



Helping Clients
with Public Legal
Education and
Information



Helping Clients with Public Legal Education and Information

Welcome to the PLE Toolbox!

What is PLE?

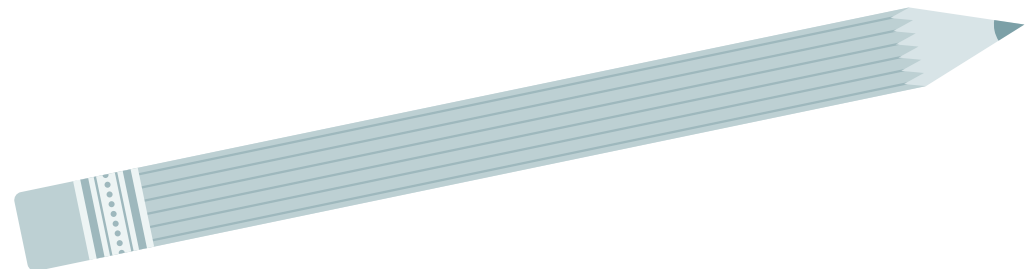
Public legal education and information (PLE) covers a wide range of activities aimed at improving knowledge about the law and helping people deal with legal issues. PLE can empower people and communities by helping them deal with legal issues and get involved in the decisions that affect them.

How to use PLE?

PLE gives your clients information about their legal rights and can help them take steps to address their legal issues or problems.

Why a PLE Toolbox?

Our PLE Toolbox allows us to create, gather and share information and resources about good PLE practices with input from PLE professionals and community agencies and workers in one handy place. We hope to make it simpler for you to identify legal issues in your community, and prepare and share PLE information in the ways that make most sense for the people you work with.





Helping Clients with Public Legal Education and Information



MODULE 1: How to help your clients

- Setting the right tone
- Understand how legal information is organized
- Detecting legal issues, areas of law and legal topics
- Find sources for more legal information and legal services
- A checklist about reliable online legal information
- A checklist about next steps



MODULE 2: Developing print and online content

- Writing clear information materials
- Designing clear written information
- Presenting clear and effective online content
- Making sure your information is accurate and useful
- Find sources for more tips on print and online content
- A checklist about writing clear information materials
- A checklist about designing clear written information
- A checklist about presenting clear and effective online content
- A checklist about making sure your information is accurate and useful



MODULE 3: Using technology (coming in Summer 2016)

- Tips for using video content effectively
- Tips for designing and using mobile apps effectively
- Interactive online tools (for example, wikibooks)
- Best practices for social networking
- Checklists



MODULE 2: Developing content

Introduction

This module will help you develop content and legal information that works for your audience.

This module will provide you with tools to help you:

- write clear information materials
- design clear written information
- present clear and effective online content
- make sure your information is accurate and useful



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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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Writing clear information materials

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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Writing clear information materials

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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MODULE 2: Developing content

Designing clear written information

The design of your material is critical to getting your message across. Your information must be presented in a way that is visually engaging and appropriate for your audience.

Here are some clear design tips to help you prepare print information.

Leave a lot of white or blank space to break up dense text

- use good-sized page margins
- use bulleted lists
- add space between paragraphs
- leave more space above a heading than below so the heading looks connected to the text that it's describing
- aim for short lines

Vary your approach, and include graphics and images

- use various ways to present your material, such as charts and decision trees, questions and answers, and short case studies and examples
- use photos, illustrations, or cartoons to make your information more visually appealing
- pick images that reflect your audience in terms of race, culture, age, gender, and ability
- use flowcharts to show how a process works step by step

Many of these principles also apply to preparing online information. You'll find more information about tips specific to online information in the next section of this module, "Presenting clear and effective online content".

You'll also find more clear design tips for print in CLEO's Better Legal Information Handbook, pages 47-50.



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MODULE 2: Developing content

Presenting clear and effective online content

People are increasingly using the internet to find information, including by using mobile phones and tablets. If information is not well organized with clear headings and small chunks of text, people might give up after a few sentences. The internet has been described as promoting a “culture of impatience”.

