



League of Women Voters of California
Convention 2017

Writing for Everyone

Using the principles of user-centered design
and plain language to improve your writing



WILLIAM COOLEY

Program Manager at Common Knowledge

- Worked on 2016 Easy Voter Guide
- Former special education teacher
- Background in journalism and design
- Lives in Sonoma with wife, Teressa, and golden retriever, Rory



AGENDA



Writing as Design

Understanding audience and purpose through the principles of user-experience design



The Writing Process

First drafts as anticipatory design; creating a better first draft with Plain Language



The Editing Process

Evaluating prototypes with target audiences; writing as an iterative process



Notes on Translation

Online Tools and Additional Resources

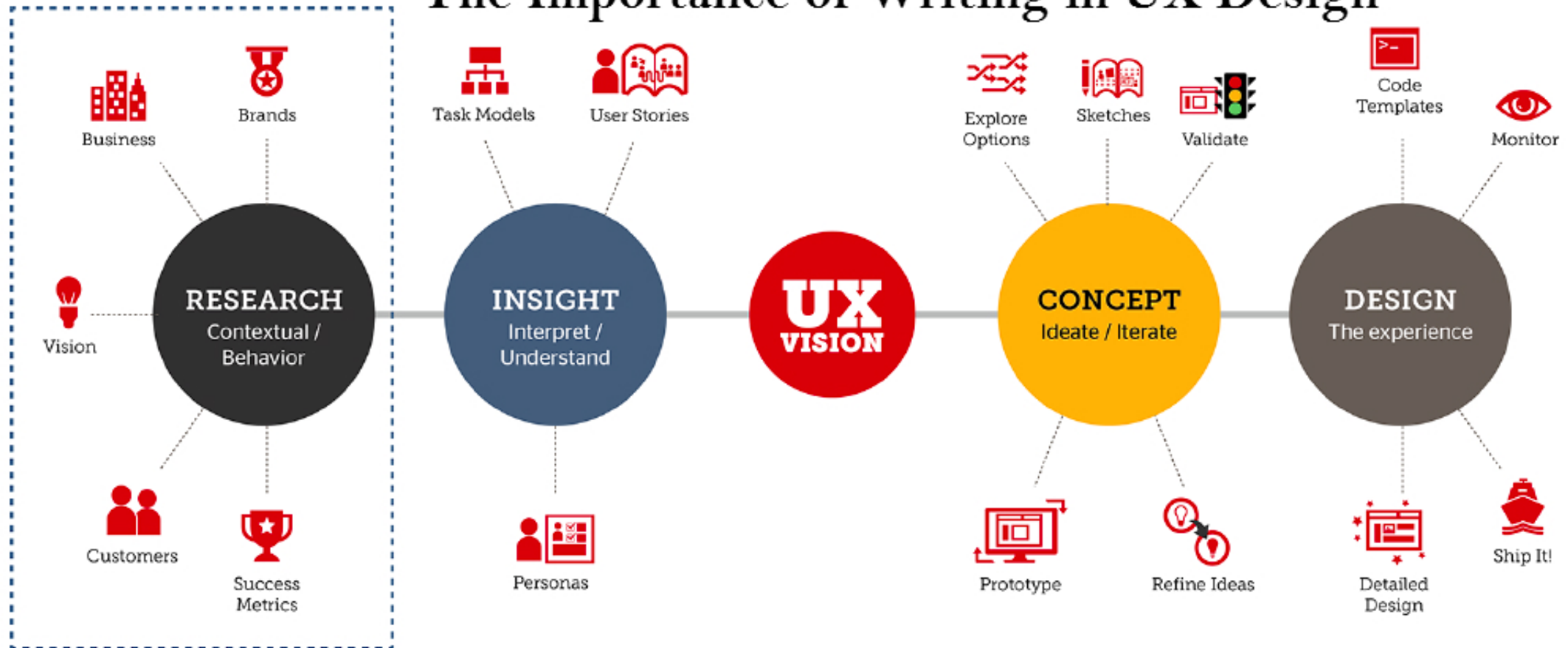
Questions and Comments

Writing as design

- Writing and design have long been considered **separate** disciplines
- User experience (UX) research shows that these lines are **blurred**



