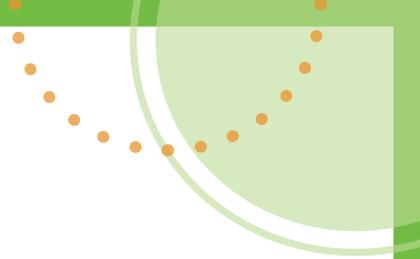




FEDERATION OF  
CALGARY COMMUNITIES

# PLAIN LANGUAGE STARTER GUIDE





# WELCOME!

This guide was created with community organizations in mind, to help you communicate with your members and residents.

This plain language starter guide doesn't need to be used in order, or in full. Use it for whatever you need help or support with!

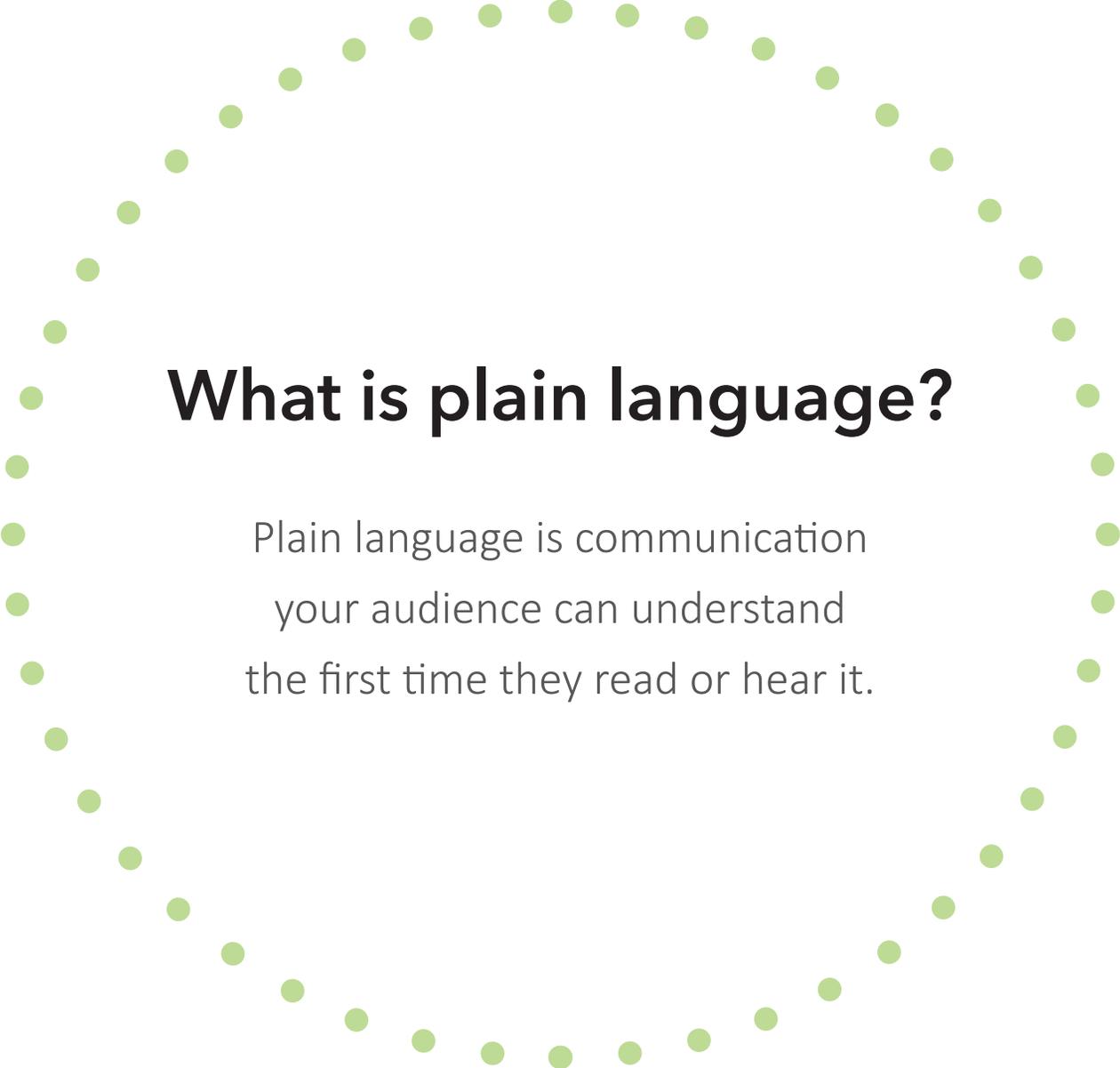
Some of the tips may seem obvious, so use them as a reminder of how important it is to use plain language to connect with everyone in your community.

