

Creating Welcoming + Effective Written Communication Part 1: Introduction to plain language



Sarah Glazer, Sr. Program Manager
Clear Language Lab at Literacy Works
May 28, 2025

Welcome + Business

- Participate however you feel most comfortable
- Ask questions as they come up
- We will not take a break - do what you need to do to take care of yourself
- Slides + Resources are in the Training Overview + Resources Doc

Training Resources Google Doc



bit.ly/May28workforcwebinar
(this link is case sensitive)

Sarah Glazer, MA (she + her)

Senior Program
Manager
for the Clear Language
Lab at Literacy Works



Help create clear and usable
communication through training and
materials review



Taught Language Arts + Adult ESL



Something bringing me joy today...

Introduce Yourself

Share in the chat:

1. Your name + pronouns
2. Your role
3. Something bringing you joy today



Literacy Works

a Chicago-based non-profit

We believe access to information is critical for a fair and equitable society

Community Literacy

Member-based program that works to provide training, mentorship, and advocacy alongside the adult literacy sector

Clear Language Lab

We work with a variety of sectors to make everyday communication in systems be more useful, understandable, and equitable

We work to...

Make plain
language the norm
in everyday
communications

Center those that
have been
traditionally
harmed by systems

Co-design
whenever possible

Think broadly
about accessibility

Use
communications to
build connections

Make it easier for
folks to participate
in everyday life

Today we will...



Define plain language



Explore basic strategies for writing content your audience can understand, navigate, and use.



Identify how the Curse of Knowledge impacts communication



Compare and contrast examples of workforce communication

Before we get started...

