

# improving the reader experience

Reaching low-literacy audiences  
with **clear design principles**



**nine**

questions you  
need to know  
the answers to

literacy levels

15 seconds  
to impress

plain language  
thesaurus from  
A to almost Z

**plus**

'nip and tuck' tips for  
budget-conscious  
communications

# [y\_i\_design]

Publisher  
**NSGD**

Creative Direction & Design  
**Naomi Shacter**

Contributors  
**Yehuda Janowski**  
**Deena Nathanson**  
**Carolyn Wilby**

Plain Language Consultant  
**Carolyn Wilby**

Production Manager  
**Yehuda Janowski**

*[y\_i\_design]* is published by Naomi Shacter Graphic Design [NSGD]. All rights reserved. Contents of this publication may not be reproduced in any manner without written consent of the publisher. © 2010

*[y\_i\_design]* is a resource publication that provides tips and strategies for producing clear communications. If you would like to remove your name from our mailing list, please drop us an e-mail with your name, company name and mailing address and we will promptly remove your listing. Otherwise, please pass *[y\_i\_design]* on or archive it for future reference.

**How to contact us**  
T: 905.771.1840  
F: 905.771.7523  
E: [y\\_i\\_design@nsgd.com](mailto:y_i_design@nsgd.com)  
W: [www.nsgd.com](http://www.nsgd.com)



**[Cover photo]** Digital collage: Naomi Shacter. Photos: istockphoto.com [equipment, hand] and Photodisc [face].  
**[Interior images]** All interior photos and illustrations are from istockphoto.com unless otherwise credited.

Watching my kids navigate their way through the ups, downs, curves, and in-your-face sidewinders of life—sometimes successfully, sometimes not so well—has given me plenty to reflect on, both professionally and personally.

The thing that strikes me most in observing the human condition from the ground floor up, is how easily miscommunication and assumptions can interrupt important connections: to family, to friends, to community. That sentiment transfers into the professional arena too.

Just because we think it or believe it, doesn't make it so. Knowing your audience, their needs, how they perceive and receive information, where they get their information, and ultimately, how they use it, are *all* important to the communication process.

This issue of *[y\_i\_design]* is about the readers' experience—what they need and how you can provide it. In the absence of vocal chords, visual communications are part of your organization's voice. They tell readers who you are, what your message is, and most importantly, how you feel about them. With the right *visual* tone, your materials can help your words resonate, and make the connection to your audience even stronger.

Cheers,

Naomi Shacter  
[nshacter@nsgd.com](mailto:nshacter@nsgd.com)

## CONTENTS

03

**bits & bites**  
tip of the month  
  
defining literacy levels

04

**improving the reader experience**  
with clear design principles

05

**15 seconds to impress**  
the power of words

06

**9 questions to ask yourself**  
& refresh your audience connection

07

**plain language thesaurus**  
alternatives for 'big words and phrases' from A to almost Z

08

**this won't hurt a bit—honest**  
'nip and tuck' tips for budget-conscious communications

**what's your pet peeve?**  
receive a \$25.00 gift card if we use yours!



## Social responsibility

Is it possible to do good and be good at what you do, simultaneously?

# Absolutely!

Here's a company doing just that. [www.oliberte.com](http://www.oliberte.com)



### Tool tip of the month

When you need to snap a quick photo for the company newsletter or e-news, remember to keep your subject free and clear of all dirt, dust and lint. This is especially important when shooting products and subjects with dark areas. While you may not notice those white flecks and stray hairs on the CEO's suit jacket, the camera lens will—in every minute detail. One more thing: don't forget to remove shrink wrapping or plastic coatings intended for product protection prior to the photo shoot.

Visit [www.nsgd.com/blog](http://www.nsgd.com/blog) for more tips.

# [defining literacy levels]

level	description	[%]	outcome
1	Poor reading skills  May recognize only one or two familiar words in simple text	<b>20</b> per cent of Canadian adults are at this level (2003)	May not be able to use or understand printed directions properly  May give the incorrect dosage of medication  Everyday tasks like grocery shopping or paying bills can be too stressful or impossible to complete  May cope with excellent memorization skills
2	Can read simple material that does not involve complicated tasks  Preferred writing style is plain language	<b>28</b> per cent of Canadian adults are at this level (2003)	New tasks that require reading are difficult to learn  Heavy text pages or long paragraphs are intimidating  Will not read for pleasure
3	Can read well enough to cope with most demands of everyday life and work in an advanced society  This level is equal to high school completion and minimum level required for college entry	<b>35</b> per cent of Canadian adults are at this level (2003)	Technical information that uses industry jargon, like that found in manuals, could be frustrating  This is the minimum literacy level required to understand the information and benefits available in the marketplace to all Canadians
4/5	Strong reading skills	<b>17</b> per cent of Canadian adults are at this level (2003)	Technical information that uses industry jargon, like that found in manuals, could be frustrating  Challenging and complex printed information can be processed and understood

Sources: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, Statistics Canada and Clear Language at Work.



