

# How to Develop a Plain Language Program

BY BRIAN LIEB

*Note: This is Part 2 in a two-part series.*

If you read the article on plain language in the July-August 2022 issue of *Minnesota Cities* magazine, you're aware that using plain language in your communications can provide a variety of benefits for your city and for the people who rely on your services. Plain language improves processes and makes you more efficient. It saves money — mainly in reduced phone calls. And it increases access to city programs and compliance with regulations.

There is no downside to establishing a plain language program; it just takes time and effort.

## Make a commitment

The first step is to implement an official plain language policy. While the day-to-day work of plain language happens in departments, your program won't thrive without clear expectations from the top.

Every organization has long-term employees who've worked in government for decades. Many of your high-level managers and supervisors progressed through the organization back when communications were notoriously dense. For them, long-winded, official-sounding text and legalese are normal.

Making plain language an official communications policy not only demonstrates that you are serious about clear communication, but it empowers front-line staff and announces to the reluctant holdouts in your organization that they can finally let go of the old rules.

## Build capacity

At its core, a plain language program is a commitment to good customer service. And just like other customer service initiatives, you need to provide a foundation of support for staff so they can do their best work. You do that by assigning a point person to guide the program, establishing writing standards, and finding and training staff.

## Assign a point person

If you want your plain language program to survive beyond early efforts, you need to assign someone to lead it. You need someone who can explain how to communicate using plain language, answer questions from staff, track the work, and keep leadership apprised of progress.

An easy choice is someone from communications, but you don't need to select a writer. Again, it's about customer service. As long as the point person has strong organizational skills and is committed to customer service, your program will be in good hands.

## Establish writing standards

Every writer has questions about grammar and style. Should you include the Oxford/serial comma in a list? Do you capitalize the word "city" when it's by itself? Is it "wellbeing" or "well-being"? And do you just Google the questions, or is there some secret rule book that has all the answers?

The solution is to establish your own style guide to answer common questions and help ensure your communications have a consistent style. Base it on established style guides — like the AP Stylebook or the Chicago Manual of Style — and post it where employees can easily find it.

If you don't have the time or expertise to create your own, borrow one. Hennepin County ([hennepin.us/writingguide](https://hennepin.us/writingguide)) and King County, Wash. ([kingcounty.gov/help/editorial-style-guide](https://kingcounty.gov/help/editorial-style-guide)) maintain quality guides based on current national best practices.

## Find and train staff

This work can't be done by one or two writers in your communications department. There are simply too many webpages, letters, program descriptions, and email responses to write.

Fortunately, you almost certainly have a significant number of competent writers working for your city, hidden throughout the organization. They might be doing other work right now — processing forms, managing programs — but they are capable of crafting clear, concise text.

When you start building your plain language program, encourage staff to express their interest in joining the team. Then, urge managers to let their staff participate. Not only will your communications improve, but staff will appreciate the ability to expand their skills.

And if you have the budget, invest in writing training to improve the skills of your staff. The goal is to teach people to let go of the academic style we all learned in school, and master a simpler approach that avoids jargon and highlights the most important information. Any instructor can find good tips on clear writing at [plainlanguage.gov/guidelines](https://plainlanguage.gov/guidelines).

## Keep the ball rolling

The final step is to continue to improve. Promote the program to city residents and provide a way for them to let you know if your communications aren't meeting their needs. Encourage city staff to flag poorly-written materials, then develop a process so that information can be routed for review and rewriting. And schedule regular reviews of your information to ensure it continues to meet the needs of residents. ☑

Brian Lieb is the plain language coordinator with Hennepin County. See the Hennepin County writing guide he developed at [hennepin.us/writingguide](https://hennepin.us/writingguide).