

# Practical plain language exercises

Learn how to write your company's  
materials in plain language

write

# What we'll cover

- 'Before and after' example
- Three elements to focus on
- Time for practice

# What is plain language?

Plain language is communication your audience can understand the first time they read it.

Material is in plain language if your audience can:

- find what they need
- understand what they find the first time they read it
- use what they find to meet their needs.

# Before and after example

# [tdi.texas.gov/commissioner/initiatives/ Webinar-October-2021.html](https://tdi.texas.gov/commissioner/initiatives/Webinar-October-2021.html)

## **October 14: Workshop: Practical plain language exercises**

This webinar will help you get started writing your company's materials in plain language and transform a dull, ordinary document into something customers easily understand.

[Try Some Plain Language Editing](#) (Word format, 1 page)

[Plain Language: Before and After](#) (PDF, 1 page)

## BEFORE

### 11. Security Interest

- 11.1 You must store any collateral which is goods at the address shown as that of its owner in the disclosure statement. You must not allow any collateral to be taken out of New Zealand. You must also care for and maintain collateral and comply with any laws relating to its ownership and use and you must not use it in any dangerous or illegal activity or for any purpose for which it was not intended. You may not race any collateral which is a motor vehicle. The creditor may inspect any collateral on giving 24 hours written notice and you shall make such collateral available for inspection at the address that you have provided as the place where the owner lives. The creditor need not give notice if the goods are at risk and it may enter any place where it believes the goods may be to look for and inspect them.
- 11.2 You must not do anything or allow anything to happen which may impair or undermine any debtor's ownership of collateral or the creditor's security interest in collateral. Further you must not grant any other security interest over collateral nor allow any lien to be created over it nor dispose of nor allow the disposal of collateral by sale or gift or lease or in any other way nor cause nor allow collateral to be taken out of the possession of the debtor who owns it, nor destroyed, damaged, endangered, disassembled, removed from the place where you are required to keep it or concealed from the creditor. You must not obtain any personalised registration plate on any motor vehicle which is collateral nor otherwise alter or remove any serial number unless you first obtain the creditor's consent in writing.
- 11.3 Any accessions (including replacements and accessories) which are attached to collateral which is goods shall become part of the collateral.

## AFTER

### 11. How you must treat the property (our security interest)

Your property (listed on page 3 of this contract) is our security interest. This means that we can use the property to make sure you meet your obligations under this contract, or that we're paid the money we're owed under the contract, or both. To protect our security interest, you must do or agree to certain things.

#### 11.1 You must keep the property at your address

You must keep the property listed on page 3 of this contract at your address shown on page 1 of this contract. You must not let the property be taken out of New Zealand.

#### 11.2 You must make the property available for inspection

We may inspect the property after giving you 24 hours' written notice. You must make the property available for inspection at your address. We do not need to give you any notice if the property is at risk, and we may enter anywhere we believe the property may be to look for and inspect it.

#### 11.3 You must keep the property safe

You must care for and maintain the property and comply with any laws relating to its ownership and use. You must not use it in any dangerous or illegal activity or for any purpose it wasn't intended for. If the property is a motor vehicle, you may not race it.

You must not do anything or allow anything to happen that may damage or undermine your ownership of the property or our security interest in the property.

You must not grant anyone else a security interest in the property, or allow anyone to take possession of it because you owe them money.

write

# Activity: spot the difference

Take time to compare the 'before' and the 'after'.

Paste into the chat five changes you notice in the 'after' that improve the experience for the reader.

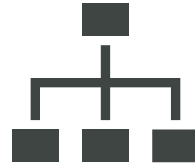


What can we learn about  
reader-focused writing from the  
'before' and 'after'?





the look



the structure



the language



the look

# Where do readers' eyes go?



Before

## SECURITY INTEREST

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You must not do anything or allow anything to happen which may impair or undermine any debtor's ownership of collateral or the creditor's security interest in collateral. Further you must not grant any other security interest over collateral nor allow any lien to be created over it nor dispose of nor allow the disposal of collateral by sale or gift or lease or in any other way nor cause nor allow collateral to be taken out of the possession of the

After

## How you must treat the property (our security interest)

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### You must keep the property at your address

You must keep the property listed on page 3 of this contract at your address shown on page 1. You mustn't let the property be taken out of New Zealand.