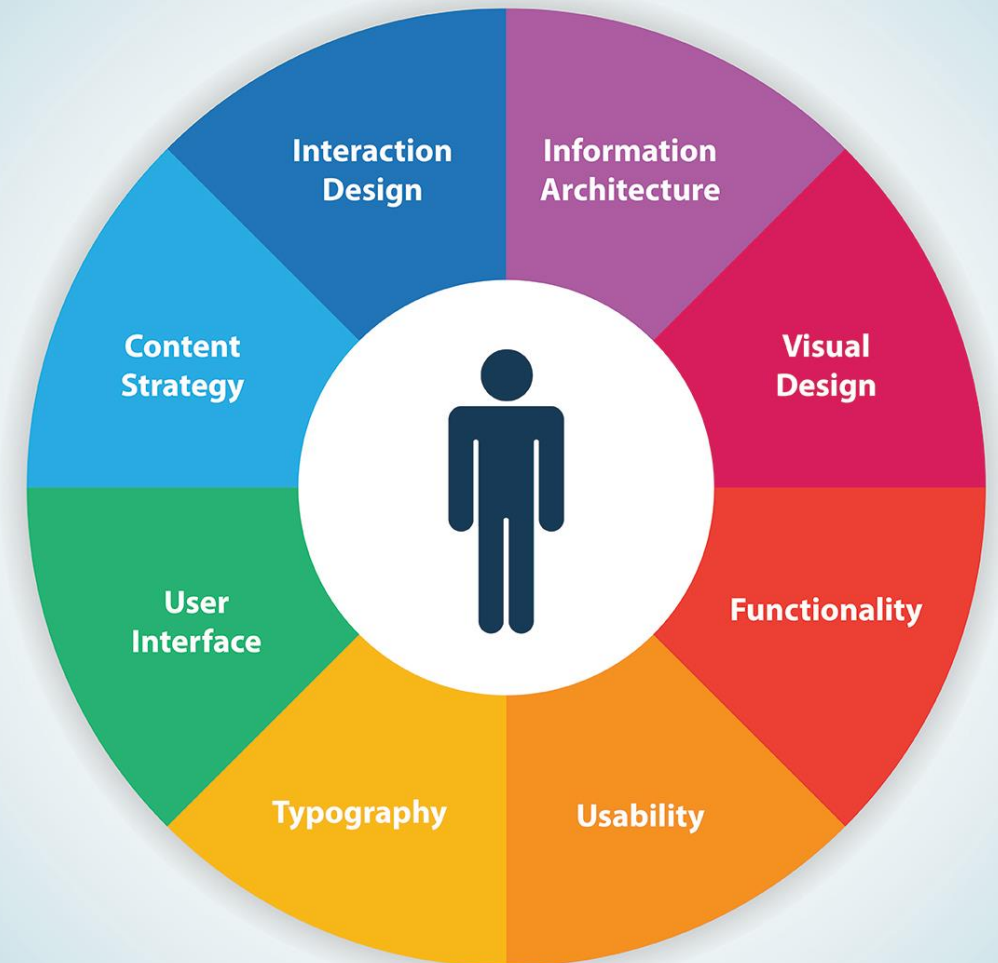
The Importance of Writing in UX Design



User-centered design

For those who will use a **product** at the center of the planning process

- All aspects of the product are designed with **respect** for the needs of actual users



Exercise #1

Who we write

for

On your worksheet take a minute to reflect

- When you write, who do you **think about**?
- What **type of audience** are you writing for?



One-minute reflection



PAIR SHARE



With a Partner

Take turns sharing what you wrote for Exercise #1

- What audiences did you and your partner identify?