How we read	
Print	Online
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• we read most of the words on a given page• we read from top to bottom, and from left to right (in English)• we can read up to 250 words a minute in print	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• we read only 20-30 percent of the words that we see on a typical basis• we read in an “F” pattern (left to right, top to bottom, left to right)• we read 25 percent slower than in print

(table reprinted with permission from Emily Dockrill-Jones, Page&Screen Communications)

That’s why it’s important to think about writing a bit differently for the web than you would for print. People want to find the information they need quickly, and are not likely to scroll through long lists of information.

The principles discussed in the previous section of this module, “Designing clear written information” also apply to online content, but there are specific principles related to creating online content. Here are some things to keep in mind when writing information to be used online.



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MODULE 2: Developing content

Presenting clear and effective online content

Make your information easy to scan

- highlight key words and hyperlinks to make them stand out
- use clear headings and subheadings to help direct readers to what they need
- use vertical or “bulleted” lists rather than including several points in one sentence - if using lists, make sure that the language and punctuation in the lists are consistent from point to point
- chunk your content - make sure that information is presented in short sentences and paragraphs
- use lots of white space
- consider using images to highlight what you’re saying
- avoid using a complex layout that is hard to follow on screen (for example, more than one column of text)

Get straight to the point

Place the key message at the very top of the page, where even readers who typically give up after a few lines will see it. This is often referred to as the “inverted pyramid” style of writing. See the graphic on the next page for an example of inverted pyramid presentation.



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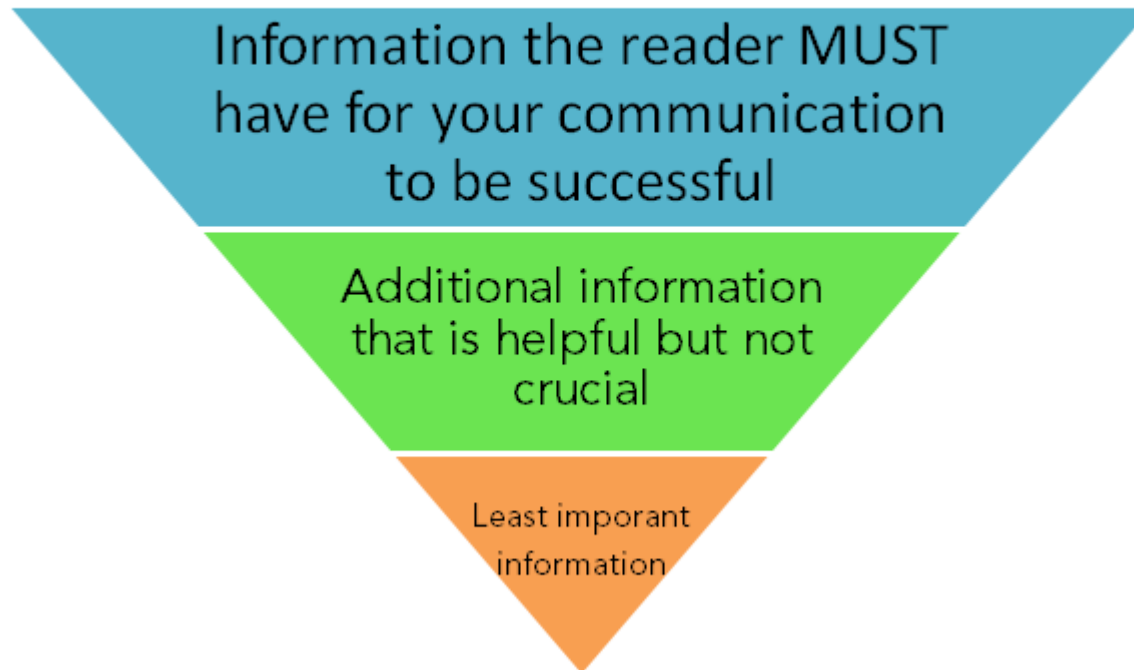
MODULE 2: Developing content

Presenting clear and effective online content



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Inverted pyramid writing



What to remember when writing online content

- crucial information must go at the beginning
- people could stop reading at any time



MODULE 2: Developing content

Presenting clear and effective online content

Be brief

- use half the word count (or less) than when writing for print format
- write in small chunks of text

Don't use Adobe or Microsoft uploads as your only type of information

If using documents produced in Adobe Portable Document Format (PDFs) or Microsoft Word or PowerPoint documents, make sure your content is available in HTML as well.

