

Unlock the Power of Plain Language to Create Lasting Change

Workshop by Content Matters
May 1, 2024



"Downtown Durham" by Angelo Yap is licensed under CC BY 2.0

A little about who we are.

**We're plain language
advocates. And we're
happy to be here today!**

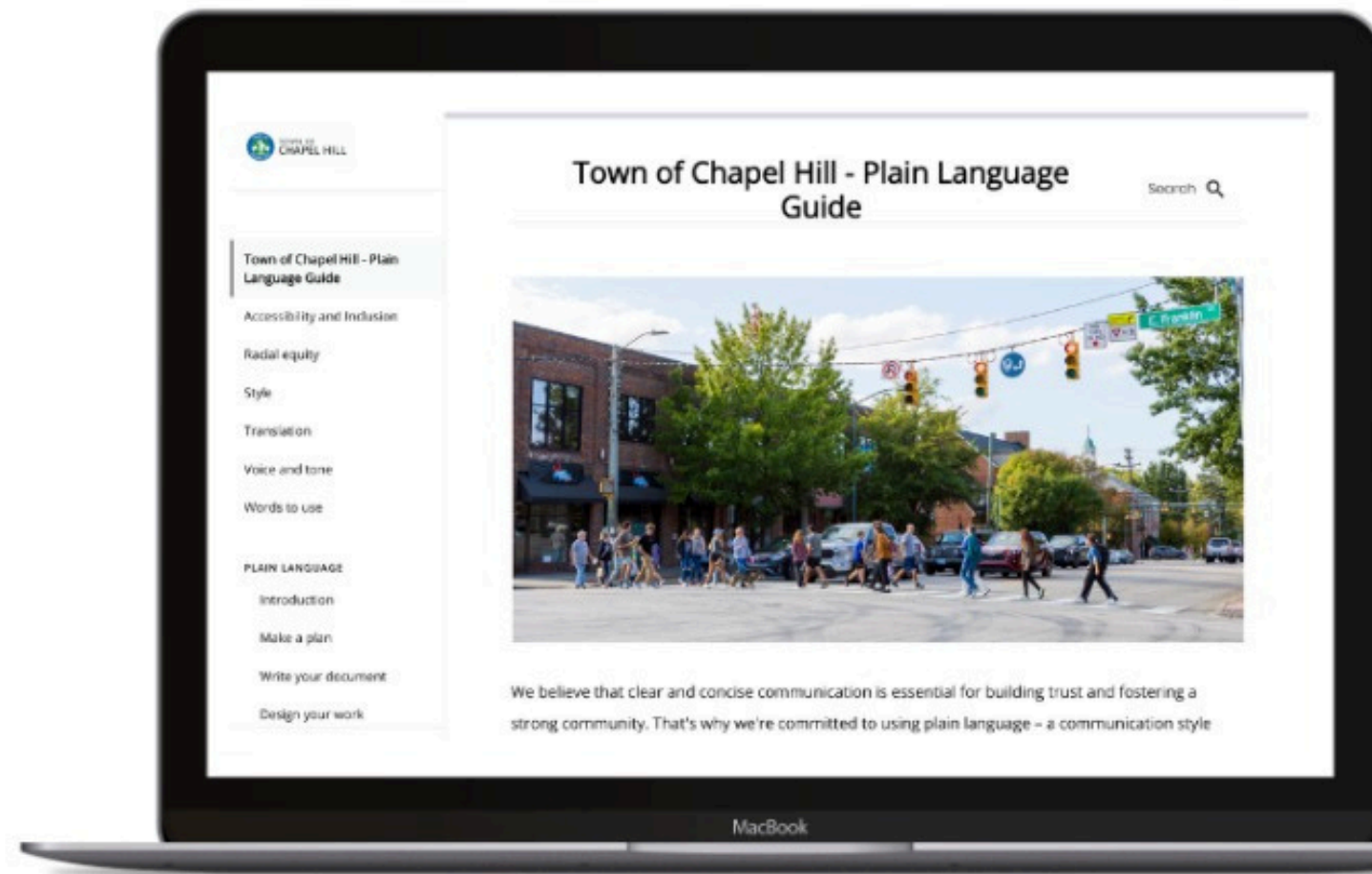


Stacey Martin, Owner
Certified Content Professional



Seton McGowan
Senior Creative Strategist

People matter.



