

Plain Language Course – Exercise File

A place to work on the exercises in the [Plain Language Course](#).

Suggested solutions can be found in this document and in the online course after each exercise.

Exercise One: How Well do you Understand?

Read the following text samples and try to figure out what they mean:

Sample Text 1:

All individuals who work with children or vulnerable adults, or have unsupervised access to children or vulnerable adults in the ordinary course of their employment, or in the practice of an occupation, or during the course of an education program and who are employed by or licensed by, or receive regular ongoing operating funds from the provincial government are covered under the Criminal Records Review Act.

Sample Text 2:

Under the Criminal Records Review Act, you must have a criminal record review conducted by the Criminal Records Review Program (CRRP) if you:

- Work with children or vulnerable adults, or
- Have unsupervised access to children or vulnerable adults during your employment, occupation or education, or
- Are licensed by or receiving funding from the provincial government

Takeaways/answers on next page.

Exercise One Takeaways

If you gave up on reading the first paragraph and just moved on to the next one, you are not alone. Giving up is a common reaction when we come across text that is dense and hard to read.

Both text samples are about determining who needs to have a criminal record check performed.

Notes on Text Sample 1:

- Message is buried in a long and confusing run-on sentence
- Even if part of the sentence applies to you, it is hard to figure out what to do
- You might ignore the information altogether or contact a government representative for clarification.

Notes on Text Sample 2:

- A little shorter (55 vs. 66 words)
- Conveys the same information much more clearly
- Easy to scan, skip over the parts that don't apply
- Helps the reader focus on the parts that are relevant

Exercise Two: What are they trying to say?

What is really being said in the following real-world writing samples?

1. A doctor records on a patient's chart: "Patient failed to fulfill his wellness potential."

2. U.S. Army talks about "vertically deployed anti-personnel devices."

3. Civilian mechanics at a McClellan Air Force base in California are placed on "non-duty, non-pay status."

4. The Massachusetts Department of Public Works speaks of "ground-mounted confirmatory route markers."

5. A store in St. Louis advertises "semi-antique" rugs.

Takeaways/answers on next page.

Exercise Two Takeaways

Answers:

1. Patient is dead
2. Bombs
3. They were fired
4. Road signs
5. Used rugs

Exercise Three: Website Comparison

Start by clicking each link to load up the sites in new windows or tabs, but try to avoid looking at the pages right away.

[Sample Page #1](#)

[Sample Page #2](#)

For each one:

1. Set a timer for 10 seconds
2. View the page
3. Hide the page from view and write down everything you remember about what was on it

| Page 1 | Page 2 |
|--------|--------|
| | |

Takeaways/answers on next page.

Exercise Three Takeaways

Consider the following questions:

- What did you notice first?
- What stood out on the page?
- What was the content about?
- What additional information do you think you'd find if you spent more time on the site?
- What is the target audience?

These sites take quite a different approach. Think about the pros and cons of each.

What if it were urgent or important?

Now consider how the design considerations of these sites might change if they were about **Automated External Defibrillators** (AEDs) instead of made up objects.

Search for a couple of sites that explain how to use an AED and think about which one you would want to refer to in an emergency situation.

Exercise Four: A Structured Overview

Below is a jumbled paragraph about a common North American breakfast food.

Try to unscramble the information and draft an outline of appropriate headings that could help to structure this information in a more logical and helpful way.

Toast is most commonly eaten with butter or margarine spread over it, and may be served with preserves, spreads, or other toppings in addition to or instead of butter. You may need more slices because it is so good. Later, simple devices were created to toast bread in the fire, such as wire frames to cook the toast more evenly. Some sandwiches, such as the BLT, call for toast to be used rather than bread. The practice of toasting bread became popular in the Roman Empire. Toast with jam or marmalade is popular. The word "toast" actually comes from the Latin "tostum," which means "to burn or scorch." You will need a toaster and a slice of bread. Toast is considered by many to be delicious! The first breads were likely toasted by laying them in front of the fire on a hot stone. Toast is a common breakfast food.

Overview:

Takeaways/answers on next page.

