



Summary of Standard

CAN-ASC-3.1:2025 – Plain Language



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Introduction to the CAN-ASC-3.1:2025 – Plain Language Standard

This Standard is the first edition of the CAN-ASC-3.1:2025, Plain Language Standard.

This Standard will help organizations to create accessible, clear, and efficient communication. It shows how to identify, prevent, or remove barriers to communication that their audiences, including persons with disabilities, may face.

It is based on the following definition of plain language:

“A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended audience can easily do each of the following:

- find what they need,
- understand what they find, and
- use that information.”

Only members of the intended audience can say whether a communication is in plain language for them.

Where other standards and guidance refer to a “document,” “content,” or “publication,” this Standard refers to a communication, as in the definition of plain language.

This Standard uses the term “intended audience” because it is more inclusive than “reader.”

Benefits of plain language

Both the intended audience and the organization benefit from plain language because it can save both parties time and money.

Intended audiences who receive communications in plain language benefit in these and other ways:

- they quickly understand actions to take,
- they make fewer mistakes,
- they are more likely to follow instructions,
- they are more satisfied with products and services,
- they are more likely to find the source of communication credible and reliable, and
- they can more easily increase their knowledge and counter disinformation and misinformation.

Organizations that offer communications in plain language benefit in these and other ways:

- they can share or exchange information effectively and efficiently,
- they remove or prevent communication barriers, and
- they reduce follow-up questions and the need to clarify communications after publication.

Goals and purpose

This Standard contributes to the goal of the *Accessible Canada Act*: realizing a Canada without barriers. This goal will benefit all people, especially people with disabilities.

This Standard is intended to align with these and other relevant standards, guidelines, acts, codes, regulations, and statutes:

- CAN-ASC - EN 301 549:2024 - Accessibility requirements for Information and Communication Technology products and services (EN 301 549:2021, IDT)
- CAN-ASC-5.2.1: Part 1 - Design and Delivery of Accessible Programs and Services: Accessible Service Delivery – Accessibility for federally regulated entities as defined by the *Accessible Canada Act* (draft)
- ISO 24495-1:2023: Plain language — Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines
- *Accessible Canada Act*
- *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*
- *Canadian Human Rights Act*
- *Official Languages Act*
- *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*

This Standard envisions communications and information that are accessible, inclusive, barrier-free, and discrimination-free for all people in Canada and outside Canada. This includes persons with disabilities, who communicate with or receive communications from federally regulated entities.

This Standard will help organizations achieve accessible communications in which audiences can easily find, understand, and use the information they need. This Standard describes types of barriers and ways to address them.

Scope and overview

This Standard applies to communications of information in various formats to meet audience needs, for example:

- printed communications,
- websites,
- digital books,
- social media posts,
- public service announcements on television,
- online videos, and
- documents produced in braille.

This Standard applies to communications in Canada's official languages and primary languages for communication by Deaf people. This Standard could also benefit communications in other languages.

This Standard could apply to all organizations, communicators, and entities in the private and non-profit sectors by helping them to make their communications accessible. Specifically, this Standard is intended for use by federally regulated entities.

This Standard refers to any entity using this Standard as an organization and addresses it directly as "you."

The first 9 clauses of this Standard cover details on the Standards Development Organization and the technical committee, which are responsible for developing the Standard. The clauses also include legal obligations, definitions, and ways the Standard should be used.

Clauses 10 to 14 are drawn from the definition of plain language and cover the following subjects:

- Clause 10: Audience
- Clause 11: Evaluation
- Clause 12: Structure
- Clause 13: Wording and expression
- Clause 14: Design

Each of the clauses listed above includes the following:

- requirements: “shall” statements
- recommendations: “should” statements
- options: “may” statements
- strategies and possible strategies
- notes including examples and cautions

These help you understand what to do, how to do it, and why.

Audience

Clause 10 focuses on how to identify the intended audiences for the communication, their needs, the ways they identify themselves, the languages they use, the formats they prefer, and the barriers to communication they may face.