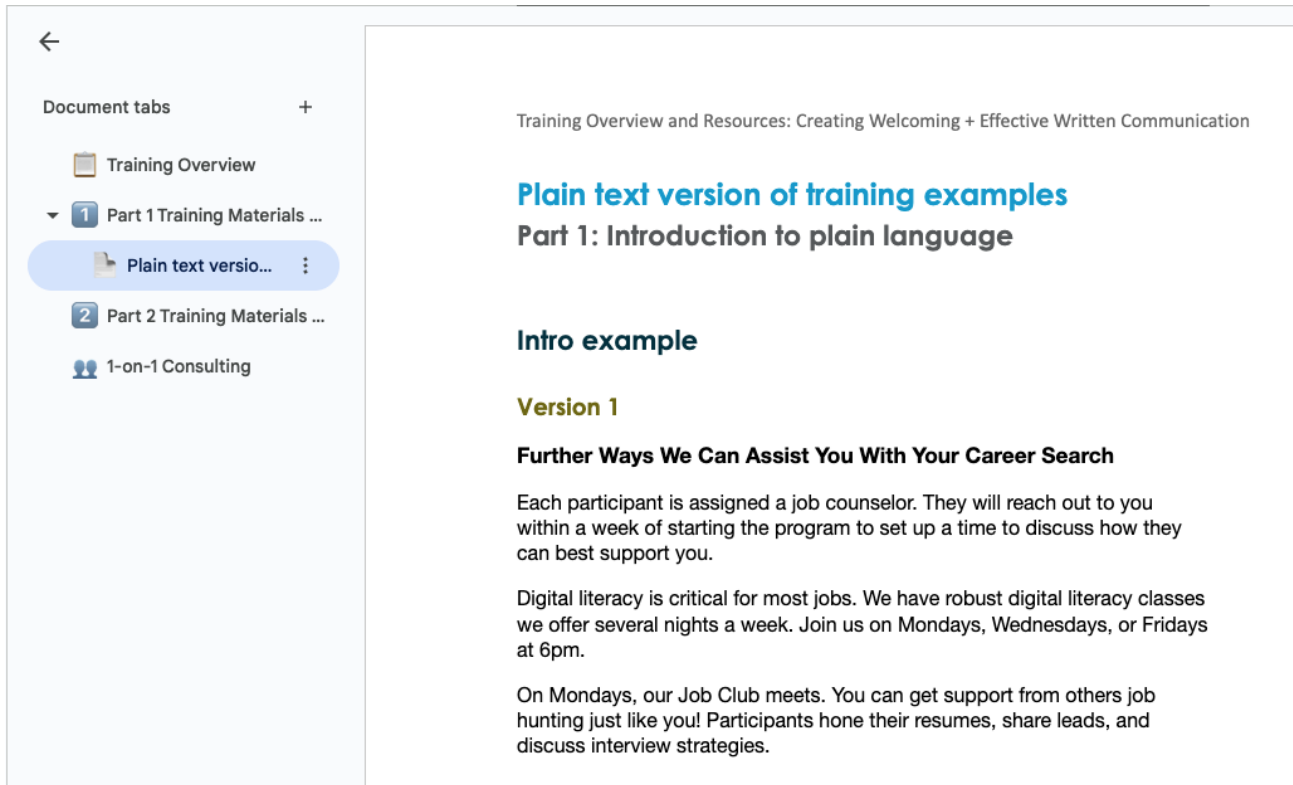
What I'm NOT going to do

- Tell you how to do your job
- Pretend I know all about your work
- Give you a set of hard rules to follow

What I am going to do

- Explore with you what it means to write in a way that centers your audience
- Share a variety of strategies and tools to think about
- Offer a different perspective

Plain Text Examples



The screenshot shows a Google Doc interface. On the left, a sidebar titled 'Document tabs' contains a list of documents: 'Training Overview', 'Part 1 Training Materials ...' (expanded), 'Plain text versio...' (selected), 'Part 2 Training Materials ...', and '1-on-1 Consulting'. The main content area displays the title 'Training Overview and Resources: Creating Welcoming + Effective Written Communication'. Below this, the heading 'Plain text version of training examples' is followed by 'Part 1: Introduction to plain language'. The section 'Intro example' includes 'Version 1' and a subheading 'Further Ways We Can Assist You With Your Career Search'. The text describes a job counselor's role and digital literacy classes.

Training Overview and Resources: Creating Welcoming + Effective Written Communication

Plain text version of training examples

Part 1: Introduction to plain language

Intro example

Version 1

Further Ways We Can Assist You With Your Career Search

Each participant is assigned a job counselor. They will reach out to you within a week of starting the program to set up a time to discuss how they can best support you.

Digital literacy is critical for most jobs. We have robust digital literacy classes we offer several nights a week. Join us on Mondays, Wednesdays, or Fridays at 6pm.

On Mondays, our Job Club meets. You can get support from others job hunting just like you! Participants hone their resumes, share leads, and discuss interview strategies.

Training Resources Google Doc




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Plain Language

What is it?

Why does it matter?





What makes written communication clear and effective?

Share a word or two in the chat

Plain language

Communicating so your **intended audience** can:



Find the information they need



Understand what they find



Use that information to do what they need to do



Which version feels easier to read? Why?

Further Ways We Can Assist You With Your Career Search

1

Each participant is assigned a job counselor. They will reach out to you within a week of starting the program to set up a time to discuss how they can best support you.

Digital literacy is critical for most jobs. We have robust digital literacy classes we offer several nights a week. Join us on Mondays, Wednesdays, or Fridays at 6pm.

On Mondays, our Job Club meets. You can get support from others job hunting just like you! Participants hone their resumes, share leads, and discuss interview strategies.

What To Do Next

Meet with your **job counselor**. They will call you within a week to make an appointment

Attend our **computer classes**. They meet Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 6pm-8pm.