We got a lot of helpful information from the sources below, so check them out for more plain language support!

- **The Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN)**
- **Translation Bureau of Canada**
- **Province of British Columbia - Plain Language Guide**

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# What is plain language?

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

# Basically, plain language is communication that's simple and easy to understand.

Why is this important? Think about how many messages you're reading and hearing every day.

It's a lot! We need to make sure our message stands out and is understood by our audiences.

What's the best way to do that? Write and speak in plain language.

Let's get started!

# KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Who is your information for: Your residents or members? A business? A government official?

Knowing your audience is **key**.

You need to know who your audience is, so you know what language they're comfortable with. This is important if some of your audience doesn't speak English as their first language.

Here are some helpful questions to ask yourself:

- Who is our audience? Break it down!
- How do they communicate: written, verbal, online?
- Is English their first language?
- What information are they looking for?



# KNOW YOUR MESSAGE

Before you jump into evaluating if you're using plain language, it's important to first think about what your message is.

When communicating we usually include information based on what we think is important.

We need to ask ourselves: What does our audience **NEED** to know?

What we think is important and what our audience needs to know can sometimes be different.

There's lots of information we can give, but how much is necessary?

What questions will our audience have and will our information answer them?

Helpful tip: think about who, what, where, when, why, and how.

Always remember to remind your audience who you are, what you do, and the value you offer.

# BE CONVERSATIONAL

Writing conversationally, just like how we speak, can really change the tone of information.

It can also build a relationship with your audience. It makes you sound relaxed, relatable, and easy to understand.

Use words like “we”, “us”, and “our” instead of formalities like “The X Community Association.”



## Don't Say

The X Community Association invites you to our AGM on September 10. The event will include updates, electing a new board of directors, and networking.



## Say

Join us for our AGM on September 10! Come hear about what we've been up to this past year, help us elect a new board of directors, and meet your neighbours.

# KEEP IT SIMPLE

Your choice of words matters! Being wordy and repetitive can confuse your audience.

**Always ask yourself:** Is there an easier way to say this with less words?

Choice of words is especially important when your audience includes people who don't speak English as their first language.

Here are a few examples of simplified words and phrases from the Government of Canada's Translation Bureau:

<b>Before</b>	<b>After</b>
Facilitate _____	Help
In the absence of _____	Without
At this point in time _____	Now
Due to the fact that _____	Because
After this is accomplished _____	Then

# AVOID SLANG

Slang, or shortened language, is the use of casual and informal words and phrases often specific to a certain area or country.

While slang is popular and common, not everyone understands it. To communicate effectively, avoid using slang when speaking and writing.

Here are a few examples of commonly used slang phrases that can confuse your audience:

<b>Slang</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
DIY _____	Do it yourself
Chill out _____	Relax
Give us a shout _____	Contact us
Screw up _____	Make a mistake
Hang out _____	Social gathering

