



GUIDE

# Clarity Counts: A guide to clear communication

Why clear communication is mission-critical for business.

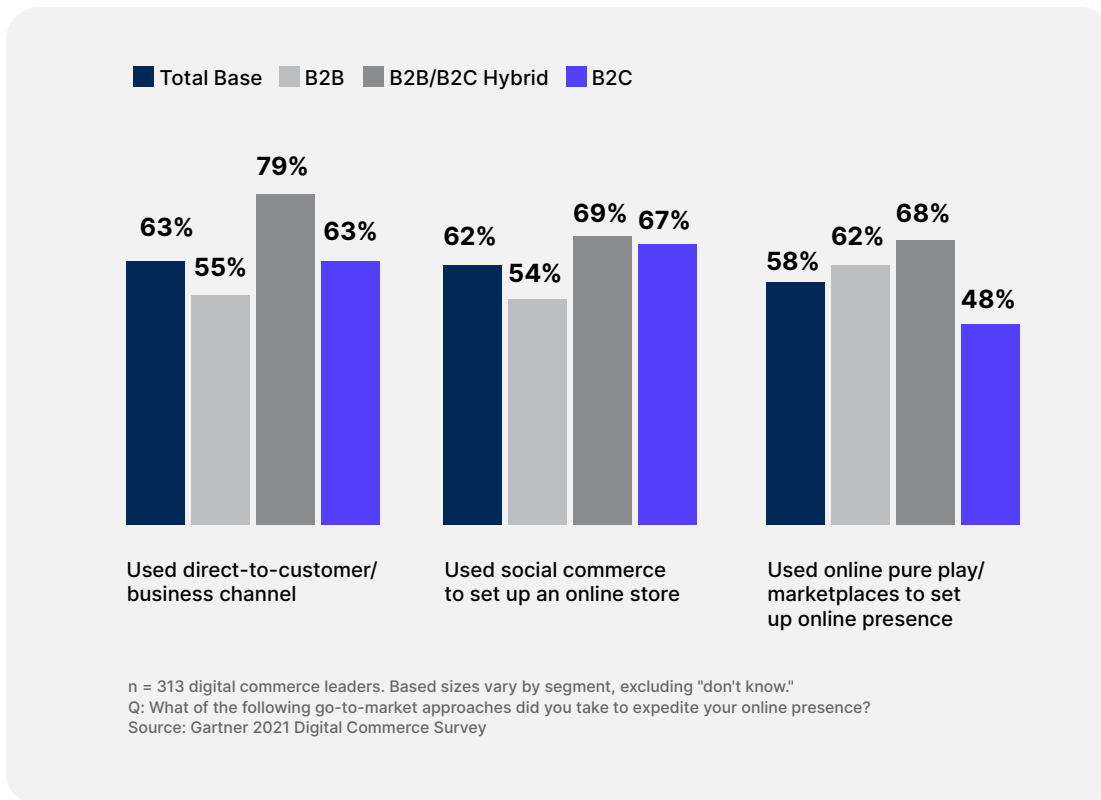


# Introduction

Clear communication is the foundation of a customer-centric strategy. It helps consumers access the information they need, when they need it, and in the right context. So, why are so many companies struggling to leverage clarity as a revenue driver?

In a recent study from McKinsey, [75% of leaders agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic had forced their organizations to establish an online presence](#) and launch digital commerce in an extremely short amount of time.

This reliance on digital channels has changed consumer behavior and pushed companies to find new ways of communicating with their customers. Alongside this rapid digital transformation, we've also witnessed a significant shift in customer expectations.





Satisfying customer expectations is nothing new. From traditional brick-and-mortar stores to newer digital-first business models, making customers feel valued and exceeding their expectations has always been a winning formula for a successful business.

And the role of clear communication in meeting these customer expectations can't be overstated. Clarity underpins progressive business strategies that build trust and create long-term relationships with customers.