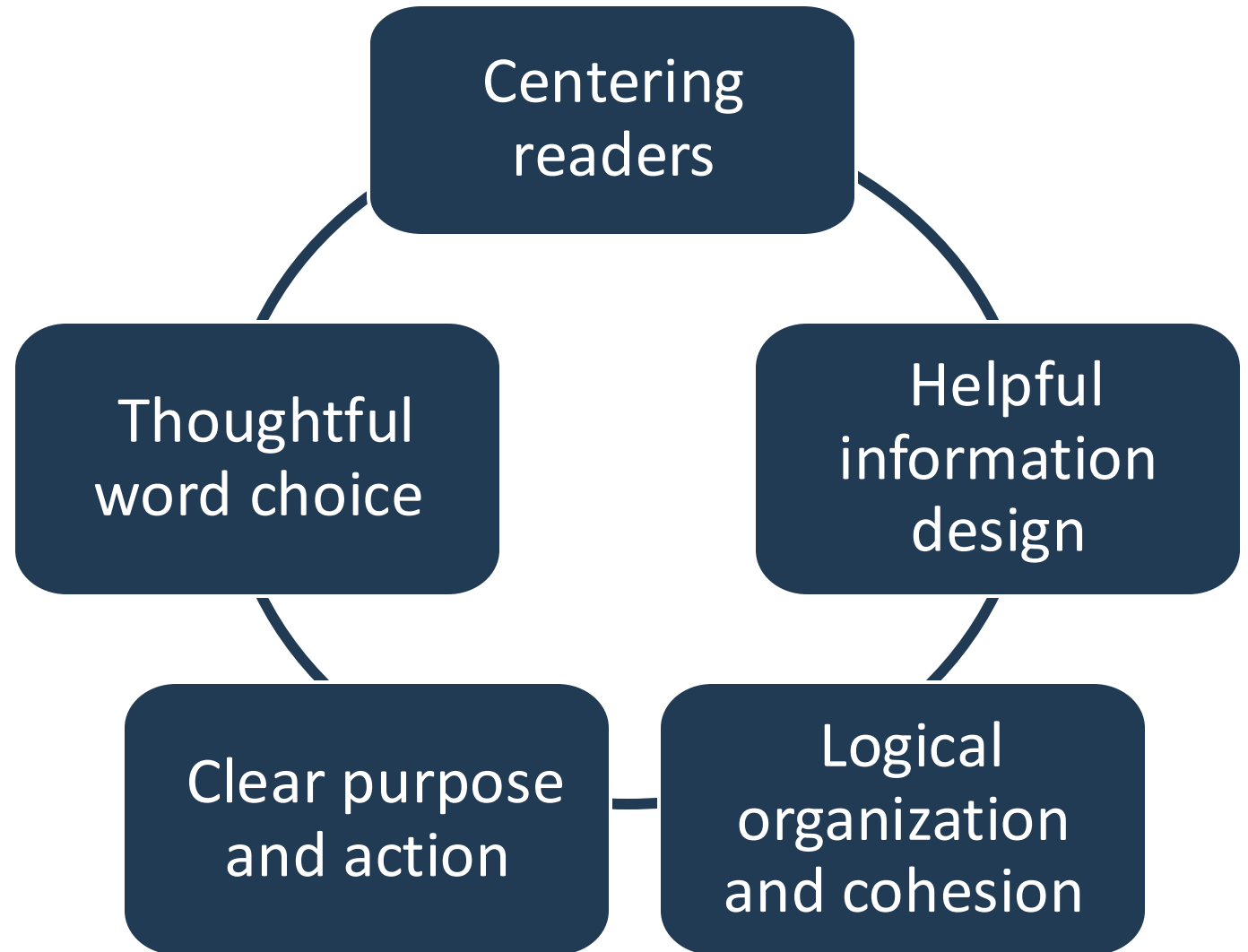
Attend our **Job Club** held Mondays at 10am.

2



Resume
Writing

Key elements of plain language



Plain Language...

Is about:

- Centering the reader
- “Right-sizing” information to the context and need
- Strategies and guides, not hard “rules”
- Having a lens grounded in equity being reflective

Is not about:

- Watering down or “dumbing” down information
- Being so short you’re missing key information
- Writing for a specific grade or reading level



**Why does this
matter?**



What can make reading hard?



Word choice



Grammar complexity



Length + density



Cognitive load



Emotional state



Familiarity with
the topic

Nielsen Norman Research

Website Use Study

Participants used either a plain language site or a more complex site to complete a task

High Level
Literacy Skills



Low Level
Literacy Skills



- ✓ Faster at tasks
- ✓ Better at tasks
- ✓ More satisfied with site

The impact of challenging words

Using unfamiliar words can make our audience:

- Feel like our content isn't for them
- Mistrust the information we're sharing
- Trust us less as an organization
- Feel less motivated to work with us



Ethics and equity

“Plain language gives citizens and consumers better access to their rights, and it combats the information apartheid that convoluted, overly complex documents generate.”

