

Write for the Reader

Developing Research Briefs

Workshop Objectives

- clear language & design
- research briefs

Matthew Shulman

- Peel-Halton-Dufferin Adult Learning Network



What is Clear Language

Clear language is an approach to communication that puts the **reader first** and focuses on **action**.

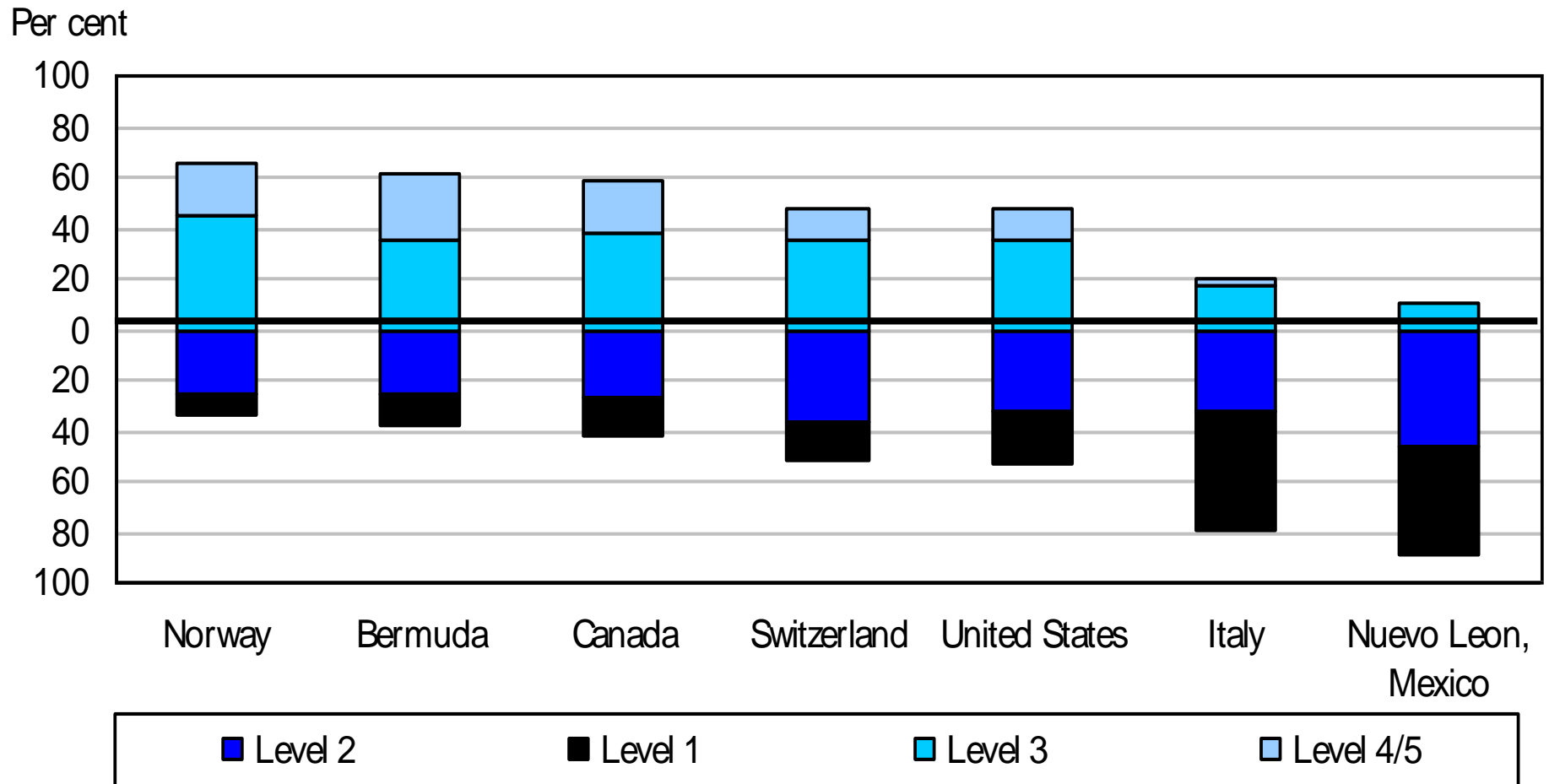
What is Clear Language

- writing your reader knows
- information your audience needs
- design that helps understanding