CONTENT MATTERS
your-content-matters.com

CASE STUDY

Empowering Chapel Hill, NC through Plain Language and Generative AI

Objectives
The Town of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, needed to evolve their communications strategies to meet the demands of their town's growth. Chapel Hill already had a lot of work done in this area, ranging from a plain language initiative to training, but they wanted to take this a step further.

Challenges
Chapel Hill needed a partner to help bring together their existing projects and create a strategic plan for the future. This was no small task as they have over 700 employees, many with differing skills and needs, that needed to be considered.

Solutions
We worked with Chapel Hill to develop a comprehensive training program, a style guide, and generative AI best practices. This included developing curriculum and materials for the training program and style guide. And experimenting with AI-based generative tools to see how they could fit into the Town's communications efforts.

IMPACT

Enhanced Trust and Engagement
By adopting plain language guidelines, Chapel Hill is significantly improving the readability and comprehension of its communications.

Efficiency and Consistency
Creating a center of excellence content hub and standardized procedures improves efficiency and consistency, allowing communicators to deliver timely and accurate information to their audiences.

Enhanced Accessibility
Chapel Hill promotes inclusivity and equal access to information by empowering their communicators with guidelines and tools for writing in plain language.

You can do this too. Find a champion, start small and get support. There is no one right way to do this. It's important and worth doing.

MARY JANE NIRDLINGER
Deputy Town Manager,
Chapel Hill, NC

TOWN OF CHAPEL HILL

Words matter.

When, Where, and How to File Your North Carolina Return

When to File Your Return

If you file your return on a calendar year basis, the 2022 return is due on or before April 15, 2023. A fiscal year return is due on the 15th day of the 4th month following the end of the taxable year.

When the due date falls on a Saturday, Sunday, or legal holiday, the return is due on the next succeeding business day. For example, in 2023, April 15 lands on a Friday, so the return is due on Monday, April 17, 2023. If your return is filed on a day other than the due date, it is considered timely filed. See Directive 2019-01 for a Tax is Considered Timely Paid if the Due Date Falls on a Saturday, Sunday, or Legal Holiday.

Grade level

11.4

Out of the Country: If you are a resident of North Carolina and you are granted an automatic four-month extension to file your North Carolina individual income tax return if you fill in the circle on page 1 of Form D-400. "Out of the Country" means you live outside the United States and Puerto Rico and your main place of work is outside the United States and Puerto Rico or you are in military service outside the United States and Puerto Rico. The time for payment of the tax is also extended; however, interest is due on any unpaid tax from the original due date of the return until the tax is paid.

Nonresident Aliens: Nonresident aliens are required to file returns at the same time they are required to file their federal returns.

If you are unable to pay the tax due, you should still file your return by the due date to avoid the failure to file penalty. You may be eligible to enter into a payment agreement with the Department of Revenue.

<https://www.ncdor.gov/taxes-forms/individual-income-tax/when-where-and-how-to-file-your-north-carolina-return>

Before

When to File Your North Carolina Return

- If you file your return on a calendar year basis, the 2022 return is due on April 15, 2023.
- If the due date is a Saturday, Sunday, or legal holiday, you can file your return on the next business day.
- If you are out of the country, the return is due on the next business day.
- Nonresident aliens must file their returns by the due date.

Where to File Your North Carolina Return

- You can file your return online.
- The online filing option is available for most taxpayers.
- To file your return by mail, use Form D-400.
- To file your return in person, visit a local tax service center.

