "**We appreciate your cooperation.**"

In contrast, **passive voice** emphasizes the action rather than the subject.
For example, "**Your cooperation is greatly appreciated.**"

There are three key reasons we prefer active voice: clarity, brevity, and engagement.

Give It A Try:

- Below is a paragraph written in passive voice.
- In the space provided, rewrite the paragraph using active voice.

Stream & Buffer Restoration

This strategy refers to repairing the local streams that have already been impacted by increased stormwater flows. Restoration addresses erosion, poor water quality, and damage to natural wildlife habitats. This can be done by restoring the stream shape, stabilizing eroded banks, and providing engineered structures in the stream to improve wildlife habitat.



Activity 5 - Bringing It all Together

Give It A Try:

It's time to put everything we've learned today into action and edit a document using plain language.

- First, break up into groups of 3-4.
- As a group, choose a piece of content to edit together. Spend the next ten minutes editing the document. It may be helpful to edit the document one tip at a time e.g. break up long text, then edit the jargon.*
- Before we wrap up for the day, each group will share their edits, highlighting which plain language tips they used.

*It's important to note that when revising a document you will likely focus on the editing tips, starting with tip #3. When writing a new document, you will start with tip #1, Know Your Audience, and follow tip #2, Organize Your Thoughts, before using the editing tips.

Thank you!