

# Portable Plain Language: A Go-To Resource for Individuals and Organizations

People and organizations are looking to create Plain Language programs. Currently, there are insufficient resources or standards available to help them create, implement, and maintain this type of program in their respective work environments.

The Center for Plain Language (Center) is the leading voice on plain language in the United States—providing tools, resources, information, checklists, and guidance to federal, state, and local governments, private business, and the public.

The Center wanted to develop a resource to help people and organizations start a Plain Language Program at their respective workplaces. The Center decided the best way to do this was to publish an easily digestible, portable e-book.



## USE CASES

Content Architecture, Technical Editing, Publishing, Plain Language, Project Management



## TECHNOLOGIES

Microsoft Word, Amazon.com, Amazon Kindle Direct

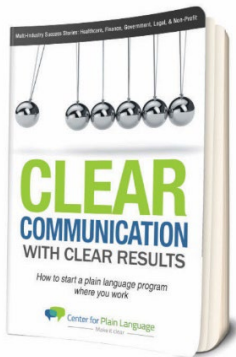


# Offering a free incentive for new members

The primary objective of the [Clear Communication with Clear Results: How to start a plain language program where you work](#) e-book was to offer it free to new members. The 62-page resource would be chock full of stories and tips from five organizations that tackled the big effort: **To bring simplicity to industries as diverse as healthcare, tax administration, government, professional services, and nonprofit work.** The e-book would be the go-to resource for individuals and organizations interested in starting a program. And it would further promote the Center as the foremost authority on clear communication for government and business.

## Nothing short of a team effort

Center members volunteered to support the e-book effort, which included content development, content design, and production. To establish a solid foundation for the e-book project, I created a Project Proposal outlining the objectives, plan and approach, management, and special-interest topics that were relevant to book publishing. As Executive Editor, Contentful Owner/Director Donna Creason led the team through the entire process — from content development, reviewing, and editing to cover design and page layout to the final stretch of production and publishing.



“Beyond her considerable skills and experience, Donna stood out to the other volunteers on the project as a great leader, someone quick with praise and thanks, giving tangible and constructive feedback, always positive in her outlook and always keeping the team energized and excited to meet our deadlines. Donna’s expertise in publishing made this project a pleasure for all involved and led to a publication the Center is truly proud to distribute.”

— Brian Berkenstock, Project Coordinator and Center Board Member



# Snapshots from the e-book

INTRODUCTION

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Somewhere along the way, the world view on clear communication shifted. For government, nonprofits, and the private sector, clear communication was no longer simply a "nice to have," something done as if for charity. The work of clear communication is now expected. It's the norm. Organizations that don't deliver can fall by the wayside, lose funding, and see support disappear.

How did we get to this tipping point?


**Some demand came from the people.** The digital explosion, in particular, placed a high value on good customer service. You simply can't deliver that without clarity: clarity of word, design, and experience.

**Some demand came from the law,** like the [Plain Writing Act of 2010](#). (We're proud to say the Center had a hand in that.) Accessibility laws also played a part. The disability community grew tired of being ignored. They organized, rose up, and demanded their rights.

And some demand came from you, professionals from...

- Accessibility
- Branding
- Communications
- Design
- Information technology
- Marketing
- Search engine optimization
- User experience

You have long known that clear communication—in all its fullness of organization and structure, logic and sentences, and word choice—is right, sensible, and the way things should be. Your diligence in pushing the need to always be clear helped drive the change.



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TOP 10 LIST OF GUIDING PRINCIPLES

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The following list includes recurring insights culled from the five case studies presented in this e-book as well as some unique, and enlightening, tidbits from individual contributors.

**10 Get support from top execs.** Let's be honest. This is the best way to get things done. Commitment from the top makes every step in the process of building a clear communication program easier. When faced with opposition to change, you can say, "Well, if you want to go against the wishes of the CEO..." (Then watch the verbal backtracking and acrobatics that ensue to get out of that one!)


**9 Become the expert.** Don't wait for someone higher up on the org chart to start the process. *You* become the expert. Then, find like-minded crusaders and band together. Employees look to experts to make key decisions. Most people are not opposed to hearing, "This is the new way." In fact, knowing the "rules" can simplify their lives. It gives them an authority to reference when faced with questions or opposition.

**8 Convert coworkers.** Whether you start with top support or build from the grassroots up, you'll need to educate colleagues so they'll join you. Appeal to their common sense ("Clear communication is good for everyone.") and their desire for success. ("Being at the forefront of this movement will make you look gooooooood.") You may have to build relationships one at a time. Will you convince everyone? No, but you'll eventually tip the balance in favor of clear communication.

**7 Keep up the momentum.** Always recognize and reward people who join the team, support the new or growing program and who produce good work. A simple e-mail (with a cc to a manager) can mean so much.

**6 Train. Train. Train.** It's not fair to ask people to change without giving them the tools they need. So offer in-person or virtual workshops. Create self-guided digital courses. Publish a newsletter or share e-mails with tips and tricks. (Outreach serves a dual purpose; you're also keeping people engaged for the long haul.)

**5 Be patient.** It may take time. Maybe more than you expected. (As in, your "worst-case-scenario" amount of time!) It's easy to give up. Don't. Instead, take a breather. Ask for help. Share the load.



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RESOURCES

## Plain Language and Clear Communication Resources

### WEBSITES

Center for Plain Language  
[www.centerforplainlanguage.org](http://www.centerforplainlanguage.org)

Plain Language Act | Office of the Director of National Intelligence  
<http://www.dni.gov/index.php/resources/plain-language-act>

The Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN)  
[www.plainlanguage.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov)

Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN)  
[www.plainlanguageinternational.org](http://www.plainlanguageinternational.org)

Plain Language | National Institutes of Health (NIH)  
<http://www.nih.gov/institutes-nih/nih-office-director/office-communication-public-liaison/clear-communication/plain-language>

Plain Language | Office of Personnel Management (OPM)  
<https://www.opm.gov/information-management/plain-language>

Plain Language | Center for Disease Control and Prevention – Health Literacy  
<http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/developmaterials/plainlanguage.html>

Plain Language | U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
<http://health.gov/communication/literacy/plainlanguage/PlainLanguage.htm>

Plain Writing | Social Security Administration  
<https://www.ssa.gov/agency/plain-language>

For more options, do a Google search on the words "plain language" and "clear communication." In the meantime, these should keep you busy.

### BOOKS

*Effing the Fog of Legalese: Essays on Plain Language* (Joe Kimble)  
Combines the strong evidence and myth-busting arguments for plain legal language with much practical advice and many useful examples. And no other book is more likely to open lawyers' eyes to the emptiness of legalese.



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Let's connect