How to File Your North Carolina Return

- You can file your return using Form D-400.
- The form is available online.
- You can also file your return in person.

If You Cannot Pay Your Taxes

- You should still file your return by the due date.
- You may be eligible to enter into a payment agreement with the Department of Revenue.

Grade level

7.1

Changes

- Used shorter sentences.
- Replaced technical terms with simpler language.
- Used active voice and personal pronouns.

Department of Revenue website.

Form D-400).

After

City of Durham. Your Content Matters

Each communication can

Drive action.

Connect communities.

Build culture.

Give a sense of belonging.

Simplify the complicated

world we live in.



Casey and Davida, Pelican's SnoBalls

**You'll leave today's
workshop with plain
language tools
you can
immediately use to
communicate more
effectively.**



Agenda

- ① **What's plain language?**
- ② **Getting started**
- ③ **Equity & Inclusion**
- Break*
- ④ **Tips**
- ⑤ **Group Exercise**
- ⑥ **Resources**





①

What is Plain Language?

Kristi, Tater Bread Cafe, N Alston

"The Department of Public Works is responsible for the maintenance of all city streets and sidewalks."

Instead of saying

"The Department of Public Works is responsible for the maintenance of all city streets and sidewalks."

Instead of saying

"The Department of Public Works fixes and maintains city streets and sidewalks."

you could say

"The Department of Public Works is responsible for the maintenance of all city streets and sidewalks."

Instead of saying

"The Department of Public Works fixes and maintains city streets and sidewalks."

you could say

Plain Language is a communications style you can use to **simplify** anything you communicate.

It's not about grammar or being academic.

It's about using language that your audience can **understand.**



Saltbox Seafood Joint

"The Zoning Board of Appeals will be considering a request for a variance to the city's zoning code at its next meeting on January 10th."

Instead of saying

"The Zoning Board of Appeals will be considering a request for a variance to the city's zoning code at its next meeting on January 10th."

Instead of saying

"The Zoning Board of Appeals will be considering a request for a variance to the city's zoning code at its next meeting on January 10th."

Instead of saying

"The Zoning Board of Appeals will decide whether to allow a change to the city's zoning code at its next meeting on January 10th."

you could say



Why now?

Cousins Jose and Chris, Trinity St

SIMPLIFY

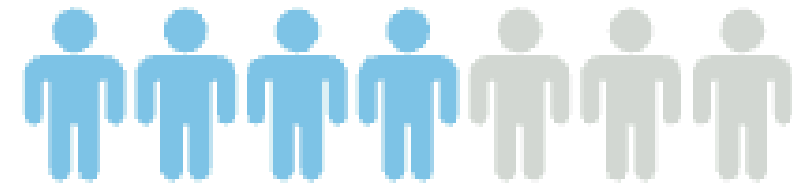
Let's talk about Plain Language

1

SIMPLIFY

Let's talk about Plain Language

1

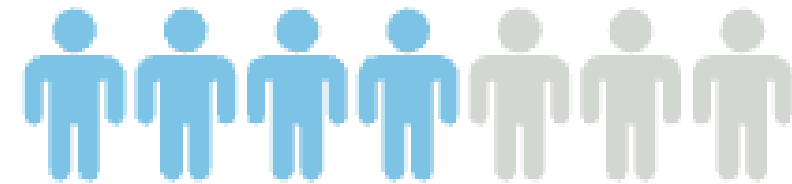


Almost half of adults in the United States have difficulty reading and understanding text.

SIMPLIFY

1

Let's talk about Plain Language



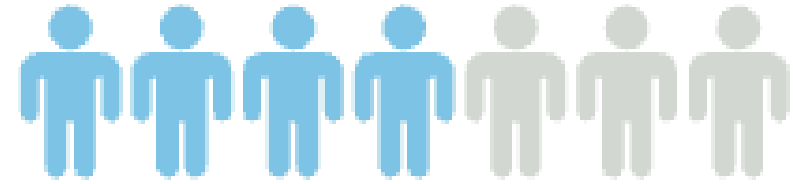
Almost half of adults in the United States have difficulty reading and understanding text.

