

The Clarity Kit

Effective Communication for Municipalities



Promoting Clear Communications in Your Municipality

Frequently Asked Questions About Clear Language

Top 10 Clear Writing Tips

Clear Language at Work – Before and After Examples

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Why Use Clear Language?

Clear language isn't an issue only for our members who don't have much formal education, or for those whose first language isn't English or French. It is an issue for most of us who, from time to time, have difficulty with complicated written material. Or who are just drowning in paper.

Tamara Levine,
Co-ordinator
CLC Workplace Literacy
Project, Briarpatch
Magazine, 2002

What is Clear Language?

Clear language is an approach to communication that puts the reader first – it focuses on action. Clear design means using the visual aspects of communication, such as type, formatting, and graphics, to help readers get the message. Why are clear language and design so important?

First of all, clear language is an inclusive approach to communication. It helps to make information accessible for everyone. In this sense, clear language and clear design are aspects of the issue of literacy.

There are a number of reasons why clear language is growing in importance for the municipal workplace. For one thing, technology has changed our jobs. With personal computers, electronic communication and the World Wide Web, almost all of us have become writers. Unfortunately, most of us were not trained to write for the modern workplace.

New technology also means working with new and more complex equipment and dealing with new workplace hazards. Now, more than ever, we need to be able to read and understand instructions, pay attention to warnings and follow safe procedures.

Municipal workplaces have changed as well. Municipalities are bigger and much more complex now. When we don't communicate well with the public, with co-workers and in labour/management relations, we may face a host of problems.

What Problems Does Unclear Language Cause in Municipal Workplaces?

Communication Breakdown

Unclear policies and procedures can cause a breakdown in human resource processes. They can prevent people from getting access to benefits. Even something as basic as the vacation policy can cause real

problems if people don't understand how it works. At its worst, the breakdown in communication can result in grievances, human rights complaints and poor labour/management relations.

Unsafe Workplaces

Unclear language can, and does, cost lives. When health and safety procedures are confusing or complex, people don't read them. Without good information, workers may expose themselves, and others, to danger. Municipalities leave themselves open to costly lawsuits and serious liability.

Bureaucratic Culture

Unclear language can make your workplace seem bureaucratic. It contributes to vague decisions, needless delays and a climate of secrecy that makes people distrustful or frustrated. It leads to unproductive meetings and a failure to make timely decisions. It breaks down team spirit and erodes working relationships. People go away from meetings feeling confused and excluded – especially new and younger employees.

People feel frustrated and fearful about being able to meet the demands of the workplace – not because they lack the skills, but because unclear language creates a lot more 'hoops to jump through'. It takes longer to read, and can cause errors and misunderstandings that take time and energy to sort out – time and energy that could have been spent more productively.

Disengaged Citizens

The errors and wasted time that result from a lack of clarity in municipal workplaces cost money – taxpayers' money. When people feel they are not getting the services they pay for, they become cynical about municipal government. When citizens cannot understand the processes of government, they don't get involved.

Employees need to know that this is how the organization wants to be perceived and how they are expected to contribute. Being part of an organization that is trying not to be bureaucratic can improve job satisfaction.

What's Happening in Clear Language?
(CAMA & CUPE)

The job of the collective agreement is to let people know their rights and responsibilities. Lots of grievances arise because supervisors don't know the collective agreement either. Clear language is as much for them as it is for the members of your local.

Union steward, Do Your Members Know Their Contract? (CUPE, 2003)

Who Benefits Most from Clear Language and Design?

- People with too much to read and too little time
- People who have lower levels of education and literacy
- People who are new to Canada and still learning English or French
- Younger people and new employees who are still learning the language of the workplace
- People who have learning disabilities or visual impairments

How Do Municipalities Benefit from Clear Language?

Transparency in Municipal Government

Clear language and design are essential tools in the movement toward transparency and accountability in municipal government. Good communication flows in two directions.

Towns and cities keep their citizens better informed about the services they pay for and the issues that affect them.

At the same time, clear communication makes citizens feel they are dealing with an open and accessible government – one that wants them to get involved, have their say, and make an impact.

An Inclusive, Service-driven Municipal Workplace

Clear communication has a huge effect on the quality of working life for municipal employees. For managers, it means major time savings and a sense that energy is going toward productive public service. The chance to improve communication skills on-the-job can lead to career advancement.