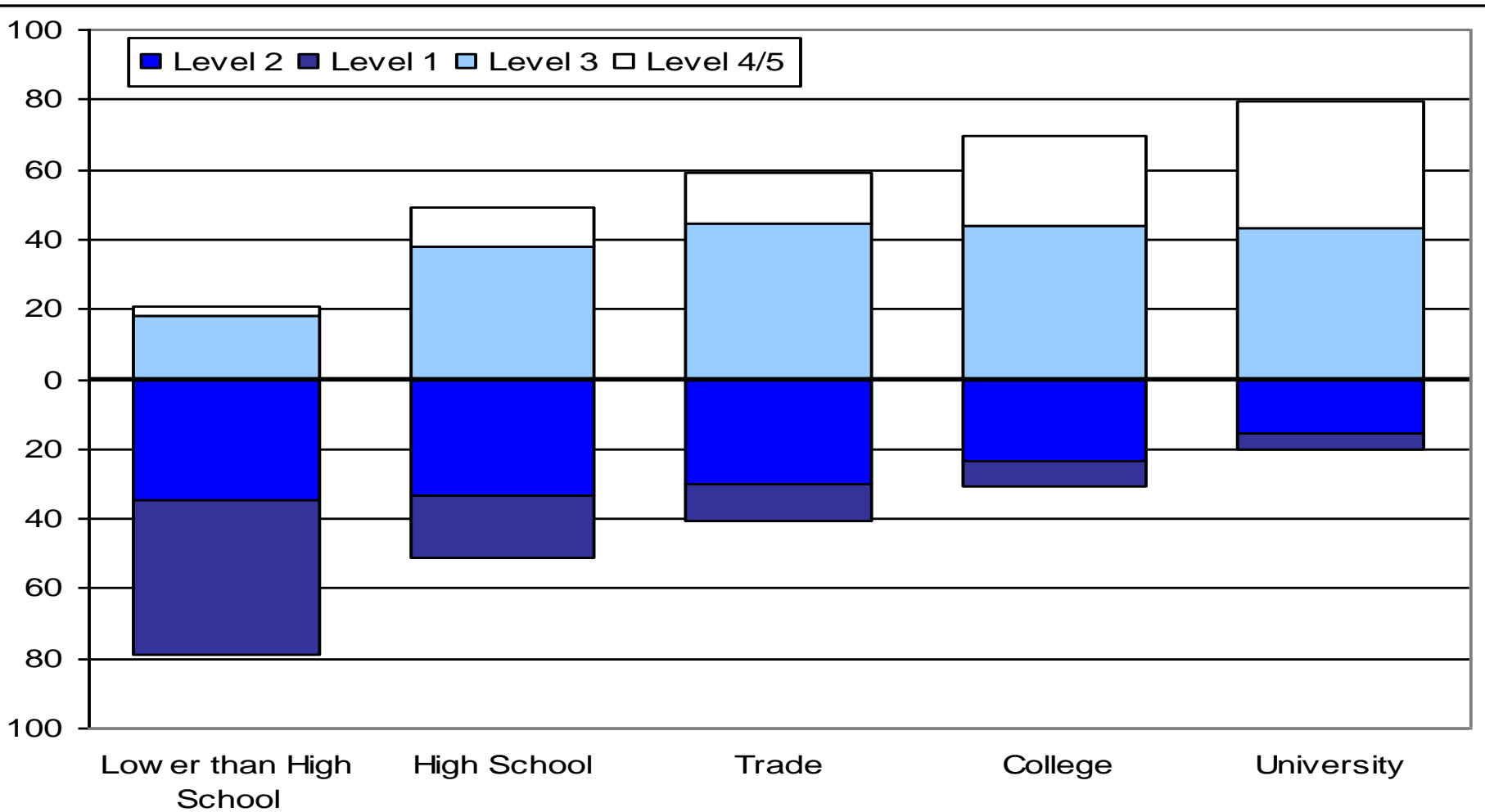
Need for Clear Language

- literacy skills
- experience with English
- information overload
- readers are changing