## “Clarity underpins progressive business strategies that build trust and create long-term relationships with customers”

But it's not just customers that benefit from clear and engaging communication. [Clarity can enhance your employee experience](#), foster positive work cultures, ease the transition to hybrid work, and reduce attrition rates among staff. It's essential for companies who want to prevent a loss of talent to “[The Great Resignation](#).” This trend saw [4.4 million Americans leave their jobs last September](#), and resignations remain unusually high to date.

Reducing complexity in communication and embracing plain language is a practical way for companies to improve their customer experience, motivate their staff, and boost profits.





# The cost of complex communication

Complexity causes confusion and mistrust.

Think back to a time when you needed clear instructions to complete a task or get help during a stressful situation. Was it easy to get the information you needed, or was it jargon-laden and unnecessarily complex?

If it was latter, it was probably an unpleasant experience that led you to another brand the next time you needed support. [With trust down across all institutions except business in 2021](#), plain language offers a pathway for companies to connect with their consumers and support them in a practical and quantifiable way.

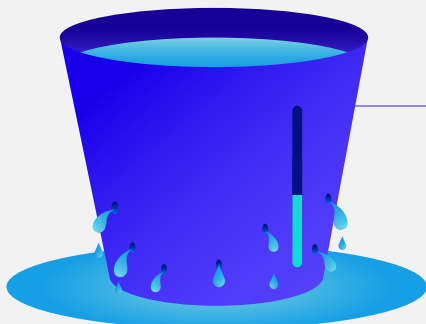
The reality is that how your organization communicates has the power to frustrate a consumer into switching to a competitor or transform them into a loyal brand advocate.

A recent Zendesk report showed that [65% of consumers want to buy from companies that offer quick and easy online transactions](#), and [50% of them will switch to a competitor after one bad experience](#). So it comes as no surprise that [many companies plan to analyze and prioritize investment in their customer experience in 2022](#). Despite the rapid increase in digital adoption by companies at the onset of the pandemic, [many customers can't tell the difference between brands' experiences](#).

**“65% of consumers want to buy from companies that offer quick and easy online transactions, and 50% of them will switch to a competitor after one bad experience”**

## Evidence for Why Digital Experiences Fail to Build Brands and Shape Customer Journeys

### Impact of Digital Experiences



#### Poor Differentiation

46% of customers can't tell the difference between most brands' digital experiences.

#### Audience Skepticism

58% of customers believe that most digital experiences don't impact what they end up buying.

#### Low Efficacy

14% of customers did something different after a recent digital experience.



Despite the rapid increase in digital adoption by companies at the onset of the pandemic, [many customers can't tell the difference between brands' experiences](#).

This lack of distinct experiences presents a unique opportunity: plain language can become a critical differentiator for your company in this environment. A recent Qualtrics report revealed that [89% of companies that lead with customer experience \(CX\) financially outperform their competitors](#). And effective use of plain language can enhance your customer experience to build trust and grow revenue.



## Plain language empowers customers and employees

Plain language unlocks products and services for a wide range of customers, regardless of their literacy or education levels. Both private and public organizations can benefit from the accessibility that plain language brings to customer interactions.

[The Plain Language Federation](#) states that:

“A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure and design are so clear that the intended audience can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.”

And if you work in a government organization, plain language is the law. President Obama signed the [Plain Writing Act of 2010](#) into federal law to ensure that federal agencies use plain language as a standard of communication. Plain language is a citizen's right for the American public.

From a business perspective, adopting plain language guidelines as best practices can increase customer satisfaction while reducing costs. It makes sense: customers who can easily understand how to use your product or service don't need to reach out to your support reps.

This reduces conversation volume and removes friction for your employees while also reducing your costs—helping you scale your organization without additional overheads.



# You can't fix what you don't understand

As management guru Peter Drucker once said, “If you can't measure it, you can't improve it.” In this line of thought, you can begin to improve your understanding of the clarity of your communications.