For unionized workers, clear communication can mean these things and more. Many unionized workers rely on technical and safety instructions to do their jobs effectively. Clearly written workplace information can mean the difference

between smoothly running municipal services and chaos. Clearly written health and safety information can mean the difference between life and death.

A Democratic Union with an Informed Membership

Clear communication in the union means that more people know what's going on and what rights they've won. For instance, the Hospital Employees Union in British Columbia created a version of their contract that explains the different clauses and answers common questions. It has been very popular with the members.

Having a document like this frees up a lot of time for stewards. Instead of having to explain the contract over and over again, they can get on with other union activities. Meanwhile, members understand their contract better and give better input during preparations for contract negotiations.

Questions People Often Ask About the Clear Language Approach

Q Won't writing in clear language take too long?

A It's true that it takes time to learn new techniques for writing clearly and to 'unlearn' old habits. But in the long-run, writing clearly saves time. The clear language approach asks you to invest time at the beginning to get a clear picture of:

- *what* you want to write,
- *why* you are writing it, and
- *who* the audience is.

Research into writing behaviour shows that when people invest time up-front to do this kind of planning, they spend up to 50% less time actually writing. Also, they have less 'writer's block', they need fewer revisions, and they are more likely to get the results they wanted.

Q Won't clear communication cost too much?

A Bringing clear language and design into the workplace will certainly mean some costs for training and support. Weigh that investment against the longer term financial benefits of clear language. A number of studies have shown that clear language saves money spent on fixing errors, re-doing jobs, and getting extra help to understand a task.

For instance, an outreach campaign aimed at getting more families to take advantage of the Saskatchewan Employment Supplement improved participation by 42%. They got this result with half the budget of the previous campaign – all because they revised the brochure using clear language and design.

Q If I write simply, will some of my readers feel insulted?

A First, last, and always, good communication is about respecting your audience. If you are writing for busy colleagues, get to the point and don't oversimplify. Give them the information they need, but leave out what they already know. Far from

being insulted, they'll thank you for not wasting their time.

If you are writing for a broad general public, respect their range of educational and language backgrounds by choosing commonly understood terms and explaining new concepts. Respect them as adults by adopting a friendly, direct, helpful tone.

Now, test your draft with someone you respect – someone who does not know much about your subject. Ask them if your tone reflects the respect you feel for them. Then you'll know.

Q I write about specialized subjects. Does the clear language approach prevent me from using technical terms?

A No. It's important to introduce your readers to technical terms they will need to carry out tasks, get services or take part in decision making. Just make sure that you explain the terms. Leave out any 'jargon' that serves no real purpose.

Q I work with legal documents. If we use different language, will it stand up in law?

A Since our legal system is built on case law and precedents, many lawyers worry that new, clearer language could be challenged in court. But that's not what's happening. Instead, consumers are going to court to challenge contracts written in 'legalese' – and they're winning.

In the 2002 *Smith v. Co-operators Insurance* case, the Supreme Court of Canada interpreted the statutory obligation to "provide consumer information" as a duty to communicate "in straightforward and clear language, directed towards an unsophisticated person."

To find out more about the worldwide movement toward clarity in legal drafting, visit the Web site of **Clarity**, an international association promoting plain legal language at: www.adler.demon.co.uk/clarity/home/about.htm

Q We haven't had any complaints about unclear language. If it isn't broken, why fix it?

A You may not have a problem. On the other hand, your problem may be hiding. Think about your own life. When the garbage pick-up schedule changes on your street, do you read the new schedule, or do you peek out the window to see what the neighbours are doing? Often, instead of complaining, people try to cope with the problem on their own.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Do we ask for feedback from our audience in a way that makes it easy for them to point out problems with our communications?
- Are there people in our audience who might feel intimidated by complex language and ashamed to admit they do not understand it?

Another way to find out more about whether a lack of clarity is affecting your workplace is to conduct a Clarity Audit™ using the tool included in this kit. A Clarity Audit will help you and your co-workers get a sense of the strengths and weaknesses of your communications and lead you to an action plan for making any needed improvements.

Q Is the clear language approach associated with any political party or agenda?

A No. Clear language is part of a more general movement in western democracies toward accountability, transparency and good government. This direction is supported by all political parties. In Canada, organized labour has been a leader in promoting clear language as a tool for building more democratic and inclusive unions. In the United Kingdom and Australia, clear language has been on the public agenda since the 1970s.