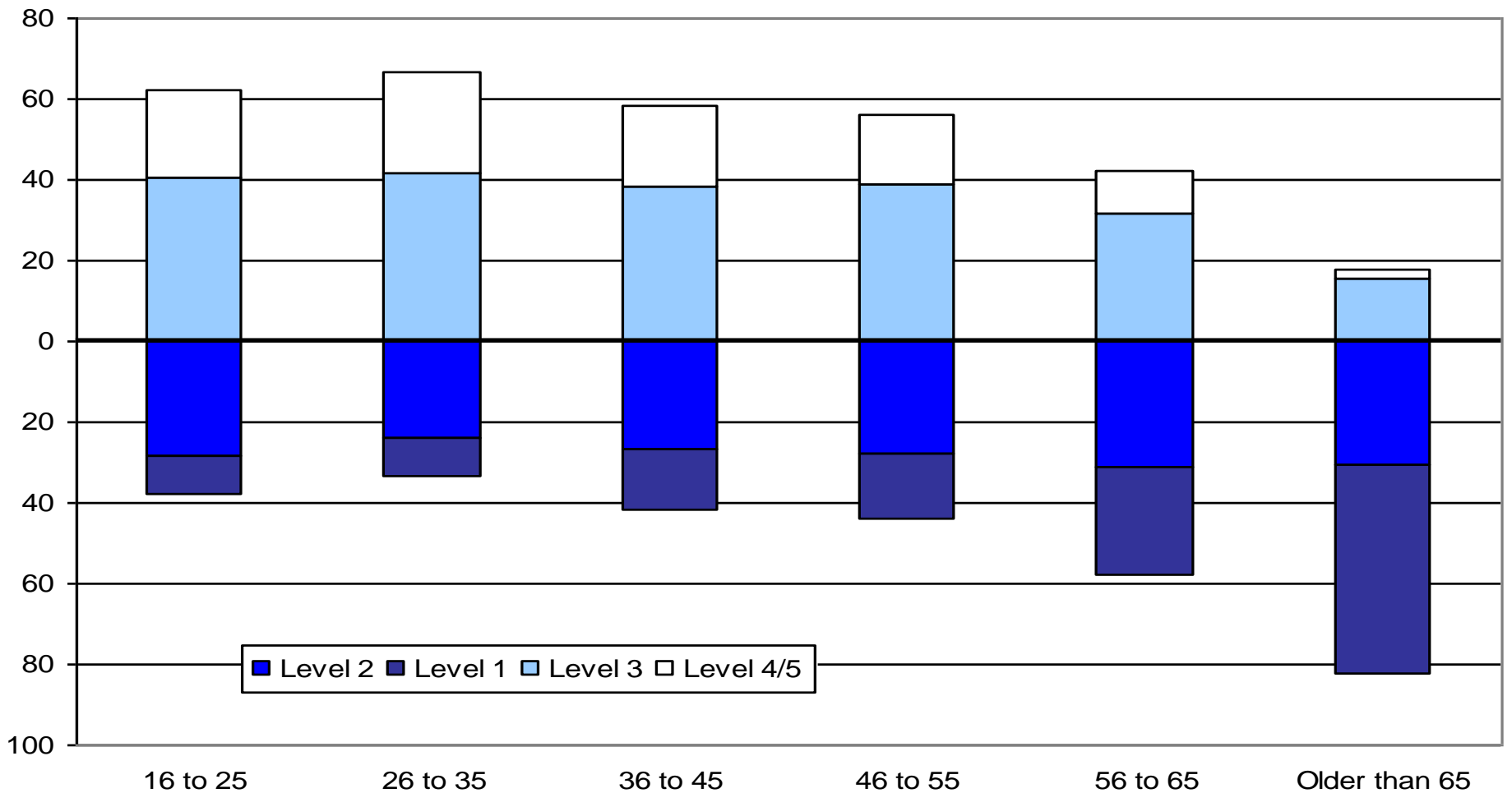
42% of Canadians lack sufficient literacy skills



