



plain language



IFLS LIBRARY SYSTEM: REBECCA KILDE
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WHAT IS PLAIN LANGUAGE

Plain English is clear, straightforward expression, using only as many words as are necessary. It is language that avoids obscurity, inflated vocabulary and convoluted sentence construction. It is not baby talk, nor is it a simplified version of the English language. **Writers of plain English let their audience concentrate on the message instead of being distracted by complicated language.** They make sure that their audience understands the message easily.

Professor Robert Eagleson, Australia

<https://www.plainlanguage.gov/about/definitions/short-definition/>

WHY SHOULD I USE PLAIN LANGUAGE?

So your audience can:

- Find what they need
- Understand what they find
- Use what they find to meet their needs

PLAIN LANGUAGE GUIDELINES

- Write for your audience
- Use Plain Language
 - Short and to the point
 - Conversational
- Organize the information
- Design for readability
- Test your assumptions

- It's a lot of information.
- Links and citations included.
- You don't have to do all of this right now this very second.
- Please put your questions in the chat.



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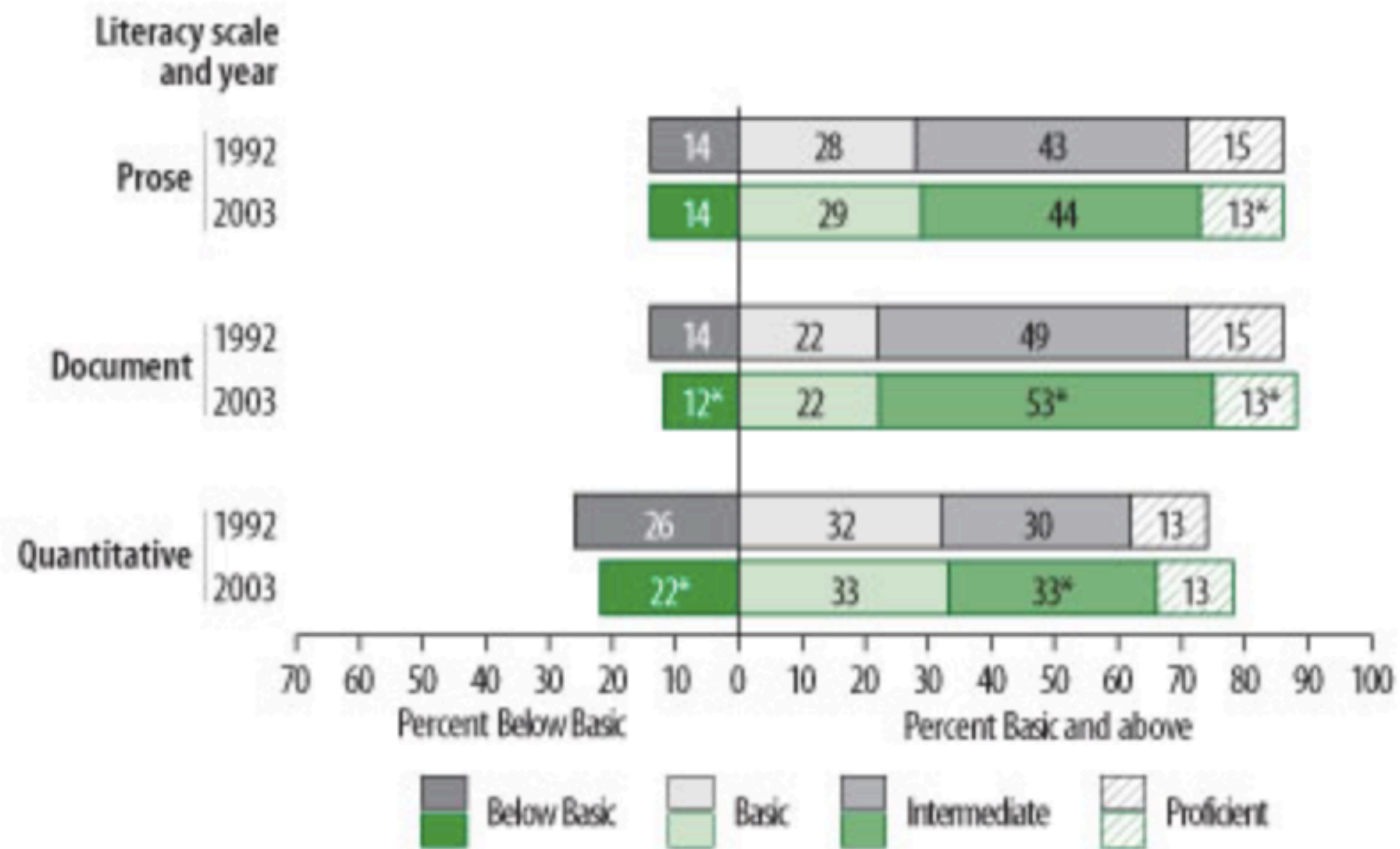
WRITE FOR YOUR AUDIENCE: CHECKLIST