### You must make the property available for inspection

We may inspect the property after giving you 24 hours' written notice. You must make the property available for inspection at your address. We don't need to give you any notice if the property is at risk, and we may enter anywhere we believe the property may be.

### You must keep the property safe

You must care for and maintain the property and comply with any laws relating to its ownership and use.

You mustn't:

- use it in any dangerous or illegal activity or for any purpose it wasn't intended for
- do anything or allow anything to happen that may damage or undermine your ownership of the property,

write

## Before

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- use it in any dangerous or illegal activity or for any purpose it wasn't intended for
- do anything or allow anything to happen that may damage or undermine your ownership of the property,

# When rewriting, put effort into:



the look

- creating frequent opportunities for the eye to enter the text
- emphasising the left-hand margin
- creating visual variation on the page.



## Fire



### You are covered for

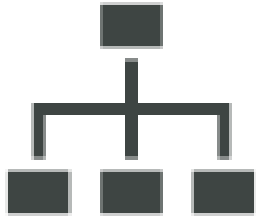
Loss or damage to your insured home and contents caused by fire, including bushfires and grassfires. Fire is defined as burning by flames.



### You are not covered for

Loss, damage, or destruction caused by:

- bushfire or grassfire during the uninsured period → **page 62**
- normal use over time of items that are usually exposed to heat, such as a splashback
- scorching or melting when there is heat but no flame. This includes scorch or burn marks caused by a cigar, cigarette, or pipe
- smoke or soot when no damage from fire has occurred, unless you have selected and we have agreed to provide optional Accidental Damage cover on → **page 50**.

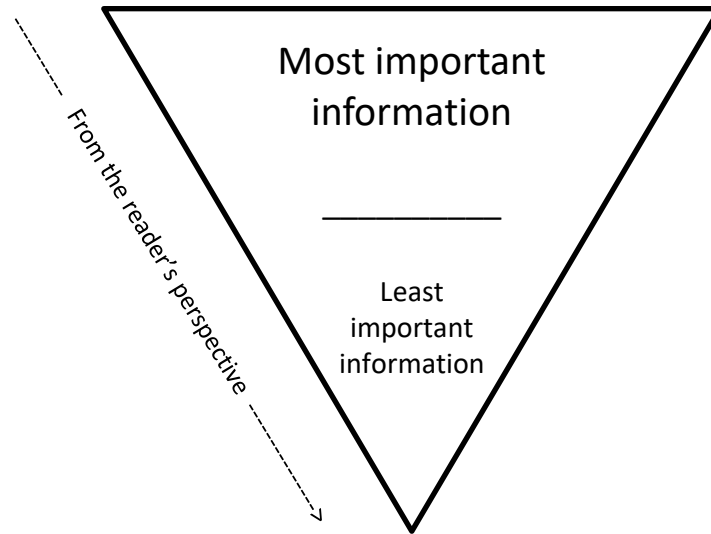


the structure



# What structure do readers expect?

## Inverted pyramid structure



# No particular structure

Collection of all the facts that relate to security interest

write

Before


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Informative heading 

Answers to readers' key questions 

Main points as headings 

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write



write

# Frequency of claim



# Add informative headings

Label  
headings

Question  
headings

Statement  
headings

## Capability building

We collaborate with other government agencies to improve our learning management system. Inland Revenue is part of the Learning Management Systems cross-agency group, which enables us to share training resources with ACC, DIA, Ministry of Justice, MSD, Ministry of Health and Statistics New Zealand.

*Inland Revenue Annual Report*

## Sharing training resources

We collaborate with other government agencies to improve our learning management system. Inland Revenue is part of the Learning Management Systems cross-agency group, which enables us to share training resources with ACC, DIA, Ministry of Justice, MSD, Ministry of Health and Statistics New Zealand.