Q This is not the way we were taught to write in school. Is this 'good English'?

A Most people are not taught to write for the workplace when they are at school. Clear language is a more modern writing style, but it does not break rules of grammar or spelling. It's very good English!

Q Our municipality has a skilled communications department. Why do we need to use clear language?

A Your communication department is a centre of expertise and one of your most valuable assets. But good communication skills have become important for everyone in the modern workplace – not just those who handle external communications. For instance, forty years ago, most managers dictated letters and reports. Today, people write their own reports and handle huge amounts of their own correspondence through email.

Everyone can benefit from training that helps them get to the point and get the results they need. And in municipal government, it's important that the training includes all levels of decision making. That's because the approval process can change documents along the way. Without clear language training, some of those changes might make the document harder to read.

Q We produce so many documents in our workplace. Do we have to put *everything* into clear language?

A You don't have to do it all at once. Do it strategically. Use the Clarity Audit to help you identify the 'top tier' of documents that are in most need of revision. Select the documents that will have the biggest impact on your organization in terms of time saved or errors avoided. One or two may be enough to get started.

Measure the improved results you get with this small group of documents and celebrate your success. Build on the energy and momentum you have created to move on to the next tier of documents that need revision.

Case Study

Los Angeles County

With 10 million citizens and 120 thousand employees to serve them, Los Angeles has the largest county administration in the United States. In 2002, the county's Quality and Productivity Commission funded a pilot clear language project in the Department of Consumer Affairs. The results were remarkable.

The department hired clear language consultant Bill DuBay to work with staff 'champions' on the project. Bill developed training programs for the county's Quality and Productivity Managers as well as the staff. Together, they rewrote tip sheets, Web pages, form letters, and manuals.

Measuring the Results

"One thing we did in our little pilot project was to revise some phone scripts for the department's Small Claims Advisor program," says DuBay. Consumers who call this program can choose from more than 50 recorded messages on topics such as filing a small claim or making an appeal. After listening to the message, callers who need more help can ask to be connected to a volunteer advisor.

Before the pilot, an average of 5,000 callers asked to talk to an advisor each month. Since the clearer messages went on line, that number has dropped to 3,500 – a 30% reduction. This frees up the advisors to spend more time with callers who have complex questions. Another big bonus is that caller wait time has been drastically reduced.

Learning from the Project

What were the 'lessons learned' from this project about changing the communications culture in such a big organization? Bill DuBay stresses support from the top. "All the up-front investment requires strong commitment by the top officials of the organization. It cannot be done, however, by executive [order]. It requires a good deal of training and method."

Tim Bissell, Deputy Director of the Department of Consumer Affairs, points out that doing a baseline study like the one done for the small claims call centre is a key to success. These kinds of measurable results are a great motivator for managers, he says, and it's not hard to find something to measure. Most departments send out form letters, for instance, and it's easy to measure the number of calls and inquiries a department receives before and after redesigning the form letter.

"The positive results of this project were not surprising", says Tim Bissell. "This project confirms that plain language is one of the best investments the county can make."

For more information on this program, visit <http://qpc.co.la.ca.us/pl.asp>



**BACK TO
BASICS!**

**Plain Language
Works Best**

County of Los Angeles
Quality and Productivity Commission
Plain Language Committee

For additional information call (213) 974-1361 or visit <http://qpc.co.la.ca.us>

Case Study

Saskatchewan Employment Supplement (SES)

During the 1990s, the province of Saskatchewan designed a group of programs to help people make the move from social assistance to jobs. One of those programs, the Saskatchewan Employment Supplement, provided a cash incentive to work. The benefit actually increased until people were earning enough income to sustain themselves; then it tapered off like traditional assistance.

Six years later, there was a 41% drop in the number of families receiving assistance – 6,800 families and almost 15,000 children. The province had its lowest social assistance case-load since 1991. A fairly successful program, wouldn't you say?