Plain Language and Ethical Action, Russell Willerton

Reasons for using plain language

Practical: what's the point of sharing information that doesn't work for our audience?

Ethical: why would we want to communicate in a way that makes people feel dumb or alienated?

Equitable: how does unnecessary complexity harm folks already struggling to access services and information?

How do we create clear + effective communications?



Using plain
language
strategies

Countering
the Curse
of
Knowledge

Applying
Trauma-
Informed
Care




**How do we center
our audience?**





Knowing our reader

Share in the chat:

- Who are you writing to?
 - What kind of information are they looking for?
- 

Watch + reflect

**As you watch,
think about:**

- What does this have to do with clear communication?
- Have you experienced something similar?



“Once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like not to know it. Our knowledge has “cursed” us. And it becomes difficult for us to share our knowledge with others, because we can’t readily re-create our listeners’ state of mind.”

Chip Heath and Dan Heath, authors of *Made to Stick*

The Curse of Knowledge at play

Leaving out key information:

- Event details
- Contact information
- Explanations of new ideas
- Important steps in a process

Writing how we write to colleagues:

- Using unfamiliar words and phrases
- Sharing information that's not relevant to your audience





Think about it...

- A time you assumed people had prior knowledge about a topic and then realized they didn't.
- Common questions that people have about some aspect of your work.

Countering the Curse of Knowledge

Know your purpose

- Think about the actions you want your audience to take with the information you're sharing

Collaborate + get feedback

- Collect surveys + engagement data
- Connect with audience directly
- Track common challenges
- Review content with colleagues

Use digital tools

- Readability formulas + editing software can help identify challenging content
- Ask AI to identify jargon or questions someone might have



Know what matters to your audience

Share in the chat:

- How does (or doesn't) this flyer meet the needs of youth looking for a job?
- What questions might they have?



LOOKING FOR A SUMMER JOB?

**MAYOR'S SUMMER YOUTH
EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM IS NOW
ACCEPTING APPLICATIONS!**

APPLY TODAY

<https://www.sunnydale.gov/youth-jobs>

APPLICANTS MUST BE:

- Sunnydale Resident
- 16-25 years old

APPLICATIONS ACCEPTED UNTIL:

- Friday, March 3
- Family Services Department (Sunnydale Mall)



For more information call Buffy Summers at
123-467-7890

How is this version different?

Share your thoughts
in the chat



LOOKING FOR A SUMMER JOB?

APPLY FOR THE MAYOR'S SUMMER YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM!

ABOUT THE JOBS

- Earn \$15 an hour
- Part-time and full-time opportunities
- You could work at a city office, park, or a local business

APPLICANTS MUST BE:

- Sunnydale Resident
- 16-25 years old

HOW TO APPLY

- Submit your application before 5 pm on Friday, March 3
- Visit sunnydale.gov/youth-jobs or scan the QR code



For questions or support, you can call or text Buffy Summers at 123-467-7890

Anticipating audience questions

- Described the opportunities
- Grouped application steps together
- Added a QR code and texting option for support



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What's your purpose?

What do they
need to know
to do this?

I want my audience to...

- Register for something
- Change a behavior
- Share information
- Make informed decisions

**What title
would be
clearer for our
audience?**

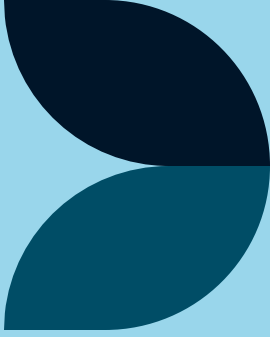
Share your ideas
in the chat

Audience: People with non-traditional
education + backgrounds

Purpose: Create resumes that frame their
background positively



Reminders for **centering your audience**



- ☐ Start with a clear purpose
- ☐ Work with your audience, formally + informally to understand their needs and background knowledge
- ☐ Try to anticipate and proactively address questions
- ☐ Check for the Curse of Knowledge



**If your audience feels too broad,
think about who it's not**

**Can our audience
find what they
need?**



1

What's
different
about how
these flyers
are
organized?

Share in the
chat



Bookville Area Career Fair

A wide variety of local
employers will be present -
bring copies of your resume
and dress for success!