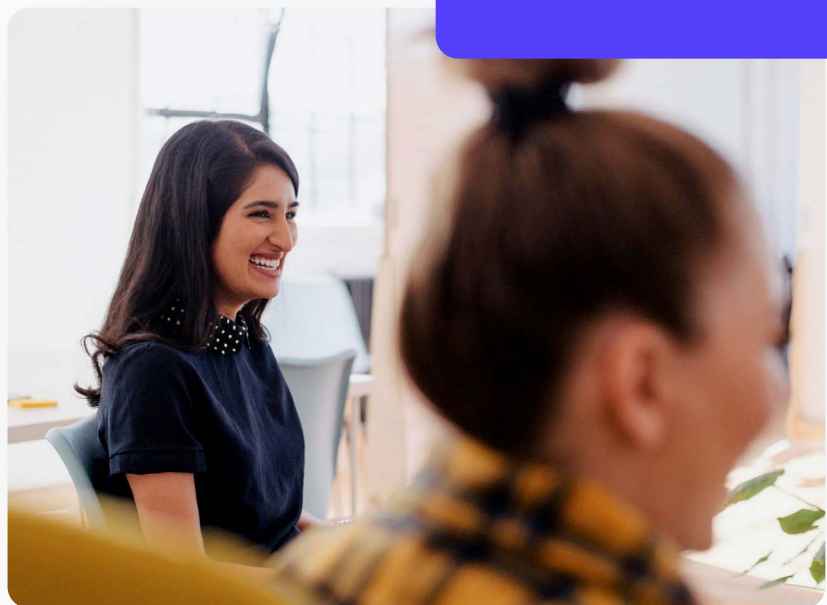
[The average North American consumer reads at an 8th-grade level](#), and it's best practice for companies to use this as a benchmark when writing. Content written at a higher grade level requires more focus from users and can be a barrier to services for those with accessibility issues.

## “Language analysis can transform the quality of your content using quantifiable metrics and give actionable advice on where your writing can be improved”

When writing, you should keep the context of your communications and the customer's experience in mind so you “[lead with the need](#).” Language analysis can transform the quality of your content using quantifiable metrics and give actionable advice on where your writing can be improved.

Consumers live busy lives and don't have time to waste on complex information—they expect fast, personalized support when they need it. When you reduce the grade level, your content is easier to understand so customers get the right message, at the right time, and in the right context.

It's important to note that the Flesch Reading Ease Score isn't the only indicator of quality content. There are other elements to consider when you write, including sentence density, adverbs, and the context of the message you're trying to deliver. But scoring your content is a powerful and subjective way to benchmark your communications and start the conversation about plain language in your organization.



### What is the Flesch-Kincaid Reading Ease Test?

Rudolf Flesch was a writing and readability expert who developed his readability formula in 1948. He was a key player in the Plain English Movement of the late '40s. He published many seminal books about the importance of plain language and clear writing. And a few decades later, he teamed up with J Peter Kincaid to develop the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Test.



# 4 steps to clearer communication

By now, you can see many tangible benefits to using plain language in your company's communications. Your messaging will be easier to understand and accessible to a broader audience. Here are some plain language guidelines that you can use to improve the quality of your communications immediately.

## 1. Keep the grade level of your content low

[The average North American consumer reads at an 8th-grade level](#) so it's best to use this as a benchmark in your communications. By keeping your grade level low, you'll ensure your content is accessible to a wider audience. Maintaining a lower grade level empowers non-native English speakers or those with accessibility issues to easily access your content.

**Take this example from an anonymous streaming service:**

We provide numerous [company name] Service options. Certain [company name] options are provided free-of-charge, while other options require payment before they can be accessed (the "Paid Subscriptions"). We may also offer special promotional plans, memberships, or services, including offerings of third-party products and services. We are not responsible for the products and services provided by such third parties.

