

# **What is Plain Language?**

Prepared for the  
Plain Language Ad Hoc Committee  
of the Productivity and Quality Commission

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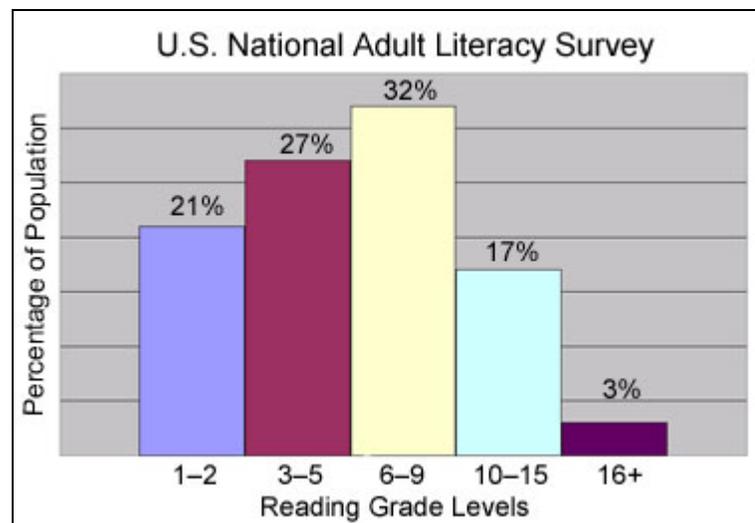
## What is Plain Language?

Plain Language is language that everyone in your audience can easily understand. It helps them to read and comprehend instructions easily and to read and fill out forms accurately and completely

Plain Language means writing in a way that is easy-to-read, looks good, is organized logically, and is understandable the first time you read it.

## What are the basics of plain language?

Adults have different levels of reading skill. The National Adult Literacy Survey shows that the average adult in the U.S. reads at the 7<sup>th</sup> grade level, with nearly 50 percent below the 6<sup>th</sup> grade level and over 80 percent below the 10<sup>th</sup> grade level.



*Fig. 1. Results of the U.S. National Adult Literacy Survey, showing percentage of U.S. adults in each literacy level.*

Experts recommend that documents for the general public be written at the 7<sup>th</sup>-grade level. Documents about health, medicine, or safety should be written at the 5<sup>th</sup>-grade level. Documents for special groups can be adjusted according to their reading skill and the purpose of the document.

Plain language means:

1. Determine the reading level of the audience.
2. Create texts that match that reading level.

## Why do we need plain language?

In the 1960s, consumer groups began promoting and winning legislation requiring plain language in contracts, insurance forms, and legal notices.

Now, governments at every level, in the U.S. and around the world have plain-language requirements for official documents.

For example, Section 6215 of the California Government Code states:

Each department, commission, office or other administrative agency of state government shall write each document which it produces in plain, straightforward language, avoiding technical terms as much as possible, and using a coherent and easily readable style.

The California Administrative Code also requires regulations in plain language, defined as "written or displayed so that the meaning of regulations will be easily understood by those persons directly affected by them" (Section 11349).

## The Costs of Poor Writing

As much as 40% of the cost of managing business transactions is spent on problems caused by poor communications. Poorly designed forms can waste up to 28% of staff time.

Eighty percent of the adult reading population cannot find consumer-health information written at their levels. This problem costs the U.S. a whopping \$62 billion a year in extra health costs.

Business and government Web sites regularly present information written at the 12<sup>th</sup>-grade level and up, reaching less than 15% of their intended audience.

If you are not using plain language, you are wasting money and paying costs like these:

- Support calls resulting from documents too difficult to read.
- Memos and business letters that require endless clarification.
- Legal notices and procedures that no one can read.

- Newsletters that reach only a fraction of the targeted audience.
- Web sites that fail to inform and motivate readers to act.

## The Benefits of Plain Language

A plain-language program can be one of the best investments your organization can make. As part of best practices in business and government, plain language produces these benefits:

1. Reduced cost of communications at all levels.
2. Increased customer satisfaction.
3. Increased readership and understanding of documents.
3. Completion of forms on the first try. More correct information gets back to your office.
4. Reduced liability.
5. Reduced costs of customer support.

When **Southern California Edison** simplified its mail insert for soliciting for the Winter Assistance Fund for the elderly, contributions went up Over 40 percent.

Ground-operation manuals revised in plain language saved **Federal Express** an estimated \$400,000 in the first year

A new plain-language software manual issued by **General Electric** reduced supports calls from each customer by 125 a month and the company between \$22,00 and \$375,00 for each customer.