- Who is my audience?
- What does my audience already know about the subject?
- What does my audience need to know?
- What questions will my audience have?
- What's the best outcome for my library? What do I need to say to get this outcome?
- What's the best outcome for our audience? What do I need to say to get this outcome?

WRITE FOR YOUR AUDIENCE

- Be specific about who you're talking to.
- Question your assumptions.
- Centered on what users need or want, and how to guide them.
- Plain language is not dumbed-down language.

WRITE FOR YOUR AUDIENCE



- Do you need to segment your audience more?
- **What are your assumptions?**
- Plain language is not dumbed-down language
- Focus on what users need or want to know, then guide your readers.

https://nces.ed.gov/naal/kf_demographics.asp#1

WRITE FOR YOUR AUDIENCE

- Success markers: you know who you're writing for, what they want to do, and what they know and need to learn.

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PLAIN LANGUAGE: SHORT & TO THE POINT

✘ Don't say	✔ Say
a and/or b	a or b or both
accompany	go with
accomplish	carry out, do
accorded	given
accordingly	so
accrue	add, gain
accurate	correct, exact, right
additional	added, more, other
address	discuss

<https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/words/use-simple-words-phrases/>

PLAIN LANGUAGE: SHORT & TO THE POINT

- Avoid redundancy
- Cut out excess modifiers

<https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/concise/>

✗ Don't say	✓ Say
a number of	several, a few, or many
a sufficient number of	enough
at this point in time	now
is able to	can
on a monthly basis	monthly
on the ground that	because
an amount of X	X
be responsible for	must
in order to	to


PLAIN
LANGUAGE:
HIDDEN
VERBS &
RANDOM
WORD
GENERATORS



✘ Don't say	✔ Say
To trace the missing payment, we need to <u>carry out a review</u> of the Agency's accounts so we can gain an understanding of the reason the error occurred.	

PLAIN
LANGUAGE:
FREE YOUR
VERBS!

CREATE
CLARITY.

✘ Don't say	✔ Say
<p>To trace the missing payment, we need to <u>carry out a review</u> of the Agency's accounts so we can gain an understanding of the reason the error occurred.</p> 	<p>To trace the missing payment, we need to review the Agency's accounts so we understand the reason the error occurred.</p>

✘ Don't say	✔ Say
<p>Underground mine worker safety protection procedures development</p>	<p>Developing procedures to protect the safety of workers in underground mines</p>
<p>Draft laboratory animal rights protection regulations</p>	<p>Draft regulations to protect the rights of laboratory animals</p>

PLAIN LANGUAGE: SAY WHAT?

- Question every word
- Does the reader need the info to complete the requested action?
- Beware acronyms.

Leading	Space Between Lines
Interlibrary Loan	Find Items Not At Our Library
Reference Librarian	Librarian (then ask, "What kind of info are you looking for?")
Circulation	Items Checked Out; Items Being Used
What's Your Pet Peeve?	What Do You Use Instead?

PLAIN
LANGUAGE:
KEEP
SUBJECT,
OBJECT &
VERB CLOSE
TOGETHER

Consider this long, convoluted sentence:

If any member of the board retires, the company, at the discretion of the board, and after notice from the chairman of the board to all the members of the board at least 30 days before executing this option, may buy, and the retiring member must sell, the member's interest in the company.

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In essence, the sentence says:

The company may buy a retiring member's interest.