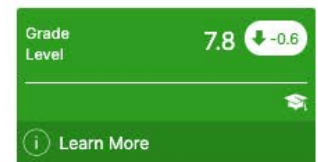
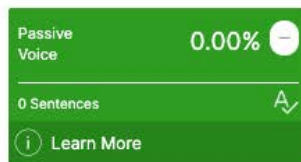
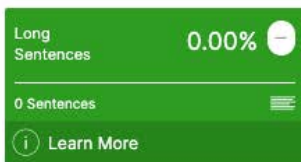
Using VT Writer, we can see that the copy has a grade level of 12.6. You would need 12.6 years of education to understand this snippet of text.





**By rewriting this in plain language, we can increase our readability score and reduce our grade level to make it more accessible for consumers. We can see that it now reads at a 7.8 grade level, a huge improvement on the original terms and conditions:**

We give many [company name] options. We give [company name] options free-of-charge. Other options need payment before you can use them (the "Paid Subscriptions"). We may also offer special plans, memberships, or services. These special offers may include third-party products and services. We are not responsible for the products and services provided by such third parties.



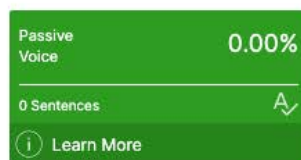
## 2. Use shorter sentences

Sentence length plays a key role in your readability score. Your customer's live busy lives, and when faced with a problem or a query, they want quick, easy access to the information they need. They don't want to face long, complex sentences when stressed or completing a routine task.

If you are looking for a rule of thumb, [Plainlanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov) suggests that, "Your document should have an average sentence length of 20 words, or fewer, in documents, and 15 on the web."

**Take this paragraph from the credit card policy of a major bank in America:**

Earn a credit limit increase after making 5 monthly payments on time within 10 months from account opening when meeting credit criteria.\*



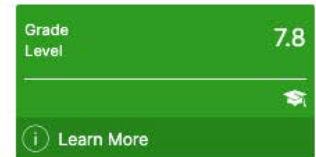
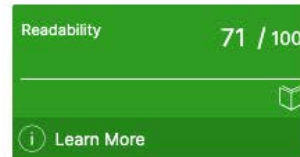
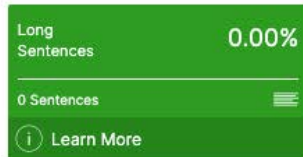
Although this paragraph doesn't contain passive voice, it's unnecessarily long. It also contains complex language that would require 13.4 years of education to understand.





**By comparison, this example from American Express is much clearer and easy to read:**

You can request a credit limit increase once your account has been opened for at least 60 days.



### 3. Avoid complex and jargon-laden language

It's a common misconception that [complex subject matter demands complex language or industry-specific jargon](#). Legalese and complex words dominate certain industries like insurance, finance, or healthcare. But the average consumer can't understand formal and highly-technical language.

Plain language allows you to convey complex ideas in simple terms so more people can understand your message and take the required action. Find simpler alternatives to complex words wherever possible.

Don't say	Say
exceeding	more than
consecutive	became in a row
henceforth	from this point forward
cardiovascular disease	heart disease



## 4. Use active voice

Passive voice conveys an academic tone and is not direct. It can also make it unclear who is taking the action. Swapping the passive for active voice allows you to communicate more clearly.

**Active:** Our hiring team will review your application.

**Passive:** Your application will be reviewed by our hiring team.

In the example above, the active voice sentence makes it clear who will be reviewing your application. Active voice sentences tend to be less wordy. They're also more conversational as they reflect the way people talk to one another.