Exercise Four Takeaways

Sample solution:

1. What is Toast?
2. How To Make Toast
3. History of Toast

In the sample solution, the topics flow from most relevant and important to least, as perceived by the writer. It could be argued that the topic of most interest to readers might be "How to Make Toast", in which case it should be moved to the top.

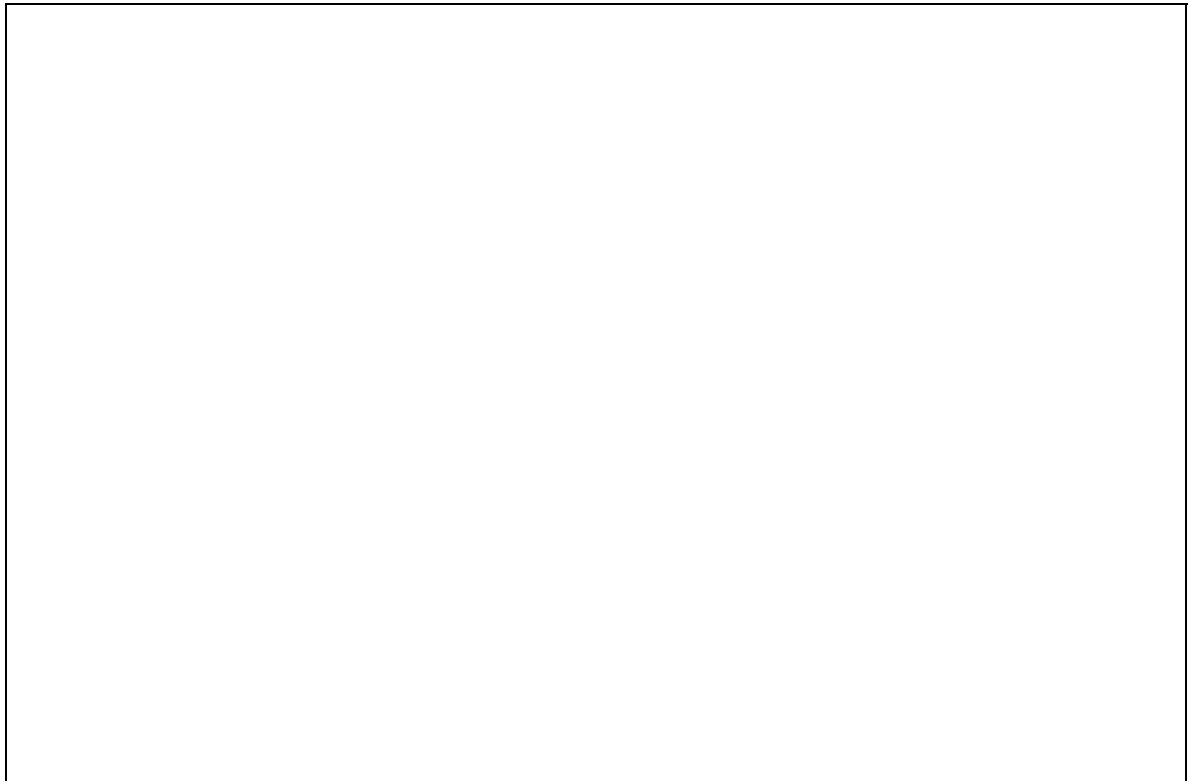
Exercise Five: Chunking and Headings

Practise chunking and headings.

1. Break the following text into smaller pieces based on key topics
2. Add a relevant heading to each chunk

Sample Text:

In the United States, large globe artichokes are frequently prepared by removing all but 5–10 mm of the stem. Sometimes they may have thorns which can interfere with eating. To remove thorns, around a quarter of each scale can be cut off. To cook, the artichoke is boiled or steamed. A cooked, unseasoned artichoke has a delicate flavour. While the outer stem is often tough and bitter, the core of the stem tastes similar to the artichoke heart, and is edible. Salt may be added to the water if boiling artichokes. Covered artichokes, in particular those that have been cut, can turn brown due to enzymatic browning and chlorophyll oxidation. Placing them in water slightly acidified with vinegar or lemon juice can prevent the discoloration. Leaves are often removed one at a time, and the fleshy base eaten with hollandaise, vinegar, butter, mayonnaise, aioli, lemon juice, or other sauces. The fibrous upper part of each leaf is usually discarded. The heart is eaten when the inedible choke has been peeled away from the base and discarded. The thin leaves covering the choke are also edible.