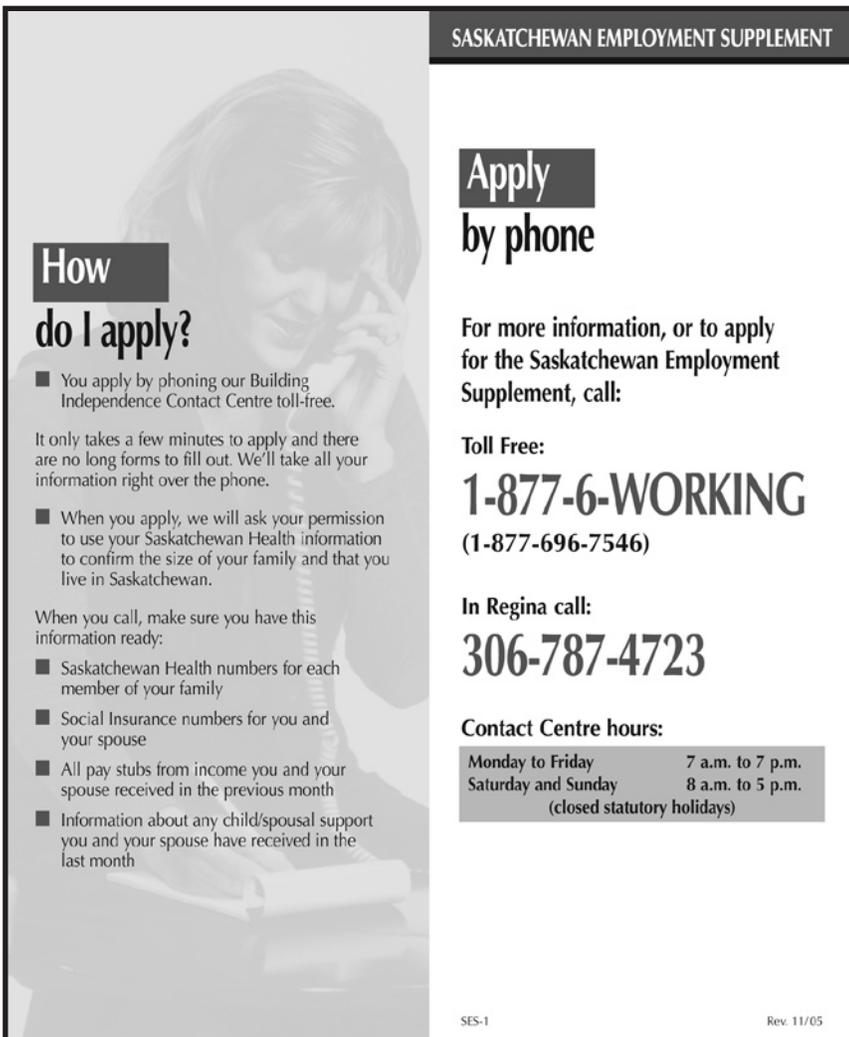
So why had so many of the families eligible for SES failed to apply? To find out, Saskatchewan Social Services developed a profile of eligible applicants and held a focus group. They discovered that the knowledge level about the program was very low. When focus group participants were given the description of the program from the brochure, only one person felt she had a better understanding.

What the Readers Said

Most of the participants said the brochure was vague, lacked details, and did not help them to understand the program. So Bill Carney, then Director of Communications and a clear language champion, had the brochure revised using clear language and design. When the new brochure was tested with focus groups, there was 100% interest in the SES program.

The Results are In

Through a comprehensive direct mail program, Carney blanketed Saskatchewan's low income population with the new brochure. The result within two years: 42% more people from the target group were receiving the Saskatchewan Employment Supplement.



SASKATCHEWAN EMPLOYMENT SUPPLEMENT

How do I apply?

- You apply by phoning our Building Independence Contact Centre toll-free.

It only takes a few minutes to apply and there are no long forms to fill out. We'll take all your information right over the phone.

- When you apply, we will ask your permission to use your Saskatchewan Health information to confirm the size of your family and that you live in Saskatchewan.

When you call, make sure you have this information ready:

- Saskatchewan Health numbers for each member of your family
- Social Insurance numbers for you and your spouse
- All pay stubs from income you and your spouse received in the previous month
- Information about any child/spousal support you and your spouse have received in the last month

Apply by phone

For more information, or to apply for the Saskatchewan Employment Supplement, call:

Toll Free:
1-877-6-WORKING
(1-877-696-7546)

In Regina call:
306-787-4723

Contact Centre hours:

Monday to Friday	7 a.m. to 7 p.m.
Saturday and Sunday	8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
(closed statutory holidays)	

SES-1 Rev. 11/05

Before and After

Northlands Park and CUPE Local 30

Northlands Park, an Edmonton community organization, has a proud history going back to 1879. It manages major Alberta events such as the Capital EX and the Canadian Finals Rodeo, with 1,620 staff and a host of volunteers.

