

Thriving in
Change and
Complexity

Rising to the challenge in
Continuing Education

CAUCE CONFERENCE 2026
HALIFAX | MAY 13-15

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Halifax, Nova Scotia · May 13 - 15



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Plain Language as a Strategy: Embedding Accessible Communication in Continuing Education for Stronger Industry Alignment

Dr. Vesna Maljković
Simon Fraser University





With respect and gratitude 🌿

SFU

SFU respectfully acknowledges the Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), sə́ilwə́taʔ (Tseil-Waututh), xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), kwikwə́łəm (Kwkwetlem), Kwantlen, qí́cəy' (Katzie), Qayqayt, Semiahmoo and Tsawwassen peoples on whose traditional, unceded territories our three campuses reside.



Dalhousie University operates in the unceded territories of the Mi'kmaw, Wolastoqey, and Peskotomuhkati Peoples.



SFU Continuing Studies (CS)

- Vancouver, Canada
- SFU since 1965
 - CS since 1971
- CS is bridging:
 - Academia ↔ Industry
 - Professional ↔ Personal Growth
 - Local ↔ Global

Clear communication—plain language

- as a strategic workforce tool,
- to support safer, more inclusive workplaces,
- to strengthen industry alignment,
- to improve learner outcomes.



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Modern communication

- Why can't you write to the "general" public?
- What is different about the modern reading audience?
- How is plain language a solution?
- Why not simply let AI do it for us?

Why plain language matters



Plain language is not about simplifying ideas—it is about making complexity usable.



Plain language is positioned as a systematic communication strategy that improves adaptability, inclusion, and real-world application.

Plain language movement

Challenges in understanding complex information have increased the need for clear communication.



CAUCE
Canadian Association for
University Continuing Education

Plain language: Beyond a movement

The International Plain Language Federation:

- Center for Plain Language
- Clarity
- Plain Language Association International (PLAIN)

International Organization for Standardization (ISO):

- ISO 24495-1:2023 Plain language — Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines
- ISO 24495-2:2025 Plain language — Part 2: Legal communication
- ISO 24495-3:2026 Plain language — Part 3: Science writing
- TBA: Certification, Document design, Evaluation

Canadian plain language standard: CAN/ASC-3.1:2025

Our approach and guiding principles

How can we transform complex information into communication that enhances comprehension, trust, engagement, employability?

“Writing in plain language requires you to adopt a particular approach, or attitude, to writing.”

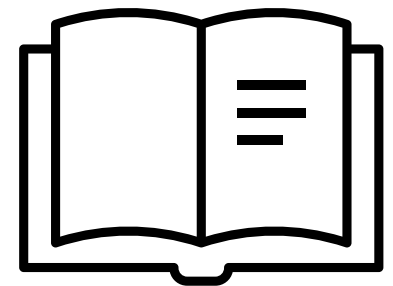
<https://www.iplfederation.org/plain-language/>

- Examples from SFU Plain Language Certificate
- Guided by recognized standards:
 - International Plain Language Federation (ISO 24495-1/2)
 - Canada’s CAN/ASC-3.1:2025 Plain Language Standard
- Focus on practical methods and tools through guiding principles

ISO 24495-1: Plain Language – Governing Principles and Guidelines

Key principles:

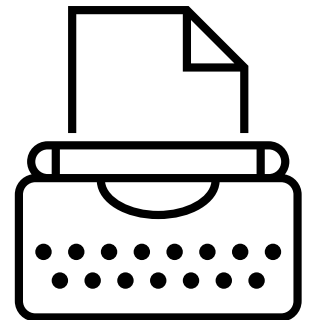
- Put readers' needs first (purpose, context, characteristics).
- Select content ethically: accurate, complete, and not misleading.
- Remove unnecessary or distracting information.
- Structure content so readers can scan, navigate, and locate key points.
- Use familiar words, clear sentences, concise paragraphs, and respectful tone.
- Evaluate with real users and revise continuously.
- Includes a practical checklist for implementation.



ISO 24495-2: Plain Language Legal Communication

Key additional principles:

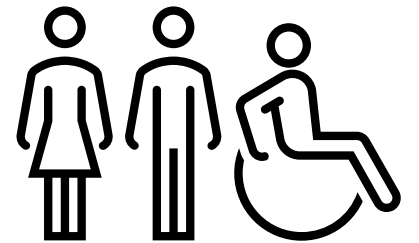
- Collaborative writing from the start (multiple participants).
- Layering information for different audiences (novice → expert).
- Meaningful headings and introductions that explain scope and purpose.
- Explicit evaluation of risks if critical information is missed.
- Careful reuse of templates to avoid inherited complexity.