# Improving the reader experience

It's not just what you say that's important; how you present your information matters too. Using clear design principles improves the readability of your visual communications, *and* helps you convey information clearly, especially to a low-literacy audience. **Part 1: White Space.** by **Naomi Shacter**

## What is white space?

You've probably heard the term *white space* used many times. On the printed page, it's everywhere—from the small, unused space in and around letters, to those large, glamorous spaces of nothingness. But white space is far from nothing; it welcomes a reader in and provides a relaxing environment to receive information. Think of it as an open invitation for your audience to come in and *hear* what you have to say. White space is all the *empty* space:

- in between and around words;
- in between and around letters;
- in between lines of text;
- in between columns;
- in the margins, footers and headers; and
- around visuals.

## How much is enough?

A 50/50 ratio of white space to content (content is made up of visuals and text) would make your readers and designer very happy. If you were to suck out all the white space on a page and pile it in a corner, and then do the same with all the content, you should have two equal parts. But, since that's not a realistic way to measure white space, you'll just have to 'eyeball' it. If it feels right, it probably is. If the page feels heavy and uncomfortable to read, then there's likely not enough white space.

Another formula for creating the illusion of more space, is to use the 30/30/40 ratio. That's 30 per cent text, 30 per cent visuals, and 40 per cent white space. So, while that doesn't give you the ideal ratio of white space, the equal use of visuals (e.g. graphics,

illustrations, charts, photographs) to text gives the impression that there is.

## What if there isn't enough?

Your readers may not fall over themselves trying to get away from your communications, but they probably won't stick around to read your information either. So, how do you make up for the lack of white space?

Simple. You cut copy. There is usually a way to say more with less. You *could* of course add pages or increase the page size, but cutting text is the most effective way to free up space without adding to your costs.

## What shouldn't you do?

In an effort to add more content to a communication piece, text is often

reduced and condensed. This 'fix' basically squeezes out what little white space there is; the result is a denser page. The average reader may persist through a text-heavy piece, but a reader that isn't as confident or skilled, will give up before they've acquired the information you wanted them to have.

### Why is it important?

Too much information on a page and too little white space, makes information intimidating. If content is not easily defined by the white space around it, readers have difficulty focusing on what they need to. If they are overwhelmed or confused by the appearance of your materials, they can miss important information. For a low-literacy reader, that could mean the difference between giving the correct dosage of medication and the wrong dosage that harms themselves or their child. Filling out applications can also seem impossible if the presentation of information is cluttered and confusing.

What ever your audience's literacy level, everyone benefits from well designed spaces. Use clear design principles to ensure your words are read and understood.



### white space tips

- use a 50/50 or 30/30/40 ratio;
- pay attention to the small spaces around text, headings, subheads and in between lines of text;
- leave ample room for margins and space between columns of text;
- use plain language principles to edit and trim your copy;
- use your knowledge of white space to assess the readability of your current visual communications, and when developing future materials; and
- repeat this chant to your colleagues and creative team: *I will not squish!*

# 15 seconds to impress: the power of words

By **Deena Nathanson**

We have thousands of words at our fingertips and often feel the need to show them off. Proving that we're smart doesn't always make for good copy though. As a matter of fact, it can put readers off our message.

Creating good, clean copy that is easy to read and understand should be simple, but it's not. Before we put pen to paper, or type a single keystroke, we need to define our audience. Once we're sure who we're writing for, we can hone our message.

Readers give us 15 seconds to pique their curiosity. In that time we need to ensure that they decide that our message is interesting or important enough to keep reading.

### Use bold headings and short paragraphs

Dividing text into short, digestible paragraphs with boldfaced headings is a great way to capture the audience's attention. Each should deal with a single issue—once your point is made, move on. You can always change the wording and repeat it later on.

### Provide tips as a bulleted list

Do you have a set of advantages or tips to offer the reader? A bulleted list will grab his or her attention and illustrate your point in a clear, concise and easy-to-read format. The list will:

- catch the reader's eye;
- focus attention on your key information; and
- ensure that your message is delivered in easy-to-digest bits.