PLAIN LANGUAGE: SHORT SENTENCES, PARAGRAPHS AND SECTIONS (CHUNKING)

Sentences

- One idea per sentence
- Break complex ideas up into their parts, and give each part its own sentence
- Vary sentence length

Paragraphs

- 150 words, 3-8 sentences
- One-sentence paragraphs are okay
- Vary paragraph lengths
- Consider using headings

Sections

- Break up sections to make information understandable at a glance.

PLAIN LANGUAGE: SHORT SENTENCES, PARAGRAPHS AND SECTIONS

✘ Before

Notice of a bid advertisement shall be published in at least one local newspaper and in one trade publication at least 30 days in advance of sale. If applicable, the notice must identify the reservation within which the tracts to be leased are found. Specific descriptions of the tracts shall be available at the office of the superintendent. The complete text of the advertisement shall be mailed to each person listed on the appropriate agency mailing list.

✔ After

1. Thirty days before the sale, we will publish a notice advertising bids. The notice will be in at least one local newspaper and in one trade publication. It will identify any reservation where the tracts to be leased are located.
2. We will share information about this process in two other ways. We will mail the advertisement to each person on the appropriate agency mailing list. We will also provide specific descriptions of the tracts at the superintendent's office.

<https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/concise/write-short-paragraphs/>

PLAIN LANGUAGE: CONVERSATIONAL

x Passive voice	✓ Active voice
The lake was polluted by the company.	The company polluted the lake.
New regulations were proposed.	We proposed new regulations.
The following information must be included in the application for it to be considered complete.	You must include the following information in your application.

PLAIN LANGUAGE: CONVERSATIONAL

- Use the present tense
- Use contractions
- Use personal pronouns



There's more at this link:

<https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/conversational>

PLAIN LANGUAGE

- Success markers: readers understand the words and grasp the intended message quickly and confidently.

PLAIN LANGUAGE GUIDELINES

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- **Organize the information**
- Design for readability
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ORGANIZE THE INFORMATION

- Check that content flows logically
- Main idea first
- Break content into short sections that reflect natural stopping points
- Write headings that help readers predict what is coming up
- Use topic sentences and transition words
- Use lists to break up the text and outline steps in a process.
- Avoid having lists within lists or several levels of information.
- Use tables to make complex material easier to understand.

ORGANIZE THE INFORMATION: HEADINGS

Kinds of headings

- question headings (Why use headings?)
- statement headings (Use helpful headings)
- topic headings (Headings)

Be clear and descriptive

- Use enough words to guide your reader
- Building headers can help you identify similar groups of information

ORGANIZE THE INFORMATION

Topic Sentences & Transition Words

Topic sentences and transition words work with headings to guide readers through the information.

- A good topic sentence provides a transition from one paragraph to another, and lets the audience know what's coming next.
- A transition word or phrase (usually in the topic sentence) clearly tells the audience whether the paragraph expands on the paragraph before, contrasts with it, or takes a completely different direction.

This can help you refine the logical order of your information.

DESIGN THE INFORMATION: LISTS

Lists make information easier to scan.

- Start with an explanatory sentence.
- Then eliminate repetitive words, like "a" and "the."
- Use consistent grammar.
- Align left for lists to make them readable.

Bullet style helps people understand what the list is for.

- Solid square or round bullets indicate a list of related things.
- Checkboxes motivate action.
- Numbers guide through the steps in a sequence.

BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLE

✘ Before

1910(94(d) (1) General.

(i) This paragraph applies to all operations involving the immersion of materials in liquids, or in the vapors of such liquids, for the purpose of cleaning or altering the surface or adding to or imparting a finish thereto or changing the character of the materials, and their subsequent removal from the liquid or vapor, draining, and drying. These operations include washing, electroplating, anodizing, pickling, quenching, dyeing, dipping, tanning, dressing, bleaching, degreasing, alkaline cleaning, striping, rinsing, digesting, and other similar operations.

✔ After

1910.122 When does this rule apply?

1. This rule applies to operations using a dip tank containing any liquid other than water:
 - To clean an object;
 - To coat an object;
 - To alter the surface of an object; or
 - To change the character of an object.
2. This rule also applies to drying or draining an object after dipping.