In the summer of 2004, CUPE Local 30 and Northlands Park agreed in principle to put their collective agreement in clear language. Early in 2005, Beverley Norman, CUPE Education Rep, delivered a clear language workshop to three reps from Local 30 and four managers from Northlands Park.

In the workshop, the union and employer worked through two clauses in the collective agreement. In both cases, they were able to agree on clear language versions. They continue to work on a plain language version of the agreement.¹

Before

7.05 Supplementation of Compensation

If a permanent employee of Northlands is prevented from performing his work with Northlands in excess of five (5) consecutive working days due to an occupational accident or illness that occurs during the course of his work for Northlands, and the accident is recognized by the Workers' Compensation Board as compensable within the meaning of the Worker's Compensation Act, Northlands will supplement the award of the Worker's Compensation Board for loss of wages and any other allowances provided as the result of a compensable accident together with the supplementation by Northlands will equal the normal net pay of the employee for the class or position to which he is permanently appointed. This amount shall be subject to the normal deductions of the employee concerned. Payment shall commence upon the execution of an assignment by the employee to Northlands of his compensation for loss of wages plus other allowances provided as a result of a compensable accident and shall continue until the Worker's Compensation Board certifies that the employee is able to return to work or until granted a permanent pension by the Workers' Compensation Board, whichever may be the sooner. Said supplementation shall not be payable to any permanent employee entitled to compensation after pension age if such an employee is entitled to any pension, or after the employee's sixty-fifth (65) birthday if such an employee is not entitled to a pension.

After

7.05 Workers' Compensation

If you are a permanent employee injured at work, you will be paid by the Workers' Compensation Board (WCB) for the first five days of your injury. After five days, you will be paid by Northlands Park.

You will receive your normal net pay (take home).

Your net pay will be based on your permanent job classification. This will continue until:

- You are able to return to work or,
- You receive a WCB pension or,
- You reach 65 years of age.

¹ These examples come from the current collective agreement prepared by Northlands Park and CUPE Local 30. They appear in CUPE Local 30 Literacy News, March, 2005.

Northlands Park
and
CUPE Local 30

(continued)

Before

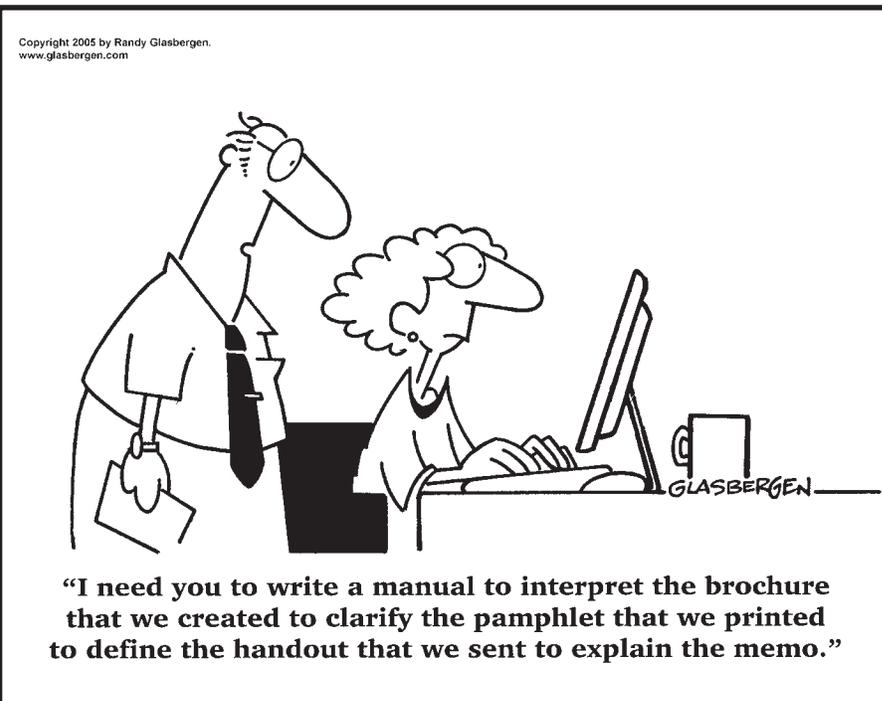
8.02 In the event that a holiday occurs on a Saturday or a Sunday the following working day(s) shall be considered the day(s) in lieu. Employees working on either or both days shall receive premium pay on either one of the days worked. If employees prefer days off in lieu of time worked on designated holidays, it shall be by mutual consent (see section 5.01.02). In the event a designated holiday is coincident with an employee’s day off, the employee shall be allowed the next scheduled working day as a day off with pay.