BOOKVILLE HIGH SCHOOL
12345 MAIN STREET
BOOKVILLE, IL
FRIDAY, MAY 4, 2022
10AM TO 4PM

No registration required.
Questions? Contact Dorothy Gale
at 773-555-1234 or
email dorothy@bookvilleWD.org

2

START YOUR NEXT CHAPTER!

BOOKVILLE AREA CAREER FAIR

PRESENTED BY BOOKVILLE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT CENTER



DETAILS

- Friday, May 4, 2022
- 10:00 AM - 04:00 PM
- Bookville High School
12345 Main Street
Bookville, IL
- You **do not need to register** for this event

HOW TO PREPARE

- Dress for success
- Bring copies of your resume
- Be ready to talk to employers in health care, manufacturing, sales, hospitality, and more

QUESTIONS

- Dorothy Gale at 773-555-1234
- dorothy@BookvilleWD.org

Group information logically and predictably

- Title + tag line
- Picture
- 3 sections with heads:
 - Details
 - How to prepare
 - Questions





START YOUR NEXT CHAPTER!

BOOKVILLE AREA CAREER FAIR




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-  Dress for success
-  Bring copies of your resume
-  Be ready to talk to employers in health care, manufacturing, sales, hospitality, and more

QUESTIONS

-  Dorothy Gale at 773-555-1234
-  dorothy@BookvilleWD.org

Organize Information Logically

What makes sense for your topic and how people will use this information?

- Importance
- Order of steps
- Listicle
- FAQs
- Who, what, where, when, why
- Something else...

**Finding,
onboarding,
and retaining
volunteers...**

**5 ways to keep the
flu away...**

#1...

#2...

How the new law will affect you...

The first way...

The second way...

**Job Training
Program**

What is the
program?

Who can apply?

What are the
requirements?

What should I do
next...

Descriptive titles and headings



Guide your
reader like a
road map



Help us find
what we're
looking for



Break up text
into digestible
chunks

What's your reaction to this excerpt?

Share a word or emoji in the chat.

A 60-word sentence!

Services offered to employers include referral of job seekers to available job openings, include assistance in development of job order requirements, matching job seeker experience with job requirements, skills and other attributes, assisting employers with special recruitment needs, arranging for Job Fairs, assisting employers analyze hard-to-fill job orders, assisting with job restructuring and assists with closures and downsizing.

Guidance on sentence length

Long sentences “can cause confusion because they demand so much effort and short-term memory.

So, it's best to make one main point” per sentence

“Aim for an average of 15–20 words throughout”

Oxford Guide to Plain English, Martin Cutts

**Let's make it
easier to read!**

Services offered to employers include referral of job seekers to available job openings, include assistance in development of job order requirements, matching job seeker experience with job requirements, skills and other attributes, assisting employers with special recruitment needs, arranging for Job Fairs, assisting employers analyze hard-to-fill job orders, assisting with job restructuring and assists with closures and downsizing.

SOLUTION #1: Split it up

Services offered to employers include referral of job seekers to available job openings, include assistance in development of job order requirements, matching job seeker experience with job requirements, skills and other attributes, assisting employers with special recruitment needs, arranging for Job Fairs, assisting employers analyze hard-to-fill job orders, assisting with job restructuring and assists with closures and downsizing.

We offer many services to employers.

We can help develop job order requirements as well as match job seekers to job openings that match their skills and the job's requirements.

We can also assist employers with special recruitment needs, job fairs, hard-to-fill job orders, job restructuring, closures, and downsizing.

SOLUTION #2: Use a list

Services offered to employers include referral of job seekers to available job openings, include assistance in development of job order requirements, matching job seeker experience with job requirements, skills and other attributes, assisting employers with special recruitment needs, arranging for Job Fairs, assisting employers analyze hard-to-fill job orders, assisting with job restructuring and assists with closures and downsizing.

We offer many services to employers:

- Develop job orders that attract qualified candidates
- Connect job seekers to job openings that match their qualifications through case management and job fairs
- Assist with other needs such as restructuring, closures, and downsizing

SOLUTION #3: Use Q & A

Services offered to employers include referral of job seekers to available job openings, include assistance in development of job order requirements, matching job seeker experience with job requirements, skills and other attributes, assisting employers with special recruitment needs, arranging for Job Fairs, assisting employers analyze hard-to-fill job orders, assisting with job restructuring and assists with closures and downsizing.

