

Parents with Cognitive Limitations Work Group

Recommendation for Plain Language in State Government and Local Agency Documents for Parents

Purpose:

Connecticut state agencies share a wealth of written information with parents that is designed to help them support their child's development, education and success. When information is written clearly it helps parents find what they need, understand what they read, and use it to fulfill their needs. ¹ When information is unclear parents are at risk of losing their children, housing, and benefits such as medical insurance and cash assistance. Children suffer from the resulting family destabilization and are more likely to experience poor outcomes in terms of education, health and psycho-social development.

Not only does clear information assist families, but it also conserves resources and staff time in administering programs. In order to maximize the usefulness of written information for parents, The Connecticut Parents with Cognitive Limitations Work Group is making the following recommendation for the use of plain language in state government and local agency documents.

Recommendation:

Most written materials for families should be at a 4th to 7th grade level.

In addition, written documents should use:

- Clear language that is commonly used by the intended audience;
- Only the information needed by the recipient, presented in a logical sequence;
- Short sentences written in the active voice that make it clear who is responsible for what; and
- Layout and design that help the reader understand the meaning on the first try (including adequate white space, bulleted lists, helpful headings, graphics and easily readable font). ²

For an example of a government document that was revised using the plain language concepts see attached Request for Cash, Medical and Food Stamp Assistance from Ohio.

¹ From the Federal plain language project (plainlanguage.gov)

² From Florida DCF and Washington state plain language guidance

General Resources

Simply Put

This guide from the CDC helps you translate technical and scientific language used in many fields into information that captures and holds the interest of your intended audience. It provides tips for writing simply, using visuals, and organizing information for easy recall and understanding. *Simply Put* was developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and is available at <http://www.cdc.gov/od/oc/simpput.pdf>.

Plain Language.gov

This web site provides a range of tools, examples and other resources to improve communication. It is sponsored by PLAIN, the Plain Language Action and Information Network, whose goal is to promote the use of plain language for all government communications. (at www.plainlanguage.gov)

Resources for Assessing Reading Level

Grade Level

Microsoft Word has a tool called the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Index that will test a document to determine the grade level or mean the number of years of education generally required to understand that text. This test works best for documents with a narrative structure (full sentences and paragraphs). For instructions on how to activate this feature in Microsoft Word, go to the Parents with Cognitive Limitations Work Group web site at: <http://www.ct.gov/dcf/cwp/view.asp?a=2570&Q=314494>.

The SMOG Readability Calculator

SMOG (Simple Measure Of Gobbledygook) is a readability formula that estimates the years of education needed to understand a piece of writing. SMOG is particularly helpful for checking forms and other documents that do not use full sentences. SMOG can be calculated using the instant free online SMOG Calculator at <http://www.wordscount.info/hw/smog.jsp>.

Resources for Word Choice, Layout and Design

Readable Font Size and Style

- A web site that deals specifically with typography and font size is at www.ldresources.com.
- The journal *Clarity* presents many descriptions and examples of documents that were revised using best practice in the field of plain language. See for example an article about the State of Ohio's process for revising a form for the Cash, Food Stamp and Medical Assistance program that incorporates many of the recommendations for layout and style. See page 9 of Kleimann, K., Bain, I., Whitman, L. (2006). Removing

barriers to food stamp assistance – one complex form at a time. *Clarity* (55), 32-38. Available at: <http://www.clarity-international.net/downloads/55.pdf> .

- For guidance on text appearance refer to page 9 of **Simply Put** at <http://www.cdc.gov/od/oc/simpput.pdf>
- The National Institutes of Health has created a nuts-and-bolts guide to using plain language. See *Clear and to the Point: Guidelines for Using Plain Language* at NIH, available at <http://oma.od.nih.gov/ma/customer/customerserviceplan/attachment2.htm>

Using Active Voice

Readers prefer active voice sentences, and we should try to use the active voice in most of our business writing to communicate our message most effectively. Active voice clearly identifies the action and who is performing that action. Unfortunately, much of government writing is in the passive voice, giving documents a wordy, bureaucratic tone.

- See **PlainLanguage.gov** “Writing Tip: Use active, not passive sentences” at <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/quickreference/dash/dashactive.cfm>

Guidance for Creating Plain Language Web sites

- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services developed a website that offers guidelines and examples for creating websites that are easy to understand and navigate, (available at: <http://www.usability.gov>)
- The Trace Center, which is devoted to making technologies more accessible and useable, maintains a web site with a wealth of tools and resources for creating user friendly websites (available at <http://trace.wisc.edu/world/web/>)

State Efforts to Promote Plain Language

State Policy

A number of states have enacted plain language legislation including Connecticut’s Statute Sec. 42-152 which deals with plain language in consumer contracts.

- A sample of plain language laws is available at: <http://www.languageandlaw.org/TEXTS/STATS/PLAINENG.HTM>
- In addition several state governors have delivered executive orders such as the states of Washington (Executive Order 05-03 available at http://www.governor.wa.gov/execorders/eo_05-03.pdf) and Florida (Executive Order Number 07-01 available at <http://www.flgov.com/pdfs/orders/07-01-outline.pdf>)

State Documents and Resources:

- The Florida Department of Children and Families produced a useful Plain Language Guide available at <http://www.languageandlaw.org/TEXTS/STATS/PLAINENG.HTM>.
- The state of Washington maintains a very useful web site at <http://www.accountability.wa.gov/plaintalk/default.asp>

Online Training

- The National Institutes of Health offer an online training with many examples related to medical writing at: <http://plainlanguage.nih.gov/CBTs/PlainLanguage/login.asp>.