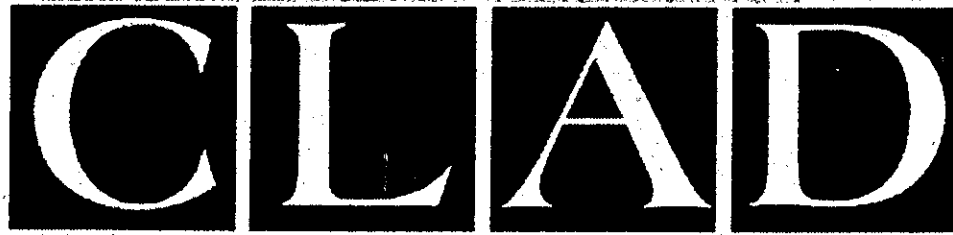


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**Clear Language and Design**

## **Clear Language Workshop**

**Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association**

Friday, October 16, 2015  
1:00 p.m. – 2:30 p.m.

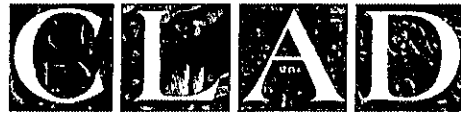
**Facilitator:**

Sally McBeth, Manager

Clear Language and Design

Toronto Centre for Community Learning & Development

CLAD@idirect.ca



## Clear Language and Design

### Sally J. McBeth



Sally McBeth is Clear Language and Design's manager and lead consultant, with 29 years of experience as a professional editor and trainer in print, digital, and spoken communications.

Sally is the author of the *Clarity Kit*, a guide to creating a clear-language organizational culture. She was a contributor to *Plain Language in Plain English*, a comprehensive guide to plain language best practices and guest editor of the international journal for legal writers, *Clarity*.

Sally has been a trainer with the Ontario government's clear language initiative since 2006, teaching communications staff in all ministries how to produce clearly written press releases, correspondence, reports, and web pages. During 2006/07, she was lead trainer and research consultant on the City of Toronto's clear language project for more than 1,000 report writers and approvers. In 2011, Sally trained internal trainers at the Financial Services Commission of Ontario, who then rolled out the program across the organization.

Sally is a regular guest lecturer to clinical and research fellows on knowledge translation and exchange at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. She is a member of the Editors' Association of Canada, the Society for Technical Communication, Clarity, and the Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN). A regular speaker at the association's biennial conferences, Sally is also on the program planning team for the September 2015 conference to be held in Dublin, Ireland.

### Recent writing, editing and assessment projects

- Municipal Property Assessment Corporation: Property assessment notice and information insert
- International Labour Office, Geneva: National employment planning guide for trade union leaders in developing countries
- College of Nurses of Ontario: Review of all correspondence from the Entry-to-Practice team; training and coaching for registration administrators
- Bank of Montreal: Certificates of insurance for mortgage and credit card holders
- United Way Toronto and McMaster University: Report and on precarious employment
- T.E. Wealth: Financial education webinars for employees in the energy sector
- John Stapleton (Open Policy): Retirement planning for people on low incomes
- Social & Enterprise Development Innovations: Financial literacy curriculum
- Heart & Stroke Foundation: Website and handbook for stroke survivors and caregivers
- Manitoba Student Aid: Redesign and usability testing of student loan application
- Health Canada: Guidelines on pre- and post-natal maternal and infant nutrition

## What is Communication?

– a process in which information is exchanged between individuals using a common system of symbols, signs and behaviour

– Webster's dictionary

**CLAD**

With clear writing, your reader understands you:

- accurately
- easily
- the first time.



**CLAD**

## Workshop Outline

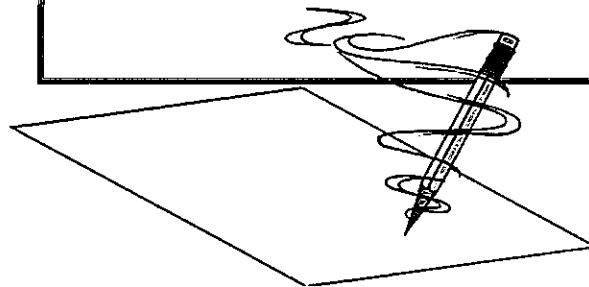
1. The case for clear language
2. Planning and structuring:
  - Define your purpose
  - Know your audience
  - Apply research-based principles of organization
3. Writing techniques:
  - Use strong verbs
  - Manage sentence and paragraph length
  - Choose shorter, more familiar words and phrases
  - Measure the Grade Reading Level using Readability Statistics in Word or <https://readability-score.com>

**CLAD**

## Defining Purpose

**Start by asking:**

“What do I want to *happen* because I wrote this? What should my reader do or learn?”



