Plain Language Helps Residents Access Essential Services

BY BRIAN LIEB

Note: This is Part 1 in a two-part series. Part 2 will discuss how to implement a plain language program.

Your city communicates daily with residents and others. They visit your website, read your social media posts, and slog their way through official forms and letters to access things like building permits, parks and rec forms, and snow emergency information.

Unfortunately, many critical communications from local government are poorly written, full of jargon, and overloaded with unnecessary information. They are often full of legal-sounding sentences like: "Copies of the attached forms must be included to ensure accurate submission."

Those communications don't provide what readers need, and they definitely don't ensure accurate submission. Instead, they leave readers confused and frustrated.

But we can do better. Clear communication from government can make a difference in people's lives. It can affect access to medical care or housing, or the ability to vote. It impacts every service your city provides, and residents deserve to receive information they can understand and use.

Fortunately, there's a relatively simple way to meet the needs of readers while also improving organizational efficiencies — by using plain language.

It's not about you

Plain language is writing that focuses on the reader. It's an international best practice, and it's been a requirement for U.S. federal agencies since 2010.

The official definition used by more than 20 countries says that "a communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information."

To do that, there are a few key principles to keep in mind:

- **Be concise.** You should provide only what the reader needs. Long explanations and legal justifications make it harder to find key information. You should also strive for shorter sentences and paragraphs. Research shows that sentences longer than 15-20 words are likely to be confusing, regardless of the reader's literacy level.
- **Avoid jargon, acronyms, and complex sentences.** Most residents are not familiar with your city's business processes and jargon. So, the language you use with your co-workers won't work for the people who need your services. Instead, use common words and simple sentences.
- **Organize and format so readers can easily find what they need.** There's no rule that says you must format city emails, letters, and forms like dense legal contracts. Instead, break up the text into smaller chunks, and use descriptive subheads and bullet points.

Great benefits

While writing in plain language takes some practice, it can result in great benefits. For example, Arizona Department of Revenue staff rewrote and simplified one of their forms, which led to 18,000 fewer phone calls per year.

And results like that aren't surprising when you consider typical government writing. For example, in the "before" paragraph below, not only is the language difficult, but the lengthy, complex sentences hide key messages. By applying plain language principles, you get something that is much more likely to resonate with families in your community.

BEFORE

Infants and children who drink water containing lead in excess of the action level could experience delays in their physical or mental development. Children could show slight deficits in attention span and learning abilities. Adults who drink this water over many years could develop kidney problems or high blood pressure.

AFTER

Lead in drinking water can make you sick. Possible health effects of high lead levels in your drinking water include:

For children:
- *Delayed growth*
- *Learning disabilities*
- *Short attention span*

For adults:
- *Kidney problems*
- *High blood pressure*

One unoriginal but useful tip

One common complaint about plain language is that it's simply dumbing down the information. It isn't. It's acknowledging that the reader may not be an expert in government processes and jargon.

We should approach writing the way investor Warren Buffet does. He's a strong proponent of clear communication and plain language, and he has a good handle on why most communications go awry.

"Perhaps the most common problem is that a well-intentioned and informed writer simply fails to get the message across to an intelligent, interested reader," wrote Buffet. "In that case, stilted jargon and complex constructions are usually the villains. One unoriginal but useful tip: Write with a specific person in mind."

Exactly. That's the perfect place to start every time you write — by focusing on the needs of your readers. MC

Brian Lieb is the plain language coordinator with Hennepin County. See the Hennepin County writing guide he developed at **www.hennepin.us/writingguide**.