- PDFs and MS documents can be hard to find online
- some users who rely on screenreading devices can't access PDF content at all

Make your hyperlinks descriptive

- avoid making hyperlinks from phrases such as "click here" or "for more information"
- use the link to describe where the reader will be taken (for example, "You'll also find more clear design tips for print in CLEO's Better Legal Information Handbook, pages 47-50.")

Consider what your content will look like on mobile devices

- make sure that your online content is mobile-responsive and can be read on smaller devices
- think carefully about the order that items displayed horizontally on a desktop should look like when placed vertically at smaller resolutions in a mobile setting
- PDFs and MS documents are not always mobile-responsive and, even if responsive, are almost impossible to read on phones or small tablets



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MODULE 2: Developing content

Presenting clear and effective online content

Boost the chances of people finding your content

- use the words your audience uses - by using keywords that your audience might use, you will help them understand the content and will help optimize it for search engines
- use search engine optimization (SEO) techniques
- create keywords for your content - use them in the text, not just in the “metadata” or hidden descriptions for your page
- insert links to outside sources where appropriate
- try to have your URLs reflect the nested nature of your site’s content (for example: www.example.com/main-topic/sub-topic/name-or-article)

Use images, graphics, video, and multimedia where possible

- any graphics, images, video, or multimedia used should reinforce the text on your page
- if using images or graphics, create “alt text” (text that describes any images you upload) so that people with limited or no vision can “access” the images
- if using videos, they should be captioned in order to be accessible to people with hearing disabilities



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MODULE 2: Developing content

Making sure your information is accurate and useful

There is no point producing public legal education and information (PLE) unless it's accurate, reliable and geared toward your target audience. Here are some tips about how to make sure the PLE you produce is accurate.

Work with legal reviewers

Giving information about the law can be tricky. Quite often figuring out the law means interpreting the law.

Make sure to include a legal expert on the project team – a lawyer, community legal worker or paralegal who has experience in the area of law you're writing about.

If possible, it is very helpful if your legal expert or reviewer has practical, on-the-ground experience. That way, the expert can consider how laws and legal processes are applied in real-life situations. Academics who do not have direct experience with clients are usually not the best choice of writers for PLE aimed at giving practical advice.

Consider real-life situations

Ask your legal reviewers to consider how legal processes are applied in real-life situations. Make sure you explain to them who your audience is and the purpose of the information.

Practical realities may differ depending on where someone lives in the province and the barriers they face. For example, filing documents with a court or tribunal can be very different for someone living in a rural or remote community than for someone in a large urban centre. Make sure to tell your reviewers if your information is meant for a variety of communities across Ontario.

Check all the facts

If you're including phone numbers, website addresses, benefit rates, or other changeable information, it's important to double and triple-check this. Make sure you're getting your information from the original source if possible.



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MODULE 2: Developing content

Making sure your information is accurate and useful

Do one last check

Make sure to check your legal and practical content very close to the end of the process, just before you publish. The law can change at any time and so can website addresses, phone numbers or office locations.

Make sure you state which province the information relates to

Many laws vary from province to province. If the information you're producing only applies to Ontario, say so. If it applies to all of Canada, that's also worth including.

Put a date on it

Your PLE materials should include the date on which the legal expert reviewed the materials for accuracy. As well, you may want to include the date that a law took effect, if you think your readers need to know that.

Add a disclaimer

It is always a good practice to add a disclaimer to PLE materials that tells users that the materials are intended as legal information and that they should seek legal advice from a lawyer if they have a serious legal problem.



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MODULE 2: Developing content

Finding sources for more tips on developing content

Below is a list of tools to help you create clear and compelling print and online information.

Writing and designing clear information

CLEO's Better Legal Information Handbook: A start-to-finish guide for community workers on planning, preparing and evaluating your PLE written materials. Contact the PLE Learning Exchange to order a print copy, or check out our PDF with interactive links at www.cleo.on.ca/sites/default/files/docs/cleo_betterlegalinfo.pdf

Better Legal Information: the how-to's of plain language: a webinar series hosted by CLEO's PLE Learning Exchange, exploring practical techniques to create easy-to-understand legal information for the public. Nicole Osbourne-James, a plain language editor at CLEO, presents both seminars.