Reflection

- How does your audience differ based on the type of writing you are doing?
- Who specifically do you think about while writing?

Using personas

- Personas are models used to communicate the **needs** of real-life users (*readers*)
- They help designers (*writers*) to think about and **empathize** with actual people



Jill Anderson



"I'm looking for a site that will simplify the planning of my business trips."

AGE 29

OCCUPATION Regional Director

STATUS Single

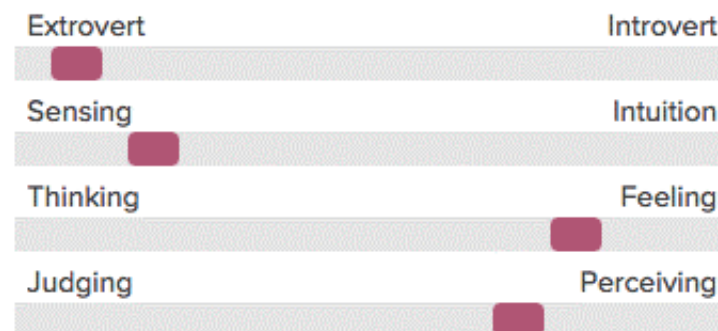
LOCATION Portsmouth, NH

TIER Frequent Traveler

Bio

Jill is a Regional Director who travels 4-8 times each month for work. She has a specific region in which she travels, and she often visits the same cities and stays in the same hotel. She is frustrated by the fact that no matter how frequently she takes similar trips, she spends hours of her day booking travel. She expects her travel solutions to be as organized as she is.

Personality



Brands



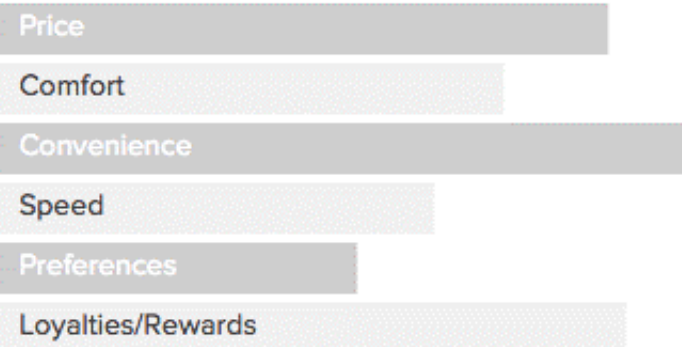
Goals

- To spend less time booking travel
- To maximize her loyalty points and rewards
- To narrow her options when it comes to shop

Frustrations

- Too much time spent booking - she's busy!
- Too many websites visited per trip
- Not terribly tech saavy - doesn't like the process

Motivations



Technology

IT & Internet

Software

Clark Andrews

AGE 26

OCCUPATION Software Developer

STATUS Single

LOCATION San Jose, CA

TIER Experiment Hacker

ARCHETYPE The Computer Nerd

Friendly

Clever

Go-Getter



Motivations

Incentive

Fear

Achievement

Growth

Power

Social

Goals

- To cut down on unhealthy eating and drinking habits
- To measure multiple aspects of life more scientifically
- To set goals and see and make positive impacts on his life

Frustrations

- Unfamiliar with wearable technology
- Saturated tracking market
- Manual tracking is too time consuming

Bio

Aaron is a systems software developer, a "data junkie" and for the past couple years, has been very interested in tracking aspects of his health and performance. Aaron wants to track his mood, happiness,

Personality

Extrovert

Introvert

Sensing

Intuition

Thinking

Feeling

Judging

Perceiving

Technology

IT & Internet

Software

Mobile Apps

Social Networks

Brands



Personas don't need to be

Reader A – Name: Anne		
Background Describe your reader. Who are they?	Goals What do they want to accomplish?	Frustrations/Challenges What challenges do they have?