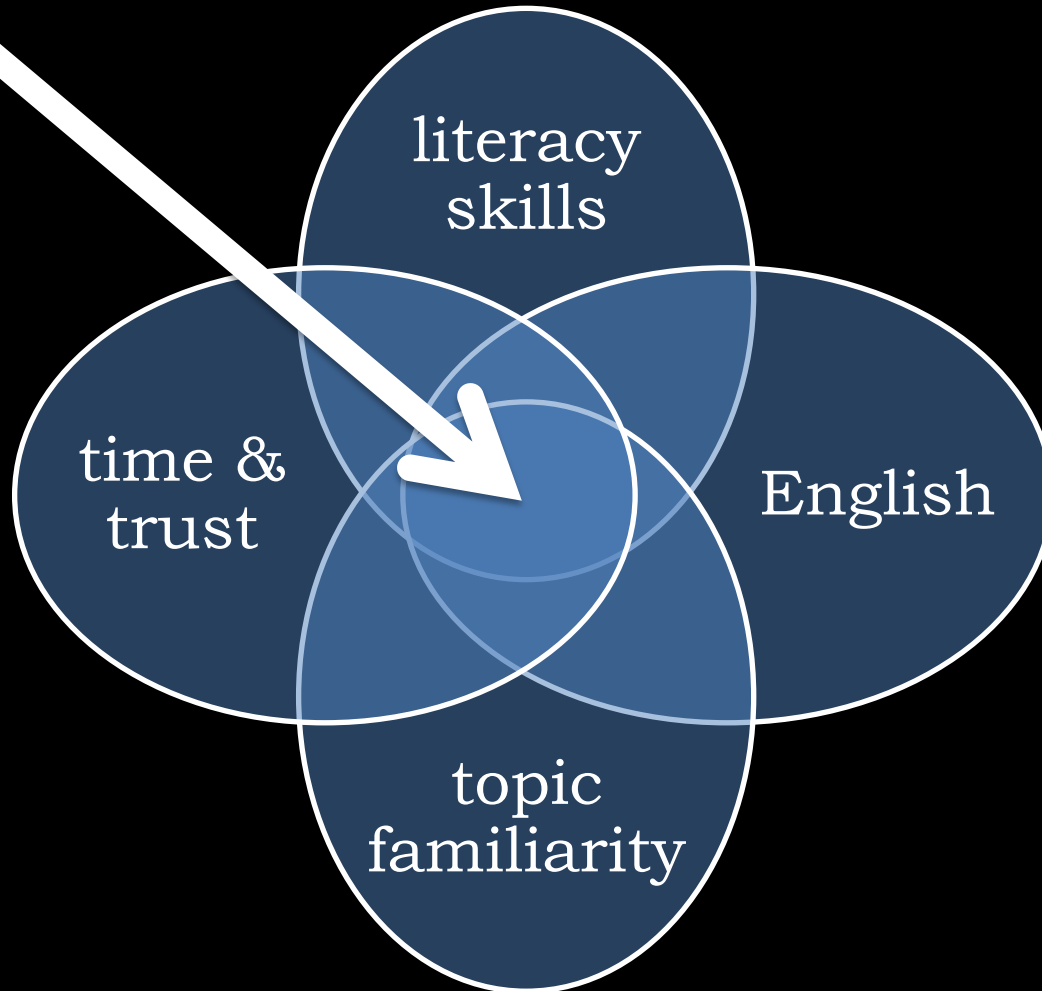
Education ≠ Literacy



Use It or Lose It



Readers of Academic Prose



Benefits of Clear Language

- reach larger audience
- engage people
- save time and money
- improve outcomes

Common Objections

- takes too long
- offends readers
- sophistication and precision

6-Step Process

Think

Plan

Write

Design

Test

Revise



Step 1: Thinking

- know your reader
- know your purpose
- know your impact

Step 2: Planning

- essential information
- order
- tone
- style
- format
- design

Step 3: Writing

- put most important ideas near the beginning
- use logical order based on reader's needs
- make the order of the material obvious

Step 3: Writing

avoid acronyms and abbreviations

- i.e. vs. e.g.