This Clause includes the following topics.

Identifying the intended audience

To develop a communication in plain language, you shall do each of the following:

- identify the intended audience for the communication,
- identify if the intended audience consists of a primary audience for the communication and one or more secondary audiences, and
- if there is more than one audience, identify if an audience needs a separate communication.

Learning about the intended audience

Throughout the development of your communication, you shall consult and engage with the intended audience about their information needs and any barriers they face except where consultation and engagement are not possible in some cases, for example, in emergencies.

Learning about barriers

You shall learn about the barriers that members of your intended audience might face in finding, understanding, and using your communication.

Evaluation

Clause 11 focuses on how to evaluate a communication to ensure that it meets the needs of the intended audiences. Evaluation methods include:

- desktop review: using checklists and software to support you in creating a plain language communication
- subject matter expert review: engaging subject matter experts to make sure that the information is accurate
- plain language expert review: engaging a professional with plain language training or expertise to review the communication to identify and remove barriers to finding, understanding, and using the information in a communication

But the 2 most important ways to evaluate a communication are testing and ongoing evaluation.

Testing

As you develop your communication and before you publish it, you shall test your communication with members of your intended audience.

You shall recruit testers who reflect the diversity of your intended audience.

Ongoing evaluation

You should continue to evaluate your communication regularly after publication for the following reasons:

- to determine if communications continue to meet audience needs,
- to evaluate any communications that could not be evaluated before publication, and
- to learn how audiences are using communications.

Structure

Clause 12 focuses on how to create a structure for your communication that:

- includes the information the intended audience needs,
- organizes it, and
- helps your audience to navigate the communication to find what they need.

Using effective titles, headings, and overviews are ways to help the audience.

This Clause includes the following topics.

Structure and audience

You shall develop the structure of a communication using these strategies:

- learn what structures and formats are accessible to the intended audience, familiar to them, and preferred by them,
- plan the structure to help the intended audience find information in the communication, and
- evaluate the structure of the communication with the intended audience and revise based on the evaluation.

Planning information and its parts

If your communication has many audiences, you should do either of the following:

- Develop separate communications for each audience.

- Structure the single communication in a way that clearly identifies what information is directed to each audience.

Organizing the information

You shall organize the information in a structure that is as simple as the intended audience needs.

Wording and expression

Clause 13 focuses on how to make information easy to understand for the intended audience. It shows how to use each of the following to make meaning clear:

- words
- numbers
- sentences
- punctuation and capitalization
- titles and headings
- paragraphs, sections, and lists
- writing style and tone

This Clause includes the following topics.

Words

You shall choose clear and precise words that the intended audience already knows, understands, uses, and accepts.

You shall help your intended audience learn words that are unfamiliar to them, uncommon words, or specialized words.

Numbers

You shall express numbers in the form that makes them clear and understandable for the intended audience.

Titles and headings

When using titles and headings, you shall construct them using these strategies:

- Use words and expressions the intended audience easily understands.
- Use titles and headings that are brief and accurately describe the topic or purpose of what is to follow.

Design

Clause 14 focuses on the physical and visual elements of a communication. It shows how to use the following to help the intended audience find and understand the information they need:

- overall design
- format
- layout
- typography
- contrast and colour
- visuals
- tables

This Clause includes the following topics.

Format

You shall choose the format that best meets the needs and preferences of your intended audience.

Layout

You should create white space in your communication using strategies set out in this Standard.

Typography

You shall choose a typeface and font size that your intended audience can easily read from a comfortable distance within the context of the situation.

Visuals

When using visuals, you shall use them to support the intended audience's understanding of the information in your communication.

You shall use a type and style of visuals that is accepted by your intended audience and appropriate for the purpose.

Annexes

Informative annexes for this Standard give more information, summaries, and selected sources. The following are annexes for this Standard:

- Annex A: Forms checklist
- Annex B: Shall, should, and may clauses
- Annex C: Bibliography