# BE ACTIVE AND PRESENT

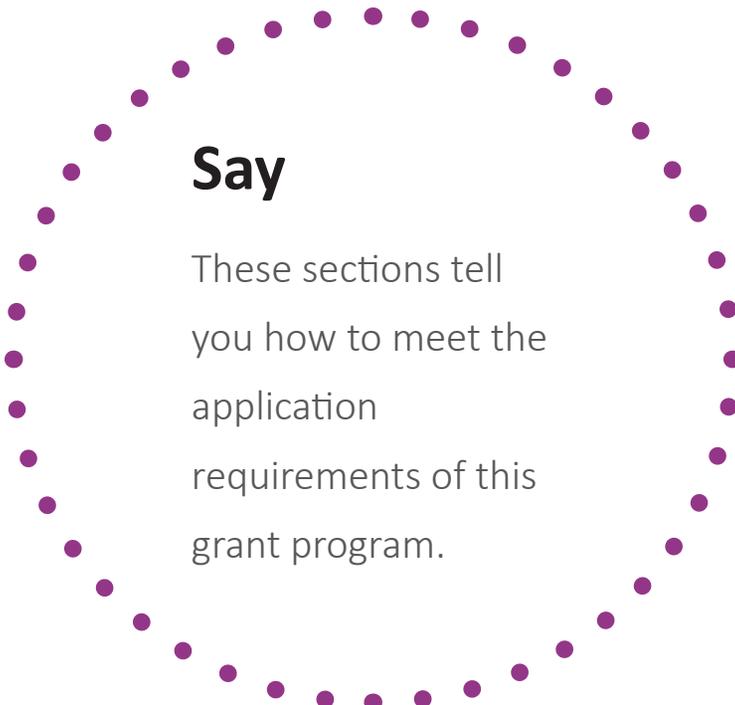
Use an active voice and a present tense. Passive voice is vague and impersonal, and an active voice makes it clear who's doing what. Present tense also makes communicating simple and direct.

**For example:**



## Don't Say

These sections describe the information that would satisfy the application requirements that would apply to this grant program.



## Say

These sections tell you how to meet the application requirements of this grant program.

# USE POSITIVE LANGUAGE

Use positive words to make your point. Using negative words and double negatives can confuse your audience and affect their actions.

## For example:



- Enter the information in one file
- We always comment on traffic issues in our community



- Enter the information in no more than one file
- We can't not comment on traffic issues in our community

# BE CONSISTENT

Use words consistently. Using different words to describe the same thing will confuse your audience.

## For example:

If you call a group **'youth'** make sure you always use the word youth in your document or speech. Avoid switching between similar words like teenagers, kids, etc.



# USE EXAMPLES

Using examples helps you explain complex or difficult information.

An example helps your audience relate to the information by giving it context. When appropriate, consider using pictures or icons instead of words.

As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words!

## **For example:**

If you're trying to get people to use the correct recycling bin, use pictures or icons, not words. This is helpful when your audience doesn't speak English as their first language.



# KEEP IT ORGANIZED

How you organize your information also helps make your message easier to understand.

The 3 R's of plain language will help you organize your information:

## 1. Reorganize

- If needed, use a table of contents.
- Do you have a call to action? Make it obvious: **big and bold!**
- Use lists! They're a clean way to show a series of steps, requirements, or pieces of information.
- Keep your sentences and paragraphs short. One idea in each.

