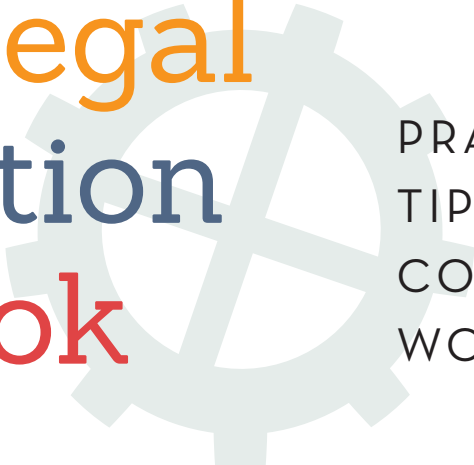




Better Legal Information Handbook

PRACTICAL
TIPS FOR
COMMUNITY
WORKERS



Better Legal
Information
Handbook

PRACTICAL
TIPS FOR
COMMUNITY
WORKERS



CLEO

Community Legal Education Ontario
Éducation juridique communautaire Ontario

ISBN 978-1-77163-000-9

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Based on the original *Better Information Handbook*, published by Advicenow 2009, London, United Kingdom, and the *Better Information Handbook*, published by Victoria Law Foundation 2011, Melbourne, Australia.

Adapted with the kind permission of Advicenow and Victoria Law Foundation.

CLEO has taken care to ensure the accuracy of the material but web links and references may change. We invite you to report any errors or outdated links to betterinfo@cleo.on.ca.

Visit www.plelearningexchange.ca for a Portable Document Format (PDF) version of the handbook with active hyperlinks. You can view it online, print it off, and order additional copies.

September 2013

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 2014, CLEO (Community Legal Education Ontario / Éducation juridique communautaire Ontario) marks its 40th anniversary of providing clear, accurate, and practical information to help people across Ontario understand and exercise their legal rights.

CLEO also supports the work of others involved in providing legal information. Community legal clinics and other legal sector agencies, a wide range of community-based organizations, and government offices at all levels produce legal information for diverse communities throughout the province.

We developed the *Better Legal Information Handbook* to give them some helpful tips and tools.

The handbook covers the fundamentals: knowing your audience and writing for them, choosing the best format for your information, and usability testing and evaluating. It draws together the principles of plain language and design and gives practical advice on how to apply them.

Our version is based on the original *Better Information Handbook* published in 2009 by Advicenow in the United Kingdom and then adapted in 2011 by the Victoria Law Foundation in Australia. Thanks to both Advicenow and the Victoria Law Foundation for their wonderful work and for supporting our edition.

We called on a number of legal information practitioners to help us in this endeavour and thank them for giving their time:

- Margaret Capes
- Lisa Cirillo
- Pamela Cross
- Karen Dick
- Andrea Gunraj
- Joanna Hayes
- Michele Leering
- Jill McNall
- Jennifer Ramsay
- Tamar Witelson

I'd also like to extend a special thanks to our editorial team of Kim McCutcheon, Lead Writer and Editor, and Claire Foley, Editor, and to all the dedicated CLEO staff for their passion for and commitment to developing better legal information; in particular, for their contribution to this handbook, Michael Blazer, Caroline Lindberg, Fiona MacCool, and Jane Withey.

Finally, thanks as always to our funders: Legal Aid Ontario, the Department of Justice Canada, and the Law Foundation of Ontario.

Julie Mathews, CLEO Executive Director, August 2013



SECTION 1 – WHY PRODUCE BETTER LEGAL INFORMATION?



About the handbook

People who understand the laws that affect them are better able to participate in the justice system and exercise their legal rights.

The challenge is to produce and present legal information in the best way possible, so that it reaches those who need it and is useful to them. This is often the job of community organizations, small and large, community legal clinics and other legal sector agencies, as well as government offices at all levels.

For many groups, producing legal information for the public is only one of their activities. They might have a great idea for an information project but may not have the resources or specialized skills to make it happen.

The handbook is meant to fill that gap. It looks at the issues involved in producing information about the law for the public, gives examples of what works, and provides practical advice on how to develop and complete a project. In doing this, we hope to stimulate debate on the best ways to produce legal information and improve the general quality of what's produced.

What is legal information?

In the handbook, “information” refers to any of the wide range of materials produced to help people deal with legal issues – from a fridge magnet to a self-help book or a website. Another term that's used to describe this type of work is “public legal education and information” or “PLEI”.

Section 1 – Why produce better legal information?

The handbook is mostly about written information – other methods are discussed, but not in as much detail. However, the underlying issues are generally the same, so it should be useful no matter what form of information you’re planning to produce.

What is better legal information?

To be effective, legal information needs to be accurate, up to date, and in plain language. It has to:

- provide the information that your reader needs
- get its message across and be understood by your audience the first time it’s read
- have content that directs the reader to take appropriate action
- be available in the most suitable format
- grab and hold the reader’s attention
- be available when and where it’s needed
- work as part of the wider delivery of community and legal services

A great deal of legal information is produced for people to access on their own, particularly online information. But for many people in many types of situations, it’s most effective if someone goes through the material with them and works with them to get the help they need.

Who benefits from better legal information?

Legal problems are common because the law affects so many aspects of everyday life – housing, income support, work, consumer purchases, family issues, and so on. Most people have a problem in one or more of these areas at some point in their lives. These problems can cause stress and anxiety and may lead to health problems or even loss of a home or a job. And of course, they have a much greater impact on people who are already disadvantaged in some other way, for example, by poverty, disability, language, or unemployment.

Section 1 – Why produce better legal information?

Ontario is home to a rich diversity of people of many income levels, races, cultures, languages, ages, and abilities. Many of these communities have difficulty getting information and services to help them deal with the law or the legal system. They need to be able to access information that's effective, practical, and responds to their issues and concerns. This type of community-based information is critical to connecting the public with the justice system.

Why produce more legal information?

Given all the legal information that's out there, it's tempting to think that there's no need for any more. But information on the same general topic may be developed for different purposes. Legal information can be used to help people:

- avoid or minimize the impact of legal problems
- gain an awareness of their legal rights
- understand and address legal problems
- take steps in a legal process

Legal information can also play an important role in law reform or social action. Information will look very different, with different content and suggested strategies, depending on its purpose.

And legal information may cover the same general topic but focus on particular issues and give different referral information depending on the audience. For example, family law information for women who have experienced violence will focus on different issues and give different referral places than family law information for a wide audience.

Information produced by government departments most often explains or summarizes the law. It doesn't usually offer practical guidance or steps for users to exercise their rights. And it may not give users information about controversial issues or ways to appeal government decisions. In contrast, information developed by community-based organizations looks at issues or concerns of community members. This type of information typically gives practical, action-based information that reflects community members' real-life experiences.

Section 1 – Why produce better legal information?

Working together and sharing information

In Ontario, as more and more organizations are producing legal information, it's essential that they work together. This is important not only to avoid duplicating work but to ensure that information isn't developed in isolation.

People looking for legal information have to be able to find what they need, as easily as possible, regardless of what website or brochure they start with.

By communicating with each other as we start projects, sharing our work, and adapting the “best” of each other's content and approaches, we will increase the reach and quality of our information. The handbook is one step in this direction.

We invite you to participate in a network of Ontario organizations that provide legal information for their communities, called the Public Legal Education (PLE) Learning Exchange.

The PLE Learning Exchange is open to anyone interested in developing better legal information, sharing information about their legal information projects, and learning from others. The project's website at www.plelearningexchange.ca includes research, tools, and other resources to help community organizations do their legal information work.

The value of take-home information

Research from many sectors tells us that more and more people are accessing information online. So is print material still useful?

It's true that the overall number of people with access to computers and the Internet has grown, and that people who are comfortable sorting through the vast amount of online information may be able to find the legal information they need. But many community workers caution that we shouldn't be too quick to discard print – many of their clients don't have access to a computer or don't have the skills or confidence to search for information on the Internet.

