

The Use of Plain Language in Parliamentary Work



ParlAmericas briefing documents present comparative research, policy considerations, and areas for legislative action on issues of interest to parliamentarians, with a special focus on our member parliaments in the Americas and the Caribbean.

What is plain language?

Plain language is a form of communication in which the **drafting, structure, and design** make it easy to find, understand, and appropriately use necessary information.¹

The most important aspect in this type of communication is to **focus on the recipient of the information**, ensuring it is easily accessible to everyone. **Clear language content is concise and designed to save time and effort for the target audience.**

The purpose of plain language is to achieve **useful, efficient, and transparent communication that promotes equal access to information for all people**. This directly contributes to ensuring the effective exercise of the universal right of access to public information.

Debunking some myths about plain language

It is important to clarify that plain language does not mean:²

- ⊖ Generalizing the law. Plain language maintains the same level of legal rigour, but requires additional effort to structure and draft in a more easily understandable way.
- ⊖ Doing an informal translation of legal documents. Laws must be drafted precisely to avoid ambiguities and problems of interpretation. Clear language does not replace legal technique, but rather complements it to facilitate access to legal information.
- ⊖ Removing all technical terms. When it is necessary to use specialized words, they should be explained in accessible language that allows everyone to understand their meaning.
- ⊖ “Lowering the standard” of public documents. Plain language does not underestimate users; on the contrary, it can serve an educational purpose by facilitating understanding of legal principles and concepts.

¹ [What is Plain Language?](#) Plain Language Association International.

² [Plain Language Guide for Legislative Texts and Information](#). NDI, 2020.

Why use plain language in parliaments?

Clear language plays a fundamental role in parliamentary work, as it makes the responsibilities, decisions, advancements, and work of the legislature more accessible to citizens. This strengthens public confidence and improves understanding of parliaments' role in democratic systems.

Given that one of the main functions of parliaments is to draft laws that establish rights and obligations, it is essential that these texts are understandable to all members of the public. When legislative information is not understood, it creates distance and mistrust and prevents the effective enforcement of laws; on the other hand, **clear communication strengthens ties with society and reinforces institutional legitimacy.**

In addition to passing laws, parliaments also oversee the government, represent citizens, and must be accountable to the public for their own work. Using clear language in these activities helps everyone understand what parliament does, participate in an informed manner, and easily access public information.

This approach is particularly relevant for historically marginalized groups, such as young people, Indigenous Peoples, women, and people living in rural areas, who often face additional barriers to accessing public information. **Clear communication helps ensure that no one is left behind in understanding and exercising their rights.**

Plain language therefore offers a double benefit:

- ➔ On the one hand, it strengthens the trust in and legitimacy of parliaments;
- ➔ On the other hand, it enables citizens to learn about, understand, and exercise their rights effectively.

It is a tool for bringing institutions closer to the people they serve.

Clear language can be used in all areas of parliamentary work, such as internal communications, working documents, and even legislative drafting. However, it is especially important in documents and communications directed towards citizens, such as newsletters, announcements, publications of laws, information on participatory processes, accountability reports, and others.

The use of plain language can be complemented by the adoption of inclusive language³, which not only facilitates understanding but also contributes to recognizing and highlighting diversity. Incorporating both approaches, where appropriate, can promote more accessible and representative communication.

Clear language promotes legislative openness by ensuring that public documents are not only able to be accessed, but also understood. This feature is key to promoting broader, more informed, and effective citizen participation, as it provides clarity on parliamentary processes and the issues under debate, increasing the possibilities for engagement and advocacy.

3 <https://parlAmericas.org/uploads/documents/Publication-InclusiveLanguageParliamentaryWork-en.pdf>

Open parliament is a model of management and innovation that seeks to bring parliaments and citizens closer together while also strengthening parliamentary transparency and access to public information, accountability, inclusive citizen participation, ethics, and probity.

For more information on open parliament, visit the [Road Map Towards Legislative Openness 2.0](#), or visit [Converging Legislative Agendas - Exploring synergies between open parliament and gender equality](#) (available in Spanish) for information on the relationship between open parliament and gender equality.

How can plain language be applied in parliaments?

Below are some recommendations for writing or speaking in plain language within the parliamentary context. These suggestions are based on various sources, including the [Guide to Fostering the Readability of Legislative Texts](#) used by the Government of Canada, [recommendations](#) from the Plain Language Association International (PLAIN), and plain language tools (in Spanish) used in the [Congress of Colombia](#), the [Congress of Chile](#), and the [Ombudsperson's Office of Ecuador](#).