avoid idioms / phrases from other languages

- modus operandi

Step 3: Writing

be careful with nouns made from verbs:

- decision, determination, examination

use concrete, specific words:

- food instead of nutrition

avoid language with cultural bias / improper time reference:

- “dial the phone”

Step 3: Writing

vary the sentence length

use simple, complete sentences:

- Zenaida organizes this conference
(Subject) (Verb) (Object)

reduce noun stacks

- “micro bacteria population diversity has increased in the last three years”

Step 3: Writing

use positive statements

- **Before:** Do not open door until checking that area is clear.
- **After:** Check that the area is clear then open the door.

write in the active voice

- **Before:** The door was left open by the security guard.
- **After:** The security guard left the door open.

Step 3: Writing

Paragraphs

- 3 – 5 sentences
- topic sentence
- introductory words, phrases, transitions, definitions, examples, commentary

Chunks

- information blocks
- one kind of meaning
- leave out what's not relevant to this chunk

Step 4: Designing

- questions and answers
- check lists
- point form
- tables

Step 4: Designing

- every chunk of information
- eliminate need for transitions
- enable scan / skip

Step 4: Designing

text type – 12 pt.

headline type – 18 pt.

slide type – 44 pt.

Step 4: Designing

Lower case letters are easier to read than capital letters. They give the reader more visual information about the characteristics of each letter.

WORDS MADE UP OF CAPITAL LETTERS ARE SEEN AS BLOCKS AND ARE HARD TO READ, ESPECIALLY IN A PASSAGE OF TEXT.

Step 4: Designing

Text that has a ragged or uneven right margin is easier to read than text that has a justified or full margin. This paragraph was typed with an uneven right margin and no hyphenation.

Text that is centred or ragged on both sides doesn't show the reader where sentences begin and end. It looks like each line is a sentence in itself.

A justified right margin creates unequal spaces between words and hyphenates many words at the end of lines. Hyphenated words are hard to read, so turn off "hy-phenation" when you use a word processor. This paragraph was typed with a full margin and hy-phenation.

Step 4: Designing

- contrast
- ratio of images to words

Step 5 & 6: Testing and Revising

- Flesch-Kincaid
- Fog Index
- Fry Readability

$$.39 * \frac{\# \text{ words}}{\# \text{ sentences}} + 11.8 * \frac{\# \text{ syllables}}{\# \text{ words}} - 15.59$$

Step 5 & 6: Testing and Revising

- read document aloud
- ask colleague to read your draft
- conduct a focus group

Research Briefs

- engagement
- accessibility
- capacity building

Audience / End User

- who is the audience?
- what is the purpose?
- what is the intended impact?
- so what? / what's in it for me?

Purpose / Impact

- design, deliver programs / services
- build knowledge / expertise
- train staff
- market programs
- seek partnerships

Research Brief Template

- publisher (organization)
- researcher / author
- publication date (of summary)
- key references, citations
- Key subject words

Research Brief Template

- 1500 - 2000 words maximum
- short title
- summary of summary
- where to learn more
- visual (image, chart, graphic)

Paper

Understanding the Economic
Integration of Immigrants:
A Wage Decomposition of the
Earnings Disparities Between
Native-Born Canadians and
Immigrants of Recent Cohorts

Brief

Language use affects how much an immigrant earns

Sections

- summary
- key findings
- research brief text
- charts / tables
- conclusion
- references / info about research

January 2009

Title of Research Brief: in ten words or less

Research Brief No.

In about 150 words, describe briefly the significance of the research with bridge to key findings

Key Findings

- *In bullet format*
- *List the significant findings*
- *In the order of importance*
- *Starting from the most significant*
- *Include implications of findings, if possible*

Research Briefs with the 6 Steps

- Think: who do we want to read these?
- Plan: what content is essential?
- Write: what might be potential jargon?
- Design: what visuals can be included?
- Test: does it meet the guidelines?
- Revise: adapt using clear language principles

More Information

- Clear Writing and Literacy, 2nd Edition

www.nald.ca/library/research/olc/clear/cover.htm

- Matthew Shulman

mcshulman@phdaln.on.ca

905-812-3533