Takeaways/answers on next page.

Exercise Five Takeaways

See below for a possible answer. Note that one of the sentences (“While the outer stem is often tough...”) has been moved to a more logical position in the information flow:

Preparation

In the United States, large globe artichokes are frequently prepared by removing all but 5–10 mm of the stem. Sometimes they may have thorns which can interfere with eating. To remove thorns, around a quarter of each scale can be cut off.

Cooking

To cook, the artichoke is boiled or steamed. A cooked, unseasoned artichoke has a delicate flavour. Salt may be added to the water if boiling artichokes.

Preventing Browning

Covered artichokes, in particular those that have been cut, can turn brown due to enzymatic browning and chlorophyll oxidation. Placing them in water slightly acidified with vinegar or lemon juice can prevent the discoloration.

Eating an Artichoke

Leaves are often removed one at a time, and the fleshy base eaten with hollandaise, vinegar, butter, mayonnaise, aioli, lemon juice, or other sauces. The fibrous upper part of each leaf is usually discarded. The heart is eaten when the inedible choke has been peeled away from the base and discarded. While the outer stem is often tough and bitter, the core of the stem tastes similar to the artichoke heart, and is edible. The thin leaves covering the choke are also edible.

Note that a lot more could be done to convert the text above to plain language. For example, the entire passage is written in the passive voice. Try changing it to the active voice and revising the text further after you complete Exercise Nine.

Exercise Six: Latinate

Historically, English has two principle streams: Latinate (via Norman French) and Anglo-Saxon (Old English).

Latinate words are often multi-syllabic, dry and have simpler substitutes:

Latinate vs. Anglo-Saxon Words

| Latinate | Anglo-Saxon |
|----------|-------------|
| Canine | Dog |
| Domicile | House |

For historical reasons, Latinate is commonly used in government, law and higher education. Many argue it is used to intimidate, disempower, obfuscate and make the speaker feel important.

For fun, try to translate the following Latinate back into everyday expressions.

1. Scintillate, scintillate, asteroid diminutive.

2. Members of an avian species with identical plumage will congregate.

3. It is futile to become lachrymose over precipitately departed lacteal fluids.

4. The stylus is more potent than the claymore.

5. It is fruitless to indoctrinate a superannuated canine with innovative manoeuvres.

Takeaways/answers on next page.

Exercise Six Takeaways

Answers:

1. Twinkle, twinkle, little star
2. Birds of a feather flock together
3. No use crying over spilled milk
4. The pen is mightier than the sword
5. You can't teach an old dog new tricks

Exercise Seven: Sentence Shortening

Break the following sentences into two to simplify them:

1. The human resources department will process your unemployment insurance application and let you know within two weeks if you are successful.

2. Once you are hired you will require first aid training but be aware that the training will have to occur before your first day of work.

3. Although the ministry requires you to apply for coverage before your contract is up, Form B can be submitted anytime during the calendar year whether or not your contract is completed.

Takeaways/answers on next page.

Exercise Seven Takeaways

Suggested Solutions:

1. The human resources department will process your unemployment insurance application. They will let you know within two weeks if you are successful.
2. Once you are hired you will require first aid training. Be aware that the training will have to occur before your first day of work.
3. The ministry requires you to apply for coverage before your contract is up. Form B can be submitted anytime during the calendar year, whether or not your contract is completed.

Tips

Look for conjunctions like "and", "but" and "then" as places to split a longer sentence into two.

Exercise Eight: Cut Wordy Phrases

Match the unnecessarily long phrase with its shorter counterpart:

| Wordy Phrase | Correct Match | Short Phrases |
|-----------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| a number of | | please |
| owing to the fact that | | change |
| at the present time | | about |
| in a timely manner | | to |
| in an effort to | | if |
| make a modification to | | because |
| in regard to | | now |
| provide the opportunity for | | then |
| it is requested that you | | promptly |
| in the event of | | many |
| after this is accomplished | | let |

Takeaways/answers on next page.