After

8.02 If a holiday falls on your regular working day, you will get that day off with pay.

If a holiday falls on your regular day off, you will get the next working day off instead.

If you work on the holiday, you will be paid at 2X your regular rate of pay.



Before and After Greater Vancouver Municipal Bylaw

After taking a clear language course, Rick Novosel, a Park Operator with Greater Vancouver Regional District Parks and Greenways, became a plain language champion. When the opportunity came up to rewrite a parks bylaw in plain language, he was ready for the challenge.

Rick did the first drafts and then called on the assistance of Christine Mowat of Wordsmith Associates Communications Consultants Ltd. Here is a selection from the old bylaw and the new draft version.²

Before

10. COMMERCIAL SERVICES, ACTIVITIES OR DEMONSTRATIONS

- (1) No person shall sell, exchange or barter or expose or display for sale, any goods, materials or services whatsoever, including but not limited to food and refreshments, nor shall any person conduct any business or commercial activity in a Regional Park or a Regional Trail unless that person has the prior express written authorization of the Parks Manager or a valid Park Permit.
- (2) No person shall post, affix, deliver, paint, publish or distribute any notice, advertisement, sign, placard or hand-bill or any kind whatsoever in a Regional Park or Regional Trail unless that person has the prior express written authorization of the Parks Manager or a valid Park Permit.
- (3) No person shall operate or station any Commercial Vehicle or any Motor Vehicle displaying advertising or equipped with a public address system in a Regional Park or a Regional Trail for the purpose of advertising, promoting, demonstrating or attracting attention unless that person has the prior express written authorization of the Parks Manager or a valid Park Permit.

After

13. Commercial Services, Activities, or Demonstrations

- a. Unless he or she has the *Parks Manager's* written authorization or a valid *park permit* allowing the activity, a person in a *regional park* must not
 - i. Sell, barter, or display for sale any goods, services, or materials, including food and refreshments.
 - ii. Conduct any business or commercial activity, whether paid for in advance of, during, or following the activity.
 - iii. Post, deliver, paint, publish, or distribute any notice, advertisement, sign, placard, or handbill of any kind.
 - iv. Operate or station any commercial vehicle or any motor vehicle displaying advertising or equipped with a public address system for the purpose of advertising, promoting, demonstrating, or attracting attention.

² Please note that, at the time of printing the Clarity Kit, the new bylaw had not yet been approved. The example is included to demonstrate how legal language can be simplified.

Before and After

Toronto Municipal Reports

The Toronto City Clerk's office launched a clear language initiative in 2006. One goal is to make staff reports to Council and committees much more concise and accessible for the public, as well as for councillors and other decision makers.

Working with clear language consultants from Colborne Communications and Clear Language and Design, City Clerk staff analyzed a large sample of staff reports. One common problem they found was excessive use of the passive voice in report recommendations. Passive voice hides the person making the recommendations and makes it hard to know who is responsible for carrying them out. Here is a short example of how to recast recommendations in the active voice:

Before	After
<p><u>Recommendations:</u></p> <p>It is recommended that:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) the Terms of Reference for a review of Toronto's Governance System as outlined in Appendix 1 be approved; (2) a 3-member external advisory panel be invited to participate in the review and undertake an engagement process with members of Council, civic leaders, community members, and other key stakeholders; (3) the Mayor canvas Members of Council regarding potential panel candidates who will have the confidence and trust of the public and Council, and that the Mayor report directly to Council as soon as possible recommending the panel members and chair; 	<p>The City Manager recommends:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Council approve the terms of reference for a review of Toronto's Governance System (Appendix 1). 2. Council appoint a three-member external advisory panel to undertake the review, engaging members of Council, civic leaders, community members, and other key stakeholders. 3. The Mayor be responsible for canvassing Members of Council for the names of panel candidates who would have the trust of the public and Council. 4. As soon as possible, the Mayor recommend the panel members and a proposed chair to Council.