### Grammar and spelling count

Sometimes when we craft our easy-to-read messages, it's worth forgetting some of what we learned in school. It's okay to use contractions and to be informal, but our grammar and spelling need to be correct.

Errors in how we use and spell words are jarring and can turn a reader's attention away from the text. Instead of receiving a call to action, she or he will wonder what's wrong with the message.

Don't take a chance—use your spell checker, edit, proofread and edit again. The 15 second chance to engage the reader is too significant to be lost.

Your message is important so maximize the impact of your words and grab your audience's attention.

Deena Nathanson is a public relations and communications consultant. She makes sure that her clients' messages are well-developed and clear. For more information contact Deena at [Deena.Nathanson@sympatico.ca](mailto:Deena.Nathanson@sympatico.ca).





# 9 questions to ask yourself & refresh your audience connection

By\_Naomi Shacter

With all the ways to convey information, connecting with an audience has never been easier—or *more confusing*. More than just an act of plug and play, knowing your audience well reflects in the way you present information. Ask yourself the following questions to re-evaluate what you know about them, and to refresh your connection.

- 1 Are my perceptions about my audience valid and up-to-date?** *When I was a kid I walked barefoot in the snow.* I cringed when my parents made comparisons like that, and what's worse—I catch myself making similar statements. Get reacquainted with your audience and prevent your readers from rolling their eyeballs at your information, by eliminating content that comes across as out-of-touch.
- 2 Are my perceptions based on a personal experience?** *My partner burns boiling water therefore men can't cook (not mine, I swear).* An isolated or ongoing experience with one member of a group is not a reflection of an entire group; it's an opinion and opinions are in fact, not fact. So, maybe the 'Report on Declining Family Nutrition' cover would be better served by an image other than that of a disoriented man with an egg beater stuck in his ear.
- 3 Are my perceptions based on assumptions?** Is the kid who walks around with tattoos up his arm, and his boxers hanging out really headed for a life of crime, or is he aspiring to publish his own consortium of magazines? Assumptions never tell the whole story, and rarely help you connect.

- 4 Have I fallen for some of the many myths associated with my audience?** Like rumours, myths have a way of turning misconceptions into believable facts. Do *all* Canadian's really say 'eh', and do *all* seniors find new technologies too frustrating to embrace? Of course not. Just because a commonly held belief has taken up residence in the mainstream, doesn't make it accurate.
- 5 Have I examined the facts regarding my audience?** It's easy to fall into the same routine and rely on what you already know. *We paid a fortune for these stats* is not reason enough to rely on out-dated data. Continue building your resources with new information.
- 6 Do my organization's current communications stereotype my audience?** Ruth War recalls the words she saw on a banner of a restaurant she *use to* frequent. *Wifey, wifey, don't make dinner. Make reservations.* "It was so condescending, I was infuriated", says Ruth. Communications that play on stereotypes create feelings of disrespect and alienate the intended audience. The only message they get is that *you don't* get them.
- 7 Are there sensory or physical issues that affect my audience?** Understanding the needs of a visually impaired audience, for example, makes it possible to use appropriate font sizes for information materials. That in turn shows you care, and improves your ability to convey information in a format that is perceived and received well.
- 8 What is my audience's literacy level?** Knowing your audience's literacy level helps you create communications that are suitable for your readers. See *Defining Literacy Levels* on page 3.
- 9 Do I respect my audience's intelligence?** *What do they know, I'm the expert?* I made that mistake early on and it continues to remind me that every source and piece of information has value, and is transferable. Communicating isn't a one-sided effort with a *father-knows-best* attitude.  
We can all learn a great deal just by listening—it's by far the most important component for developing useful communications that build strong and lasting connections.

# Plain language thesaurus By Carolyn Wilby

'Big words and phrases' can usually be replaced by simpler and clearer choices—there are numerous options from A to almost Z. Here are just a few:

 Words				 Phrases			
access (v.)	use, get	afford an opportunity	allow, let				
acquire	buy, gain, get	as a consequence of	because of				
adequate number	enough	attached herewith please find	here is				
adjacent	beside, next to, touching	because of the fact that	because				
advise	tell, inform, say, write	be supportive of	support				
affirm	agree with	due to the fact that	because				
alleviate	ease; lessen, make less, soften	geared to the needs of	will help				
alter	change	have the capability	be able, can				
annually	each year, yearly	have the capacity	can, to be able				
apparent	clear, plain	I am of the opinion that	I think				
apply	put on, use	incumbent upon	must				
assist	help, aid	in close proximity to	near				
attempt	try	in connection with	about				
bacteria	germs	in spite of the fact that	though				
beneficial	good for, helpful, useful	in the course of	during				
biannual	every two years, twice a year	limited number	few				
capacity	ability, size, space	on the basis of	by, from				
cease	stop, end	on the grounds of	because				
chronic	ongoing, constant, long-term	owing to the fact that	because				
compulsion	urge	preliminary to	before				
dearth	lack, shortage	prior to	before				
deceased	dead	subsequent to	after				
decrease	cut back, drop, make less	the manner in which	how				
deem	think	this serves to illustrate	this shows				
dehydration	water loss	to the extent that	if, when				
demonstrate	prove, show	until such time as	until				
demoralize	discourage, cause to lose hope	we have no option but to	we must				
depart	check out, go, leave	with respect to	about, on				

**Publisher's note:** The above word chart has been provided courtesy of Carolyn Wilby, a plain language specialist. Visit [clearlanguageatwork.com](http://clearlanguageatwork.com) for more plain language resources and a complete thesaurus.



## What's your pet peeve?

Send us your pet peeve. If we select it for the next issue of [y\_i\_design] or use it on our blog, we'll send you a \$25.00 gift card to Indigo. Here's one of our personal favourites.

“You know what really grinds my gears? When someone calls me and says, “*Someone called me from this number, who are you?*”

Hey, you called me buddy. FYI: Call display is not a replacement for call answer. If the call warranted a call-back, they would have left a message!”

— Sidney J.

We really hope you enjoyed this issue.

Send your questions, comments, story ideas and pet peeves to: [y\\_i\\_design@nsgd.com](mailto:y_i_design@nsgd.com)



[www.nsgd.com](http://www.nsgd.com)

[y\_i\_design] is printed on Chorus Art Silk, 80lb Text. This paper is FSC certified, and contains 55% recycled content and 30% post-consumer waste. ♻️

# This won't hurt a bit—honest

## 'Nip and tuck' tips for budget-conscious communications

By\_Yehuda Janowski

Internal communications and company newsletters are often the first to go when budgets are tight; the more 'glamorous' materials like annual reports are not immune either. There are alternatives for producing viable, and yes leaner, visual communications, and no, it doesn't have to be painful. Consider one or more of the following 'nip and tuck' procedures to save your communications and lower your production costs.

**Reduce the page count.** Page reduction is a straightforward way to cut costs. The minimum number of pages for a saddle-stitched report or newsletter is four, and goes up from there by multiples of four. You can drop your page count by fours, if the initial page count was eight or more. **Pros:** You save on print costs, and postage if you rely on mailing for distribution. Design fees can be less as well for a considerably smaller publication. **Cons:** You need to rethink your content and eliminate information that is more self-indulgent than useful.

**Check your weight.** Paper stocks come in several weights, in both text and cover. Try lowering the weight of the paper stock you're currently using. **Pros:** Lighter stock is less expensive, and can reduce the overall weight of your piece enough to lower your postage, and therefore distribution costs. **Cons:** Watch for heavy ink coverage; it may show through to the other side on paper that is too light.

**Don't bleed.** Bleed in printing refers to ink that extends to a page's edge. Pages designed with bleed require a larger size sheet for printing, before trimming to the desired size. **Pros:** Eliminating bleed can reduce your print and paper costs. **Cons:** Can restrict the design.

**Maximize the press sheet.** Try to design printed materials so that the format makes use of the full press sheet. **Pros:** There's less paper waste and trimming, which improves your cost per unit. The more *brochures* you are able to set up on a press sheet, the more you save. **Cons:** You need to plan ahead and work with your creative team to determine the size of press and sheet you will be working with, before the design gets underway.

**Decrease your print run.** Take an inventory of what's left from your last print run and if there are too many remaining, print less next time. **Pros:** Less paper consumption and energy expended on printing and distribution is kinder on your budget and the environment. **Cons:** If you underestimate, it can be costly to reprint just a few on a traditional press. In that case, you can reprint digitally.

**Print on demand.** Rather than printing a large quantity at the outset, print just enough based on your immediate needs, and then post a PDF version online for mass consumption. **Pros:** Depending on the format, this is great for small print runs, where you need just a 'few' printed reports for important stakeholders. **Cons:** If you need hundreds of multi-page documents, you may end up paying much more to do several runs versus one complete traditional run.

**Publisher's note:** The above tips are just some of the options available to reduce your production costs of printed materials. Evaluating the importance and relevance of all communications, regardless of budget pressures, is good practice—and so is maintaining an ongoing connection with your audience.