Plain language can **reduce the time it takes to read and understand** a document by up to 50%.



SIMPLIFY

Let's talk about Plain Language



Almost half of adults in the United States have difficulty reading and understanding text.

Plain language can **reduce errors by** up to

70%

Plain language can **increase comprehension** by up to

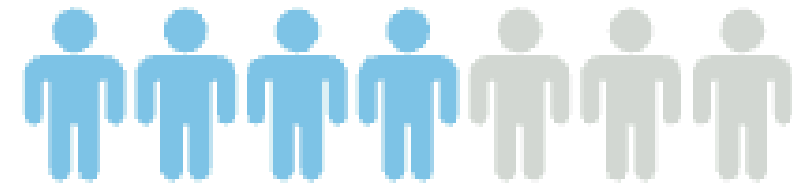
30%

Plain language can **reduce the time it takes to read and understand** a document by up to 50%.

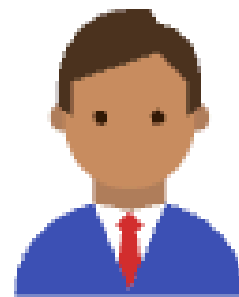


SIMPLIFY

Let's talk about Plain Language



Almost half of adults in the United States have difficulty reading and understanding text.



When government documents are clear and easy to understand, people are more likely to **trust** the government.

This can lead to **increased resident and community participation and cooperation.**

Plain language can **reduce errors by** up to

70%

Plain language can **increase comprehension** by up to

30%

Plain language can **reduce the time it takes to read and understand** a document by up to 50%.



Build trust

When your audience trusts your content, they're more likely to believe what you say, take action on your calls to action, and become loyal supporters.

But if your content is confusing or difficult to understand, it can erode trust and damage your reputation.



Larry at Wimpy's Grill, West Durham

You take a lot of time to write clearly

You could save as much as **\$6.1M** in just one year by clarifying emails and documents.

The cost of clarifying emails

How much time and money do your people spend clarifying poorly written internal emails? Estimate the numbers below or send a quick email to other managers to get the information you need.

Number of employees	400
Average hourly pay of employee	40
Average number of internal emails received each day for each employee	40
Percentage needing one or more clarifications*	50
Minutes spent on clarification per email	5
Cost of clarifying emails each day	\$26667
Cost of clarifying emails each week	\$133333
Annual cost based on 46 weeks per year	\$6133318

The cost of wasting managers' work time rewriting or correcting documents

How much time is wasted in your workplace by managers correcting or rewriting documents written by their team members? Estimate the numbers below or send a quick email to other managers to get the information you need.

Wasted work hours each week for a single manager	5
Number of managers	7
Average hourly rate	50
Hours wasted per week	35
Hours wasted per year, based on a 46-week year.	1750
Value of hours wasted per year, based on a 46-week year	\$80500

The cost of wasting personal time rewriting or correcting documents

How many hours of personal time do you waste each week correcting or rewriting documents written by your team?