Persona Example: Anne

Reader A – Name: Anne		
Background Describe your reader. Who are they? Anne is a 24-year-old teller at a bank. She attended community college and earned an A.A. degree. She helps care for her ailing grandmother and two younger siblings (13 and 18).	Goals What do they want to accomplish? Anne wants to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Learn about propositions for the upcoming election.▪ Help her grandmother and younger sister vote	Frustrations/Challenges What challenges do they have? <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Limited time to read▪ Struggles to understand some political terms▪ Has a hard time explaining measures to her grandmother

Exercise #2

Using

personas

On your worksheet, develop two personas of your own

- Think of people you know: friends, clients, family members
- The length is not important, but be creative and realistic



Four-minute writing

Reader A – Name:

Background

Describe your reader.
Who are they?

Goals

What do they want to accomplish?

Frustrations/Challenges

What challenges do they have?

Reader B – Name:

Background

Describe your reader.
Who are they?

Goals

What do they want to accomplish?

Frustrations/Challenges

What challenges do they have?

Persona Example: Anne

Reader A – Name: Anne		
Background Describe your reader. Who are they? Anne is a 28-year-old teller at a bank. She attended community college and earned an A.A. degree. She helps care for her ailing grandmother and two younger siblings (12 and 18).	Goals What do they want to accomplish? Anne wants to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Learn about propositions for the upcoming election.▪ Help her grandmother and younger sister vote	Frustrations/Challenges What challenges do they have? <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Limited time to read▪ Struggles to understand some political terms▪ Has a hard time explaining measures to her grandmother

TABLE TALK



Group Share

Go around the table having each person take 30-60 seconds to read **one** of their personas



Reflection

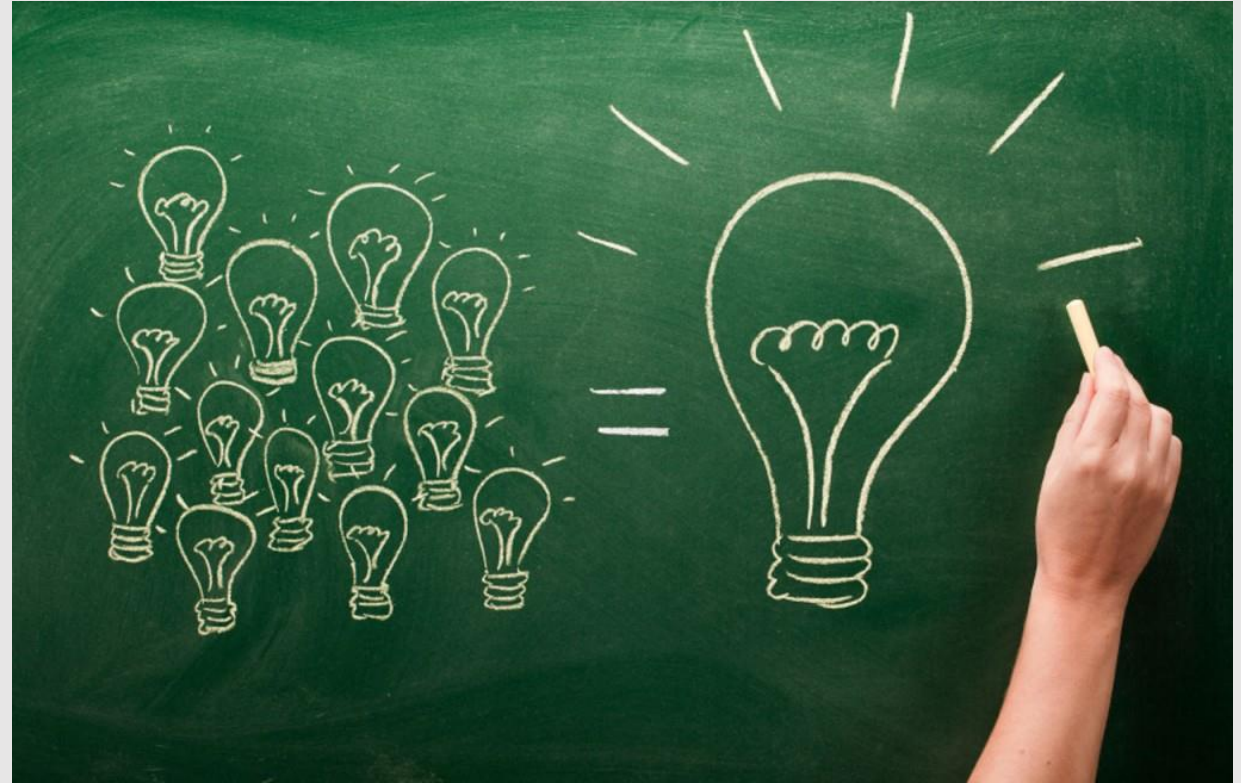
- Was this activity easy or challenging?
- How was this different from the way you normally think about your readers?

