

## Clear Writing: A Positive Response to Low Literacy

Over the last several weeks, we have been highlighting the importance of having good literacy skills in order to function effectively in our complex society. Being considered literate should go beyond being able to read this newspaper, although that, in itself, is a skill that many in our community struggle with. Being literate can also encompass being able to manage one's finances or health needs, and we've focused on each of these issues in this series.

We may have painted a fairly bleak picture, pointing out all the barriers that block people with low literacy skills from leading healthy and successful lives. In this last article, then, we'll focus on the positive and on what you can do to help, whether you are developing forms for government services or writing the weekly church bulletin. Let us introduce you to a concept called "Clear Writing."

What is clear writing? According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs, a strong proponent of clear writing, it is "a way of presenting information so that it is easy for everyone to read and understand." Clear writing includes both what is said as well as how it's said – what words are used and what the finished product looks like.

There are some simple rules to follow that will improve the clarity of your message: Here are just a few.

1. First, consider the language you use.
  - Write directly to your reader, using "you:" For example, say "You must send this form back by March 31" instead of "Forms must be returned by March 31." Using this style of sentence structure keeps the subject (You) doing the action (sending the form back), another central rule of clear writing.
  - Stick to a positive tone. Tell your readers what you want them **to** do, not what you want them **not** to do!
  - Use common language. Many workplaces have technical words – jargon – that are not understood by people outside their walls. Also avoid difficult words or TLAs, unless you explain them (Three Letter Acronyms).
    - Next, think about how you organize the information. Use headings, numbered lists, bullets, and boxes to highlight important details.
2. Now, pay attention to the type size and style you choose for your finished product.
  - This newspaper follows the clear writing recommendation and uses a serif type, with little "feet" on the ends of letters. This helps the reader's eyes to flow along the lines of text more easily.
  - Avoid using ALL CAPITAL LETTERS – doing so removes the shape (the up-and-down) of language – a clue that is a significant help to readers in deciphering the printed word.
  - Use **bold** instead of *italics* – **bold** is easier to read.
  - Avoid using full-justification text. Although it may look neater, it is more difficult to read. Sometimes, it creates strange spacings between letters in a word or words in a sentence. Rough right margins help the reader keep his or her place.

3. Finally, use white space – both around and within your article - to make your message easier to read.

For more information about Clear Writing or help rewriting some of your company's documents to be more accessible to everyone, you can contact the local literacy network, Literacy Ontario Central South at [www.locs.on.ca](http://www.locs.on.ca).