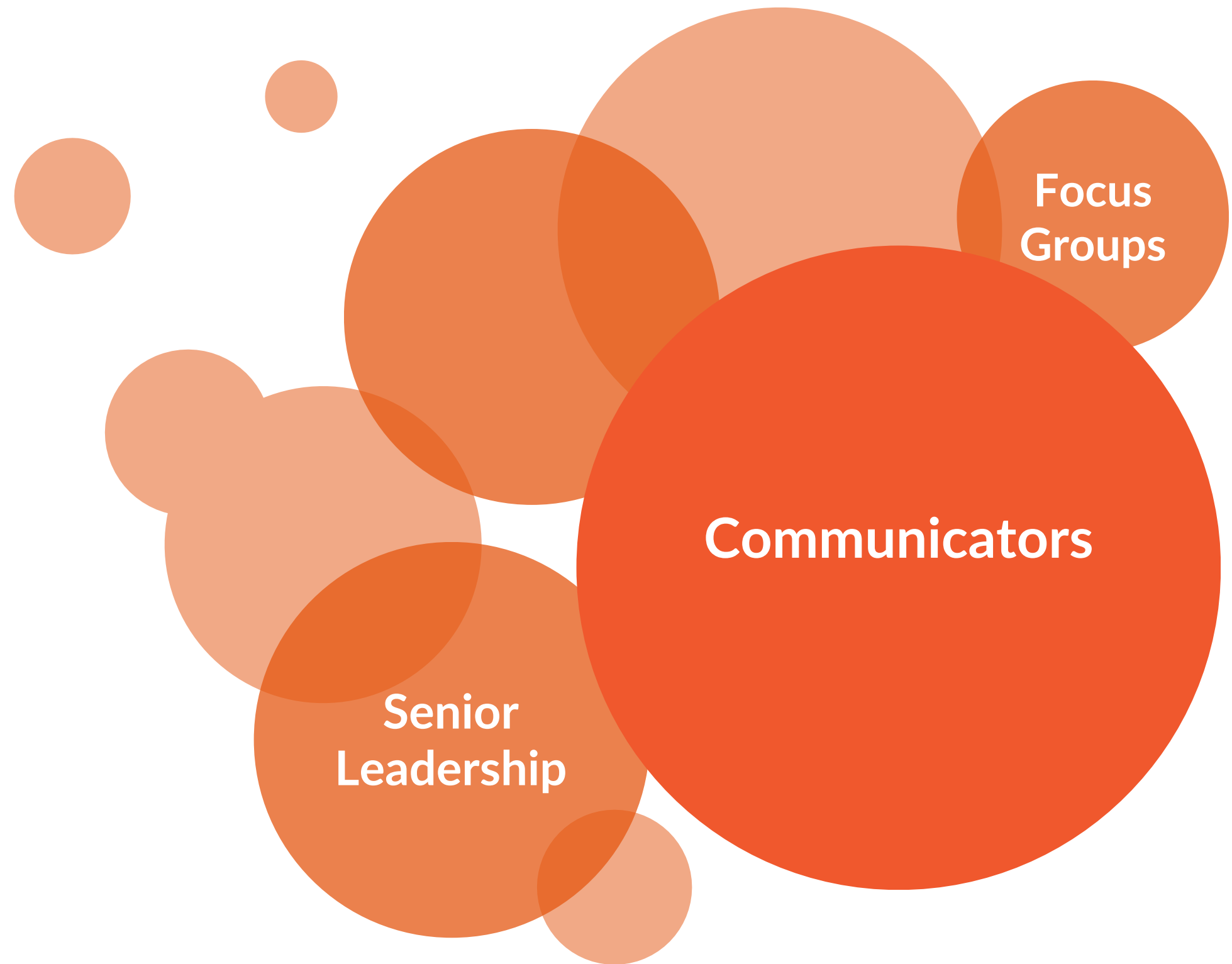
Hours per week	8
Hours per year, based on a 46-week year	368

Champions at all levels are key to success

Senior level decision makers bring strategic direction and the expectation of communicating effectively.

Communicators bring the skills and implement plain language strategies.

Focus groups help identify areas of need.





②

Getting Started

Know your audience

Organize your thoughts

Guide your reader

Jason, Talbert Building Supply

Know your audience

Understanding your audience shapes how and what you write.



Immigrants, learning a new language?



Long-time residents concerned about town development?



Young parents, passionate about public education and the environment?

Know your audience

**Who are they?
What do they need to know? What do they already know?**

HOW DO THEY SEE THEMSELVES?