STEP BY STEP: APPLYING PLAIN LANGUAGE IN PARLIAMENTARY WORK

1. IDENTIFY THE AUDIENCE AND THE OBJECTIVE

Being clear on the intended audience for a communication allows for content to be adapted effectively. It is key to define who it is for, what prior knowledge they may have, and what they really need from the communication.

Useful questions:

- ➔ What does my target audience need to know?
- ➔ What is their profile (age, educational level, background)?
- ➔ What questions might arise when reading or listening to this information?

What to avoid		What to do
 Using overly technical language		 Consider the audience profile
 Communicate as much information as possible		 Identify interests and needs to prioritize which information to share

2. DEFINE THE STRUCTURE

Once the audience and objective have been defined, it is important to organize the content in a way that makes it easy to understand. The structure should respond to the needs of the audience and the formatting

most appropriate for the type of message.

Useful questions:













- ➔ What is the most suitable format for this type of content?
 - 🔍 Examples:
 - 🔍 Infographics to explain bills
 - 🔍 Timelines for participatory processes
 - 🔍 Checklists on the requirements for submitting requests for access to public information, among others
- ➔ What approaches to organizing or structuring the content would the target audience be most familiar with?
 - 🔍 Examples:
 - 🔍 Introduction ➔ Development ➔ Conclusion
 - 🔍 Title ➔ Subtitles ➔ Key points
 - 🔍 Questions ➔ Answers
- ➔ What sequence or order of information will facilitate navigation and understanding of the content?
 - 🔍 Examples:
 - 🔍 From the general to the specific
 - 🔍 From the problem to the solution
 - 🔍 Chronological order
 - 🔍 Starting with requirements and then steps to follow
 - 🔍 Starting with outlining rights and then the mechanisms for exercising them

Recommendations for structuring information:

- ➔ Determine the format of the communication according to the channel and audience.
- ➔ Include the most relevant information at the beginning.
- ➔ Use clear headings to guide the reader and group related content together.
- ➔ Incorporate lists or point form when to help simplify information.
- ➔ Include links to other documents that can help provide further information.

3. EXPRESSION

Once the structure of the communication has been determined, the next step is to write the content clearly and concisely. Suggestions for achieving this include:

What to avoid	What to do
 Using complex and long expressions <i>Example: With a view to the previously expressed sentiments, and taking into account the background information detailed above...</i>	 Ensuring clarity, conciseness, and good flow in the information <i>Example: For these reasons...</i>
 Writing very long and confusing sentences <i>Example: Based on current legislation, and considering the multiple social variables that affect the population of rural women...</i>	 Writing concise sentences (of no more than 20 words).  Use the subject + verb + complement structure. <i>Example: The law seeks to improve access to services for rural women.</i>
 Writing subordinate clauses <i>Example: With the aim of promoting women's participation in decision-making, the project was presented.</i>	 Writing simple sentences <i>Example: The project was presented to promote women's participation in decision-making.</i>
 Drafting long paragraphs with multiple ideas. <i>Example: A 15-line paragraph explaining the law, its background, key actors, and impacts.</i>	 Ensuring that paragraphs are short and contain only one main idea. <i>Example: A paragraph explaining only the objective of the law: "This initiative seeks to strengthen the political participation of young women in local government."</i>
 Using technical terms	 Choosing common and frequently used words  Defining any terms that are necessary to include