Top 10 Clear Writing Tips

1. Before you start to write, ask yourself why you are writing this document. What do you want the reader to **do**? Now ask yourself what you know about your audience and their reading habits. How well do they read? How will they **use** this document?
2. Organize information in a way that is logical from **your reader's point of view**. For instance, if you are explaining how to do something, write in logical, numbered steps.
3. Use lots of **headings** and sub-headings to break up paragraphs. Pack each short heading with as much information as you can about what's coming up in that part of the text.
4. Put information into **bulleted lists**. Use bullets to list items, or to break up a long sentence with many dependant clauses. Don't overuse bullets, though, or they will lose their impact. And your page will look like you took a shotgun to it.
5. **Speak directly** to your readers. Whenever you can, address them in the second person, as 'you'. Try to write the way you would speak to someone.
6. **Use strong, active verbs**. Instead of "The decision of the committee was ..." write, "The committee decided." Instead of "The Report of the Commissioner was reviewed by the task force," write: The task force reviewed the Commissioner's report."
7. **Explain specialized language** for readers who do not have your expertise. Avoid any unnecessary jargon.
8. Keep your sentences and paragraphs **short**. Introduce only one new idea in each sentence. Start a new paragraph for each topic. Instead of writing a transitional sentence, write a sub-heading that helps the reader to scan.
9. **Don't let the design get in the way** of the message. Keep in mind who your readers are and how the material will be presented. Choose a type size and style that is easy to read. Use colour and graphics to help tell the story – not just for decoration.
10. **Test your document**. Ask a colleague for feedback. Use a readability tool to check the reading level. Test it with a focus group to find out how well they understand the message. The way you gather feedback will depend on the document. But one thing's for sure: feedback helps!

Remember that clear language is about awareness, training, and support, not about correcting people or policing how they use language.

Do Your Members Know Their Contract? (CUPE)

Where to Go to Learn More

Print and Online Resources

- *Making it Clear: Clear Language for Union Communications*, Canadian Labour Congress, 1999. This handy binder is chock-full of practical suggestions and examples of what you can do to make your communications more accessible. Includes overheads to present a clear language workshop (\$16). Order from:

CLC Literacy Project
2841 Riverside Drive
Ottawa, ON K1V 8X7
Telephone: (613) 521-3400
Email: clcliteracy@clc-ctc.ca

- Visit the Web site of the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators for a list of clear language resources at: www.camacam.ca/downloads/en/2005-01-Clear-Language-Literacy-Resources.pdf

Audio-visual Resources

These short audio-visual tools are good icebreakers for a presentation on clear language.

- *Invasion of the Space Lobsters*. Four minute, animated film produced by the National Film Board of Canada with the Canadian Labour Congress, 2005. Giant extraterrestrial lobsters land in the backyard of a Canadian family attempting to fix their barbeque. In a gesture of friendship, the lobsters start to recite the manufacturer's manual, resulting in misunderstanding and world chaos.

Available in French and English, on DVD and VHS, with a discussion guide. Special discount offered for CLC members. To order, contact:

National Film Board of Canada
Sales & Customer Services, D-10
PO Box 6100
Station Centre-Ville
Montreal, QC H3C 3H5
Toll-free: 1-800-267-7710
In the Montreal area, call (514) 283-9000

- *Solutions Proposed by Four Adult Learners*. Fourteen minute documentary produced by the Fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français, 2004. Four Canadians with mild literacy problems describe the difficulties they have to overcome when they read documents in their daily lives and the ways that clear language would help them.

Available in French and English, on DVD (\$15) and VHS (\$20) plus shipping and handling. To order, contact:

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235 Chemin Montréal Bureau 205
Ottawa, ON K1L 6C7
Telephone: (613) 749-5333 ext. 226
Email: fcarriere@fcaf.net

PowerPoint /Slide Presentation

- *Use Clear Language to Improve Municipal Communications*. This short presentation goes with the Clarity Kit. It summarizes the main issues related to using clear language and can be customized for your municipality. It is available in PowerPoint or slide format from the following Web sites:

Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators

www.camacam.ca/downloads/en/2005-01-Clear-Language-Literacy-Resources.pdf

Canadian Union of Public Employees

www.cupe.ca/clearlanguage

Acknowledgements

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- Novosel, Rick, Park Operator, Greater Vancouver Regional District Parks and Greenways, Vancouver, BC.

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