Exercise Eight Takeaways

Answers:

Phrase Matching Exercise Answers

| Wordy Phrase | Equivalent Short Phrase |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| a number of | many |
| owing to the fact that | because |
| at the present time | now |
| in a timely manner | promptly |
| in an effort to | to |
| make a modification to | change |
| in regard to | about |
| provide the opportunity for | let |
| it is requested that you | please |
| in the event of | if |
| after this is accomplished | then |

Exercise Nine: Changing Verbs from Passive to Active

Sentences written in the passive voice tend to be longer and it is less clear who is performing the action.

Example:

Passive: The pole was struck by lightning.

Active: Lightning struck the pole.

Convert the following sentences from passive to active voice:

1. The effects of an opioid overdose can be reversed by Naloxone.

2. Today in a speech to the Union of BC Municipalities, a new program was announced by the premier.

3. The citizens of B.C. are served by B.C.'s elected leaders and public servants.

4. One type of air pollution is caused by hydrocarbons.

5. The dividends of a strong and diversified economy and prudent fiscal management are delivered by British Columbia's fifth-consecutive balanced budget.

6. It was decided by the court that the contract was unconstitutional.

7. The kayak was invented by Indigenous people for transportation and fishing.

8. The original trusses and the repair were designed by the same registered professional.

9. The tax applies even if the insurance was purchased by a non-resident on your behalf.

10. Today's blog was written by staff working on elder abuse prevention.

Takeaways/answers on next page.

Exercise Nine Takeaways

There are many possible answers to these exercises - here are some sample revisions:

1. Naloxone can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose.
2. Today in a speech to the Union of BC Municipalities, the premier announced a new program.
3. B.C.'s elected leaders and public servants serve the citizens of B.C.
4. Hydrocarbons cause one type of air pollution.
5. British Columbia's fifth-consecutive balanced budget delivers the dividends of a strong and diversified economy and prudent fiscal management.
6. The court decided that the contract was unconstitutional.
7. Indigenous people invented the kayak for transportation and fishing.
8. The same registered professional designed the original trusses and the repair.
9. The tax applies even if a non-resident purchased the insurance on your behalf.
10. Staff working on elder abuse prevention wrote today's blog.

Note that there are cases when the passive voice is appropriate, but the active voice tends to be stronger and more direct and therefore contributes to clearer, simpler writing.

Now put your active voice conversion skills to the test by editing your response to Exercise Five. Change the general description of artichoke preparing and eating into a set of instructions.

Exercise Ten: Sentence Simplification

Use clues such as prepositions to find places where the following sentences can be reworded and shortened:

- 1. She is going to order supplies for the party.
- 2. She organized a meeting during which she consulted with the director.
- 3. The training gives you the opportunity to increase your skills and abilities in using CMS Lite.
- 4. I am interested in the topic about which you wrote.
- 5. There is no current estimate of the number of boxes of records in the possession of the school.
- 6. A knowledge of correct web style is the duty of all of the writers of the content of this website.
- 7. The politician responded to the allegations with vehemence.
- 8. She was disturbed by the violent images in the movie.
- 9. Their attempt to achieve a reduction in paperwork was unsuccessful.
- 10. The best outcome for this scenario would be a change in policy.
- 11. It is imperative that you do not leave the waffle iron belonging to Tom unattended as it has a broken fuse and it could catch fire.

Takeaways/answers on next page.