What to avoid		What to do
Example: A <u>motion</u> was made to amend the internal regulations.	➤	Example: A <u>proposal</u> was made to change the internal regulations.
✗ Using unnecessary formalities		✓ Prioritising important information and eliminating unnecessary details
Example: This letter serves as confirmation that we have received the document containing the aforementioned legislative proposal...	➤	Example: We hereby inform you that we have received the document containing the legislative proposal.
✗ Using vague expressions		✓ Using specific data and figures
Example: <u>Many people</u> support the measure.	➤	Example: <u>78% of those surveyed</u> support the measure.
✗ Using slang, strange words, or Latin		✓ Using appropriate and clear language
Example: The proposal becomes a <u>sui generis</u> regulatory input...	➤	Example: The proposal offers an <u>innovative</u> regulatory alternative...
✗ Adopting use of the impersonal		✓ Using an active voice to know who is performing an action
Example: The public hearings <u>were held</u> .	➤	Example: The Committee on Children and Adolescents <u>held</u> public hearings.
✗ Using acronyms without explaining their meaning		✓ Avoiding or explaining acronyms
Example: The OAS and the IACHR presented a new report on human rights.	➤	Example: The Organization of American States (OAS) and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) presented a new report on human rights.
✗ Avoiding the use of multiple or unnecessary negations.		✓ Drafting in the positive when it is clearer
Example: <u>Incomplete</u> applications will not be accepted.	➤	Example: Only complete applications will be accepted.
✗ Using verbs as nouns		✓ Using verbs that directly indicate the action
Example: The <u>implementation</u> of the regulation will be carried out by the parliamentary team.	➤	Example: The parliamentary team will <u>implement</u> the regulations.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) FOR CLEAR LANGUAGE

🇨🇦 The House of Commons of Canada uses AI tools to draft initial plain-language versions of [information on parliamentary procedures](#), as well as to update scripts and recordings of explanatory videos. This content is always reviewed and edited by professionals before publication. The approach forms part of the Chamber's [2023-2025 accessibility plan](#),⁴ of which plain language is a central component.

4. DESIGN

Clear language refers not only to what is said, but also to how information is presented. Visual design plays a key role in understanding content and can facilitate or hinder access to information, especially in parliamentary contexts.

The following are recommendations to apply in the design of content to contribute to clear communication:

- ▶ Leave sufficient white space, separating paragraphs to avoid dense blocks of text.
- ▶ Maintain appropriate line spacing and margins.
- ▶ Use visual aids, such as icons, tables, or graphs, whenever possible.
- ▶ Choose a clear font and a legible font size.
- ▶ Ensure there is good contrast between the text colour and the background.
- ▶ Consider accessible formats for people with visual or hearing impairments, such as read-aloud, captions, or Braille or audio versions.

5. EVALUATION

A commitment to ongoing critical review and improvement is an important approach to adopt in relation to communications products. A good practice is to ask someone else to review the document and offer constructive comments on its clarity and effectiveness.

Where possible, it is also useful to test the text with people outside parliament to assess whether they understand the information properly and to identify possible improvements. This type of feedback can be key to ensuring that the content complies with the principles of plain language.

Examples of plain language in parliamentary work


Although laws must use technical and precise language due to their legal nature, it is essential that their content can be understood by all citizens. Disseminating laws with clear language helps to strengthen the public's awareness of their rights, especially in matters of protection and access to justice.

⁴ The House of Commons of Canada develops three-year plans to comply with the [Accessible Canada Act](#).

From a human rights perspective, parliament’s role is not limited to legislating to promote and protect rights. Parliaments also have a responsibility to ensure that information about these rights is understandable to all, making sure that citizens are aware of the measures that exist and how to access support in the event of a rights violation.

For example, in the case of sexual harassment, if people do not understand the legal provisions in place or are unaware of the channels for reporting complaints, protection measures lose their effectiveness. Simple, accessible language and an appropriate legislative outreach strategy are key tools for realizing rights, promoting equality, and strengthening collective well-being.

Below are real-life examples of plain language being used in the legislative sphere:

 Trinidad and Tobago⁵	
What the law says	Plain language
“...it is expedient that the Steelpan be officially and legally declared as the national musical instrument in recognition of its fundamental value to the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and its citizenry.”	The Steelpan [is declared] as the national, musical instrument of Trinidad and Tobago.’
Clause 4. <i>The Minister to whom responsibility for culture is assigned shall cause to be prepared and laid in Parliament, every two years from the date of commencement of this Act, a report on the recognition, status, promotion, development and impact of the Steelpan at national, regional and international levels.</i>	The Minister [shall] report to Parliament on the promotion, development and impact of the Steelpan, nationally and globally, every 2 years.

5 Examples drawn from [The National Musical Instrument Bill](#), 2024 and its corresponding [Bill Essentials](#) document.

What the law says

Plain language

Art. 6. g. Violence against women in public spaces: violence perpetrated against women by one or more persons, in public places or places accessible to the public, such as means of transport or shopping centres, through verbal or nonverbal conduct or expressions with sexual connotations that affect or damage their dignity, integrity, freedom, free movement, or permanence and/or create a hostile or offensive environment. (Paragraph incorporated by Art. 1 of Law No. 27,501, Official Gazette 8/5/2019)

What is street sexual harassment?