How can we help employers?

We can help develop job orders that attract qualified candidates.

We can also assist with other needs such as restructuring, closures, and downsizing

How can we help job seekers?

We can help connect job seekers to job openings that match their qualifications through case management and job fairs.

SOLUTION #4: Add visuals and bolding

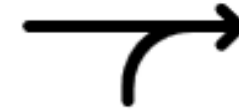
We offer many services to employers:



Develop job orders that
attract qualified
candidates



**Connect job seekers to
job openings that match
their qualifications**
through case
management and job
fairs



Assist with other needs
such as restructuring,
closures, and downsizing

Aim for...



1 idea per
paragraph



1 topic per
section



Reminders for helping readers **FIND** what they need

- ☐ Organize information in a logical way
- ☐ Limit information to 1 idea per paragraph and 1 topic per section
- ☐ Use descriptive headings and subheadings to create easy to navigate sections

**Can our audience
understand what
they find?**



Identifying challenging vocabulary

Share in the chat:

- What words or ideas might be new or challenging for readers?

What are some of the services offered by ABC Community Center?

- Orientation and Job Club, a job readiness program
- Vocational assessment, basic education, and vocational skills training
- Job search
- Work experience opportunities
- Supportive Services, such as childcare, transportation and school and work-related expenses
- Specialized Supportive Services for mental health, substance use disorder, and domestic violence victims
- Post-Employment Services to help those employed retain their jobs

Challenging words

Academic Vocabulary

- Retain
- Post
- Orientation
- Expenses
- Specialized

Jargon

- Vocational assessment and skills
- Basic education
- Job Club

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What makes some words “hard”?

“Academic” Language

- Words that are more common in reading (especially textbooks, newspapers, etc.)
- Often have more familiar equivalents

Jargon

- Specialized terms in a sector or domain
- Can be helpful shorthand if everyone has the same understanding
- Can make people feel like outsiders

Always ask...

Do my readers need to know these specific words?
If yes, how can I provide adequate support?

Is it enough to focus on the idea and use more common, everyday language?

How is this version clearer?

Share your thoughts in the chat

We can support you in finding a job in many ways...



Job Club, a class to help you learn more about work in the U.S.



Job training or classes



Job search help



Resources you might need to work (like a daycare for your children or a way to get to a new job)



Support in other parts of your life if you are having a hard time



On-going support to help you keep your job - or get a better job in the future

Supporting understanding

- Added pictures
- Reframed as how we can help you
- Removed, replaced, or explained challenging language
- Job club explanation
- Job readiness program → job training or classes
- Retain → help you keep your job
- Specialized support services → support in other parts of your life

We can support you in finding a job in many ways...



Job Club, a class to help you learn more about work in the U.S.



Job training or classes



Job search help



Resources you might need to work (like a daycare for your children or a way to get to a new job)



Support in other parts of your life if you are having a hard time




On-going support to help you keep your job - or get a better job in the future



Challenging words + ideas

Share in the chat:

- What words or ideas are difficult to explain in your work?
 - How do you explain new or unfamiliar language when it's unavoidable?
- 

Providing adequate support

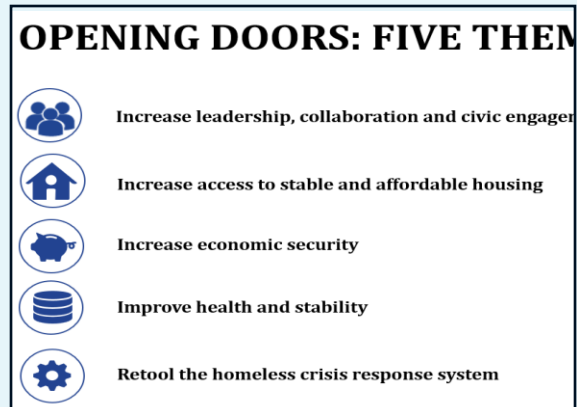
- Use an alternative
- Add a plain language definition
- Provide supporting context
- Share an example



