



## MODULE 2: Developing content

### Writing clear information materials

When preparing public legal education and information materials (PLE), focus on creating the written content first:

- What are you writing about?
- What is the specific information you want to convey?
- How will you explain your subject matter so that your readers understand it?

Although layout and design are important, you need to make sure that your writing is clear and accurate.

Here are some tips to help you do that.

#### **Identify your audience**

For information to be effective, you need to know your audience - not just what information they need, but also the ways they understand and use information. Some things that are important to know about your target audience:

- their level of education in English
- their literacy and language skills
- their age and gender
- the kinds of issues they face and how they're affected
- how stressed they might be by their legal problems
- how they might come across information or where they might access it

If you work directly with your target audience, try to find ways to get their feedback. If you don't work directly with your target audience, consider consulting with or surveying front-line workers who work with your target audience.



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### Use plain language

- Plain language is language that people in your target audience can easily understand.
- It's not just the words you choose but the way you organize and present them. Use small chunks of text rather than long paragraphs, and use headings as "signposts" to help your audience find the specific information they need easily.

### Choose the right words

- **Be direct.** Talking directly to readers makes the information more personal and draws them in. Use "you" rather than "he/ she" or "someone".
- **Use common or plain words instead of jargon.** For example, say "use", not "utilize"; say "try", not "endeavour"; "end", not "terminate".
- **Define any legal terms that you have to use in plain language.** Sometimes your reader will need to know legal terms in order to navigate the system or understand legal forms.
- **Be consistent.** Using the same word over and over again is not boring - it's consistent.
- **Use strong, active words.** Avoid the passive voice. Active forms are easier to understand, because it's clearer who or what is doing something. For example, instead of saying, "The documents should be brought by you to court", say "Bring the documents to court."
- **Watch out for acronyms.** Acronyms can be hard for people to understand. Make sure to spell them out where possible, and spell them out more than once in longer documents. For example, instead of writing "CRA", write "Canada Revenue Agency".
- **Be careful with contractions.** Some people with very low literacy skills or who are just learning English might find contractions like "can't" confusing.



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### Note that numbers can be tricky

- **Use digits rather than spelling out numbers - they're easier to read and remember.** For example, instead of using "two thousand and sixteen", use "2016".
- **Avoid tricky constructions and abbreviations with dates.** Many people order the day and month differently. Spell out the month to make sure that people understand the date.
- **Be as specific as possible.** Legal information often has a lot of references to time periods and dates. Give examples to make sure that people understand the time frames. For example, instead of using "5/6/2016" or "6/5/2016", write "June 5, 2016".
- **Present numbers visually.** Table formats can be helpful if you are presenting information with a lot of numbers (for example, child support guidelines).
- **Avoid using Roman numerals.** For example, instead of "Step I, Step II, Step III, Step IV", use "Step 1, Step 2, Step 3, Step 4".

### Read your PLE materials out loud when you're editing them

- Reading out loud can help you pick up on wording that seems artificial, stilted, or hard to understand.
- Consider asking a colleague to listen to you read your PLE materials and give you feedback.



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