- Personality
- Season of life
- Priorities
- Interests/hobbies

WHAT'S THEIR BACKGROUND?

- Age
- Level of Education
- Occupation
- Single or married?

WHO ARE THEY?

- New to town?
- Long-time resident?
- Do they feel they are allowed to engage?

WHAT ARE THEIR WANTS/NEEDS?

- What are they looking for?
- What do they need to do?
- What are their needs?

HOW DO THEY COMMUNICATE?

- Device usage
- Media habits
- Daily activities



Know your audience

**Who are they?
What do they need to know? What do they already know?**

WHO ARE THEY?

- New to town
- New to the southeast
- First-time homeowners

WHAT'S THEIR BACKGROUND?

- 30's; employed full-time
- College-grad
- Married with kids

2



New Resident Nina

Know your audience

**Who are they?
What do they need to know? What do they already know?**

HOW DO THEY SEE THEMSELVES?

- Busy or "on the go"
- Passionate about public education
- Interested in environmental impacts
- Active, engaged citizen

WHAT'S THEIR BACKGROUND?

- 30's; employed full-time
- College-grad
- Married with kids

2

WHO ARE THEY?

- New to town
- New to the southeast
- First-time homeowners

WHAT ARE THEIR WANTS/NEEDS?

- Trust in government agencies
- Access to town services
- Opportunities to engage and have a voice in local government

HOW DO THEY COMMUNICATE?

- Smartphone
- Web, email
- Community groups, social media
- Council meetings



New Resident Nina



ABOUT

Nina is an HR Manager and 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.

PAIN POINTS

Overloaded with information. Instead of finding a clear summer camp schedule, Nina encounters a frustrating obstacle course. Menus twist and turn, links lead to dead ends, and the elusive pool information remains hidden. Finally, Nina throws her hands up in defeat and logs off.

MOTIVATIONS



Tuned into
Community
Events



Interested in
Sustainability



Engaged
with City Gov



Invested
in Public
Education

BEHAVIOR



Decisive

Makes quick
decisions based
on a steady flow
of information

EXPECTATIONS

Nina expects her town's online presence to foster a sense of community and reflect Durham's personality. She wants everyday information like event info, construction updates, trash collection, and safety information easy to find and highlighted on the homepage when relevant.

NEW RESIDENT NINA

BUSY

EASILY FRUSTRATED



Age 38

Status Married

Job Title HR Manager

Resident



ADVOCATE AUNG

INVOLVED LIASION



Age 46
Status Single
Job Title Burmese Pastor



AMBIVALENT ANDREW

MINIMAL USE OF MEDIA MOBILE-FIRST



Age 29
Status Single
Job Title Remote Worker / IT



BURNED OUT BIBI

FRUSTRATED WANTS ACCOUNTABILITY



Age 56
Status Married
Job Title Retired



INVESTED IRIS

NOSTALGIC DOESN'T UNDERSTAND JARGON



Age 67
Status Married
Job Title Retired Teacher



NEW RESIDENT NINA

BUSY EASILY FRUSTRATED



Age 38
Status Married
Job Title HR Manager

Business Owner



ENTREPRENEURIAL ELSIE

PROSPECTIVE BUSINESS OWNER OUT OF TOWNER



Age 35
Status Single
Job Title Founder of Small Business Start-Up



PROACTIVE PAULINA

RESIDENT BUSINESS OWNER HAS LIMITED INTERNET ACCESS



Age 50
Status Married
Job Title Restaurant Owner

Employee



ENVIRONMENTAL EVAN

PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYEE CHANGE SEEKER



Age 43
Status Married
Job Title Urban Planner

Press



MEDIA MICAH

NOT A RESIDENT SEEKING SINGLE SOURCE OF TRUTH



Age 33
Status Single
Job Title Reporter





Activity 1 - Know Your Audience

NAME

Who is your target audience? Identify their persona.

AGE

Think about how this person engages with your department.