Street sexual harassment, that is, violence against women in public spaces, consists of physical or verbal acts of a sexual nature against a person who does not want to participate in such acts. Sexual harassment is based on the gender or sexual identity of the person being harassed.

Does the law that punishes sexual harassment apply only to harassment that occurs on the street?

No. The sexual harassment law also applies to harassment in private spaces that are open to the public, such as a shopping mall, theater, or bar.

Law 1472 of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires. Misdemeanor Code, Art. 53.

Article 53 - Harassment. Intimidation. Anyone who intimidates or harasses another person in a threatening manner, provided that the act does not constitute a crime, shall be punished with one (1) to five (5) days of community service, a fine of eighty (80) to four hundred (400) fixed units, and/or one (1) to five (5) days of arrest. The action shall be dependent on private proceedings, except in cases where the victim is under 18 years of age.


What penalties apply to someone who sexually harasses another person?

A person who sexually harasses another person may be punished with a fine, community service, or arrest.


⁶ Examples drawn from the Simple Law platform of the Argentine Ministry of Justice (see link; in Spanish),= related to provisions added on street harassment in [Law 26.485 - Law on Comprehensive Protection to Prevent, Sanction, and Eradicate Violence Against Women in Spaces Related to their Interpersonal Relationships](#).


Experiences from other parliaments

Below are some examples of the use of plain language in the dissemination of laws:

 **Trinidad and Tobago:** The Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago promotes clear language and public understanding of legislation through tools such as “Bill Essentials,” which are clear language summaries of bills, and the inclusion of explanatory briefs and notes on bills. These documents, which are publicly available on the [Parliament’s website](#), summarize the purpose, background, and key provisions of bills in straightforward and accessible language.

 **Canada:** Plain language in legislation and parliamentary work is advanced through tools like the [Legislative Summaries](#) produced by the [Library of Parliament](#). These documents, available to the public on Parliament’s website, set out the intent, context, and main elements of bills in accessible and straightforward language. The drafting and summaries of legislation are supported by Justice Canada’s drafting guidance and the federal government’s accessibility policies.






 **United Kingdom:** In the United Kingdom’s parliamentary system, legislation is accompanied by [Explanatory Notes](#) which are prepared for each bill. These documents, published alongside the full text of the bill, outline its purpose, background, and principal effects in clear and accessible language. The Parliament also publishes [Easy Read guides](#) that explain basic parliamentary processes, such as how laws are made and what select committees do, in very simple language.

 **Note:** There is significant and expanding work on plain language within parliaments and legislative contexts across Latin America. In countries such as [Colombia](#), [Chile](#), and [Ecuador](#), dedicated guides and manuals have been developed with organizations that work specifically on clear language that offer practical recommendations for drafting legislation, legislative information, and public documents in clear and accessible language. By contrast, English-speaking parliaments have not yet engaged in such formal fora or partnerships dedicated to advancing clear language. This makes the Latin American examples especially useful as sources of good practices and comparative learning, highlighting opportunities to adapt and apply similar approaches in English-speaking contexts. These guides have been referenced to develop this tool.

Checklist for using plain language

Questions		YES	NO
1	Has the key information needed by the target audience been identified?		
2	Was the audience profile taken into account when preparing the communication?		
3	Were possible doubts or questions that might arise when reading or listening to the information considered?		
4	Was a format chosen that is appropriate for the type of content, familiar to the target audience, and easy to navigate and understand?		
5	Is the most important information presented at the beginning of the document?		
6	Is the content organized into clear and distinct sections?		
7	Does the wording make for easy and understandable reading?		
8	Does the document's design contribute to the clarity of the content? (spacing, line spacing, typography, and font size)		
9	Were visual elements or graphic aids used to complement the information?		
10	Was someone outside the institution asked to review the document and provide feedback on its clarity?		

Useful resources

-  [Guide to Fostering the Readability of Legislative Texts](#), Government of Canada, 2025.
-  [What is Plain Language?](#), Plain Language Association International (PLAIN).
-  [Plain Language Checklist](#), British Columbia, 2024.
-  [Road Map towards Legislative Openness 2.0](#), ParlAmericas, 2022.
-  [The Use of Inclusive Language in Parliamentary Work](#), ParlAmericas, 2025.



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