The screenshot displays the VT Writer interface. At the top, it shows 'VT Writer | Scan Results' and 'You are on the Unlimited plan | Peter@xyz.com'. The main content area features a text snippet: 'These first-party benefits, known as personal injury protection (PIP), are a mandatory coverage'. Below this, there are four summary cards: 'Long Sentences 33.33%' (red), 'Passive Voice 0.00%' (green), 'Readability 20/100' (red), and 'Grade Level 14.1' (red). To the right, there are two more cards: '6 Watch Words found' and 'No Ignored terms found'. Below these cards are buttons for 'Show/Hide', 'Edit', 'Copy all content to clipboard', and 'Actions'. The bottom section is divided into 'Content', 'Suggestions', 'Readability', and 'Grade Level'. The 'Content' section shows the text snippet with a 'Watch words' callout: 'Tone of Voice Simplify by saying 'costs that we don't cover' instead.' The 'Suggestions' section lists: 'Long Sentence (Try to split this long sentence. It is...)', 'Hidden Verb (Try to make 'compensation'...)', '4 Long words (These are 'mandatory', 'comprehensive'...)', and '6 Watch Word Hits (Tone of Voice Simplify by saying 'costs that we don't cover' instead.)'. The 'Readability' and 'Grade Level' columns show '20/100' and 'Grade 14.1' respectively.



# Why do businesses fail to communicate clearly?

It can be hard to align an organization's communications to a single tone of voice. Many companies struggle with maintaining clarity in their communications despite having a style guide.

Often this is because it's not practical for employees to consult a style guide every time they write, and many staff may not consider themselves to be "writers." But operating without this consistency means you can't ensure on-brand messaging across all customer touchpoints.

The copy you write must capture the attention of your audience and compel users to take action. We know that [customers will switch to a competitor if they're not happy with their experience of a product or service](#). Plain language is a foolproof way to instantly provide clear direction to your customers, reduce friction, and improve their experience with your business.

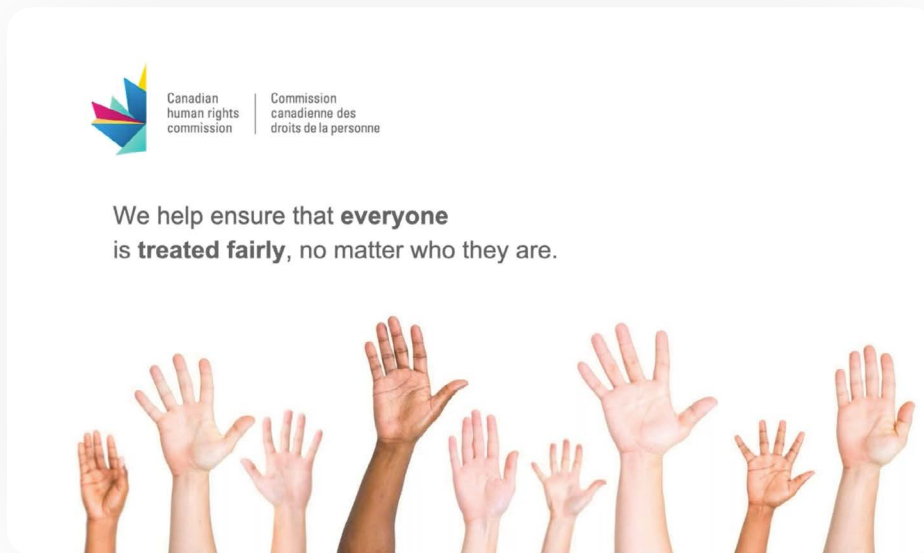
Clear messaging not only strengthens your company's customer journey, it also aids internal communication and supports organizational alignment. Consider [this example from the Canadian Human Rights Commission](#). Their original mission statement was complex with unnecessarily long sentences:

## Mission Statement (circa 2008)

The Commission works with employers, service providers, individuals, unions, governmental and non-governmental organizations, and provincial and territorial human rights bodies to foster understanding and commitment to achieving a society where human rights are respected in everyday practices. The Commission is working within a new service delivery model that provides discrimination prevention initiatives, modern dispute resolution approaches for addressing inquiries and complaints, as well as regulatory, policy, and knowledge development. Enhancing employment equity in federally regulated employment sectors for women, Aboriginal peoples, persons with disabilities, and members of visible minorities is also a key function.