The writing

process

Keeping our audience and users in mind we should:

- Research
- Plan/Outline
- Prototype (draft)
- Test with users
- Revise



Writing Tip #1

Next time you sit down to write, jot down a few quick personas.

- How will real-life readers **interact** with what you write?
- What **questions** will they have?
- How will your writing align to their **goals**?
- How can you **minimize** their challenges and frustrations?

Plain language

- Inspired by George Orwell
- Initially focused on **government communication** to the public
- Has since been adopted by governments and organizations worldwide



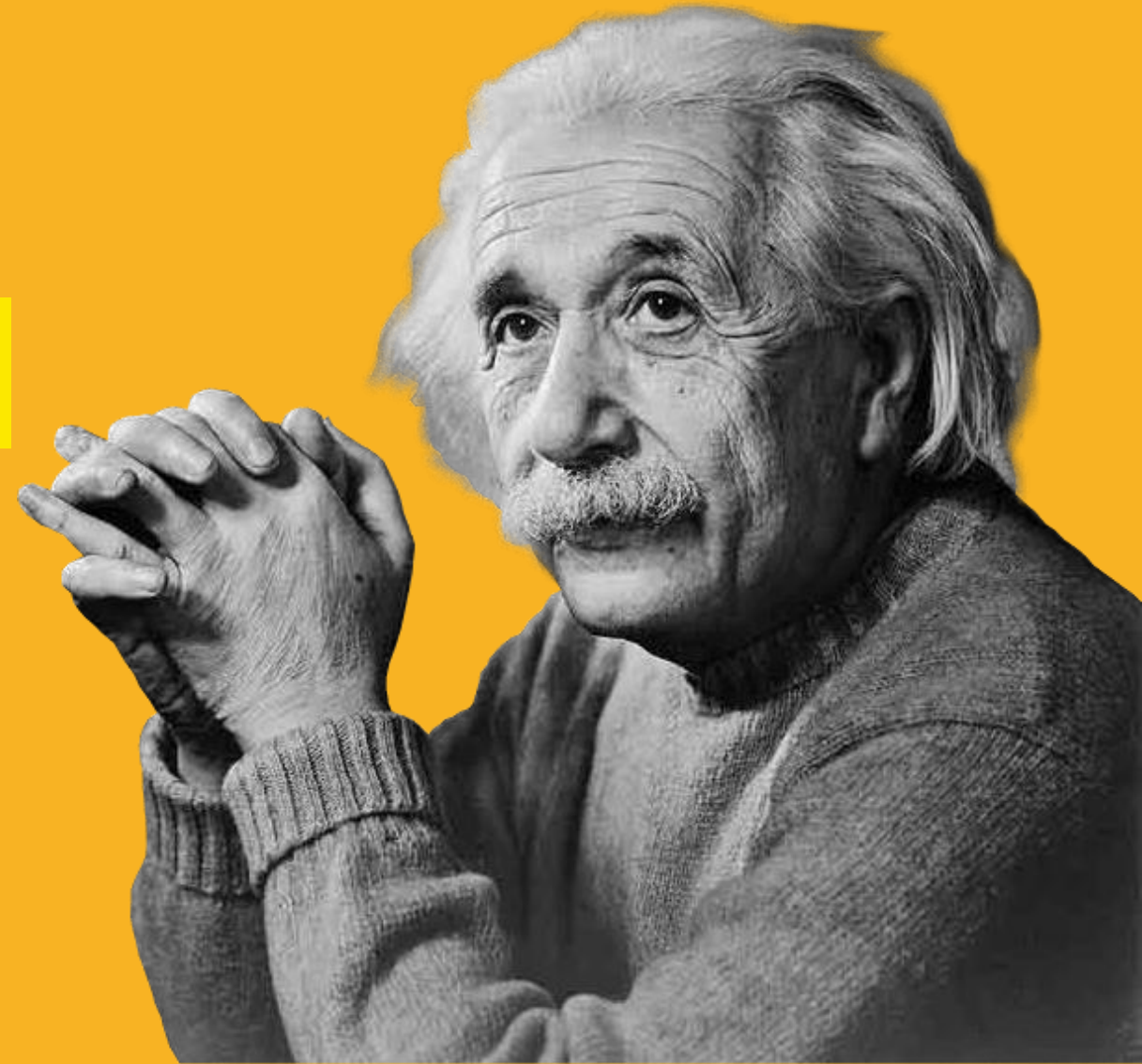
What makes it plain?

“Communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can readily **find** what they need, **understand** it, and **use** it.”



“
*If you can't
explain it **simply**, you
don't understand it
well enough.*”

Albert Einstein



Einstein never had to explain this

“ The board may make disbursements pursuant to any apportionment made from any funds in the 2016 State School Facilities Fund, irrespective of whether there exists at the time of the disbursement an amount in the 2016 State School Facilities Fund sufficient to permit payment in full of all apportionments previously made. However, no disbursement shall be made from any funds required by law to be transferred to the General Fund. ”

From Prop 51 (2016)

So how do we do it?

- Keep sentences as short as possible, while retaining meaning
- Use words that are familiar to many audiences
- Avoid figurative language
- Use bullet points, tables and graphics when possible
- If you have to use a word that your audience might not understand, provide a definition or example

Orwell's rules

- Never use a long word where a short one will do
- If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out
- Never use the passive voice
- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent



Exercise #3

Writing practice

On your worksheet:

- Write a **paragraph** describing the sample ballot measure
- Reduce jargon and use **plain language**
- Continue to think about your **audience** and **personas**



5-minute writing

Exercise #3 – Practice Writing in Plain Language

Write a paragraph describing the sample ballot measure. Using **plain language** and the principles we have discussed, describe the measure and explain what would happen if it passes.

PAIR SHARE



With a Partner

Discuss Exercise #3

- What was easy? What was hard?
- Where there certain words or phrases that were particularly difficult to write in plain language?
- How did the LAO's source material shape up? On an A–F scale, what grade would you give it for clarity and accessibility?

The editing

process

- Writing in plain language is not natural
- Have other people read your prototype (draft) and give you feedback
- Continue to think about your audience



Use checklists to improve your editing

Document Checklist for Plain Language

Use this checklist to see if your document meets plain language standards. (If you are writing for the web, here's the additional [weblist](#).) Click on the links for a brief explanation of each standard. You can find more extensive discussions of these standards throughout this website, especially in the "howto" section.