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

LOCATION

OCCUPATION

MARITAL
STATUS

KIDS

ANNUAL
INCOME

BACKGROUND	
MOTIVATIONS	
CHALLENGES	
GOALS	
BEHAVIORS	

Exercise

Personas

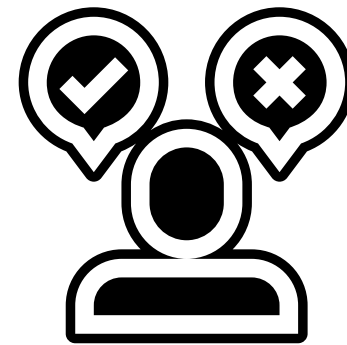
Organize your thoughts

**It'll take more time
upfront but will likely
save time during the
writing process.**



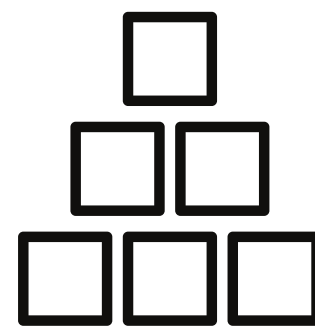
Identify

Identify your topic and main takeaway.



Decide

Decide the points you want to cover.

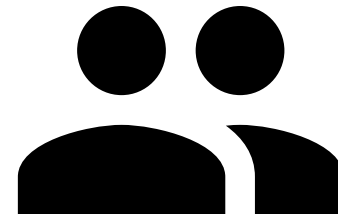


Organize

Organize your thoughts in a logical order

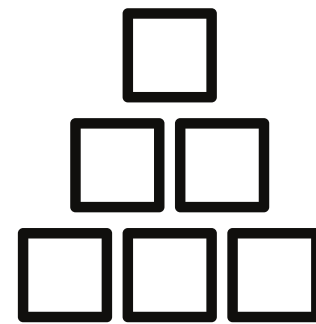
Guide your reader

Think. Structure. Focus.



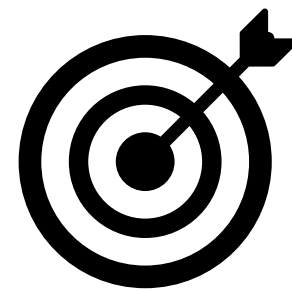
Think about reader

Think about content from your reader's perspective.



Structure

Structure works when readers can quickly and confidently find the information they are looking for.



Focus

Keep your reader focused by only including content that helps the reader accomplish the identified task.

Example 2: Welcome Email (example)

Before

All:

(new employee name here) is cleared to start on 02/27/2023. Feel free to reach out for next steps on her first day. (new employee name here) , on your first day of work, you will need to provide appropriate original documents so that we can confirm that you are legally able to work in the United States. We verify this information using a process called E-Verify. Every person the Town hires must complete this process. For a complete list of acceptable documents, please refer to <https://www.uscis.gov/i-9-central/acceptable-documents><<https://www.uscis.gov/i-9-central/acceptable-documents>>. It is important to bring originals of these documents for us to review. Copies are not acceptable. (Town Department) Leadership Team, Please start the BossDesk ticket process for all necessary Telephone, Email and technology needs for a stress free first day for Abbey.

(new employee name here) new employees generally start work on Mondays by attending orientation from 9:00 am to 10:30. Orientations are held every Monday in the Human Resource Development (HRD) Training room located on the 2nd Floor of Town Hall. This is where you complete all paperwork and receive important information about Town policies and processes. You will also complete payroll information, including withholding forms and direct deposit information. If you have questions, feel free to contact me at the number provided below.

Congratulations and Welcome to our Team!

Example 2: Welcome Email (example)

After

Hi [Name],

Welcome to the team! We're excited to have you on board. Your orientation is scheduled for *xx/xx/xxxx*.

We've put together a few resources to help you get started.

What to expect on your first day.