## 2. Reduce

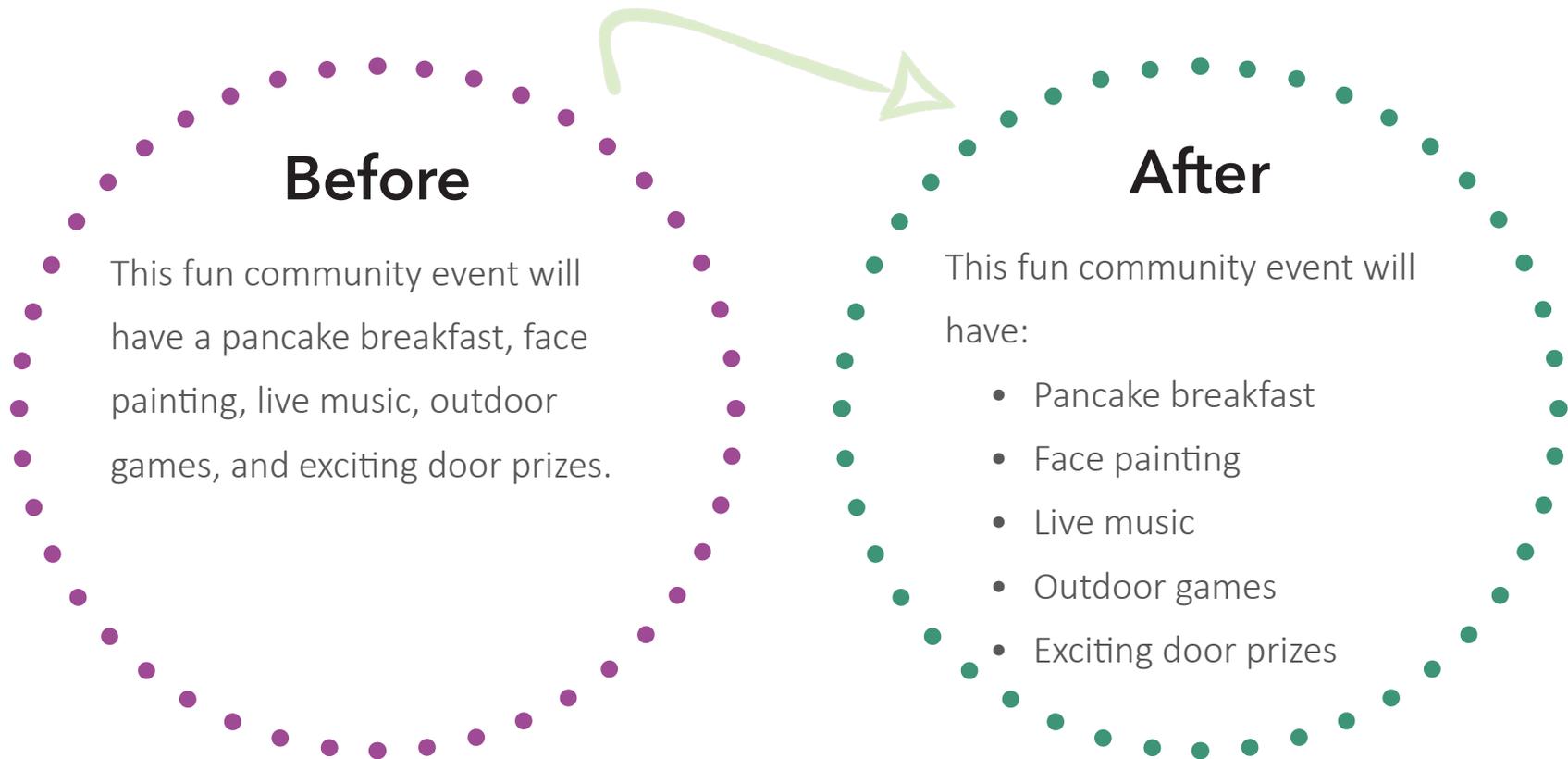
- Ask yourself: how much detail do I really need to include?
- Tell them who, what, where, when, why, and how.

## 3. Rewrite

- Read over your information and ask yourself if you really need all the information you've included. Rewrite whatever needs adjusting.



Here's an example to show how much easier it is to understand information by putting it into a list:



# GET A SECOND OPINION

Before you hit print or publish, have someone else review your work to make sure there are no mistakes and that it makes sense to them.

It's a good idea to have 2 or 3 people review your work, and if possible, they should be from the same audience you're trying to reach.

Ask your reviewers to make sure you've used plain language. If needed, give them a list of things you want them to review and look out for. Be open and welcoming to their feedback and edits.



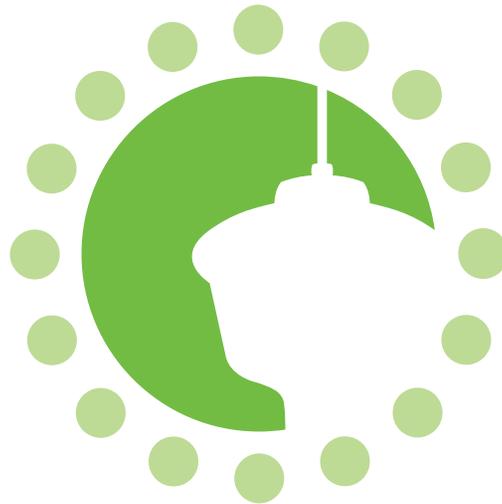
# SUMMARY

Remember, plain language is communication your audience can understand the first time they read or hear it.

This starter guide has lots of helpful tips that may seem overwhelming, but when you break it down, it's all about:

- Knowing your audience
- Being conversational
- Keeping it simple
- Avoiding slang
- Being active and present
- Using positive language
- Being consistent
- Using examples
- Keeping it organized
- Get a second opinion

If you think about these things when communicating with your audiences, you have taken the first step in using plain language!



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