- ☐ written for the [average reader](#)
- ☐ organized to serve the [reader's needs](#)
- ☐ has [useful headings](#)
- ☐ uses ["you" and other pronouns](#) to speak to the reader
- ☐ uses [active voice](#)
- ☐ uses [short sections and sentences](#)
- ☐ uses the [simplest tense possible](#)—simple present is best
- ☐ uses [base verbs](#), not nominalizations (hidden verbs)
- ☐ omits [excess words](#)
- ☐ uses [concrete, familiar words](#)
- ☐ uses ["must"](#) to express requirements; avoids the ambiguous word "shall"
- ☐ [places words carefully](#) (avoids large gaps between the subject, the verb and the object; puts exceptions last; places modifiers correctly)
- ☐ uses [lists and tables](#) to simplify complex material
- ☐ uses no more than two or three [subordinate levels](#)

Writing Tip #2

Get feedback from diverse editors who represent your target audiences.

- Solicit help from people who:
 - Look different than you
 - Work in different sectors, with different people
 - Have varying levels of formal education

Reflection questions

Ask your editors

- Did you see any **words** or **phrases** that you didn't know?
- Would this be clear to your **friends** and **family** members?
- How else could we make this more **clear**?
- Is something **missing** that would help people understand?

Exercise #4

Editing practice

On your worksheet:

- Edit the sample pro/con statement
- What could be **shortened**?
- What could be made more **clear**?
- Highlight areas that would benefit from **plain language**



5-minute edit

Exercise #4 – Editing for Access (Brevity, Clarity and Plain Language)

Read over and annotate the sample Pro/Con statement. What edits would you recommend to improve access? Where could we use Plain Language to make things clearer, shorter or easier to understand?

PAIR SHARE



With a Partner

Discuss Exercise #4

- What was easy? What was hard?
- What specific words or phrases did you underline?
- How **do you** think the text could be made simpler?

Notes on translation

Try to avoid

- Slang, idioms, and clichés
- Contractions
- Shortened words, even if they're common in English (use “application,” not “app”)
- Unnecessary abbreviations (use “for example,” not “e.g.”)

Try to always use

- Plain language principles
- Active voice (passive voice can lead to translation errors)
- Subject-verb-object structure
 - The proposition (s) would ban (v) the sale of cigarettes (o).

© MailChimp.

Online tools and additional

resources

- PlainLanguage.gov
 - Many examples and resources
- Center for Plain Language
- Plain English Campaign
 - A-Z of Alternative Words
- Clarity International



*Full resource list available at
tinyurl.com/writeforeveryone

Online editing tools

Readable.io

Text To Score

✎ Text

💾 Save

↺ Load

🕒 History

🔗 Help

🎓 Measure Readability

With Readable.io you can score any text you like, from Word docs to websites. Every piece of text is measured using algorithms like Flesch-Kincaid and the Gunning Fox index. We analyse sentiment, keyword density and even calculate typical reading and speaking times for your text.

It identifies long sentences like this one, and highlights them for you to work on.

Long words like "additionally" are highlighted too. Cliches are as easy to spot as shooting fish in a barrel. It even quickly finds adverbs and shows you when you have been using passive voice.

HemingwayApp.com

Hemingway App makes your writing bold and clear.

The app highlights lengthy, complex sentences and common errors; if you see a yellow sentence, shorten or split it. If you see a red highlight, your sentence is so dense and complicated that your readers will get lost trying to follow its meandering, splitting logic — try editing this sentence to remove the red.

You can utilize a shorter word in place of a purple one. Mouse over them for hints.

Adverbs and weakening phrases are helpfully shown in blue. Get rid of them and pick words with force, perhaps.

Phrases in green have been marked to show passive voice.

You can format your text with the toolbar.

Paste in something you're working on and edit away. Or, click the Write button and compose something new.

Hemingway
Editor

Readability

Grade 6

Good

Words: 133

Show More ▾

2 adverbs, meeting the goal of 2 or fewer.

1 use of passive voice, meeting the goal of 2 or fewer.

1 phrase has a simpler alternative.

1 of 11 sentences is hard to read.

1 of 11 sentences is very hard to read.



Questions and Comments

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California
General
Election

November 8, 2016

Polls Are Open From 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. on Election Day!