**CLAD**

## How Readers Think

1. What is this about?
2. Why should I read it?
3. What can you tell me about it?
4. Have you come to any conclusions?
5. What do you want from me?

**CLAD**

## How Readers Respond

Readers are most likely to respond to communication that:

- ☒ Clearly signals its relevance in the subject line or title
- ☒ States why it is in the readers' interest to read on
- ☒ Tells them what action is needed.

**CLAD**

**You may be able to apply for other income. To keep your rent geared-to-income, you must show us that you tried to get this income.**



Dear RGI Tenant/Co-op Member:

You may be able to get income from:

- Old Age Security, Guaranteed Income Supplement, and Ontario Guaranteed Annual Income Supplement (OAS / GIS / GAINS)
- Employment Insurance (EI) benefits
- Child support payments
- Ontario Works
- your immigration sponsor

In order to continue to be eligible for rent-geared-to-income (RGI), you must apply for this income. To apply, please contact [insert contact information].

[explain what you expect from them regarding support income here]

[explain that what their RGI Rent will be if they are eligible for RGI and what you expect from them regarding Ontario Works application here]

[explain consequences for sponsor (may be required to repay Ontario Works or may not be able to sponsor others) if the tenant is required to pursue OW and what you expect from them regarding sponsorship income here]

**Your deadline for reporting to us**



You must report back to [staff contact] within [insert number] days with proof that you have applied and documents to show whether or not you are eligible for this income.

If you do not report back to us by [insert date], you may be made ineligible for RGI which means you may be charged the market rent/housing charge for your unit.

If you have any questions, please call [staff contact] at [insert contact number].

Sincerely,

[Housing Provider Contact]

**CLAD**

# Exercise: Write two headings

[Date]

[Names of household members]

[Address of Unit]

Dear Tenant(s):

You are currently living in a unit that is larger than your household qualifies for...  
[Provide details of the service manager's process for overhoused households and why they must move].

If after one year from this notice [insert date], you have not followed the process to move to a smaller unit, the rent for your unit will increase to the market rent of \$ \_\_\_\_\_ effective [enter effective date of rent increase].

The following is a summary of the information we used to make the decision [insert summary here]:

If you disagree with this decision, you may request a review of it within [timeframe] days... People who were not involved in making the original decision would carry out the review.

To request a review, you must [provide details of process] stating the reasons that you disagree with the decision and attach any relevant supporting information.

If a request for a review is not received within the time limit, our decision will be final... If you make a request for a review and then decide that you no longer want the review to take place, you must advise [provide details of who and how to notify] in writing that you have changed your mind.

If you have any questions, please call me at [phone number].

Sincerely,

|

Manager  
[Name of Non-Profit]  
Encl.

**CLAD**

**Literacy – Comparative distributions of proficiency levels of population aged 16 to 65, 2012**

Survey Level	% of Population	Skill Level	Skill Examples
(At or below) 1	16.5%	Poor readers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty following dosage instructions on medicine</li> <li>• Difficulty finding times on a bus schedule</li> </ul>
2	32%	Narrow readers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid reading unless it 'invites them in'</li> </ul>
3	37.6%	Desired level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desired proficiency level for handling tasks in today's world</li> </ul>
4 & 5	13.9%	Above average	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most have post-secondary education</li> <li>• Can handle advanced reading tasks</li> </ul>

Source: The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), 2012



**Understanding Literacy Levels**

Newspapers and magazines	IALS Level	Grade Reading Level	Education
(Parts of) Toronto Sun	1	6 - 8	8 years of education or less
North Bay Nugget Parry Sound North Star	2	7 - 9	Middle school completion
Globe & Mail	3	10 - 13	High school graduation
National Post	4	14 - 16	College degree
Scientific American	5	17+	Post-graduate degree





# Choosing a Target Grade Reading Level

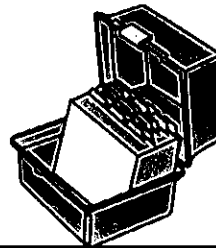
What is a good Grade Reading Level for your audience?  
Clear language experts agree on these guidelines:

If you are writing:	Then aim for a Grade Reading Level of:
<b>Essential information for a diverse public, including:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• people who are still learning the English language</li><li>• people with less than 8 years of formal education</li></ul>	Grade 5 to 6
<b>Information for the general public that introduces:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• new terms and concepts</li><li>• specialized subject matter</li></ul>	Grade 7 to 9
<b>Specialized information intended for an informed audience</b>	Grade 10 to 15 (college)

**CLAD**

### **Tip: Readers prefer advance organization**

- Use headings to help readers scan and retrieve.
- Group related information in smaller chunks to help readers retain. (Miller's Rule)



### **Organization**

- ▣ **Base the order of the information on the reader's needs.**
- ▣ **Give only the information they need.**
- ▣ **Emphasize what you want them to do.**
- ▣ **Follow Miller's 7+/-2 rule.**
- ▣ **Sort and group related information.**
- ▣ **Create meaningful subtitles and headings for each topic.**

**CLND**

## Recognizing passive voice

- ▣ There is no actor in the sentence, or the actor is in a weak position at the end.

Example: Sammy Yatim was fatally shot by police on a TTC streetcar .

- ▣ A form of “to be” (is, are, was, were, has been, will be) comes before the action word.
- ▣ The action word is a past participle.

Examples:

is intended, was decided, were sold, will be introduced, has been reviewed

**CLAD**

## Summary - Active Voice

- ▣ Clarifies responsibility
- ▣ Clears up ambiguity
- ▣ Improves the tone
- ▣ Cuts down on words

**CLAD**

# Exercise: Change passive to active

(Taken from: Capital work update, Housing Facilities Manager's report )

1. Comprehensive electrical maintenance has or is being performed at all our properties. Many items have been repaired, avoiding future potential hazards or power interruptions.

2. New fire alarm systems are being installed at [list locations].

3. Parking lot improvements will be made at [list locations].

4. A number of balconies throughout the county will be inspected this year and repairs will be scheduled as required in the coming years.

5. We appreciate your patience and do realize that during these renovations tenants are inconvenienced. We hope that once these improvements have been completed, you'll enjoy the enhancements made to your residences.

**CLAD**

# Exercise: Change passive to active

(Taken from: Capital work update, Housing Facilities Manager's report )

1. Comprehensive electrical maintenance has or is being performed at all our properties. Many items have been repaired, avoiding future potential hazards or power interruptions.

1. We are doing electrical maintenance and repairs at all our properties. This will prevent hazards and power interruptions.

2. New fire alarm systems are being installed at [list locations].

2. We are installing new fire alarm systems at [list locations].

3. Parking lot improvements will be made at [list locations].

3. We are improving parking lots at [list locations].

4. A number of balconies throughout the county will be inspected this year and repairs will be scheduled as required in the coming years.

4. Contractors will inspect a number of balconies throughout the county this year and we will schedule repairs in the coming years.

5. We appreciate your patience and do realize that during these renovations tenants are inconvenienced. We hope that once these improvements have been completed, you'll enjoy the enhancements made to your residences.

5. We know this work causes you some inconvenience. Thank you for your patience. We hope that you enjoy the improvements to your homes.

**CLAD**

## **Sentence structure and cognition**

“... (T)he problem seems to concern the amount and depth of information which the reader must store in memory in moving from one construct to the next, and how hard the transition becomes as a result. And in fact, in the experiment ... students said things like:

‘I was so busy working on this part of the sentence, I forgot it was connected with something else’.”

Berman, 1984:142-3

**CLAD**

## **Tip: Keep it short**

- **Headings: 4 – 8 words**
- **Sentences: Average of 15 words\***
- **One idea to a sentence**
- **Paragraphs: 3 – 5 sentences**
- **Web pages: 300 – 400 words**
- **PowerPoint: 3 - 7 points per slide**
- **Use bullets to break up parallel clauses into lists.**

\* Rudolph Flesch, *The Art of Readable Writing*, 1949

**CLAD**

# Managing sentence length

## Before:

Non-profit housing allows frail seniors to stay in their home communities, offers an affordable home to low-income families, gives disabled people independence, and helps the "hard to house" find and keep a decent home.

*[1 sentence, 34 words,  
Grade Reading Level 18]*

## Better?

Non-profit housing allows frail seniors to stay in their home communities. It offers an affordable home to low-income families. It gives disabled people more independence. And non-profit housing can mean that the 'hard to house' find and keep a decent home.

