

That's clear!

Implementing plain language and universal design



Module 3

Goals of this module

- Introduce the concepts of plain language and universal design.
- Help participants understand how unclear communication creates barriers, and how these barriers affect understanding, confidence, and participation.
- Show how plain language and universal design can make communication more inclusive, especially for young people in vulnerable situations.
- Equip participants with practical strategies and methods to simplify and improve their own communication materials.
- Co-create a practical toolkit that can be reused and shared within organisations.

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2h30min 🕒

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Why plain communication matters

As we saw in Module 2, barriers to understanding can come from many different situations.

When messages are too complex, people may feel excluded or discouraged from asking questions.

Plain language helps people understand information quickly and confidently. It reduces confusion, stress, and mistakes, especially for young people facing low literacy, language barriers, or learning difficulties.

Plain language supports autonomy: it helps people make decisions and take action on their own.



Why plain communication matters

Plain language is about clear wording, good structure, and accessible formats. Combined with universal design, it makes communication more inclusive for everyone.

Universal design means designing information so it works for as many people as possible from the start, without special adaptations.



Plain language and universal design: how they work together 🤝

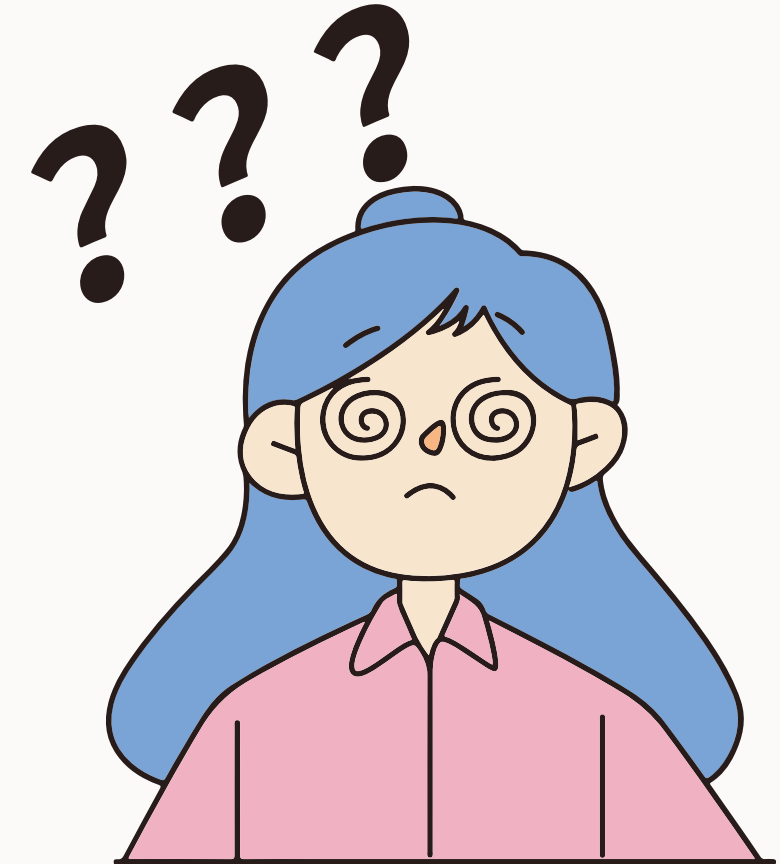
While plain language focuses on words and sentences,
universal design focuses on the whole experience ✨ :

- Structure
- Layout
- Visuals
- Formats

-> Same goal: fewer barriers, more people included



Think of a moment
when instructions were hard to understand.
What made them unclear?



**Writing can exclude
as much as it informs.**



Unlocking the Message

20min 



- You will work in small groups (3–5 people)

- First, each group receives the complex 🤔 version of the text, and tries to understand what is the subject about without any hints



After a few minutes, you are given the plain language 😊 version of the same text

- Groups try to understand the plain language text


Unlocking the Message

20min 



 The session ends with a short group discussion in which you should be able to:

- Explain what made the first text difficult
- What changed in the second version
- How unclear language made you feel and what influence did it have on you potentially taking action

 **HINT:** There's a clear connection between these observations and the idea that plain language improves understanding, autonomy, confidence, and inclusion.

What you experienced has a name: Cognitive load

🤔 When a text is long, dense, or full of jargon, the brain has to do too many things at once:

- Decode unfamiliar words
- Keep track of long sentences
- Guess what is important

😓 This creates cognitive load.

When cognitive load is too high,
understanding drops
- even for skilled readers.



If understanding of the first text felt hard,
it's not because you weren't capable,
it's because the text asked too much from
your brain.



Universal design reduces this effort by organising information visually in a way that helps everyone understand more easily.

Writing in a clear and simple way can improve text comprehension.



The literacy lens matters



The goal is no longer only to write correctly, but to make written information actionable.

Literacy focuses on people's capacity to act with information: to fill in a form, take part in an activity, understand a right, or visit a museum.

Writing in a clear and simple way therefore strengthens this capacity to act. It becomes a lever for cultural democracy and equal access.

Working through a literacy lens means designing content from the reader's point of view, with the aim of enabling understanding, confidence, and action.

A right to access information

Understanding information is a fundamental right, especially in order to:

- exercise citizenship
- access healthcare, education, and culture
- feel autonomous and recognised

Plain language is part of a broader approach based on democracy, equity, and respect for readers.



What is plain language?

Plain language is a way of writing and presenting information so that it is understood the first time by as many people as possible, whatever their level of reading, cultural background, or language.