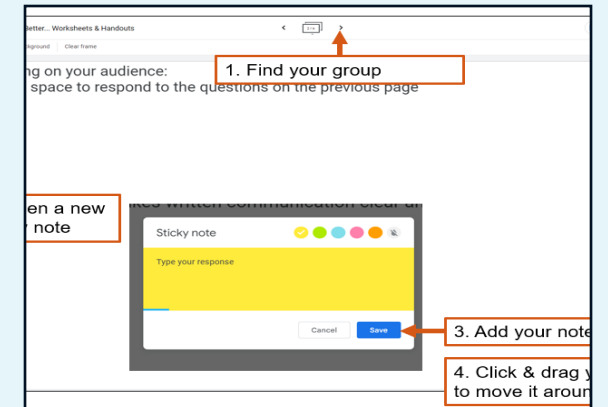
Using images to support meaning



Pictures help connect the topic and purpose to the reader's lives



Icons can support key information and provide a visual reference



Screenshots + videos are great to model processes and steps

**How do we know people understand
what we're sharing?**

Check for Understanding



Normalize Questions

“What questions to do have about...?”

“What do you think the next steps should be?”



Use Open-Ended Questions

“What are some ways to...?”

“How can I support you with this?”



Ask People to Teach it Back

“I want be sure I was clear. Can you tell me how you’re going to...?”

Make it clear that you are **not** testing people.
You are trying to make sure that you explained yourself clearly



Reminders for helping readers **UNDERSTAND** what they find

- ☐ Use images to support meaning
- ☐ Write in simple, active sentences
- ☐ Use everyday language and friendly tone
- ☐ Define technical terms and jargon when you have to use them
- ☐ Check for understanding

**Can our audience
use what they
find?**



What are the next steps to this email?

What might make it difficult to complete those steps?

Share in the chat

ATTENTION: JOB SEEKERS

Statewide Revenue Virtual Recruitment

Join the State Department of Revenue for a **Free Virtual Workshop**.

Learn about current job openings, future job openings, application process, and how to get started!

Friday, October 14, 2022

10:00 am

Register



Aligning processes + actions

Some challenges:

- I can't use the QR code if I open this on my phone
- Images aren't screen reader accessible
- Unclear who and why

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Register



Sharing Links

To sign up:

1. Fill out the registration form to tell us:
 - Your name
 - Your contact information
 - When you can meet
2. We'll match you with a tutor and call you within 3 weeks.

To sign up:

1. Scan the code or visit bit.ly/ABCregistration

You'll tell us:

- Your name
- Your contact information
- When you can meet

1. We'll match you with a tutor and call you within 3 weeks.



Digital Resources

- Underlined
- Distinct color
- Describe the destination

Printed Resources

- Shortened links (Bitly, Tinyurl, etc.)
- QR codes + shortened link

Making content actionable

- Active verbs
- Clear timeline
- Two ways to access the application
- Multiple ways to get support



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APPLICANTS MUST BE:

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- 16-25 years old

HOW TO APPLY

- Submit your application before 5 pm on Friday, March 3
- Visit sunnydale.gov/youth-jobs or scan the QR code



For questions or support, you can call or text Buffy Summers at 123-467-7890

Reminders for helping readers **USE** what they find



- ☐ Start with a clear main idea and purpose
- ☐ Test processes
- ☐ Use active verbs for instructions
- ☐ Make it clear how to get help

Wrapping Up

Resources & Next Steps

What's on your mind?

Share in the chat:

- A question you still have
- Something you want to learn more about
- A strategy you're going to try



A Few Reminders

- Plain language is **not** about following a set of hard rules
- It **is** about:
 - Centering your audience
 - Being intentional about word choice, organization, + design
- Small changes can have a big impact on your audience's experience



Training Resources

Google Doc



bit.ly/May28workforcewebinar
(this link is case sensitive)