- > Better Legal Information: the how-to's of Plain Language: 50 minutes.
vimeo.com/88661285
- > Better Legal Information: the how-to's of Plain Language, the sequel: 55 minutes.
vimeo.com/103348352

Clear Language and Design's tips on measuring readability: This website provides some tips on how to make sure your content is more readable. clad.tcld.org/measuring-readability/

Readability-score.com: This website features a free tool where you can cut and paste in your written content to grade how readable it is. www.readability-score.com/

PLE Learning Exchange clearinghouse of resources: Check out our resources pages for information from other jurisdictions and the most up-to-date resources we've located. www.plelearningexchange.ca/resources/

Please note that these links were current as of March 31, 2016.



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MODULE 2: Developing content

A checklist about writing clear information materials

Use this checklist to help you with tips that will make your information more clear.

Have you identified your audience and written for them?

- find out what type of information your audience needs, and how they understand and use it
- if you work with your audience, find out from them what would meet their needs
- if you don't work with your audience, talk to front-line workers that work with them

Have you used plain language?

- use words that are easy to understand, and descriptive headings

Have you chosen the right words?

- speak directly to your reader - use "you"
- avoid jargon and the passive voice
- define difficult but necessary words such as legal terms
- be consistent, and don't be afraid to repeat words
- watch out for acronyms, and spell them out where possible

Have you doublechecked your numbers?

- use digits rather than spelling out numbers
- when writing down dates, spell out the month rather than using a number
- be as specific as possible about time frames, and give examples
- present numbers visually by using tables and charts
- avoid using Roman numerals in headings

Have you read your information out loud?

- if some of it seems artificial or stilted, replace with more colloquial language
- get a colleague to listen to you read and give you feedback



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MODULE 2: Developing content

A checklist about designing clear written information

Use this checklist to review your information to see whether it is presented as clearly as it could be.

Are your sentences short and easy to read?

- try to limit sentence length to a maximum of 15-25 words

Have you highlighted headings and important text?

- make sure your headings stand out - they are what helps highlight your information

Is there enough white space in your document?

- make sure that there are good-sized margins
- use bulleted lists and ample spacing
- leave more space above a heading than below so that it looks connected to the text

Is your print content easy to read?

- print to a black-and-white printer to make sure that your background tone is not too dark for the font you're using
- choose fonts with easily recognizable letterforms - avoid script fonts
- avoid fonts that are too fat or narrow
- avoid using **bold** or *italic* text



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MODULE 2: Developing content

A checklist about presenting clear and effective online content

Use this checklist to review your information to see whether your online content is easy to read.

Is your information easy to scan?

- use lots of white space and headings, and avoid using more than one column

Have you gotten straight to the point?

- put the most important information first in case people stop reading halfway through

Is your content clear?

- use the words that your audience uses, and keep your sentences short
- use half the word count (or less if possible) than you would if writing for print format

Is your content available in HTML format?

- make sure that any PDF or MS Word content is also available in HTML format

Do your hyperlinks describe where they are leading to?

- avoid using “click here” or “for more information”

Can people find your online content?

- choose keywords carefully so that people can find your information
- make sure that URLs closely reflect your content

Have you used video, images, or multimedia?

- videos and images should reinforce the text on your page, and should be captioned

Is your content mobile-responsive?

- consider whether your content can be read easily on a phone or tablet



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MODULE 2: Developing content

A checklist about making sure your information is accurate and useful

Use this checklist to remind you of the steps you need to take to make sure that your information is accurate and reflects the needs of your audience.

Have you worked with a legal reviewer?

- include a legal expert on your information project team

Have you considered real-life situations?

- ask your legal reviewers to consider some of the real-life scenarios that affect your audience

Have you checked all the facts?

- make sure to check all hyperlinks, phone numbers, and other changeable information

Have you double-checked?

- double-check all legal and practical content just before you publish

Have you stated which province the information applies to?

- remember that some laws change from province to province

Have you put a date on the information?

- make sure to include the date that your information was produced, reviewed, or updated

Have you added a disclaimer?

- make sure to alert your audience to the fact that your material contains legal information only, not legal advice



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