Recent research conducted by CLEO offers many reasons behind the continued demand for print or take-home information. Feedback from community workers emphasizes the value of portable information that people can take away with them. One interviewee commented, "Clients tend to be in stressful situations and can have difficulty absorbing information. If they have information to take home, they can read it at their convenience, refer back to it as they need, and share it with family and friends."

For more information on this research, visit www.plelearningexchange.ca.



SECTION 2 – CREATING BETTER LEGAL INFORMATION



Planning your legal information project

Producing even the simplest legal information needs planning and management. Too little time or too little money can affect the results of the project. It's important to take time to plan the project, research audience needs, find suitable experts and writers, edit and review the material, and design the publication.

Here are the steps to follow, as we outline them in the handbook:

- planning your legal information project
- producing your information
- ensuring the accuracy of your information
- designing and presenting your information
- testing the usability of your information
- translating your information
- getting your information out there
- keeping your information up to date
- doing an evaluation

At the back of the handbook is a **Project plan builder**. You can use it to help plan your legal information projects, keep track of their progress, and make sure you are following the steps and tips. The handbook also mentions several resources that you may find helpful. All of them and more are included in the **Resources** section.

Planning and research

The way you approach the planning and research will be affected by the type of organization you are and who you serve. Does your

Section 2 – Creating better legal information

organization have connections to or is it part of the legal sector? Or are you part of a completely different sector? You might be a settlement organization, a multi-service agency, or a housing agency.

If producing legal information is part of your ongoing work, you may have more resources and supports readily available. This might not be the case if producing information isn't one of your usual activities.

Deciding on the issue

If you're thinking about producing new information, you have to be sure that your intended audience needs it. Before you start, you need to find out about the legal issue, who it affects, and how.

Researching the problem

If the issue is something that many of your regular clients encounter, the decision to produce the information will be easy. For other issues, or if your organization doesn't have direct contact with the audience you're writing for, you may have to do some more research. This is also true for specially funded projects. For example, the Family Law Education for Women (FLEW) project was funded by the Government of Ontario based on a recognized need for legal information on family law for isolated and vulnerable women across the province. With that as a starting point, FLEW then did a detailed needs assessment to guide them in developing materials.

For Ontario, you can find useful research related to legal information and needs on the PLE Learning Exchange at www.plelearningexchange.ca.

Assessing existing resources

The next step is to make sure that the information you want to produce isn't already available. A good place to start is the Your Legal Rights website at www.yourlegalrights.on.ca, which has a comprehensive collection of legal information resources produced by hundreds of organizations across Ontario.

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A checklist can be useful in helping you decide whether or not an existing publication or information resource meets the needs that you've identified for your audience. You can develop your own checklist or use or adapt the one below.

Here are some questions to ask:

- Does it cover the topic in enough detail?
- Is it suited to your audience and their needs?
- Does it have useful referral information?
- Does it tell people what they need to know or do?
- Is it readily available to your target audience?
- Is it accurate?
- Is it updated regularly?

If there is existing information that would meet the needs of your audience, you may decide to simply distribute it to your clients or let them know where to get it. If the information isn't exactly what you need, you could approach the organization that produced it to see if they're willing to work with you to adapt or update it.

While reviewing existing resources, you'll likely also find out which other organizations produce information on similar issues. You might consider partnering with them to develop your material.

Scanning popular media

It's useful to be aware of other sources of information your audience may be exposed to. Think about your audience and what media they might use – newspapers, magazines, or papers aimed at a particular interest group or community, organizational newsletters, local radio, popular TV programs, and blogs and other forms of social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube.

Looking at where your audience gets their information can:

- help you to find out what level of awareness and knowledge some people may already have about the issue
- give you a topical or current way of presenting the information

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- provide an opportunity to clarify misinformation or confusing messages presented by the popular media
- help you to learn more about your audience and what's important to them

Using intermediaries

Intermediaries are other organizations that have regular contact with your target audience and may or may not deal directly with the issue you're interested in. They might be community health centres, food banks, settlement agencies, housing help centres, youth employment centres, shelters, poverty action groups, and a variety of other local community agencies.

Intermediaries know your intended audience and may know how they get and use information and how a particular issue affects them. Later on, they may be able to help you get your information to the people who need it.

Using experts

Get in touch with experts. These might be lawyers, community legal workers, legal support workers, or paralegals. They can help you to understand the issue from a legal point of view and what aspects cause the most problems for people.

Deciding what you want to achieve

Legal information doesn't just present "the facts". Sometimes the goal is to raise awareness of a particular issue or help people understand it better. That way they might be able to avoid a problem or take action before a problem gets worse. Other information may be for people already experiencing a legal problem and aimed at explaining possible next steps or helping to guide them through a legal process.

Identify what you're trying to achieve before you decide anything else, and keep these goals in mind throughout the production process.

Section 2 – Creating better legal information

Information that aims to do only one thing is often the most effective. You may find that your project is trying to do more than one thing. If so, consider whether the same piece of information can do all this, or whether or not you need to produce separate pieces for your different goals.

If you're hoping to achieve more than one thing with the information, decide on their order of importance. If you later find that you can't accomplish all that you wanted, you'll know what to focus on and what can be left out. Here are some of the most common reasons for producing legal information and some of the best ways to achieve these goals.

Raising awareness

This type of information aims to let people know about something – a legal problem, a legal service, or a new law, for example. It needs to attract attention because the audience won't be looking for it but doesn't need to include much detail. It may simply tell people where to go for more information or help.

Think about what format would best attract the attention of your audience – posters, bookmarks, flyers, postcards, or something a bit more unique, such as drink coasters. Consider the best place to display or distribute your material. You can also try to get placement in media that your audience uses, for example, in a community newspaper or through social media.

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Drink coasters raise awareness

A creative example of raising awareness was a legal information drink coaster produced by the Community Advocacy & Legal Clinic (CALC) in Belleville, Ontario. Groups in the United States and Australia had used the same strategy to reach a widespread and rural audience, so CALC decided to give it a try. They produced coasters dispelling common housing myths, asking true/false questions, such as “Can I be evicted in the winter?”

In addition to distributing the coasters at coffee shops, Internet cafes, libraries, and local MP and MPP constituency offices, clinic staff have taken them to speaking events in the community, including to local high schools. And service providers have handed them out at training sessions.

Along with the basic legal information message, the coasters give the clinic’s website and phone numbers and mention that it provides free legal services to people living on a low income. As a branding effort, the coasters have also helped make the clinic’s name and logo more familiar to local agencies.

CALC staff consider the initiative a success and have gone on to produce a coaster about workers’ rights. Choosing durable material for the coasters resulted in a creative legal information product that lasts for months and even years.

Increasing understanding and knowledge

This is the classic type of legal information. It discusses a topic in more detail and may explain complicated legal concepts or offer a range of options for the reader. Having this basic understanding of a legal issue and legal rights allows people to take the next step and be better informed when working with a lawyer or legal worker.



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As always, the language and content should be appropriate for the target audience. Even in brief information, it's helpful to outline the key points up front, so people can get an overall perspective and some of the detail.

People look at information only if they immediately recognize that it's meant for them, and they understand why it's important. We talk about this more in **Designing and presenting your information**.

Guiding people through a process

This type of information sets out the steps that people need to follow in a particular legal process, such as applying to the Landlord and Tenant Board when their landlord isn't doing repairs or working through the steps of the appeal process when they're denied social assistance.

The information needs to explain each step in the process in clear, everyday language, should look at the problem from the reader's point of view, and must clearly show the path to follow. You need to ask yourself:

- What is their starting point?
- What do they need to do?
- In what order do they need to do it?

Identifying your audience

For information to be effective, you need to know your audience – not just what information they need but also the ways they understand and use information. This will help you decide what to include, how to present it, and how to make sure it reaches the right people.

If your organization provides front-line services to the audience you're writing for, you likely know many aspects of their situation. If you don't work directly with your audience, ask front-line organizations and intermediaries about your audience. And ask the audience members themselves through questionnaires or focus groups.