*[4 sentences, average of 10 words,  
Grade Reading Level 8]*

**CLAD**

## Using bullets to manage sentence and paragraph length

Bed bugs are a particular nuisance because they live in the “nest” of their hosts. Because they are so tiny and tend to hide in small crevices, they are able to travel from one location to another with little or no detection. The most common place for bed bugs to be found is in furniture and clothing. Common places to find them include: seams, creases, tufts, and folds of mattresses and box springs; cracks in the bed frame and head board; under chairs, couches, beds, and dust covers; under area rugs and the edges of carpets; behind baseboards, around window and door casings; behind electrical plates and under loose wallpaper, paintings, and posters. What makes these insects even more bothersome is the fact that they are able to travel from apartment to apartment along pipes, and electrical wiring openings. It is crucial to address the problem of bed bugs as soon as detection occurs.

[http://www.onpha.on.ca/AM/AMTemplate.cfm?Section=Info\\_On\\_Fact\\_Sheets&CONTENTID=11890&TEMPLATE=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm](http://www.onpha.on.ca/AM/AMTemplate.cfm?Section=Info_On_Fact_Sheets&CONTENTID=11890&TEMPLATE=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm)



## Using Bullets to Manage Sentence and Paragraph Length

Bed bugs are a particular nuisance because they live in the “nest” of their hosts. Because they are so tiny and tend to hide in small crevices, they are able to travel from one location to another with little or no detection. The most common place for bed bugs to be found is in furniture and clothing. Other common places include:

- seams, creases, tufts, and folds of mattresses and box springs
- cracks in the bed frame and head board
- under chairs, couches, beds, and dust covers
- under area rugs and the edges of carpets
- behind baseboards
- around window and door casings
- behind electrical plates
- under loose wallpaper, paintings, and posters.

What makes these insects even more bothersome is the fact that they are able to travel from apartment to apartment along pipes, and electrical wiring openings. It is crucial to address the problem of bed bugs as soon as detection occurs.







7420 Airport Road,  
Unit #207, Mississauga,  
ON, L4T 4E5

May 2, 2015

Attention: All Tenants at 110 Eglinton Avenue West

Dear Tenants,

Re: Parking Garage Renovation Work

This is to inform all tenants at 110 Eglinton Avenue West that in view of providing a better service, renovation work will be carried out on the Garage section starting from June 29th, 2015. The said repair works is estimated to span 11 weeks.

After due consideration of all intricacies involved; we arrived at the decision to close the parking section during the entire renovation period in order to expedite the repair works. To this end; the parking lot will be closed for repair works from June 29th, 2015 to September 6th, 2015

We highly regret all inconvenience this important repair process would cause you. However, there will be no charges for parking during this period and tenants shall have access to their assigned parking space immediately after the renovation process is completed.

Should you have questions or concerns, do not hesitate to contact the management for clarification. We thank you for your understanding and anticipated cooperation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "J. A.", written over a horizontal line.

15.



# Find a Shorter, Clearer Word or Phrase

<p>a sufficient degree of funding in the amount of give consideration to approximately at the present time attached herewith please find on an as and when required basis on behalf of prior to regarding terminate utilize with reference to in conjunction with diminution of existing core service provision uncontrolled powered descent into terrain</p>	
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# Find a Shorter, Clearer Word or Phrase

<p>a sufficient degree of funding in the amount of give consideration to approximately at the present time attached herewith please find on an as and when required basis on behalf of prior to regarding terminate utilize with reference to in conjunction with diminution of existing core service provision uncontrolled powered descent into terrain</p>	<p>enough funding of think about about now here is as needed for before about end use about with service cuts  plane crash</p>
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## **Know your lease: Maintenance and repairs**

[Housing provider] maintains the buildings and grounds, and makes repairs for problems caused by normal wear and tear. These services are covered by your rent.

Some repairs to your home are your responsibility. Examples include: plugged toilets, window screen replacements, or when service is required due to vandalism, misuse, or alterations to the unit. We will provide repair service for these items, but service charges apply.

## **Know your lease: Maintenance and repairs**

[Housing provider] maintains the buildings and grounds. We repair problems caused by normal wear and tear. Your rent pays for these services.

Some repairs to your home are your responsibility, including:

- plugged toilets
- window screen replacements
- damage from vandalism, misuse, or alterations to the unit.

We will charge a fee for these types of repairs.