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## Misuse of charities

We are working closely with the Charities Commission to tackle the misuse of the tax-exempt or concessionary status of charities. Where appropriate, we share relevant information, provide training and share knowledge on tax and charity risks. We developed charity risk referral processes for specific risk cases and recently agreed on our first joint investigation protocol.

We also completed a joint submission with the Charities Commission and the Australian Taxation Office, to the External Reporting Board on reporting requirements for charities.

*Inland Revenue Annual Report*

# Tackling misuse of charities

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# We are focused on ending tax fraud by charities

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Main points as headings 

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write

# Use inverted pyramid in paragraphs

1. Direct referral would require the court to hear and test all the evidence from the applicant and submitters to the application, rather than having many issues resolved at an earlier, less formal hearing. This will be a lot more time-consuming.
2. Direct referral will be a lot more time-consuming. The court would be required to hear and test all the evidence from the applicant and submitters to the application, rather than having many issues resolved at an earlier, less formal hearing.

# Use inverted pyramid in lists

Our focus in the year to come will be on:

- improving staff relations
- enhancing communications
- increasing public confidence
- raising awareness of our activities
- maintaining the highest standards of commitment and service.



# Use inverted pyramid in lists

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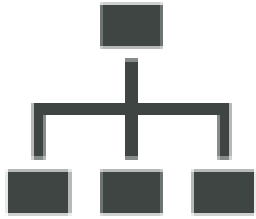


# Use inverted pyramid in lists

To maintain the highest standards of commitment and service, our focus in the year to come will be on:

- improving staff relations
- enhancing communications
- increasing public confidence
- raising awareness of our activities.

# When rewriting, put effort into:



the structure

- creating a reader-focused structure for your information
- putting main messages in your headings
- using the inverted pyramid for paragraphs
- using the inverted pyramid for lists.



the language

# What language do readers expect?

- Simple, straightforward sentences
- Precise, familiar words

# Sentence length can vary by medium

**How many words?**

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For printed documents

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For documents read on screen

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For emails and web content

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Aim for 15-20 words on average

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Aim for 12-15 words on average

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Aim for 9-12 words on average

---



write

# Break up long sentences

Further you must not grant any other security interest over collateral nor allow any lien to be created over it nor dispose of nor allow the disposal of collateral by sale or gift or lease or in any other way nor cause nor allow collateral to be taken out of the possession of the debtor who owns it, nor destroyed, damaged, endangered, disassembled, removed from the place where you are required to keep it or concealed from the creditor.

(79 words)



# Break up long sentences

You must not do anything or allow anything to happen that may damage or undermine your ownership of the property or our security interest in the property. (27 words)

You must not grant anyone else a security interest in the property, or allow anyone to take possession of it because you owe them money. (25 words)

You must not sell, give away, lease or dispose of the property, or allow it to be taken out of your possession. (22 words)

You must not destroy, damage, endanger or disassemble the property, or remove it from the place where you're required to keep it. (22 words)

You must not hide it from us. (7 words)

# Lists can help with long sentences

## **Act of terrorism**

means an act or series of acts, including the use of force or violence, of any person or group(s) of persons, whether acting alone or on behalf of or in connection with any organisation(s), committed for political, religious or ideological purposes including the intention to influence any government and/or to put the public in fear for such purposes.

---

**T**

**terrorism**

Any act by a person, alone or with an organisation or foreign government, who:

- uses or threatens force or violence
  - aims to create public fear
  - aims to resist or influence a government, or has ideological, religious, ethnic or similar aims.
- 

write

## Spot and remove clutter

Focus on the words you must have – words that carry the meaning or politeness. These are working words, which we sometimes string together with more words than we need.

Advice	Example	Fix
<b>Shorten wordy phrases</b>	in a number of in the event of	many when
<b>Look out for the little words: <i>in, of, to, as, by</i></b>	with regards to until such time as	about until
<b>Remove false starts</b>	There is There are There will be It is	Remove and start sentences with the topic.

## Spot and remove clutter

Focus on the words you must have – words that carry the meaning or politeness. These are working words, which we sometimes string together with more words than we need.