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Get as much information as you can to create a profile of your audience. It helps to know about:

- their level of education
- their literacy and language skills
- their age and gender
- the kinds of issues they face and how they're affected
- how stressed they may be by their legal problems
- how confident or able they are to take action
- how they might come across information or where they might access it

Demographic factors, such as age, gender, education, income, and ethnic or cultural background, can affect people's knowledge and experience of the legal system and their confidence in dealing with government services, the police, or the courts.

Barriers that your audience may face, such as distance, discrimination, literacy, language, and disability, can make it harder for them to access, understand, and use your information, and to access help and support.

To find out more about your audience, look at credible sources, such as:

- data from Statistics Canada
- Ontario demographic statistics, such as information from the Ontario Ministry of Finance
- social research organizations, such as local social planning councils and the Law Commission of Ontario

There is a longer list of sources on the PLE Learning Exchange at www.plelearningexchange.ca.

It might be tempting to try to reach as wide an audience as possible with one piece of information, but this usually doesn't work. The more targeted and specific you are, the more effective your information is likely to be.

Literacy facts for Ontario

- 16% of the population struggle with very serious literacy challenges and have difficulty with even the most basic written materials. Another 26% can read but not well enough to meet the demands of today's society.
- When offenders arrive at correctional institutions, approximately 65% test at a reading level lower than Grade 8 and 82% test lower than Grade 10.
- 60% of immigrants have low levels of literacy in English or French.
- More than 80% of seniors have low levels of literacy.
- People with low literacy skills earn considerably less than those with high literacy skills and are also more likely to receive social assistance.

(from *Literacy – why it matters!*, Community Literacy of Ontario)



Identifying audience needs

Once you've decided who your audience is, you have to consider what they need. Their situation affects how the problem came about, how they're able to deal with it, and what sort of information they need to have.

Having a legal problem is stressful. Research shows that people have a harder time understanding information when under stress or experiencing trauma. Even strong readers may have difficulty with written information when they're in a lawyer's office or other legal settings, like a mediation meeting or tribunal hearing. Make sure you allow for this in the content, organization, and tone of your information.

Your audience needs to be able to use and relate to the legal information, so it's important to know what they understand and

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what they're capable of doing and feel comfortable with. For example, some people have no problem writing a letter or an email. For others, this is hard and they won't be able to do it without help. They may keep putting it off, so their legal problems get worse. If you include advice on how to write the letter or email and what to put in it, your information will increase your audience's ability to deal with their current problem and possibly future problems as well.

Your information should look at the legal problem and solution from the audience's point of view. Interacting with your audience allows you to better understand their needs and also get feedback on how well your information actually works. For organizations with no direct connection to the target audience, this is more difficult. To get feedback on whether your material will be useful, you may need to connect with other groups, such as community-based agencies, that have direct and regular contact with your target audience.

Directing your audience to services

If you want to direct people to other sources of information or help, make sure that these are resources they are likely to use and able to access. Think about whether your readers face barriers, such as distance or literacy.

Choosing the format

Deciding on the best format for your information means considering both the message you want to deliver and the audience you're delivering it to. For example, is your audience comfortable with written information? Do they have easy access to the Internet?

Print information

Many people prefer to get legal information in print and this is especially true for those who face a variety of barriers. Some advantages to print materials:

- Pamphlets and fact sheets are easily passed on to others.
- Readers can carry them to appointments.

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- They are versatile and can be used for many purposes, such as workshops and displays.
- Legal and community workers can use them to discuss issues with clients. And then clients can take them home to read in a calm place in their own time.
- Many people find it easier to understand and absorb complex information presented in print.

But keeping print materials up to date can be expensive and making sure that community groups have the most up-to-date versions can also be a challenge.

Online information

The Internet can be a cost-effective way to reach a large number of people. Some advantages to online information:

- Readers can access the information on their own time, 24 hours a day.
- Readers can get the most up-to-date information on the main topic they're interested in and on related topics.
- It's easy to update, which is very useful if there are frequent changes in the law.
- The information can be presented in interactive ways, such as questionnaires or forms.

But there are still many people who don't have easy access to the Internet. Even those who have access may have difficulty finding and understanding information online. It can be hard for people to sort through all of the information they find and be sure that it's accurate and from a reliable source.

New and emerging formats

How people are accessing information is changing rapidly. So, you may want to consider other ways to present your information. When deciding on the format, think about what best suits your target audience.

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Your audience members may not all be able to access the same format. For example, many people can use a sound file on the web, but it's always very useful to have a written transcript for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. This will also help people who don't have a computer with sound or who are using a public computer, perhaps at their local library.

Videos

Some groups are successfully using videos to present legal information. Éducaloi, Quebec's main legal information provider, has a growing collection of videos available on its YouTube channel and a section of its website at www.educaloi.qc.ca/en/educaloi-tv.

Videos can help you reach particular audiences. For example, Justice for Children and Youth, which provides legal help and information to children and young people in Ontario, has created a number of educational videos on legal issues affecting youth. Topics include house parties, leaving home, using fake ID, and selling and using drugs at school. Their collection of videos is posted on their YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/user/JFCYOntario.

If your audience includes members of the deaf community, you may want to develop your legal information in American Sign Language (ASL) and present it through online videos.

Presenting legal information in ASL

In response to the lack of legal information available for the deaf community, CLEO consulted with the Canadian Hearing Society about which of its publications would be most useful to present in American Sign Language (ASL) through online video.

They first chose *Police Powers: Stops and Searches* and have now added other titles. These are the steps they followed:

1. CLEO hired a consultant to provide sign interpretation of the material with the help of a deaf interpreter – a deaf person who understands and can incorporate the nuances of deaf culture. The consultant also had experience producing videos.
2. The consultant reviewed the content to identify any difficult or confusing language that might not translate easily into ASL. She then discussed this with the lawyer responsible for the legal accuracy of the publication.
3. The consultant and the deaf interpreter developed a script. Since video is not searchable in the way text is, it's easier for users to view shorter videos if they're looking for specific information. So the information was captured in video "chapters" of 3 to 6 minutes.
4. A member of the deaf community reviewed the videos and a professor of ASL-English Interpreting, who is also a specialist in legal interpreting, reviewed it for accuracy of the translation.
5. The videos were uploaded to CLEO's Vimeo channel and to its website at www.cleo.on.ca. CLEO researched community and legal organizations that represent or work with the deaf community and announced the launch of the videos to them.



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Online games and quizzes

Another innovative format you might want to consider is an online game. For example, METRAC (Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children) developed an online game for youth that deals with sexual violence.

Using less traditional tools

When METRAC, a Toronto-based charity serving women and youth, wanted to produce an educational tool for young people to challenge sexual violence, they took a less traditional route than a brochure or pamphlet. They worked with their target audience to create a simple digital quiz game called “What It Is”.

The game can be played in English or French, online, and on mobile phones. It provides definitions and warning signs about sexual violence, tests users on their knowledge of violence and their rights, and lists community resources where users can turn for help.



A group of diverse youth tested and contributed to the game’s content through focus groups and the project was guided by a youth advisory team. To promote the game, promotional materials were distributed to schools and service providers across the country, media outlets were invited to the game’s launch, and the website “Challenge Sexual Violence” was developed. It serves as home to the game and has other multimedia resources and tools.

After the launch, METRAC evaluated the effectiveness of the game and its impact on awareness and attitudes. The evaluation process revealed that the game is a great tool for educating youth and has the potential to prevent sexual violence. To find out more about the project and the evaluation, and to try the quiz out yourself, visit www.challengesexualviolence.org.

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Mobile formats

The growing use of mobile devices has legal information providers starting to look at this as another way to reach their audiences. This could range from adapting your website to be mobile friendly to developing a legal information application or “app” that can be downloaded onto mobile devices.

“Not Your Baby” is a mobile app that METRAC designed to give users ideas about how to respond to situations of sexual harassment at home, work, and school, and on the street and public transit. You’ll find more information at www.metrac.org.

