

# Guidelines for Better Legal Information in Ontario:

## A checklist for legal information producers

### Guideline 1

#### Indicate the organization responsible for the information or website.

Users need to know who is responsible for the legal information so they can assess whether it is reliable.

Check:

- Identify the organization responsible for the information.
- If the organization may not be familiar to your reader, give some additional details. Depending on the space available, those details could include:
  - whether it's a not-for-profit,
  - who funds it,
  - any legal institutions you work with, or
  - the organization's expertise in the area of law.
- Include contact information for the organization.

### Guideline 2

#### Identify and state the intended audience or purpose.

Keep your specific audience in mind when you write legal information. Focus on the information that your audience needs most. Your audience could be a demographic (for example, older adults) or people in a certain situation (for example, workers in the food service industry).

State the audience or purpose clearly and in a prominent place. When the intended audience or purpose is clearly identified, your readers will be able to assess whether the information is likely to apply to them.

Check:

- State the intended audience or purpose in the title, subtitle, or description.
- If the audience or purpose is stated in the content, make sure that it is prominent and appears early in the text.

### **Guideline 3** Say where the information applies.

Legal information applies to specific locations, also known as jurisdictions, and it may be wrong if applied elsewhere. Online searches often return results from other regions and users may not realize that the information may not apply where they live.

Check:

- Indicate that the information applies to Ontario, Canada.
- Make the jurisdiction easy to find; place it prominently throughout your website, not just on your home page, as users won't necessarily visit the home page.
- If the jurisdiction is in the name of the resource (for example, "Getting a divorce in Ontario"), you don't need to state it separately.
- Check that the jurisdiction still appears when a user prints out the web page.

### **Guideline 4** Have a qualified legal expert review the information.

To ensure that it is up to date and reliable, legal information must be written or reviewed by a legal expert with knowledge and experience relating to the area of law.

Check:

- Get the information reviewed for legal accuracy by a lawyer or a qualified legal expert.
- Choose an expert who also has practical, on-the-ground experience relating to the area of law.

### **Guideline 5** Include the date of the last review by a qualified legal expert.

Users need to know the date the information was last reviewed by a qualified legal expert ('legal currency date') to help them assess whether the information is up to date and reliable.

Check:

- On print resources, place the legal currency date on the first or last page.
- For online information, make sure that the legal currency date appears on all main sections of the content, and ensure that the legal currency date prints out.

- Review content periodically, even if the law hasn't changed, and update the legal currency date.
- Include a disclaimer that reminds the reader that the law can change and that the material is accurate as of the legal currency date.

## Guideline 6

### **Write the information so that your audience can easily understand it.**

Information that is written clearly, with users in mind, is easier for them to understand. See page 4 for links to resources on writing in clear language.

Check:

- Use short sentences, bulleted lists, and other plain language techniques.
- Write in an active voice.
- Use common or plain words and avoid jargon or acronyms. If you have to use legal terms, make sure to explain what they mean.
- Ask some of your intended users to review a draft of what you've written and tell you whether they understand it.

## Guideline 7

### **Use clean design to make the information easy to read.**

Information that is cluttered or visually unappealing can be difficult for users to read and understand. A clean design makes the information more accessible and easy to use. See page 4 for links to resource on using clear design.

Check:

- Organize the information using plain design techniques such as frequent headings or a question and answer format.
- Use simple, uncluttered layouts and leave plenty of white space on the page.
- Format text aligned left and use an easy-to-read font.
- Use graphic elements such as boxes or charts to make important information stand out.

## Guideline 8

### **Include referrals to free or low-cost legal assistance.**

For many people, the most important piece of information is where to find in-person, phone, or other one-on-one help with their problem.

Check:

- Include the name and contact information of places where users may be able to get free or low-cost legal help.
- Refer to services that your audience is likely to use and able to access.
- Use phone numbers that are answered by a person, not a machine, wherever possible.
- Verify that your description of the service and its availability are accurate.

## Resources for clear language and design

- Better Legal Information Handbook, Community Legal Education Ontario (CLEO):  
[http://www.cleo.on.ca/sites/default/files/docs/cleo\\_betterlegalinfo.pdf](http://www.cleo.on.ca/sites/default/files/docs/cleo_betterlegalinfo.pdf)
- “Developing Content” Module 2 from CLEO's PLE Toolbox:  
<http://plelearningexchange.ca/toolbox/introduction-2/>
- Clear Language and Design:  
<http://clad.tcld.org/measuring-readability/>
- Canada.ca Content Style Guide:  
<https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/government-communications/canada-content-style-guide.html>

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