Exercise Ten Takeaways

Suggested solutions:

1. She will order supplies for the party. (Simplify and activate the verb!)
2. She consulted with the director. (Remove redundant and unnecessary phrases)
3. The training lets you increase your CMS Lite skills. (Simplify sentence form, remove wordy phrases)
4. The topic you wrote about interests me. (Activate the verb, use a conversational tone)
5. We have no current estimate of how many boxes of records the school possesses. (Reduce prepositions)
6. All content writers for this website must know correct web style. (Find hidden verbs, activate the verb, reduce prepositions)
7. The politician responded vehemently to the allegations. (Replace prepositional phrase with adverb)
8. She was disturbed by the movie's violent images. (Use the possessive)
9. Their attempt to reduce paperwork was unsuccessful. (Reveal the hidden verb)
10. The best outcome would be a change in policy. (Remove unnecessary wordy phrases)
11. Don't leave Tom's waffle iron unattended! Its fuse is broken so it could catch fire. (Use contractions, use possessives, split long sentences)

Tips

The following can be signs of passivity - watch for these markers of opportunities to simplify your writing:

- Verbs and nouns ending in "ing"
- Prepositions (is, to, since, than, on, as, at, by, for, after)
- Verbs that use a form of "to be" followed by another verb. Examples:
 - has been painted
 - is going to order
 - is being recorded
 - were regarded

Exercise Eleven: Evaluating Sample Text

Here some sample text to convert to plain language:

Effective June 1, 2017, in response to client feedback, hiring managers are no longer required to submit competition documentation to the BC Public Service Agency to confirm a hire.

Eliminating the requirement to submit competition documentation to complete a hire does not remove the requirement for hiring managers to retain competition documentation. Hiring managers are still responsible for documenting and retaining all competition files, as they currently do, for a minimum of two years.

Instructions:

1. Copy the text into Microsoft Word.
2. Use the spell checker to obtain a Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level for the page. Aim for a grade 6-8 reading level.
3. Use what you have learned in this course and the [Plain Language Checklist](#) to edit the text. Simplify, clarify, and improve the content.
4. Use [Hemingway App](#) to review the page content for additional tips.

Takeaways/answers on next page.

Exercise Eleven Takeaways

Sample Revised Text:

Hiring managers must keep competition files for at least two years. They don't need to submit them to the BC Public Service Agency.

This policy changed June 1, 2017.

Notice the following:

- The new text passes all of the Hemingway App's tests
- The readability score has dropped to grade 5 – lower than our target! Can you make it even lower without compromising the clarity of the message?
- The phrase “competition files” is government jargon. We have not changed it because our target audience is government hiring managers, and the meaning will be clear to them
- The word count has dropped to 29 – less than half of the original text!
- The effective date of the change has been moved to the end as that information is less important than the changed policy itself
- The reason for the change has been omitted as it is not likely important to the audience. Is there other information that could be left out?

Tips

There are limits to the usefulness of tools like the Hemingway App! Don't compromise clarity or lose track of what you're trying to say just to make it easier to read.

Exercise Twelve: Evaluating a Page Using a Plain Language Checklist

This exercise is the same as Exercise 11 except that you have the opportunity to select the text you want to edit.

1. Choose a webpage to review. Ideally, you would select either a page you have written or a page that you have the power to edit, but any page will do.
2. Copy the content of the page into Microsoft Word.
3. Use the spell checker to obtain a Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level for the page. Aim for 6-8 or below, depending on your audience.
4. Use what you have learned in this course and the [Plain Language Checklist](#) to edit the page. Simplify, clarify, and improve the content.
5. Use [Hemingway App](#) to review the page content for additional tips.

Page Content for Revision:

Takeaways/answers on next page.

Exercise Twelve Takeaways

- What tools did you find the most helpful?
- Do some techniques work better for the type of content you will be writing?
- Think about the process you will use in future to make sure you're writing in Plain Language

Review of Key Considerations

Does your revised text meet the following criteria from the Plain Language Checklist?

- Scan-ability: Look at the page with fresh eyes. Is it easy to scan and pick out main points?
- Purpose: Is it clear who and what the page is for?
- Know your [audience](#). Plain language at high levels, technical detail below
- Start with the most important information. Put details below
- Keep [sentences short](#)
- Keep paragraphs short and on topic
- [Cut unnecessary words](#)
- Use the [shortest word](#)
- Choose everyday words. Avoid acronyms and jargon
- [Define acronyms](#) the first time you use them
- Write in the present tense
- Use [active voice](#). "We mailed your form on May 1" not "Your form was sent on May 1."
- [Tone](#): use conversational pronouns (you, us, our, we). Use contractions (we're instead of we are)