The Centre for Public Legal Education Alberta’s mobile app called “Can My Landlord?” is meant to be a quick reference tool providing answers to common questions that tenants have about their rights. There’s more about it at <http://tenant.landlordandtenant.org>.

There’s still much to be learned about mobile formats. It can be expensive to create mobile apps, and you have to consider whether your information is suitable for reading on a mobile device and whether your audience includes active users of mobile phones.

But it has become easier to design your website so that it’s mobile friendly. This is called “responsive web design”. It means that you design your website so that it adjusts to fit the screen size or screen resolution of the visitor. That way, your website works for people who look at it with their mobile phone or tablet, and you won’t have to maintain separate versions of your site for different users.

Find out more about using technology when doing legal information work at www.pleiconnect.ca. PLEI Connect is for organizations across Canada interested in using technology in their public legal education and information (PLEI) work. TechSoup Canada at www.techsoupcanada.ca also has a wide variety of practical information for nonprofits about using technology.



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Choosing the right expertise

A wide variety of skills is needed to produce better legal information.

People working on the project need to:

- have an overview of the issue, as well as a clear idea of what needs to be achieved
- know the law and the steps needed to deal with the problem
- understand the needs of the audience
- have good writing and editing skills
- be able to present the information effectively to the audience
- have a good system for promoting and distributing the material
- have efficient project management skills

Generally, you won't find all of the above skills in one person, so you'll need a team of people working together to produce your legal information.

Project management skills are crucial. This involves researching the audience needs, figuring out what tasks and steps have to be done, deciding what the information should cover, and developing a production schedule and budget.

How the writing gets done will vary from organization to organization. See **Who will do the writing?** for more details.

You will need to have the information reviewed by someone who knows the law. The reviewer also has to understand the purpose of the publication and the needs of the intended audience. Their role is to make sure the material is legally accurate, while keeping the purpose and audience in mind. See **Ensuring accuracy** for more details.

You may want to use a graphic designer to make sure that the information is presented in the most effective way. Good design is very important in helping present complicated issues clearly. The designer also has to understand the needs of the target audience. Read about the principles of clear design in **Designing and presenting your information**.

Producing your information

Once you've decided who your information is for, what you want to achieve by producing it, and what format to use, you now need to think about the steps you need to take to produce it.

Developing the content

Who will do the writing?

Depending on the size of the project and the size of your organization and budget, you may be able to hire a writer or *you* or a colleague may be the writer. But the guidelines below should help the process, no matter who's doing the writing.

It often works well to have someone who does the writing and someone else who edits – but both with an understanding of the issue and the needs of the target audience. Neither person has to be an expert on the legal issue, as long as there is an expert involved along the way, for example, one or more legal reviewers who can comment on the accuracy of drafts.

Making sure the writing is reader-centred

Whether you hire a professional writer, or it's you or a colleague who writes the information, understanding the needs of the audience is critical. The writer needs to be able to communicate the information in a clear way so that the target readers can understand it the first time they read it. The information needs to be reader-centred, that is, written with the reader in mind:

- What does the reader already know?
- What do they need to know?
- What will they understand?

Writing reader-centred information means forgetting about your own preferences in writing style, word choice, and content, and putting yourself in the reader's position.

There's more about this in **Choosing the right language**.

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Making the roles clear

Identifying and communicating what's expected from each person on the project team should help prevent misunderstandings, duplicated work, or gaps in the process. For example, ask the legal reviewer to comment on the accuracy of the information, but make it clear that you don't need them to worry about punctuation or spelling. That's the job of the writer or editor.

Giving someone the final say

Someone needs to be responsible for having the final say and signing off on the content – that person may not be the writer. Think about this when you're planning the project and putting together your team.

Deciding what to include

Getting the level of detail right can be challenging. If there's a lot of information, it can be hard for your audience to take it all in, and they'll just end up confused. If there's too little detail, they may be frustrated because they haven't found out what they need to know.

Think about what most members of your target audience need to know, along with your purpose and what you're trying to achieve, and let these guide you in deciding what basic information to include.

A lot of legal information focuses on what the law says and doesn't really tell people what they need to know about the topic. When someone is trying to solve a problem they need to know what their legal rights are, but they also need to know:

- when a problem is a legal problem or has a legal component
- where they can get more information that relates to their particular issue
- when they need to get expert help and advice
- how to find help and advice
- who they should speak to and what to say
- what's likely to happen

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Consider the possible risks and benefits of either including or leaving out information about a particular issue. Are people likely to make the wrong decision if they don't have this piece of information? Will this detail confuse them instead of making the issue clearer?

Choosing the right language

Information on the law and legal rights must not only be accurate, up to date, and in plain language. It must also meet the needs of its intended audience. Choosing the language depends on who you're writing for and what you're trying to achieve with the information. Are you trying to raise awareness, increase understanding and knowledge, or guide people through a process?

Readability

When producing information for the public, it's important to choose the language level that's most easily understood by your target audience. To match your writing to your audience, you should consider who your audience is, as well as your purpose. This doesn't mean "talking down" to your audience – it simply means using clear communication at an appropriate reading level to reach as many members of your audience as possible.

Readability formulas can be a useful tool in helping you assess the reading ability needed to read a passage of text and to measure the reading level of your writing. There are a number of readability formulas available, and each measures reading levels in a different way, mostly looking at the length of sentences and the length or number of syllables in words.

Many people argue that these tools aren't accurate or consistent. They don't look at important factors such as the tone of the writing and the design – things we talk a lot about in this handbook. And they can sometimes give good scores to text that really isn't that plain. So why use them? Knowing the baseline reading level for your text is useful so that you can compare after you've done a plain language edit.

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If your original text was a grade 12 reading level and your revised text is grade 8, you know it's now clearer.

Simply clicking on the readability statistics in MS Word can give you some very basic information. But you could try the online reading effectiveness tool on the Clear Language and Design website at www.eastendliteracy.on.ca/ClearLanguageAndDesign/readingeffectivenessstool. The tool looks at both the mechanical factors, such as word, sentence, and paragraph length, and more qualitative factors, like tone, organization, and appearance. It also helps you to figure out the grade reading level you should aim for based on your audience and subject matter.

Many organizations targeting the Canadian public, like the Canadian Public Health Association, aim for around a grade 8 reading level. For audiences with low literacy or whose first language is not English, a lower grade reading level is the goal for print information and even lower for online information. What's important is to understand who your audience is, what their abilities are, and what other factors may affect their ability to understand information, for example, stress or their age.

Choosing the right tone

The tone of your information can have a significant impact on the way it's received by your audience. If legal information is presented in a very impersonal and formal way, it doesn't acknowledge that dealing with a legal problem can be very stressful.

Legal problems are often complicated and have serious consequences. This emotional stress can affect your audience's ability to read and retain information. Consider the different emotional contexts for people in various situations – for example, someone looking for information on domestic contracts before getting married versus a person who needs information after getting an eviction notice.

Using a tone that's reassuring and offering practical suggestions can make information more effective. For example, when women who

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have been abused have to go to court for their partner’s trial, they may wonder whether or not they can bring their children. CLEO’s booklet on this topic explains that there will be a lot of time spent waiting, which can be hard for children, and that often they aren’t allowed in the courtroom because they can be disruptive but also very distressed by what they hear.

Wherever possible, avoid using negative constructions. These can also affect the tone of your information. For example, instead of “Do not fail to notify your lawyer should something occur” use “Tell your lawyer if anything happens”.

But sometimes a negative tone gives a clearer message: “Do not talk to the police if your lawyer isn’t with you”.

Using plain language

Plain language is language that everyone in your audience can easily understand. Plain language means writing information in a way that’s easy to read and that’s understandable the first time it’s read. But it’s not just about the words you choose – plain language also means organizing and presenting information in a clear way.

Choose the right words

Use common or plain words rather than jargon

When choosing between different words, use the word you think is more familiar to your readers. This means common, everyday words, preferably with no more than two syllables.