Advice	Example	Fix
<b>Change abstract nouns to verbs</b>	the development of	develop
	the installation of	install
<b>Watch for endings like -ment, -ion, -nce, -ncy, -ure, -ity</b>	the provision of	provide
	make an adjustment to	adjust, change
<b>Avoid saying the same thing twice</b>	first established	established
	in close proximity	close
	forward planning	planning

# Abstract nouns to verbs

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## Before

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We will **make an adjustment** to the process to **provide reassurance** to the users that we have **held a consultation** with the manufacturers on the subject of workplace safety.

---

---

## After

---

We will **adjust** the process to **reassure** the users that we have **consulted** the manufacturers about workplace safety.

---

## Write in the active voice

The active voice is when the actor of your sentence – the person or thing doing something – comes before the action (the verb). We use the active voice in conversation and in stories because it comes naturally to us. You want this same sense of ease for your readers.

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The active voice is more direct, easier to understand, and has an approachable tone.

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The passive voice is less direct, more formal and bureaucratic, wordier, and less clear.

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# Activity: passive to active

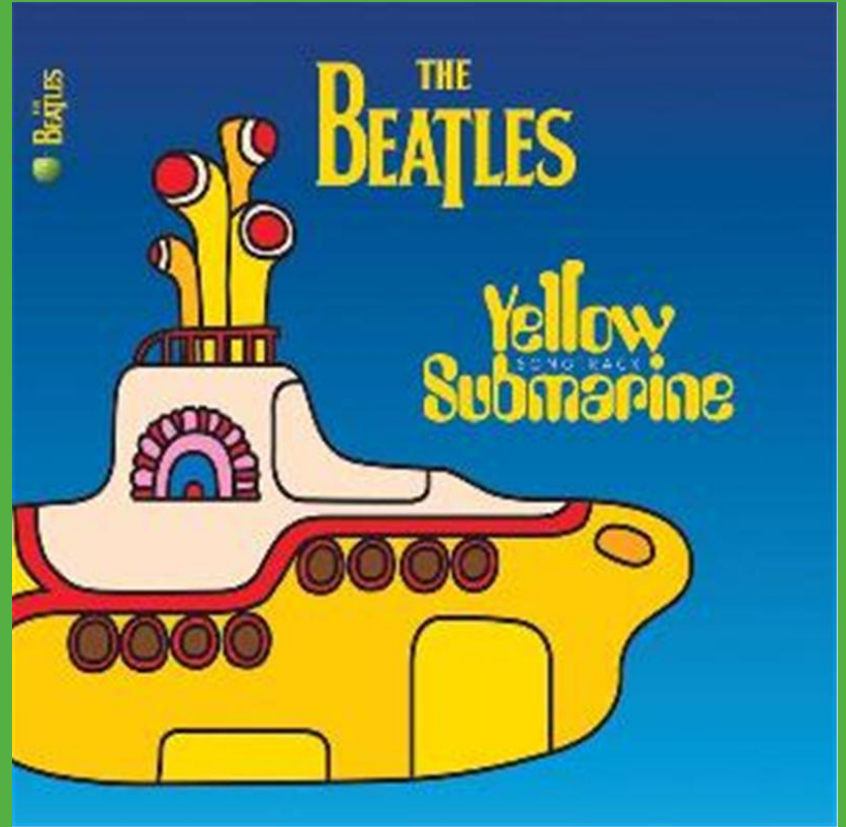
Restate the sentence so that it's in the active voice.

Ensure the actor comes before the action.



A yellow submarine is  
lived in by all of us.

We all live in a yellow  
submarine.





The instructions were followed carefully by Jo.

Jo followed the instructions.



Mistakes were made.

Charlie made mistakes.



A special cake was baked.

We baked a special cake.



# Precise, familiar words

## Less familiar

- Accessions
- The creditor
- Security interest
- Collateral which is goods

## More familiar

- Additions
- Us, our, we
- The property
- The property

# Explain technical terms

How you must treat the property (our security interest)

I have quashed, or overturned, the original decision.

... [first use of term]. [Term] means [definition].