When they reworked it in 2019 using plain language principles, they wanted anyone visiting their site to understand their mission statement quickly. Clarity was the key to aligning their messaging with their company values. Now, anyone, including new or prospective employees, can quickly understand the purpose of the commission and the values it upholds:



If you're unsure where to start with plain language and don't have a style guide, then creating one should be the first step for your organization. But if you have a style guide and still struggle to implement best practices, you need to consider leveraging technology to integrate it into your company's writing process seamlessly.

[Language analysis solutions like VT Writer](#) allow you to set parameters around the tone and style of your organization's writing using features like "Watch Words" to flag jargon and other off-brand terms. These efficiency wins can be a game-changer for busy teams and customers alike.



# The solution: use technology to audit and improve content at scale

Using VisibleThread's Language Analysis Platform allows you to make quantifiable improvements to your written communications.

VT Writer supports quality analysis at scale by measuring readability and tone of voice across all content. Leadership can measure adoption and scale improvements with users and teams over time.

The beauty of using a language analysis platform for your writing is that it provides clear, objective feedback on the quality of your writing. The metrics reduce friction for writers and aid collaboration by changing the conversation about writing and depersonalizing feedback so you focus on creating content that resonates with your customers.

**“The value of the metrics and the way that they take personal opinion out of the discussion, we [SunLife] found that that was a big step forward in empowering the writers”**

As former assistant vice-president at Sun Life Financial, Kevin Press, says, “The value of the metrics and the way that they take personal opinion out of the discussion, we [SunLife] found that it was a big step forward in empowering the writers.” Kevin implemented the plain language program at SunLife and developed the organization's first brand tone of voice with the help of our VT Writer solution.

But what is technology without trust? Technology should add value for the user. [According to a recent Gartner report](#), 90% of surveyed CMOs are investing in additional capabilities to drive digital commerce growth. But faced with reduced budgets, leaders need to ensure that their investments work hard to deliver value across multiple areas of their organizations.

VisibleThread can unlock value across all touchpoints of your customer journey to help you effortlessly meet and exceed customer expectations. Language analysis creates frictionless editing cycles for writers, provides quantifiable metrics for leaders, and empowers customers with clear, compelling messaging, so you can focus on scaling your organization for success.





# Using a Language Analysis Platform to achieve quality improvements - 5 easy steps

Clear communication requires changes to your organization's mindset and processes. The framework below offers a starting point for companies.

## Step 1: Identify a champion or team

Recognize that all departments produce content. Identify a champion or team who can work cross-functionally.

## Step 2: Create a baseline with a content audit

Gather existing customer communications and measure against readability metrics.

## Step 3: Make your style guide accessible

Provide clear guidance to all writers. Ensure they can easily access it.

## Step 4: Support writers to score content for clarity

Use technology to support writers and allow them to self-score their content for clarity.

## Step 5: Measure and improve

Analyze usage and adoption of your plain language program. Measure quality improvements over time.

## When will you prioritize plain language?

You have an important decision to make. Will you prioritize customer experience to foster long-term relationships with customers and boost revenue? Or will you choose to underestimate how plain language can transform your business internally and externally?

VisibleThread provides technology to organizations who want to improve content at scale, boost customer experience, and secure a top position in their market. The time to act is now.



# Get your free VT Writer trial today

Self-score business-critical documents and text in a single click.

**Get your free 14-day trial and improve your mission-critical business writing today:**

- Analyze Unlimited Text Snippets
- Analyze URLs
- Analyze Documents
- Create Personal Watch Words and Ignore Lists

[Get Started](#)

“I’m on temporary loan to the Public Health Agency of Canada to help with web writing about COVID-19. This pandemic has underscored the essential nature of plain language during a crisis. When communication is critical, plain language is essential. There’s no room for ambiguity.”

Susan Scruton,  
Senior Communications Advisor and Web Writer  
**Government of Canada**