CAN/ASC-3.1:2025 – Canadian Plain Language Standard

Key localized principles:

- Aligns fully with ISO 24495-1.
- Grounds plain language in Canadian accessibility, inclusion, and governance contexts.
- Developed by a technical committee according to the “nothing without us” development process.
- Positions plain language as an equity and access obligation, not just a best practice.



How do I know that a document is in plain language?

A document is in plain language only if it achieves the four principles defined in all three standards:

1. Relevant – Readers get what they need
2. Findable – Readers can easily find what they need
3. Understandable – Readers can easily understand what they find
4. Usable – Readers can easily use the information



How do I achieve these goals?

- Know your audience.
- Clarify the purpose of your document.
- Structure information for the intended audience.
- Write to reach your audience.
- Use design to guide your readers.
- Review and test whether readers can easily use the information.

Understanding your audience

Writing reader-centered text means being aware not only of what one wants to say but of how your readers will experience it.

Reader-centered common questions:

- Will they understand my intent?
- Will they feel respected?
- Will they be able to act on what I've written?
- What do they want from my document?
- How do they want to get their information?
- In what context are they receiving my communication?
- Who are they?

The limits of demographics

Consider these two potential readers:

- White males, born in the late 1940s (in the same country).
- Married twice and both have children.
- Self-employed.
- Wealthy and fond of expensive sports cars and fine wine.
- Spend much of their time in the same city.

The limits of demographics

Will we reach them in the same way?



Demographics ≠ mindset, expectations, or communication preferences.

Writing purpose

What do I want my readers to do with this document? (*writer's purpose*)

Why would they want to read it? (*reader's purpose*)

How can I align the two so the document is useful and relevant?

Common writing purposes:

- **Informing and guiding decisions** (e.g. program proposals, reports, briefing materials): the key message and implications should be clear and easy to act on.
- **Presenting recommendations with justification** (e.g. curriculum revisions, committee submissions, academic reviews): recommendations should be clearly stated and supported by evidence and rationale.
- **Providing instructions and guidance** (e.g. course materials, policies, learner resources): steps, expectations, scope, and exceptions should be clear and usable.

Language awareness




- **The audience** is anyone who reads the document, often to understand and possibly act on the information.
- **Readers** are those who are primarily looking for information.
- **Users** are people who actively use the document to complete a task or take action.
- **Profiles** are based on quantitative data—such as age, role, or other measurable characteristics.
- **Personas** are semi-fictional but research-based representations that help us understand motivations, behaviours, and the “why” behind how people engage with information.

Empathy for the audience

“As UX professionals, it is our job to advocate on behalf of our users. To do it, we must understand them. Understanding our users means building empathy for human beings who experience the product or service we create.”

~ Sara Gibson

Kate Dowler’s three stages of empathy:

- Mentalizing – understanding what someone else might be thinking or experiencing 
- Affect matching – imagining that experience as if it were our own 
- Empathic motivation – the desire to act on that understanding, to make things easier or better for the other person 

Plain language attitude

- Writing for a specific audience is applying a practical plain language tool.
- Empathizing with that audience reflects a shift toward a plain language attitude.



Information is a human right

Rooted in human rights history and mid-20th-century debates on free thought and expression.

René Maheu (1947): Information is essential for human development and dignity.

Access to information enables:

- Informed decision-making.
- Civic participation.
- Self-advocacy.



Our commitment to inclusive learning

We are committed to:

