

CLEAR COMMUNICATION

INFO SHEET ON CLEAR AND
EFFECTIVE LEGAL COMMUNICATION

The process

Identify **relevant**
information based on the
target audience's needs



Adjust the communication

Structure + Write + Present



So that the information is:

- Easy to **find**
- Easy to **understand**
- Easy to **use**

6 clear communication principles

The principles of clear legal communication (CLC) below are all related and influence each another. It's normal to reconsider some of the decisions you already made throughout a project. It's an ongoing reflection.

You'll notice that the target audience is in the middle of the wheel. This is because you must always keep the target audience in mind when you apply the principles. This is key in clear communication!





Know the target audience

The target audience is **the person or the group of people you want to communicate with**. We can also call them the reader, the audience, the recipient...

For your communication to be clear, you have to **identify and know your target audience well**.

Who do you want to communicate with?

- What are their needs?
- What is their interest in your communication? Why would they read or listen to you?
- What will they do with the information you provide?

What are the characteristics of your target audience?

- Are they comfortable reading and understanding the language of communication?
- What is their personal situation? Cultural background? Experience with the topic?
- What is their mindset when they read your work or listen to you talk?
- What are their expectations? Preconceived notions? Fears? Misgivings?

Do you have multiple target audiences?

- If so, how are they similar or different?
- Is one single communication tool enough to meet the needs of your different target audiences?
- Can you use the same channels, media, or platforms to communicate with your different target audiences?



Define the objectives

Your communication objectives are the reasons for which you communicate with your target audience. They're the "why" of your communication.

Why do you want to communicate with your target audience?

- To inform them? If so, ask yourself: why do you want to inform them? To raise awareness, convince them, advise them, make them do something?
- Then ask yourself again: why do you want to raise awareness? Why convince them? Why advise them? etc. You'll eventually find your real objective!

Do you have several objectives?

- If so, which is the most important? Why?
- Is it necessary to have different communication tools to meet your different objectives?



Choose and structure the information (1/2)

You must give **ALL** the information your target audience **needs**.
And **ONLY** that information.

What are your key messages, the ones that the target audience absolutely must understand and remember?

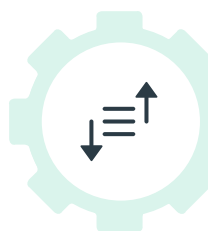
- Can you summarize each message in one sentence?
- If you could only convey one key message, what would it be?

What information does the target audience already have?

- What information are they missing to understand your key messages?
- What information are they missing to use the information in a practical way?

If you remove a particular piece of information, will the target audience still understand?

- If yes, you can usually remove that information.
- If not, the information is necessary. Ask yourself where to give that information (see next page).



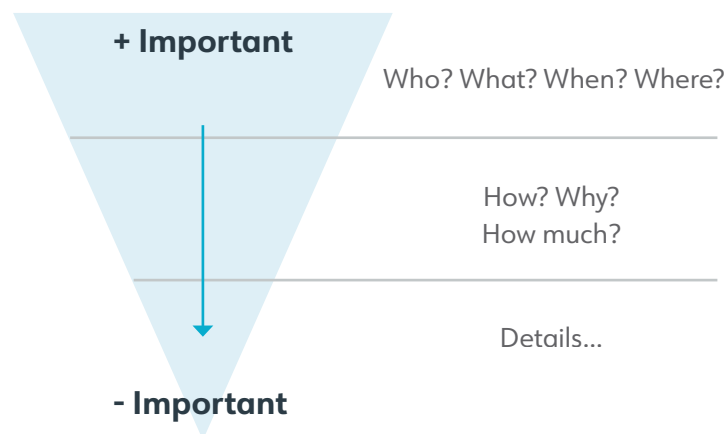
Choose and structure the information (2/2)

You must also make sure to **structure your communication** according to the importance of the information.

Is the most important information at the beginning?

Can the reader understand the information as they read without having to go back and forth?

Should less important information be moved to the end? To an appendix? To another tool?





Use plain language (1/3)

Writing in plain language means **using a conversational tone**, without the flaws of the spoken language: redundancies, filler words and phrases, and others.