Its goal is to help everyone find information easily, understand it without effort, and be able to take action.

A stylized, hand-drawn illustration of the word "WHAT?" in a light pink color with a darker pink outline. The text is slanted upwards from left to right and has a bubbly, informal font style.

Where does plain language come from?

The plain language movement emerged in the 1970s, first in the United States, Canada, and Sweden.

Its initial goal was to make administrative documents understandable for everyone and to restore trust in public institutions.

And today?

Plain language has become an international movement, supported by the European Union.

The ISO 24495-1 standard (2023) now defines criteria for clear writing.

In 2024, the European Commission launched the “Clear Writing for Europe” initiative to promote simple and accessible public communication.

A universal approach

Plain language is based on the principles of  universal design.

Universal design means designing environments, products, and services that can be used by everyone, without the need for specific adaptation (UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006, Art. 2).

In short:

- 👉 Design for everyone, without special adaptations.
- 👉 Anticipate the diversity of readers, formats, and contexts.

Plain language rules, definition, norm

Plain language is increasingly recognised as a matter of access and rights.

Understanding information is a condition for autonomy, participation, and equality.

This is why plain language is not only a set of good practices, but also a shared approach, supported by definitions, principles, and international standards.

Let's take a closer look at what plain language means, and how it is defined.

An international standard: ISO 24495-1 (2023)

Adopted in August 2023, ISO 24495-1

“Plain language – Part 1: Guidelines for clear communication”
provides a shared framework for plain language.

“A communication is in plain language if the intended audience can easily find what they are looking for, understand what they find, and use that information.”

The standard proposes a structure to improve:

- Content (vocabulary, grammar)
- Structure (headings, information hierarchy)
- Presentation (layout, typography)

Plain language role reversal lab

30min 🕒



- You will work in pairs

- One person receives a short jargon-filled 😐 or bureaucratic 🤔 text and explains it to their partner without changing the wording



After a short exchange, pairs rewrite ✍️ the text together in plain language

👉 Try identifying obstacles to clear communication and improving them by making the text clear.


Plain Language Role Reversal Lab

30min 



 The activity ends with a group discussion on:

- What was hardest to explain
- Which changes improved clarity the most

 **HINT:** Think about the idea that plain language supports dignity, autonomy, and equal access.

Beyond the words, what else could make this message easier to understand?

Think about universal design!

Before writing 

The right questions to ask

Think about...



👉 Who is your audience?

- What are their main characteristics?
 - Age, situation, familiarity with the topic, level of literacy, language, and any cognitive or sensory disabilities.
- What do they already know?
- In what context will they access the information?
 - Online, on paper, on site (crowded, noisy area), or remotely.
- Might they be supported by someone else?
 - A mediator, a relative, or a professional.
- How do you want to reach them, and through which format?
 - Paper, website, app, poster, audio, video — each format comes with different readability constraints.

Think about...



- 👉 What is at stake in your message?
- What do I want the reader to remember, understand, or do?
 - Clarify the expected action (register, attend, understand an instruction, make a choice...).
 - Reformulate it using action verbs.
- What information is essential, and what is secondary?
 - In other words, what should the reader take away (2–3 key pieces of information)?
- What happens if they do not understand it?
- Anticipate the risks:
 - Mistakes, abandonment, frustration, loss of rights, exclusion.
- Which terms are unavoidable?
 - List technical words that need to be simplified or explained.

Think about...



👉 Organising your message

- Define the subject in one simple sentence
 - (“This is an invitation to...”, “This is an information notice about...”).
- What are the logical sections?
 - (who, what, where, when, how, why).
- What is the logical order?
 - Start from the reader’s point of view and from what you expect them to do.
- Which elements are unnecessary, too technical, or repetitive?
- How can I simplify or illustrate them?

Good practices in universal design

- 👉 Organise information clearly and consistently.
- 👉 Avoid complex layouts, such as multiple columns.
- 👉 Ensure sufficient contrast (the difference in lightness between foreground and background) between essential information and its surroundings.

There are many free online checkers: [WebAIM](#) or [Accessible WEB](#).

- 👉 Maximise readability (font size, spacing, line length).
- 👉 Use tables and simple visuals to support understanding.
- 👉 Present essential information in more than one way (written, visual, spoken, tactile when relevant).
- 👉 Make differences between elements easy to identify and describe.
- 👉 Design content that works across different tools and devices, including those used by people with sensory impairments.

What tools could help
make texts clearer
in everyday life?



Mini toolkit creation

25min 



👉 Participants work in small groups (3-5 people)

👉 Each group creates a simple toolkit they can take with them and use in everyday communication

👉 Each group produces three elements:

- A short 5-point checklist to review written materials (form- and content-wise)
- A brief list of do's and don'ts for clear and inclusive communication
- One concrete example adapted to their own context (before/after)

Mini toolkit creation

25min 



 The activity ends with a short presentation of the toolkits created.

 **HINT:** tools should be simple, realistic, and reusable.

Think about universal design and how it benefits everyone, not only specific groups.



Thank you!

Any questions? Doubts?

Let's discuss

Bibliography

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Credits

Illustration ©sketchify, Canva, 2026, ©longtermassets, Canva, 2026, ©tokunana, Canva, 2026, ©andrew-rybalkos-images, Canva, 2026, ©chusnia-wy, Canva, 2026, ©macrovector, Canva, 2026, ©lada-berezkina482639494, Canva, 2026, ©dailycreative, Canva, 2026, ©roxiedesigns, Canva, 2026, ©sparklestroke, Canva, 2026

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