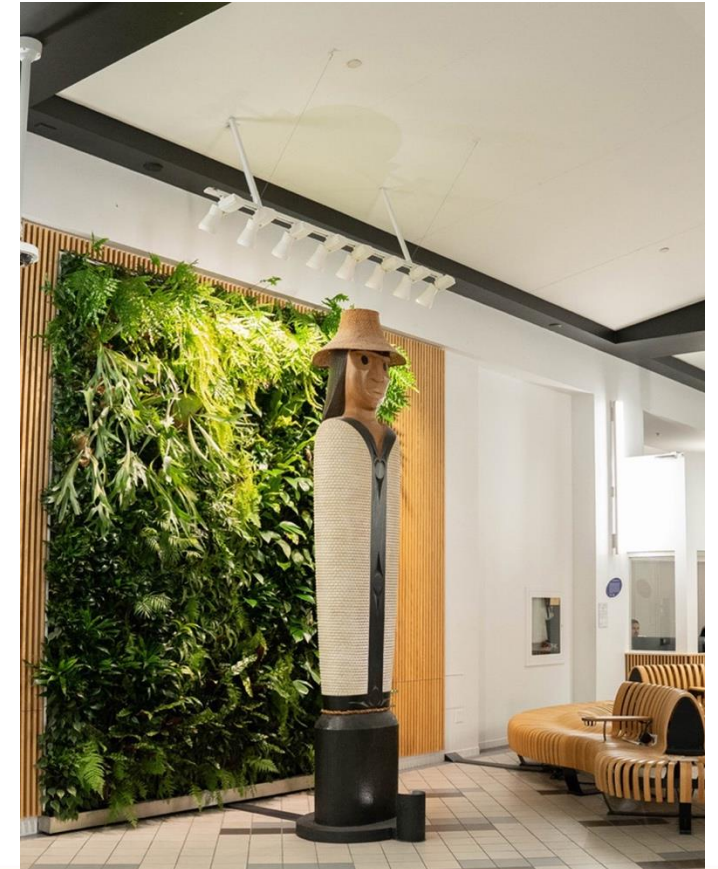
- Communicating clearly, inclusively, and respectfully across cultural, linguistic, and accessibility boundaries.
- Applying an Equity, Decolonizing, Indigeneity, and Intersectionality (EDI+) lens across all our teaching, design, and communication practices.
- Empowering and inspiring our learners to become agents of change in their lives and communities.

Beyond the words: Shifting the paradigm

Honouring diverse ways of knowing, including Indigenous perspectives.

Two-Eyed Seeing (Etuaptmumk), a concept from Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall, teaches us to:

- See with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges, and
- See with the strengths of Western knowledges —
- and use both together for the benefit of all.



Language carries memory



We choose words intentionally and respectfully.



We replaced the term stakeholder with more precise and respectful alternatives like partners, collaborators, or affected communities. The term stakeholder has colonial roots — tied to land claims made before treaties.



Ethical communication means being conscious of the histories our words carry.

Practical tools:

How do I communicate in plain language?

Structure information for the intended audience

- Chunk your content.
- Lead with important information.
- Order information from most to least important.
- Consider alternatives to the narrative paragraph.

Please bring to the exam a pencil, an eraser, a calculator, and a piece of ID.



Please bring to the exam:

- a pencil
- an eraser
- a calculator
- a piece of ID



Write to reach your audience

- Keep subject, verb, and object together

The grant applicant, although providing a clearly written and well supported grant application in terms of the technical requirements, **failed to mention** a single word about the most important requirement – **that the proposed project would help carry out the agency's underlying mission.**



The grant application was clearly written and well-supported. **But the applicant failed to even mention that the proposed project would help carry out the agency's underlying mission.** This was the most important requirement.

Write to reach your audience

- Use strong verbs instead of nouns held up by weak verbs (nominalizations)

Nominalization: The regulators initiated *a suspension of* her licence.



Strong verb: The regulators suspended her licence.

Nominalization: The successful applicant will be responsible for the *management* and *coordination* of data collection.



Strong verb: The successful applicant will manage and coordinate data collection.

Write to reach your audience

- Use the same term to say the same thing

Seniors should engage in aerobic and weight-bearing **physical activity** several times a week. **Exercise** can help the **elderly** prevent bone loss.



Older adults should engage in aerobic and weight-bearing physical activity several times a week. Physical activity can help older adults prevent bone loss.

Use design to guide your audience

- Be generous with white space.
- Use design elements to create a clear visual hierarchy.
- Adjust spacing between lines and paragraphs to visually separate logical chunks of information.
- Use alignment to guide the reader's eye through the document.



A young boy with short brown hair and orange-rimmed glasses is lying in bed, smiling broadly with his eyes closed. He is wearing a blue and white patterned shirt and is holding an open book. A white teddy bear is sitting next to him on the left. The bed has white sheets and a blue pillow. The background is a soft, out-of-focus white and yellow.

Review and test... and test and test and test

- Review brings others' expertise to your document (**readers get what they need**).
- Testing ensures the document works (**is usable**).

Key takeaways

Plain language is a tool for ethical practice

- Supports equity, transparency, and respect.
- Empowers readers to understand, choose, and act confidently.

Plain language is inclusive communication

- Helps us consider who might be excluded.
- Ensures everyone feels respected and seen.

Plain language goes beyond simplicity

- Promotes fairness, transparency, and inclusion.
- Encourages us to examine words, audiences, and histories.
- Builds trust, understanding, and genuine inclusion.

Thank you!

Let's stay connected:

vesna@sfu.ca

www.linkedin.com/in/vesnamaljkovic/



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