<https://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/awards/award-1/>

ORGANIZE THE INFORMATION: TABLES

Table can organize complicated information by illustrating relationships. BE CAREFUL! Tables need to be responsive.

Responsive tables in Divi: <https://www.elegantthemes.com/blog/resources/responsive-tables-in-wordpress>

ORGANIZE THE INFORMATION

- Success markers: readers can quickly and confidently find the information they are looking for.

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DESIGN IS GOOD COMMUNICATION

Good design makes information easier to read and comprehend.

- Use consistent heading and font styles. Use no more than 3 typefaces and select for legibility.
- Text: no smaller than 11-12 point.
- Ragged right is easier to read. Avoid tight leading.
- Use lists to break up the text and outline steps in a process.
- Avoid having lists within lists or several levels of information.
- Use tables to make complex material easier to understand.
- Limit the document size.
- The short sentences and short sections you wrote will break up information into manageable chunks. They will also build in some white space which also adds to readability.

DESIGN FOR THE WEB

Good web design helps lower barriers for people who want to use your information.

- Use consistent heading and font styles. Especially important for screen readers!
- Maintain contrast between background and text.
- People mostly skim on the internet.
 - People take 5 seconds to decide if you have what they need
 - People read about 18% of what is on the page
 - As the number of words on a page goes up, the percentage users read goes down.
 - To get users to read half of your words, limit your page to 110 words or fewer.

<https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/web/>

DESIGN: IMAGES

Images can be useful, but purely decorative images can take away from your message. Images should:

- Clarify
- Support your message
- Be culturally appropriate
- Have alt-text

Images can also act like headings and provide a visual rest when used thoughtfully.

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TESTING FOR USABILITY

If you're able: just ask one or more people to read what you've written.

- Give them a scenario
- Ask them to think out loud
- Ask specific questions, like:
 - Where did you look first?
 - What motivates you?
 - What was distracting or unhelpful?
 - What questions do you still have?

If you don't have the bandwidth for that, pay attention to

- What phone calls or in-person questions you're still getting.
- Places where people are consistently making mistakes.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

Used to make information clearer for people using government agency services.

Used to make legal language clearer and more precise.

USING PLAIN LANGUAGE FOR POLICIES

According to the Center for Plain Language: “A privacy policy that consumers are unlikely to read or understand provides no protection whatsoever.”

Words that sound official might not be. Importantly, “Must” is the only word that imposes a legal obligation on your readers to tell them something is mandatory. According to the Supreme Court “shall” means “may.” (https://www.faa.gov/about/initiatives/plain_language/articles/mandatory/)

The legal profession is moving in this direction. In most English speaking countries, the legal profession no longer argues that it is impossible for a document to be:

- on the one hand, clear and reader-friendly; and
- on the other hand, accurate, certain, and precise.

LET'S TRY IT: USE FEWER WORDS

When the process of freeing a vehicle that has been stuck results in ruts or holes, the operator will fill the rut or hole created by such activity before removing the vehicle from the immediate area.

LET'S TRY IT: USE FEWER WORDS

When the process of freeing a vehicle that has been stuck results in ruts or holes, the operator will fill the rut or hole created by such activity before removing the vehicle from the immediate area.

If you make a hole while freeing a stuck vehicle, you must fill the hole before you drive away.

LET'S TRY IT: CARDHOLDER POLICIES

<https://www.gardencitypl.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/LendRule.pdf>

Garden City Public Library cards are available free to residents of the Incorporated Village of Garden City and Fernwood Terrace. These cards allow full access to Garden City Public Library resources and entitle patrons to direct access privileges at other libraries within the Nassau Library System in accordance with the borrowing policies of each individual library. In the temporary absence of a library card, a valid driver's license or some form of identification with an Incorporated Village of Garden City or Fernwood Terrace address may be used. Library cards will be valid for three years from the date of original application.

LET'S TRY IT: CARDHOLDER POLICIES

My rewrite changes the tone and creates an introduction for chunked information based on subject.

If you are a resident of the Incorporated Village of Garden City and Fernwood Terrace, you can get a free library card lets you use all the resources at Garden City Public Library. Your card also gives you access to some services at other Nassau area libraries.

