

*Clear Language
and
Design
for
Union
Communications*



Literacy and
clear language
go together.



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What makes *Clear Language and Design* so important?

- Are you overwhelmed by the amount of written material you receive?
- Do you put off reading documents that are too wordy, complex, or technical?
- Do you sometimes avoid reading documents altogether, hoping someone will fill you in on what the message is?
- Is your “get around to it” reading pile taking over your world?

We’ve all been there. Contracts, constitutions, policy papers, even brochures, flyers, and newsletters are often written in language that is hard to understand.

Unions need to communicate through written communications, sending our message out through letters, brochures, manuals, the internet, and more. As UFCW Canada activists, we want the written word to work with us in organizing workers for their rights.

Please read on for some simple pointers that can help us all to do a more effective job in communicating with members, the unorganized, and each other.



Just what is *Clear Language and Design*?

Clear Language and Design is a way of **organizing information** so that it makes sense to your readers. It uses straightforward, familiar words.

Clear Language and Design is an **approach to communication** that begins with the needs of the readers.

Clear Language and Design matches the needs of the readers with your needs as the writer, resulting in **effective** and **efficient** communication:

- effective because readers can **understand the message**; and
- efficient because readers can read and understand the message **the first time**.

Think about it ...

How might the person reading your message be different from you?

What makes you think your message got through to your audience?

*Research shows that **Clear Language and Design** has benefits for readers at all levels. It saves time and avoids confusion and errors.*

Clear Language and Design uses language your audience will understand and gives readers the information they **need**.

Clear Language and Design combines **what** you write with **how** you write.

Clear Language and Design uses the way material appears on the page to **help** the reader understand the content.

What makes *Clear Language and Design* so important?

Unclear writing wastes time and causes confusion.

A large number of union members speak English as a second language, and may not read English well. Some members have limited or weak reading skills for other reasons. Older workers often complain about small print and unnecessarily long words.

Union activists receive so much material, they wonder when they will ever find time to read it.

Yet, the labour movement continues to rely heavily on written material to get its message out.

But does it?

Clear Language and Design helps union activists and staff find ways to overcome this communications barrier. Creating reader-friendly publications means thinking about your readers and their needs first.

Everyone will benefit from information that is quick and easy to read and understand. Your message will be received, and understood.

Think about it ...

Fashionable buzzwords and expressions, like "McJobs", "level playing field", "leading edge technology", or "downsizing", have become part of our writing.

Buzzwords can confuse and frustrate your readers. Remember, not everyone understands some new terms, and your message is lost!

Making it clear

Words to use and words to avoid

Avoid jargon. Technical, legal, or other job-related words or phrases may make material hard to understand.

BEFORE	AFTER
With respect to the processing, disposition and/or settlement of any grievance initiated under the Grievance Procedure Section of this Agreement, and with respect to any court action claiming or alleging a violation of this Agreement or any local or other agreement amendatory or supplemental hereto, the Union shall be the sole and exclusive representative of the employee or employees covered by this Agreement.	The union is your bargaining and grievance representative in all areas covered by the contract.

Avoid abbreviations. Abbreviations, acronyms (initials), or short forms can be confusing. If you must use short forms, write them out in full and explain them the first time you use them.

BEFORE	AFTER
The CLC is holding an EI workshop on Tues., Sept. 19	The Canadian Labour Congress is holding a workshop about Employment Insurance on Tuesday, September 19.

INSTEAD OF	TRY USING
<i>i.e.</i>	that is
<i>e.g.</i>	for example

Myths about *Clear Language and Design*

Some people resist using *Clear Language and Design* because they believe

- **“It’s simple-minded writing. It uses vocabulary that talks down to people.”** Not so! *Clear Language and Design* is easy for your readers to understand. It helps people find the information they need.
- **“We need legal or technical terms. Some things just can’t be written differently.”** Not so! Legally-binding documents can be written using *Clear Language and Design*, with the plus that people can understand them. If a technical term is needed, explain the term when you first use it.
- **“It takes too long and it costs too much.”** Not so! *Clear Language and Design* saves time and money. Your readers will have fewer questions and complaints. Why spend money on materials people can’t understand? *Clear Language and Design* is effective.

Clear Language and Design does not oversimplify, or leave out essential information. But it does not bore the reader. *Clear Language and Design* produces documents that are widely accessible, as direct as possible, and are created based on the readers’ experiences.

Clear Language and Design allows you to reach a larger audience with your message. And that’s important to unions – in organizing, bargaining, health and safety, public awareness, and all kinds of union communications.