So, you should try to “talk” to your target audience through your writing. It’s much more lively, engaging, and convincing.

There are several tips that can help you, both in speaking and in writing.

Use simple and common words

- Favour:
 - (1) the words most familiar to the target audience
 - (2) the simplest words.
- Avoid archaisms.
Ex. “the text”, not “said text”
- Explain or avoid legal or technical terms (jargon).
- Explain or avoid acronyms.
- Explain or avoid polysemous terms, that is, words that have multiple meanings.
Ex. prescription, hearing
- Avoid synonyms and use the “1 concept = 1 word or 1 expression” trick.
Ex. “The file = the file”, not “The file = the file, the complaint, the procedure, the case at hand, the current process...”



Use plain language (2/3)

Use a concrete and direct style

- Use a style that is neither too formal nor too informal.
Ex. use "we" and "you"
- Favour present over future tense.
Ex. "When you receive", not "When you will receive"
- Favour an active over a passive voice (unless necessary).
Ex. "This directive changes the rule", not "The rule is changed by this directive"
- Use action verbs rather than nouns or adjectives (avoid nominalisation).
Ex. "To introduce», not «The introduction of»
Ex. "This step is important", not "The importance of this step"
- Favour affirmative over negative form.
Ex. "Think of", not "Avoid forgetting"
Ex. "It would be useful", not "It would not be useless to"



Use plain language (3/3)

Use simple sentences

- Use short sentences (± 25 words).
- Limit yourself to one idea per sentence. Address exceptions, explanations, conditions, and examples in separate sentences.
- Use simple syntax: subject + verb + complement.
Ex. "Luke sang because Mary arrived", not "Luke, because Mary arrived, sang"
- Remove unnecessary words and cumbersome phrasing.
Ex. "It is essential", not "It is absolutely essential"
Ex. "Please", not "We would be grateful if you would accept to"



Choose an effective visual design (1/3)

Graphic design (layout and visual elements) must **facilitate reading** and **give life to the information and the structure**.

Graphic design must also **make people want to read** since it's what the target audience will actually see.

Is the information easy to find in the tool?

- Is it possible to understand the essential information by skimming the text?
- Is it easy to distinguish the main and secondary information?
- Is it necessary to read word by word to find specific information?

Are the headings clear?
Are they meaningful enough?

Headings can take different forms:

- Statements (e.g., «You should seek assistance...»)
- Questions (e.g., «How can I get help?»))
- Verbs in the present continuous (e.g., «Getting help»)
- Topics (e.g., «The four steps to get help»)



Choose an effective visual design (2/3)

Is it possible to make certain information stand out?

You can use:

- bulleted or numbered lists
- colours, bold, boxes, pictures, etc.

Is it possible to present information visually?

You can use infographics, drawings, images, graphs, tables, etc.



Choose an effective visual design (3/3)

Are the font size and colour appropriate for the target audience?

- For example, if your readers are older, it's advisable to use a larger font (12 points or +).
- Also, a dark text on a light background is better than a light text on a dark background.

Is the tool spaced out (empty space)?

- For example, start each new section at the top of a page. Don't hesitate to leave a blank space after the previous section.
- Also, make sure not to run paragraphs from one page to another (or, at least, not to run sentences from one page to another). If you're short of space on one page, you can move the whole paragraph or sentence to the next page.



Consult and test

You may feel that you are communicating clearly, but that doesn't mean that your target audience understands and knows how to use the information you provided. You have your biases, and above all, you know your topic very well.

For your communication to be truly clear, you should ideally **consult your target audience and test your tool**.

Consult your target audience and test your tool at different stages of the project

- You can improve the tool as you go along and avoid surprises at the end of the project.

Test your tool directly with your target audience

- You can use questionnaires, surveys, discussion groups, one-on-one interviews, hands-on workshops, etc.
- If you cannot test the tool directly with the target audience, test it with people who know the target audience well. As a last resort, you can test it with your colleagues or other people around you. It's always better than nothing!

Don't confuse appreciation with performance

- Your target audience may like your tool (appreciation) without understanding it or knowing how to use it (performance). It's up to you to decide what you want to evaluate.