Jargon	Everyday
utilize	use
endeavour	try
terminate	end

Word substitution lists are a helpful tool both for choosing everyday words and eliminating wordy phrases, such as changing “at the present time” to “now”. Here are some to check out:

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- “Plain Words,” *Caps and Spelling*
- www.eastendliteracy.on.ca/ClearLanguageAndDesign/thesaurus/
- www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/wordsuggestions/simplewords.cfm

Keep in mind that people who don’t read well may understand words when spoken but have difficulty with them in print.

Define difficult but necessary words

Sometimes you have to use legal terms. There are certain words that readers need to know as they navigate the legal system – words they may hear in court or at a tribunal hearing. If you have to use a hard word, define it for your readers with a more common word after. Or give an explanation of what the legal word means, as in the examples below:

The term **tenancy** means your legal right to live in your place. Usually that right comes from an agreement between you and your landlord. This is sometimes called a tenancy agreement, a lease, or a rental agreement. (from CLEO’s *What tenants need to know about the law*)

When a child lives mainly with one parent who has sole custody, the child and the other parent usually have the right to spend time together. This is called **access**. (from CLEO’s *Separation and Divorce: Child Custody, Access, and Parenting Plans*)

Be consistent

Although it may seem boring, don’t be afraid to use the same word over and over again. It can help your reader understand the content better. Don’t choose a harder word just for the sake of variety – using three different words to write about the same thing can confuse readers.

Change nouns into verbs

To make your writing clearer, use verbs rather than nouns. Along with the passive voice, which we talk more about later, turning verbs into

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nouns is a very common problem in legal writing. You can spot these words by looking for words ending with *-ment*, *-tion*, *-sion*, and *-ance*.

Instead of:

The function of the Family Responsibility Office is the **enforcement** of support orders and **collection** of support payments.

Write:

The Family Responsibility Office **enforces** support orders and **collects** support payments.

Use strong, active verbs

This means using the active form of the verb rather than the passive. In the passive voice, it's often not clear who or what is doing the action.

Sentences written in the active voice are easier to understand because it's clearer who is doing what to whom. This is because having the subject followed by the verb followed by the object is usually the most logical way to express an idea in English.

Instead of:

A door-to-door contract can be cancelled by the customer within 10 days.

Write:

You can cancel a door-to-door contract within 10 days.

Be direct

Write directly to your reader – address the reader as you as if you're talking to them. Using the words *you*, *I*, *we*, *us*, and *our* makes the information more personal and draws your readers in. We did this in the example directly above.

Being direct can also mean using directive language – telling people to do something, rather than simply suggesting that they could do it. But be careful not to sound too bossy!

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Watch out for acronyms

Acronyms, initialisms, and other abbreviations are useful shorthand and are common in legal documents, but your audience needs to understand them. If you have to use them, be sure to give the full word or phrase first followed by the acronym in parentheses. For example, on first reference you'd write Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) and then refer to CIC after that. This is also helpful if your readers will hear people talking about CIC rather than the full name.

If the information you're producing is long and divided into sections that not everyone will read, you may need to repeat the full word or phrase followed by the acronym more than once.

Never assume that your readers will understand an acronym or abbreviation – what might seem like universal knowledge to you may not be to others, especially newcomers to Canada.

Be careful of short forms that you use with colleagues that are not commonly used by others. For example, you might refer to the Social Benefits Tribunal as the SBT. But documents from the Social Benefits Tribunal and workers at other organizations may not use that short form. Then, it's best to avoid that acronym and use the term that your readers will most likely come across.

Be careful with contractions

When using plain language, contractions add to a friendly, conversational style – we've used them in this handbook for that very reason. But when writing for people with very low literacy levels or those learning English, write out contractions in full.

Numbers aren't always easy

Even readers with high literacy and good language skills can have low numeracy. Numeracy refers to our ability to understand numbers and do basic math for daily functioning.

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Use digits rather than spelling out numbers

For readers to be able to skim and scan, digits are much easier to read and remember than spelling out numbers. Reading numbers that are spelled out, like eighteen, is much harder than simply 18.

Avoid tricky constructions with dates

If you have to think about dates when they're presented numerically, so will your readers. Why put them through the confusion? Instead, just write out the month and use numbers for the day and year. It gets even more confusing because sometimes date formats are day/month/year or month/day/year. In the example below, it's not clear if you mean January 7 or July 1.

Instead of:

This new law applies if you signed the contract on or after 1/7/12.

Write:

This new law applies if you signed the contract on or after July 1, 2012.

Be as specific as possible

Legal information is filled with references to time periods and deadlines. It's critical that people understand how many days' notice they have to give or how long they have to make an appeal. When explaining this kind of information, try to be as specific as you can.

So, when you're explaining to tenants that the amount of notice they have to give their landlord varies from the usual 60 days when the month of February is involved, don't just explain this in an abstract way by talking about the beginning or end of a month. Be clear:

If you want to move out the last day of February, you have until January 1 to give the notice to your landlord. And if you want to move out on March 31, you have until February 1 to give the notice to your landlord. (from CLEO's *Moving out*)

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Present numbers visually

Consider presenting information that has a lot of numbers by using visual elements. For example, the amount of child support someone might have to pay is based on factors such as income and the number of children. People find it easier to pick out what applies to them when they see it in a chart.

Income per year	1 child Support payment per month	2 children Support payment per month	3 children Support payment per month
\$10,000	\$28	\$61	\$66
\$12,500	\$76	\$165	\$178
\$18,000	\$156	\$281	\$380
\$30,000	\$270	\$444	\$598
\$40,000	\$367	\$601	\$773
\$50,000	\$462	\$753	\$986

(from CLEO's *Separation and Divorce: Child Support*)

There's more about using flow charts and decision trees in the section **Designing and presenting your information**.

Keeping to the point

Keep sentences and paragraphs short

For most audiences you should keep sentences short and make only one point per sentence. It's easy to get lost in a sentence that spans several lines and has too many ideas. But remember that clarity is the goal – even if it makes the sentence longer, don't be afraid to re-word a sentence so that its meaning is clearer.

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As a guide, try to limit your average sentence to 15 words. But do try to vary the length of your sentences as this will make your writing much more interesting.

Short paragraphs are easier for readers to understand, and they introduce more white space. Ideally, each paragraph should contain only one topic. And despite what you may have learned at school, one-sentence paragraphs are okay. As a guide, keep most of your paragraphs to 3 sentences or less.

Breaking up the text

List important points separate from the text

Don't hide important information such as dates, times, and places inside a paragraph. Pull them out using lists, text boxes, or sidebars to highlight them for the reader.

Use lists

Information is much easier to understand when it's presented in a bulleted or numbered list, rather than in long sections of text. If possible, introduce your list with a phrase or sentence, to provide context, followed by a colon.

Don't overuse lists or they lose their impact – none of them stands out. You can use numbers instead of bullets, for example, if the list is a series of ordered steps.

Keep your lists short and simple, especially if they include points that the reader needs to remember or use to make decisions. Lists are best kept to 3 to 5 items, and no more than 7.

Use parallel form when listing your items. This means using the same grammatical form or construction for each item in a list.

Don't mix and match your formats – punctuation and capitalization should be consistent within a list. If you have one complete sentence as a bullet or numbered item, use capitals, full sentences, and

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punctuation at the end to make all items parallel. Or if you start one bullet with a verb, then all bullets should start with verbs.

Use consistent and minimal punctuation. You don't always need to include the words *and* or *or* before the final item. Use capitals and a period at the end only if the bullets or numbered items are complete sentences.

Instead of:

The Smoke-Free Ontario Act bans:

- smoking in workplaces;
- in enclosed public spaces; and
- prohibits smoking in motor vehicles when children under 16 are present.

Write:

The Smoke-Free Ontario Act bans smoking in:

- workplaces
- enclosed public spaces
- motor vehicles with children under 16

Readers who have English as a second language

Don't assume punctuation is the same in all languages

Readers whose native languages use different scripts might not understand even the most basic rules of punctuation, so use minimal punctuation but follow the rules.

