

The power of plain and simple

Whenever you're explaining information—whether it's cooking instructions or cancer treatments—clarity is everything. Don't lose your audience in a labyrinth of complicated jargon and convoluted wording. Instead, your text should resemble a Saskatchewan highway: clear, straightforward and a cinch to navigate.

So how do you go about building that highway? Plain language writing boils down to three key concepts:

Simplify

- *Use familiar words.* Think about how people normally talk. You don't purchase a sufficient amount of food for a weekend at the cottage. Instead, you buy enough. For a list of three-dollar words and their everyday equivalents, see page two.
- *Avoid jargon.* Unless you're speaking to specialists, keep the lingo, acronyms and industry-speak to a minimum. Sure, an audience of marine biologists will understand the term "cetaceans." For the rest of us, though, say "whales and dolphins."
- *Shorten sentences and paragraphs.* Stick to one idea per sentence. Paragraph length can vary, but break up any that stretch on too long. By inserting a hard return, you're giving your readers a little mental breathing room.
- *Clear away clutter.* Can you say the same thing in fewer words? You'll find a perfect example in the "keep it simple" sidebar on the next page.

Clarify

- *Make it easy to visualize.* If you've got a complex idea to convey, use a concrete example or an analogy to help your readers wrap their heads around it.
- *Use infographics and images.* In many cases, a well-designed graphics can get your point across far more quickly and clearly than words alone.
- *Explain unusual words.* Sometimes you just can't avoid technical jargon or uncommon terms. If that's the case, promptly define them using plain language.

Organize

- *Break up dense text.* Use headings, sub-headings and bulleted lists to help readers navigate your copy.
- *Make it logical.* Step back and look at your overall structure. Is it organized logically? Does it flow naturally from section to section? Make sure you haven't left out any key pieces of information or included things that aren't relevant to your readers.

Need a little help? At Cadmium Red, we're experts in clear messaging. Contact us at info@cadmiumred.ca.

Keep it simple

Instead of...

“For the purpose of demonstrating how to utilize Company ABC’s Bread-O-Matic, the instructions that follow will provide guidance to customers”

Try...

“How to use your Bread-O-Matic”

Use familiar words

Instead of...

accomplish
assist
at a later date
attempt
commence
component
contains
currently
demonstrate
ensure
exhibit
for the purpose of
identify
in addition
in order to
in the event of
is responsible for
objective
prior to
provide
provided that
purchase
regarding
represents
require
submit
sufficient
utilize
with regard to

Try...

do
help
later
try
start
part
has
now
show
make sure
show
to, for
find
also, too
to
if
handles
aim, goal
before
give
if
buy
about, of
is
must, need
give, send
enough
use
about