The English language

*Let's face it, English is a crazy language.
There is no egg in the eggplant, no ham in the hamburger,
And neither pine nor apple in the pineapple.
English muffins were not invented in England, and
French fries were not invented in France.
We sometimes take English for granted,
But if we examine its paradoxes we find that:
Quicksand takes you down slowly, boxing rings are square,
And a guinea pig is neither from Guinea nor is it a pig.
If writers write, how come fingers don't fing?
If the plural of tooth is teeth,
Shouldn't the plural of phone booth be phone beeth?
If the teacher taught, why didn't the preacher praught?
Why do we call it a building when it's already been built?
If a vegetarian eats vegetables,
What on earth does a humanitarian eat?
Why do people recite at a play, yet play at a recital?
Park on driveways, and drive on parkways?
How can it be hot as hell one day, and cold as hell another?
You have to marvel at the unique lunacy of a language
Where a house can burn up as it burns down,
And in which you fill in a form by filling it out,
And a bell is heard only once it goes!
English was invented by people, not computers,
And it reflects the creativity of the human race
(Which of course isn't a race at all).
That is why when the stars are out they are visible,
But when the lights are out they are invisible.
And why it is that when I wind up my watch, it starts,
But when I wind up this poem, it ends.*

(Author unknown)

Communication = Making something happen

Clear Language and Design is an approach to communications that begins with the needs of your readers.

When we speak directly to someone, we get immediate feedback. We can adjust our message if the audience does not clearly understand.

Written communication poses a greater challenge. We have to think in advance of our readers and our needs. We have to anticipate feedback so that our message is as clear as possible.

The following pages contain some guidelines you can use before starting any document.

There is no set of rules – *Clear Language and Design* is a process of thinking, planning, writing designing, testing, and revising.

The first step – thinking – starts with considering your reader, your message, and the purpose of your document.

So, what's so hard about making English easy?

- *The bandage was wound around the wound.*
- *The farm was used to produce produce.*
- *The dump was so full that it had to refuse more refuse.*
- *The soldier decided to desert his dessert in the desert.*
- *Since there is no time like the present, it was time to present the present.*
- *I did not object to the object.*
- *The wind was too strong to wind the sail.*
- *They were too close to the door to close it.*
- *A frightened dove dove into the bush.*
- *He led the dog on a lead made of lead.*
- *A tear in the painting made me shed a tear.*

Know your readers

Who will be reading the material you are preparing? What do your readers already know or understand about your subject?

Consider their

- union experience (new members, or long-time activists?)
- sector or workplace
- employment and work experience
- age
- gender
- education
- cultural and language background
- literacy skills
- special needs
- urban or rural perception

Know your message

Why are you preparing this document? Ask yourself the nature of your message to choose how to approach it. It might be:

- to report on a meeting
- to ask the readers to do something
- to inform the readers of a new policy
- to influence the readers' action
- to explain how to do something

Avoid ambiguity: consider these actual headlines ...

- *Include your children when baking cookies*
- *Red tape holds up bridge*
- *Teacher strikes idle kids*
- *Premier wins budget, more lies ahead*
- *Safety experts say school bus passengers should be belted*

Know your purpose ...

What do you want your readers to do?

- Take action?
- Learn something?
- Change their point of view?
- Keep the document for future reference?

... and keep it in mind

Communication is always about making something happen. Take some time to think about the specific action you want the reader to do after reading your material. The most effective communication has a primary focus. Knowing the purpose of the document will help you identify the focus and help you to determine:

- essential information to include
- the order in which to present the information
- words to use and words to avoid
- sentence length and structure
- tone (neutral, friendly, or assertive)
- style (question and answer, narrative, or point form)
- length of document
- format (pamphlet, flyer, letter, poster, or cartoon)
- design (type size, headings, illustrations, colour)

- *Juvenile court to try shooting defendant*
- *Two sisters reunited after 18 years in checkout counter*
- *Local high school dropouts cut in half*
- *Stolen painting found by tree*
- *Stud tires out*
- *Kids make nutritious snacks*

Making it clear

Sample contract language revision

BEFORE

ARTICLE 20 – SICK LEAVE

20.01 It is the Employer's policy that all Employees on the active payroll shall be entitled to continuation of regular pay in accordance with the provisions of this Article when absent due to illness, injury, disability, or illness of an immediate family member (immediate family member is defined as spouse (including common law spouse or gay/lesbian spouse residing with the Employee in a conjugal relationship outside of marriage), and dependent children, parents, or grandparents of the Employee resident with the Employee.

AFTER

ARTICLE 20 – SICK LEAVE

20.01 If you are on the active payroll you will continue to be paid your regular pay if you are absent due to:

- illness
- injury
- disability, or
- the illness of an immediate family member.

Immediate family member means your spouse (including common law, gay, or lesbian spouse), dependent children, parents, or grandparents who live with you.