Be careful with verbs

Idioms are expressions that mean something different than the literal meanings of the individual words. As a result, they can be difficult to understand. Think of expressions like “drop someone a line”, “keep an eye out for”, or “you're pulling my leg”. These are all figures of speech that are commonly used. But you should avoid them with readers who have English as a second language (ESL).

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You should also avoid phrasal verbs. A phrasal verb is a verb that's followed by a preposition or an adverb. This combination creates a meaning different from the original verb, for example, *give up*, *put down*, *get over*. Phrasal verbs look easy – they're short and have very few syllables. But their looks are deceiving.

There are many verb tenses, which, if you've learned a second language, you know are hard to remember. When writing for an ESL audience, use the more common and simple verb tenses, like the present tense. The present works for both present and future situations, for example, "I see my lawyer tomorrow". Using the present for future situations eliminates the auxiliary verb *will* that is often unnecessary. Auxiliary verbs can increase your word count and confuse your reader.

Using a plain language editor

Choosing the right language isn't easy. It can be hard to focus on the needs of your audience and the purpose of your information. If you're struggling to translate legal language into everyday English or you have too much material and don't know how to cut it down, it can be valuable to get help from someone with plain language expertise.



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Structuring the information

Choosing the right language for your audience is only part of your job when producing information. You also have to make sure it's presented in a logical way, so that it's clear and easy to understand.

Choosing the order

Think carefully about the best order to present the information and how your audience will find their way through it.

For example, publications have some standard parts. You may include some or all of the following:

- **table of contents:** directs readers to each section with headings and page numbers
- **introduction:** explains what's in the publication and gives an overview of the issues it covers
- **main content:** gives more details about the issues or procedures and is often broken up into several sections or steps, like we've done in this handbook
- **useful resources:** includes where to get legal help, community supports and services, and related sources of information
- **glossary:** explains difficult or unfamiliar terms – even with a glossary, you may want to define terms where they first appear

Organizing from your audience's point of view

Deal with the issues in the same order that your audience will have to. For example, if you're writing information for tenants about eviction, don't discuss this in the order it appears in the Residential Tenancies Act. Start from the point of view of the tenant who's gotten some kind of notice from their landlord. And describe the steps that the tenant has to take if they don't want to move out.

This might include describing what the tenant can do if:

- they get a notice and there is an option to cancel it
- their landlord applies to the Landlord and Tenant Board
- they have to prepare for a hearing with the Board
- there is an eviction order against the tenant

Using lots of clear headings and subheadings

Using headings makes it easier for people to find what they need and breaks up the text into shorter paragraphs. Headings need to be clear so that people know what the text underneath is about. In each short heading, include as much information as you can about what's coming up in that part of the text.

Repeating what's important

Remember that people might not read all the information at once. They might just scan for the answer to a particular question. This is especially true with online information. So you may need to repeat something that's very important, or point people to where it is, to make sure they don't miss it.

Ensuring accuracy

There is no point providing legal information unless it's accurate and reliable – in fact, it's downright dangerous. Here are some tips about how to do that.

Working with legal reviewers

Giving information about the law can be tricky. Legal rules are not always easy to interpret – figuring out what the law says about something can be a complicated puzzle of statutes, regulations, decisions of courts and tribunals, policies, and practices. Often it comes down to someone's *interpretation* of the law.

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Make sure to include a legal expert on the project team as you'll need to do a legal accuracy review of your information. This can be done by a lawyer, community legal worker, or paralegal, but it's important that the legal reviewer also have practical, on-the-ground experience. If an expert with practical experience wrote the initial draft, you may not need a separate legal reviewer. But you may need to involve more than one legal reviewer if your information covers many legal topics.

Consider real-life situations

As part of checking for legal accuracy, you want your legal reviewers to consider how legal processes are applied in real-life situations. Explain to your reviewers who your audience is and the purpose of the information. Practical realities may differ depending on where someone lives in the province and barriers they face. For example, the experience of filing documents with a tribunal may be very different for a reader in a rural or remote community compared to someone in a large urban centre. Make sure to tell your reviewer if your information is meant for people in a variety of communities across the province.

Define roles and tasks

Clearly define the role of your legal reviewers and make sure they understand what you want them to do. You may find reviewers who understand the need to explain the law in clear and simple terms. If not, you may have to talk to them about this.

Checking other facts

If you're including phone numbers, website addresses, benefit rates, or dates and time limits, it's important to double- and triple-check this information. Make sure you're getting it from the original source if possible.

As with the legal content, this information should be checked again close to the end of the process, just before you publish. The law can

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change at any time and so can website addresses, phone numbers, or office locations.

Putting a date on your information

It's essential to include a date on your material that shows when it was legally reviewed. Your audience needs to know that date because you never know how far in the future someone might read your information. Make sure that the date is easy for your reader to find – for example, on a front cover or in a header or footer in print. Online, you could put the date at the top or bottom of each webpage.

You should include a disclaimer to remind your audience that the law can change and that your material was accurate as of the date it was last checked or reviewed. The disclaimer should say that this is legal information, that legal information and advice are different, and that readers should get legal advice about their own situation.

Keeping records

Keep a record of the sources you've based your information on, as well as contact information for writers, content experts, reviewers, and other contributors. This will be useful when it comes time to update your material, as well as in handling any inquiries about your information.

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Writing for different regions

Be aware of differences in provincial and territorial laws and procedures, as well as variations in the names of government departments or other organizations. If your legal topic is under provincial jurisdiction, for example, tenant rights or social assistance, it may not be possible to address a country-wide audience and ensure legal accuracy.

Even if the information is under federal jurisdiction, such as employment insurance or refugee rights, there can be important regional variations that you need to address. Think about who this broader audience includes, and talk to intermediaries in all the provinces and territories you want to cover.

Make sure your information clearly states what regions it applies to and that it's reviewed by experts in those regions. In referral and contact lists, include organizations for each target area and check that "provincial" or "national" organizations actually serve all of the area they claim to.

Designing and presenting your information

The design of your material is critical in getting your message across. Your information must be presented in a way that's visually engaging *and* appropriate for your audience.

You may be producing your information with a whole team that includes a designer. Or you may be doing it all yourself using a word processing program like MS Word. Either way, the following guidelines should help you.

Choosing the design

Clear design makes information easier for everyone to use and understand, and it's particularly important if your audience includes people who have lower literacy, or vision or learning problems. But

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you want your design to not only be clear but also visually engaging to attract readers and keep their attention.

Mass media and commercial publications use a variety of methods to grab the interest of their audience and keep them reading to the end. You can also use different approaches to both draw your readers in and make sure your message is understood by as many people as possible. This may mean using a range of techniques, such as images, flow charts, case studies, and question-and-answer sections. But it doesn't mean that you'll use all these methods all the time.

Decide what method or combination of methods best suits your information and your audience, as well as your budget and resources.

Presenting the information

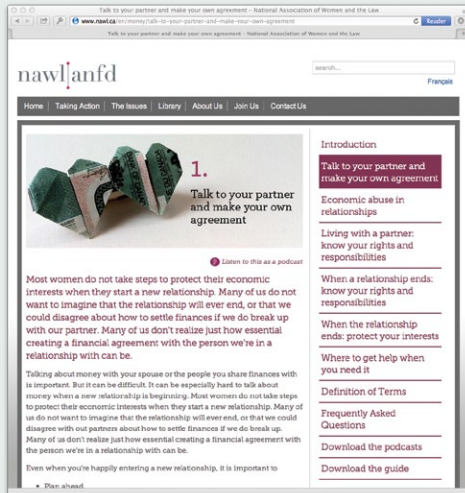
Making it stand out

If you need everyone to read a particular detail, consider highlighting it in some way, such as putting it in a box. Some readers assume the most important information is in these boxes, so they always read them.

Varying the approach

Varying the way you present your material not only makes it more interesting for your audience, it allows for the different ways that people take in new information. There are lots of techniques available. Which ones you choose depends on the effect you want to achieve and the ways your audience best receives information.

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Using various approaches

The National Association of Women and the Law used a variety of approaches in *A Women's Guide to Money, Relationships and the Law in Ontario* at www.nawl.ca/en/money.