# When rewriting, put effort into:



the language

- creating short, one-idea sentences
- reducing clutter
- using the active voice
- choosing precise, familiar words
- explaining technical terms.

# Activity: rewrite sentences

Rewrite the sentences in the handout.

Focus on:



the look



the structure



the language



# tdi.texas.gov/commissioner/initiatives/ Webinar-October-2021.html

## **October 14: Workshop: Practical plain language exercises**

This webinar will help you get started writing your company's materials in plain language and transform a dull, ordinary document into something customers easily understand.

[Try Some Plain Language Editing \(Word format, 1 page\)](#)

[Plain Language: Before and After \(PDF, 1 page\)](#)



## Try some plain language editing

In the sentences below:

1. find the main message and put it first
2. split longer sentences into single ideas
3. shorten wordy phrases
4. replace complex words with more familiar ones.



### Original

If Your luggage has been delayed, misdirected or temporarily misplaced for a period in excess of the period stated in Your Schedule of Insurance, We will reimburse the cost of purchasing emergency essential items of clothing and Personal Effects.

### COMPASSIONATE EMERGENCY VISIT

If You are travelling alone and are hospitalised for 5 or more consecutive days, We will pay for reasonable additional travelling and accommodation expenses (three star accommodation and economy class travel expenses but excluding telephone calls, meals, taxis and beverages) necessarily incurred by Your

### Copy for you to edit

If Your luggage has been delayed, misdirected or temporarily misplaced for a period in excess of the period stated in Your Schedule of Insurance, We will reimburse the cost of purchasing emergency essential items of clothing and Personal Effects.

### COMPASSIONATE EMERGENCY VISIT

If You are travelling alone and are hospitalised for 5 or more consecutive days, We will pay for reasonable additional travelling and accommodation expenses (three star accommodation and economy class travel expenses but excluding telephone calls, meals, taxis and beverages) necessarily incurred by Your

# Potential rewrite

If Your luggage has been delayed, misdirected or temporarily misplaced for a period in excess of the period stated in Your Schedule of Insurance, We will reimburse the cost of purchasing emergency essential items of clothing and Personal Effects.

We will reimburse the cost of buying emergency essential clothing and personal effects if your luggage goes missing for longer than the period stated in your schedule of insurance.

## COMPASSIONATE EMERGENCY VISIT

If You are travelling alone and are hospitalised for 5 or more consecutive days, We will pay for reasonable additional travelling and accommodation expenses (three star accommodation and economy class travel expenses but excluding telephone calls, meals, taxis and beverages) necessarily incurred by Your Spouse or one Immediate Family Member, who on the advice of a Medical Practitioner appointed by Us, travels to and remains with You until You are fit to resume the International Journey or return to Your Country of Residence, whichever occurs first.

## **We'll pay for a family member's travel in a medical emergency**

We'll pay for reasonable travel and accommodation expenses incurred by your spouse or one immediate family member. This applies if you're hospitalised for 5 or more days in a row while you're travelling alone.

Expenses we'll pay for are three-star accommodation and economy-class travel. We'll not pay for telephone calls, meals, taxis, and beverages.

We'll only pay if:

- a medical practitioner that we appoint says it's necessary
- your family member travels to and remains with you until you're fit to continue your international journey or return to your country of residence, whichever happens first.

## WEATHER CONDITIONS

If Your scheduled Public Conveyance transport is cancelled and/or Your pre-paid accommodation is damaged to an uninhabitable extent as a direct result of Weather Conditions, We will reimburse You the non-refundable portions of travel and/or accommodation arrangements paid by You or for which You are legally liable and the reasonable additional travel and accommodation expenses (three star accommodation and economy class travel expenses) incurred by You.

## **You're covered for disruptions caused by weather conditions**

Weather conditions may disrupt your travel. If so, we will reimburse you the non-refundable portions of your:

- travel costs if your scheduled public transport is cancelled
- accommodation costs if your pre-paid accommodation is too damaged for you to stay there.

We'll also pay the reasonable additional travel and accommodation expenses you incur. Specifically, we'll pay for three-star accommodation and economy class travel.

# Questions and answers