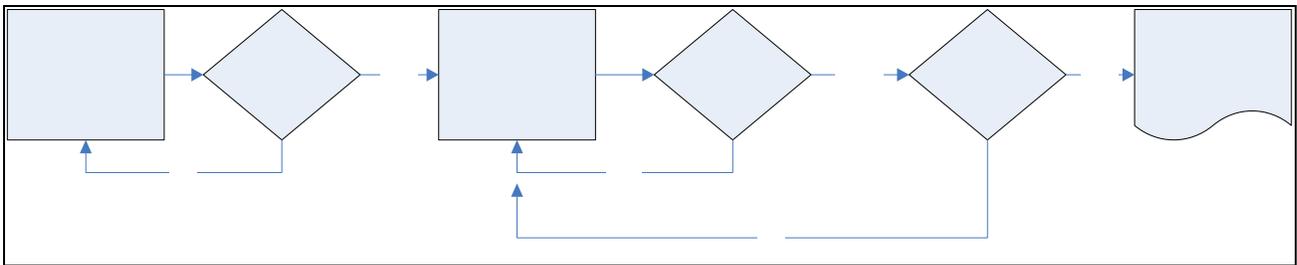
Plain-language revisions of online help for customer-service employees at **BANCO** financial services in Canada produced these results:

- Improved employee productivity by 36.9%.
- Decreased employee errors by 77.1%.
- Decreased frequency of calls to Help Desk by 17.4%.
- Decreased duration of calls to Help Desk by 10.5%.
- Estimated savings over a 3-year period: \$15.2 million CDN.

## What Does a Plain-Language Program Look Like?

To produce plain-language documents, you need a plain-language program with these three key elements:

1. **Strong commitment** on the part of top management. Without this management investment and buyoff, the benefits of a plain-language program will be short-lived.
2. **Development of standard quality processes** for the sustained creation of plain-language documents.
3. **Training of writing staff** in the **use and enforcement of the quality processes**.



*Fig 2. A typical quality process for creating documents.*

## Using a Readability Formula

Readability formulas have long been used by publishers, schools, and other organizations to determine the reading ability required to read a text. The most popular formulas have an 80 percent reliability. They give a rough estimate of reading level within one or two grades of the actual text difficulty.

Fortunately, popular word-processing programs such as Microsoft Word and Corel WordPerfect feature readability formulas.

In WordPerfect, go to the **Tools/Grammatik** page and select **Options**. Under "Analysis," check "Readability."

To test the readability of a document

1. Using the Text tool, place the Insertion point in the sentence you want to analyze.
2. Click Text, Writing Tools, Grammatik.
3. Click the Options button.
4. Click Analysis.
5. Click Readability.

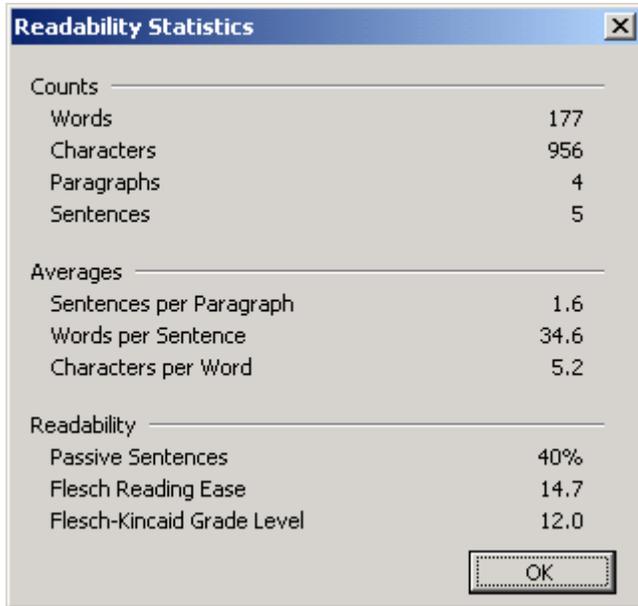


Fig. 3. The Readability Statistics box of Microsoft Word 2000 and 2003.

In Microsoft Word 2000 and later versions, you can turn on this feature by going to the Spelling and Grammar Page of the Tools/Options Menu and checking "Show Readability Statistics." Microsoft Word then will display the box shown on the left after it finishes checking spelling and grammar (with the F7 key).

This box also gives other statistics relating to text difficulty such as the percentage of passive sentences and the average length of the sentences.

At the bottom, the box gives the results of two separate formulas. The first, the **Flesch Reading Ease** formula gives a score based on a scale from zero to 100, with zero being the most difficult and 100 being the easiest.

The **Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level** gives the reading grade level required to read the text. Unfortunately, this feature of Microsoft Word is defective and only goes up to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. To get a more reliable grade level, use the Flesch Reading Ease Formula, and apply the grade level from the following chart.

<b>Flesch Reading Ease Score</b>	<b>Style Description</b>	<b>Estimated Reading Grade</b>
0 to 30	Very Difficult	College
30 to 40	Difficult	High school or some college
50 to 50	Fairly Difficult	Some high school
60 to 70	Standard	8 <sup>th</sup> and 9 <sup>th</sup> grade
70 to 80	Fairly Easy	6 <sup>th</sup> grade
80 to 90	Easy	5 <sup>th</sup> grade
90 to 100	Very Easy	4 <sup>th</sup> grade

Table 1. Flesch Reading-Ease Scores

For example, the reading grade level of the document in the Readability Statistics box above should be at the very difficult (college) level, not the 12<sup>th</sup> grade as stated.

## **For Further Information**

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Notes from May 6, 2004 presentation of Tim Bissell, Consumer Affairs Department, Los Angeles County.