Don't have a library card? Let us help you with that. We welcome visitors from outside of our service area, too!

Details about getting a library card, checking out materials and any fines or restrictions are listed below.

LET'S TRY IT: PERSONNEL POLICY

It is expected that all members of the Imaginary County Library staff will support fully the public service objectives of the library and that they will be alert to opportunities both within the library system and the community to advance its image and prestige. This implies courtesy in dealing with the public, continuing attention toward improving services, a dedication to the understanding of the needs and interests of the community.

LET'S TRY IT: PERSONNEL POLICY

My rewrite uses positive language and active verbs to define intention.

The Imaginary County Library staff provides courteous service to our community. We are dedicated to improving services by understanding the needs and interests of our community.

We will be alert to opportunities in our library system and in our community to improve and communicate our work.

LET'S TRY IT: RULES OF CONDUCT

It is the Library's mission to provide free and easy access to its facilities, resources, and services for all people of Albany. To this end, the Library has established rules of conduct that promote a safe, comfortable, healthy, and barrier-free environment. Library staff shall make every effort to apply these rules in a fair, humane, and positive manner for the benefit of all. The Rules of Conduct cover activities inside and outside the Library building, including the Library grounds and parking lots. We ask your cooperation in maintaining an environment conducive to enjoyable use of the Library for all.

While at the Library we encourage you to:

- Ask for help when you need it.
- Give us your suggestions about how we can improve our services, collections, and facilities.
- Enjoy the time you spend here.
- Have the expectation of reasonable privacy to read, view, and listen to library materials.

LET'S TRY IT: RULES OF CONDUCT

So that everyone may have a safe and enjoyable experience, the following are prohibited:

1. Using E-Cigarettes/vaporizing/ smoking on either Library property. This includes inside vehicles. (Per City Council Policy updated October 12, 2016.)
2. Using tobacco or Marijuana products in the Library or near the front door. Use may include: chewing, spitting, etc.
3. Eating – except in approved areas by authorized groups.
4. Sleeping, loitering, or lying on the floor.
5. Being in the Library without shoes, shirts, or other appropriate clothing. Children too young to walk do not need shoes.
6. Violating other user's expectation of reasonable privacy.
7. Bringing pets or other animals, except service animals, into the Library.
8. Bathing or washing clothes.
9. * Being under the influence of, consuming, or possessing alcohol or illegal substances
10. Leaving children ten years and younger unattended.
11. *Bringing into the Library anything that is unsafe, including firearms or other weapons, unless the individual is licensed to carry a firearm, or anything that creates an obstacle or takes up seating, including bicycles, carts, or large backpacks.
12. Running.
13. Talking or playing audio equipment at a volume that disturbs others.
14. *Being disruptive, disorderly, or harassing patrons and/or staff or otherwise interfering with any person's comfort or safety.
15. Cell phone use in the Library.
16. Disturbing others because of poor personal hygiene.
17. Conducting surveys or distributing printed material.
18. Panhandling or soliciting for sales or charity.
19. *Destroying, defacing, or abusing Library property.

In addition to the above, violation of any federal or state statute or local ordinance will be regarded as a violation of Library rules. The City of Albany reserves the right to eject or refuse further admission to those individuals who violate Library rules, create disorder, or engage in illegal activity, immediately and may have violators trespassed for one month, six months, or a year at both Library locations. The Library's procedure, in most cases, will consist of a verbal warning first, but conduct listed under numbers 9., 11., 14, and 19., may immediately warrant a year trespass. Violators are subject to arrest for trespass under Section 7.40.040 of the Albany Municipal Code. These sanctions are not exclusive and any other remedies available by law or equity to obtain compliance with these rules will be pursued. Patrons may appeal their trespass to the Library Board. The trespass will remain in effect during the appeal process.

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RESOURCES & REFERENCES

Guidelines for Plain Language: <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/>

Checklist for Plain Language (print): <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/resources/checklists/checklist/>

Checklist for Plain Language (web): <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/resources/checklists/web-checklist/>

Center for Plain Language: <https://centerforplainlanguage.org>

WebAim Contrast Checker: <https://webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker/>