Please be prepared to complete the following items during orientation:

- Confirm your authorization to work (I-9 form, see below).
- Enroll in your benefits. [Link]
- Complete your payroll information (withholding forms, direct deposit).

Orientation time and location:

Mondays 9:00 am - 10:30 am.
Human Resource Development
(HRD) Training room
Town Hall, 2nd Floor
Chapel Hill, NC 27514
(xxx) xxx-xxxx

Authorization to Work (I-9 form)

During orientation, we will confirm that you are legally able to work in the United States.

- Please bring the original documents for us to review. We don't accept copies.
- For a complete list of acceptable documents, please refer to <https://www.uscis.gov/i-9-central/acceptable-documents>.

- Personalized the letter.
- Added headers.
- Added bullets.
- Added links to more information online.
- Grouped information for easier scanning.

If you have any questions, feel free to reach out to me. We're here to help!

Example 2: Welcome Email (example)

After

Hi [Name],

Welcome to the team! We're excited to have you on board. Your orientation is scheduled for xx/xx/xxxx.

We've put together a few resources to help you get started.

What to expect on your first day.

Please be prepared to complete the following items during orientation:

- Confirm your authorization to work (I-9 form, see below).
- Enroll in your benefits. [Link]
- Complete your payroll information (withholding forms, direct deposit).

Orientation time and location:

Mondays 9:00 am - 10:30 am.
Human Resource Development (HRD) Training room
Town Hall, 2nd Floor
Chapel Hill, NC 27514
(xxx) xxx-xxxx

Authorization

During orientat
legally able to v

→ Please br
us to revi

→ For a con
documen
to [https://
central/a](https://central/a)

- Personalized the letter.
- Added headers.
- Added bullets.
- Added links to more information online.
- Grouped information

In Doubt? Leave it Out!

Keep your reader focused by **only including content that helps the reader accomplish the identified task.**

If you have any questions, feel free to reach out to me. We're here to help!



3

Equity & Inclusion

Language can **build relationships** and make a person feel included, but it can also create barriers **and impact a person's sense of belonging.**

Using inclusive and respectful language is key to communicating in plain language and a big reason why the City of Durham is prioritizing the use of plain language.

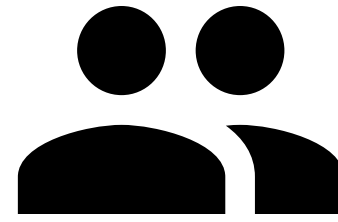
Our Racial Equity Mission

*The City of Durham **intentionally** identifies racial inequities, **engages** the community, and uses a **collaborative** approach in creating solutions, to ensure race no longer stands as a determinant of outcomes and opportunities*

Use Inclusive Language

**Use accessible
language**

Avoid labeling people



Understand Your Audience

Be aware of the cultural, social and political context of your audience.



Be Respectful

Be mindful of the language you use and the tone of your message.



Be Clear

Make sure your message is concise and easy to understand

Use Inclusive Language

General Writing Guidelines

- **Headlines, images, captions, and graphics are fair** and responsible in their depiction of people of color and coverage of issues
- Use racial and ethnic identification when it is **pertinent to a story**
- **Avoid** stereotypes
- If it is necessary to mention a person's race, **ask the person** how they prefer to be identified
- Use the name that the **subject asks you to use**, and do not ask to use a nickname instead
- **Include accents or diacritics** in the person's name rather than removing them, for example, use señora instead of senora

What is a strength's based approach?

Emphasize abilities, not limitations.

Everyone is different, and not everyone with a disability will want to be described in this way. It's important to ask people how they want to be described before writing about them.

In general, refer to the person first and the disability second.

Do



- Use a wheelchair for mobility
- Use sign language to communicate
- Person who uses a wheelchair
- Person who uses a communication device

Avoid

- Unable to walk
- Deaf
- Wheelchair-bound; confined to a wheelchair
- Non-Verbal, can't talk