Making it clear

Words to use and words to avoid

INSTEAD OF	TRY USING
<i>advise</i>	tell
<i>anticipate</i>	expect
<i>approximately</i>	about
<i>assist</i>	help
<i>commence</i>	start
<i>concur</i>	agree
<i>consequently</i>	so or as a result
<i>co-operate</i>	help
<i>demonstrate</i>	show
<i>implement</i>	start or begin or do
<i>indicate</i>	show
<i>in lieu of</i>	instead of
<i>notify</i>	tell or let know
<i>utilize</i>	use

Cut out unnecessary words

INSTEAD OF	TRY USING
<i>at the present time</i>	now
<i>has the capability</i>	can or is able
<i>with regard to</i>	about
<i>in the event that</i>	if
<i>until such time as</i>	until
<i>in view of the fact</i>	because or since
<i>it would appear that</i>	apparently
<i>notwithstanding the fact that</i>	although
<i>subsequent to</i>	after or since

One last example. Here is an adapted version of an actual local union mailing to its members ...

DIDN'T VOTE FOR THAT

The government of our province has recently announced their intent to again assault the Labour Relations Act through the introduction of Bill 123. These changes will have a huge negative impact immediately, and for the long term, on workers in this province – both unionized and non-unionized.

These changes, when passed, are of such a serious nature that our Locals have taken the unusual step of producing this mailing. We urge you to take a few minutes to review the following in detail. As you begin reading about these changes you will be surprised and angered. You will see a deliberate attack on women, families, and workers who need help, workers who want a union, and indeed workers who have a union. You will also see blatant legislation which permits, and even encourages, employers to become involved in workers' union rights in ways that have been illegal for decades.

We hope you will become motivated to use this mailing, by sharing it with other union workers, by bringing it to the attention of your families and friends, and by taking whatever proactive steps available to you to tell our government that workers matter in this province.

Six years ago, the then newly elected government of this province made drastic and negative changes to the Labour Relations Act. One change makes it more difficult for un-organized workers to join a union. Another law which allowed automatic certification based on 55% of members' support, which had been in place for over 40 years, was abolished. Another change automatically decertified farm workers who had been organized for over two years. Workers who were most in need of help were trampled on by a government that had then, and has to this day, no respect or concern for this province's workers or their families.

Now as we approach the end of the first year of a new century the assault again focuses on workers and their unions. The first changes took us back to the '50s. The newest changes take us back through the 1900s and attempt to hammer through weekly hours of work that have not been legal since the mid-1800s. Women in need of maternity and family leave were told that this province cannot compete if we allow recent improved federal laws respecting leave to prevail in this province. Since its initial introduction the government has backed away from this position and has recognized the new federal guidelines. Proof positive that pressure from the electorate can force change! If un-organized workers attempt to organize and fail, all other unions (not just the applicant union) will be barred from applying for certification for a full year. Plenty of time for the boss to weed out the now unprotected "troublemakers".

All of this is frustrating to say the least! Archaic, immoral, shameful, unnecessary, and wrong come to mind. Union workers, while they are protected by their collective agreement, all understand that negative factors in the un-organized sector always impact our employers in light of fierce competition. Perhaps this time everyone in this province will see these actions for what they really are – an intentional and direct attack on the dignity and respect owing to workers in the province who, for the premier's information, make this province prosper.

It has long been understood by everyone that everything workers gain through collective bargaining can be taken away with one stroke of the legislator's pen. I am unable to remember a time when this has been more apparent! If we do nothing, our children and grandchildren as well as present workers in this province will pay the price for our lack of action. The decision is yours.

... and here is a make-over using concepts of
Clear Language and Design for Union Communications.

*Did you vote for an **attack** on*

- **WOMEN?**
- **WORKERS?**
- **FAMILIES?**
- **RESPECT?**
- **DIGNITY?**

Did you vote for

EDUCATION CUTS?



Our children, our future

HEALTH CARE CUTS?



Can you afford to get sick?

60-HOUR WORKWEEK?



No time for your family

Did you vote for

- your employer having a say in your democratic and union rights?
- making it more difficult for people to join unions?
- stripping farm workers of their rights?

*Didn't vote for that? **Fight back!***

Mail the enclosed card to your MPP or MLA today.



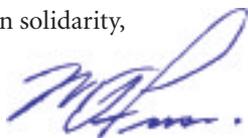
Clear Language and Design means reaching our members

It's always been important to ensure members receive the union's message. But are we always successful?

We need to be attentive to how our message is delivered. With the support of the National Literacy Secretariat, the UFCW Canada National Training Program is developing materials and courses to help union communicators, leaders, and activists find new ways of meeting members' needs in the communications they produce. As communications become easier to understand, they also become more useful to members.

This booklet is the first step in that process. We hope UFCW Canada local unions will find these efforts beneficial. By keeping in mind the simple elements of *Clear Language and Design*, we truly reach members, the unorganized, and each other.

In solidarity,



Michael J. Fraser
Director, UFCW Canada



*For more information regarding
Clear Language and Design for
Union Communications and
available courses, please contact
Susan Jones at the UFCW Canada
National Training Program.*



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