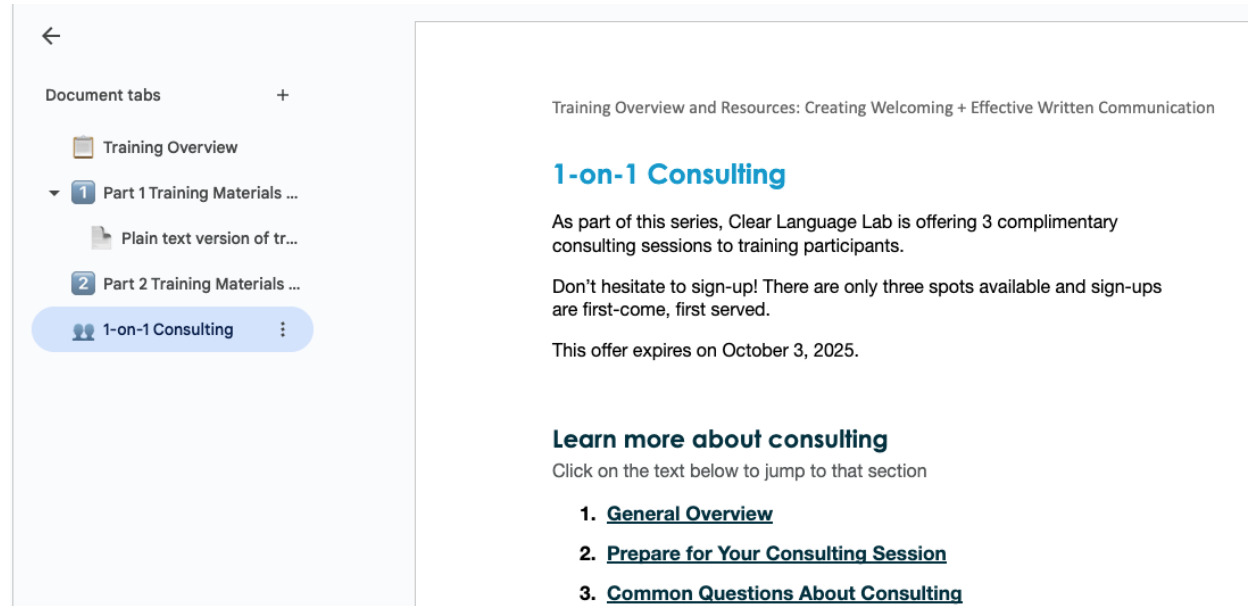


Limited Complimentary Consulting

Three 1-hour sessions

A 1-on-1 or small group collaborative session to talk about your materials or processes, and get concrete, actionable feedback.

Learn more in the resources doc



The screenshot shows a document viewer interface. On the left is a sidebar titled "Document tabs" with a "+" icon. It contains a list of tabs: "Training Overview", "1 Part 1 Training Materials ...", "Plain text version of tr...", "2 Part 2 Training Materials ...", and "1-on-1 Consulting" (which is highlighted in blue). On the right is the main content area, titled "Training Overview and Resources: Creating Welcoming + Effective Written Communication". It features a section header "1-on-1 Consulting" in blue. Below this, the text reads: "As part of this series, Clear Language Lab is offering 3 complimentary consulting sessions to training participants. Don't hesitate to sign-up! There are only three spots available and sign-ups are first-come, first served. This offer expires on October 3, 2025." Further down, there is a section titled "Learn more about consulting" with the instruction "Click on the text below to jump to that section". This section contains three numbered links: "1. [General Overview](#)", "2. [Prepare for Your Consulting Session](#)", and "3. [Common Questions About Consulting](#)".

Part 2: Communicating with a Trauma- Informed Lens

Wednesday, June 4
10:00–11:30 am CT
Zoom

More from Clear Language Lab

Sign-up at litworks.org/cll-trainings

Virtual Office Hours

- Tuesday, June 10
- 10:00 am - 12:00 pm CT

Skill-Builder Writing Workshop: Lists

- Wednesday, June 11
- 12:00–12:30 pm CT

Community of Practice

- Thursday, June 12
- 2:00–3:00 pm CT

Thank you!

Keep in touch! 😊

✉ sarah@litworks.org

💻 LitWorks.org

📷 @LiteracyWorksChicago

🌐 Literacy Works

📘 Literacy Works

Complete the
training survey



bit.ly/CLLSurveyFY25
(this link is case sensitive)