The section called *Talk to your partner and make your own agreement* includes:

- a description of the different types of agreements in the main text
- a chart of what can and can't be included in a marriage contract or cohabitation agreement
- a case study of a couple illustrating some of the main points
- a practical checklist of what should be in an agreement

Graphics and images

Photos, illustrations, and cartoons make your information more visually appealing and you can use them to explain important information or reinforce key points. Select images that reflect your audience in terms of race, culture, style of dress, age, and ability.

Graphic symbols such as check marks and x symbols (✓ ✗), thumbs up or down (👍 👎), or road signs (⚠) can be used to indicate a particular type of information so people can find it more easily. Keep to symbols that are familiar to your audience, for example, local road signs might not be recognized by newcomers to Canada. And remember that these may not convert if you are putting your information online.

There are many free and inexpensive online sources of photos and images that you can find by doing a web search.

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Flow charts and decision trees

Both flow charts and decision trees can be a clear way to show how a process works or the steps to dealing with a particular legal problem. And they're an attractive and user-friendly way of presenting complicated information.

Try to keep them simple. You may be trying to explain a complex procedure, but too many boxes and arrows can just confuse people. Leave some details out, or divide it up into more than one diagram to make it clear.

Flow charts

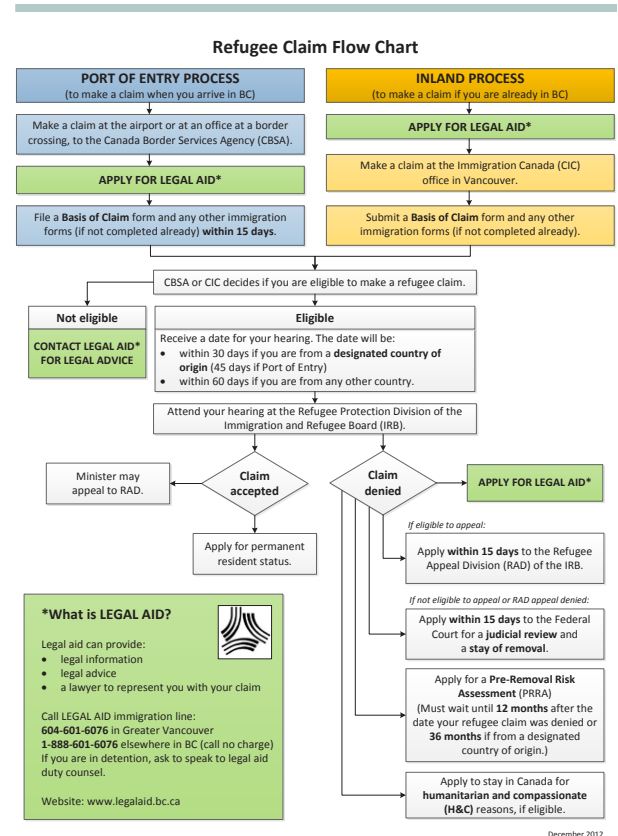
Flow charts are a visual way of showing step by step how a process works. They may follow a single path from start to finish or have some side branches if the process differs for different situations, for example, solving a problem through mediation rather than taking it to court.

Flow charts don't need to look boring. Try to engage your readers by presenting your flow chart creatively.

The Legal Services Society in British Columbia used a flow chart to explain the process for seeking refugee protection. It outlines the steps for people who make a claim when they arrive and for those who are already in the province. See <http://resources.lss.bc.ca/pdfs/pubs/Refugee-Claim-Flow-Chart-eng.pdf> (above right).

Decision trees

Decision trees also go through a process step by step but tell the reader which step to go to depending on their particular situation. For example, "If you do not have anywhere to live right now, go to Step 4".



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Online decision trees can be interactive – they respond to the answers selected and take the user straight to the next question relevant to their individual situation. Decision trees can be a great way of dealing with complicated exceptions to a basic situation. “If your problem is X, go to Q5. If your problem is about Y, go to Q6.”

CLEO used an online decision tree to present information to help renters with roommates find out which laws apply to their situation and what their rights and responsibilities are. See www.cleo.on.ca/roommates.

Case studies and examples

You can use stories about people to introduce common legal situations in a way that the audience can identify with. Keep case studies short and think about what you’re trying to achieve by using them. If you’re trying to illustrate a legal point or show how a process works, be careful not to overload people with too many details.

Sometimes readers can be confused by the change in writing style when you switch to a case study. Consider explaining clearly why you have included the case study. For example, “Wondering what a hearing at the Social Benefits Tribunal is like? Ahmed’s story explains what happened at his”. But don’t include anything in the case study that isn’t covered somewhere else in the text. Some people just don’t read case studies.

In their Know Your Rights fact sheet called *Job Scams: Is this a real job?*, the Workers’ Action Centre used a short case study to illustrate how people need to watch out for employers that ask them to pay for training to get a job. You can read it online at www.workersactioncentre.org/know-your-rights.

Questions and answers

Setting out your information in a series of questions and answers can be a good way of explaining a complicated idea in small, manageable pieces. It can also help people quickly find the information they need.

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Questions should be direct and addressed to the audience or written from their point of view, for example, “Can you sublet your apartment?” or “Can I sublet my apartment?” Or, they can be combined with mini case studies, for example, “Can Maria sublet her apartment?”

Questions and answers should be as brief as possible. If longer answers are needed, break them down into several short sentences.

Clear design tips for print information

Following these basic techniques will make your print information visually appealing and easy for your audience to read. Many of the techniques also apply to online information, particularly if it’s meant to be downloaded or printed.

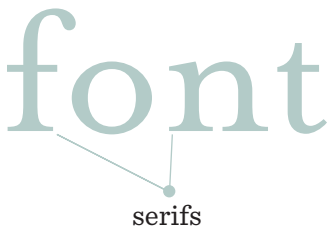
Two resources that we recommend and referred to in writing this section are *Plain Language in Plain English* and *A Guide to Creating and Evaluating Patient Materials: Guidelines for Effective Print Communication*. For more information about these and other sources for clear design tips, see the [Resources](#) section.

If your budget permits, you may want to hire a graphic designer to design and lay out your material or to create a design template for you to use.

Simple is best

Keep in mind that information that looks easy to read is most likely to get attention. Simple doesn’t mean dull – it means using a clean, uncluttered, and functional look.

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Garamond
Georgia
Arial
Verdana

Text features

Choosing fonts

Whether serif fonts, which have little hooks or curls at the ends of the letters, or sans serif fonts are more readable is a debated issue. Regardless, you should always choose fonts with your reader in mind.

Generally, 11- or 12-point type is a good size for your main or body text. (The text in this handbook is 11 point.) For readers who have vision problems, you'll need to use a larger size. Before deciding what font or fonts you use, you may want to try setting out a sample page of text to see how it looks.

Here are some examples of different fonts that are all set at 12 points:

Here's what 12-point Garamond looks like.

Here's what 12-point Georgia looks like.

Here's what 12-point Arial set looks like.

Here's what 12-point Verdana looks like.

(from *Plain Language in Plain English*, page 84)

Line spacing

Lines of type that are too close together are hard for the reader to follow. And lines that are too far apart can make the readers eyes tired. Consider setting your line spacing or "leading" a bit more than the default setting, which is usually 120% of the point size. (The text in this handbook is 11 on 15 points, which, at 136%, is more leading than the default setting.)

Showing emphasis

The following are useful tips on emphasizing text:

- Using a **bold** typeface helps readers pick out important words, phrases, and sentences, and notice important messages. But anything more than a sentence in bold can be hard to read.

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- Don't use underlining to emphasize text or headings. It interferes with readability because it cuts off the parts of letters that go below the line, like the “g” above. On a website, underlined words indicate that they link to something – and if they don't, they frustrate users.
- Using *italics* to highlight certain words or very small sections of text can make them stand out. But use them sparingly – some users may find them hard to read. Never use italics to highlight large chunks of text – this is hard for anyone to read. Italics are especially hard to read online.
- Large chunks of text should never appear in CAPITAL LETTERS. It doesn't emphasize the text – it makes it very hard to read because all the letters are exactly the same size. Use capital letters carefully, maybe in a short heading or the first few words at the start of a sentence for emphasis.

Alignment

Left justified text is the most readable – it's what we've used in this handbook. As you see, it leaves a ragged right edge and this improves readability by allowing the reader to find the beginning of the next line more easily. It also prevents large uneven spaces opening up between words, which can happen with full justification, where the lines of text have even edges on the left and right.

White space

White space is the empty space around text. White or blank space on a page is easy on the eyes. Text-heavy pages with little white space are intimidating and tiring – even to those readers with higher literacy skills. Some literacy experts recommend a ratio of 50/50 for white space and text, which is approximately the ratio in this handbook.



WHITE
SPACE

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Some ways to add white space are through:

- space between paragraphs
- more space above than below headings so it's clear they are connected to the text that follows, for example, in this handbook there's a full space above subheads and about half a space below them
- bulleted lists like we're doing here
- margins, for example, you might have wider outside margins, as we've done in this handbook

Line length

When lines of text are too long, readers' eyes become tired. The most readable line length is 50 to 70 characters, like in this handbook.

Hyphenation

Don't hyphenate or break a word over 2 lines – this makes it harder for your readers.

Contrast

Black type on white or light, non-glossy paper is best for your main content. You may use coloured text for headings.

Size and shape

More than ever before, information materials come in a variety of sizes and shapes. Make sure if you choose a smaller-sized format that you can still present your information in a font size that's big enough for your audience to read.

If you're using a multi-panel format, make sure that the flow of the information is clear. If readers pick up your brochure and unfold it, they should know what to read first and the order to follow.

Also, think about how you are going to distribute and display your material when you are deciding what size to use.

Clear design tips for online information

Below are a few specific tips for producing online information. For more detailed guidelines, check out a resource like *Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works*, which is listed in the **Resources** section.

Be brief

Present your information in short chunks. Studies show that people read much more slowly from a screen than from paper, so it's even more important to keep it short on the web. This applies particularly to the opening pages because no one likes scrolling through long sections of text when searching for information.

Longer pages may be okay for the main text. People don't mind scrolling down once they've found the information they're looking for.

Make information easy to scan

People tend to skim over web pages quickly rather than reading the whole page. They generally scan in an F pattern, so information at the top or left-hand side of the page is read more often than anything else on the page.

Put important information first

Make sure people read the most important information by putting it in the top two paragraphs, or in bullet points on the left-hand side. That way, if they don't scroll down, they still get the key points.

Use lots of headings

Headings should make clear what the following text is about. If people don't understand the heading, they may decide not to read the information.

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Make keywords stand out

Draw attention to a few keywords in the sentence by putting them in bold type. But don't overdo it – too much bold text makes it harder, not easier, for the reader to understand.

Box it up

You can put other important information in lightly coloured boxes or short paragraphs at the side of the page. Again, don't overdo it – too much “break-out” material makes it hard for people to understand what's important.

Testing the usability of your information

In the **Choosing the right language** section, we talked about readability formulas and testing that your information is at the right grade reading level for your audience.

Another important test is checking the usability of your information. The best way to find out if your information will be useful to your target audience is to ask them what they think of it – before you complete the project – leaving you time to make revisions. This is known as “field testing” your information or “usability testing”.

In this section, we've adapted tips from the two original *Better Information Handbooks* and looked at a Canadian resource called *Reaching your readers: A field testing guide for community groups*, published by Legal Services Society, BC. It has practical details that can help you plan your own field testing activities and can be found at www.lss.bc.ca/assets/communityWorkers/reachingYourReaders.pdf.

Choosing a test method

Testing your material doesn't have to mean hiring a company to find participants and run focus groups. If you have a big enough budget, you may choose to do that. But there are ways for smaller projects

Section 2 – Creating better legal information

with smaller budgets to test usability. The method you choose will vary depending on what you want to find out and what works best with your participants.

Reaching your readers lists a number of different methods of field testing – you might choose to use one or a combination of them, and most work for both print and online information:

Group testing: Bring together people who represent the audience and have a structured discussion about your material, including its organization, appearance, and general content.

Group testing provides good information about how the group feels about the material, but it's not a good way to find out if people understand the content. To test understanding, choose individual testing.

Individual testing: Ask individuals to read the material and then talk to them to see if they can understand the specific content or find answers within it. This type of testing comes closest to what would happen in a real situation.

Questionnaires: Prepare a list of questions about the content and ask participants to answer the questions on paper or online, or to answer verbally while you write down their answers. In a questionnaire, you can ask questions about content, organization, and usefulness of the information.

Talking aloud: Ask readers to read the material and describe it in their own words out loud, to identify areas that may be unclear. This gives you very good information about what's confusing or misleading. But your participants need to be comfortable reading out loud.

What questions to ask

Reaching your readers has a detailed list of sample questions that you might consider using or adapting to fit your information.

Section 2 – Creating better legal information

Group testing

Here are some sample questions *Reaching your readers* gives for group testing.

Information or content:

- Does the publication or website have too much information or not enough?
- Is there specific information that you wanted to know about that is missing?
- Is there helpful information about where to go to get help to deal with a specific legal problem?

Organization:

- What was the first thing that you read?
- Can you find your way around the information easily? What would make it easier?
- Does the order make sense? Is it organized the way you would use it?

Language:

- Are there words or sections that you didn't understand?
- Are the definitions clear?

Audience:

- Who do you think this information was written for? For example, are they men or women; what is their cultural background; are they living in an urban or a rural setting?
- Does the writing seem too formal or too familiar?

Appearance and format:

- Is it easy to read? Is the font size okay?
- What do you think about the illustrations or photographs?
- What would you change about the appearance?
- Do you look for information like this in print or online or somewhere else?

Individual testing

Here are a few sample questions from *Reaching your readers* that you might use in individual testing. You could give participants a scenario and ask them to find the answers they'd need to deal with a particular problem. Or ask them to read the information and then ask questions to test their comprehension.

- Did you find the information you were looking for?
- What part of the information did you look at first? Did it tell you what you wanted to know?
- Did you have to flip back and forth while looking for answers? If so, why?

Who to ask

If you're doing individual testing or having people read the information out loud, a sample size of about 6 people can give you a good sense of what works, or doesn't work, with your information.

With group testing or questionnaires, you can more easily consult with a larger number of people.

Finding a test group that fully represents your intended audience is hard. People who volunteer to take part may be more confident and have a better understanding of the issue than many of the people you're trying to reach. You may want to invite specific people so you have a more representative group. Consider asking intermediaries to help you find possible participants.

Test a draft version of your information with intermediaries as well – they often have a good understanding of their communities and may use your material with their clients.

Section 2 – Creating better legal information

Translating your information

Many community organizations serve populations that are linguistically and culturally diverse. Meeting their needs may require producing information resources in other languages. Translation projects are challenging, and this section aims to provide a few helpful tips.



Producing information in French

Because of French-language rights and the status of French as an official language of the courts in Ontario, French translation of legal information is a priority for many community organizations in the province.

There are many qualified French translators, and some have expertise in legal translation, plain language, or other specialized skills that can help make a translation project successful.

In legal information materials, it can be helpful to tell people about French-language rights. If someone speaks French, in many cases they have the right to government services and legal proceedings in French, including hearings before French-speaking decision makers.

The rest of this section focuses on producing materials in non-official languages. But some of the information may be helpful in producing French translations as well.

Choosing languages for translation

Some organizations serve communities defined in part by language or culture. This can make it easier when deciding on target languages for translation. But in other cases, especially if you have limited resources, identifying the highest priority languages may be the first step. Statistical information on language groups, such as census data,

Section 2 – Creating better legal information

can be useful but is unlikely to provide answers to all the relevant questions.

Here are some factors to consider in choosing target languages for translation:

- the population of a linguistic community
- the ability of community members to access information in English or French
- the need for information on a particular topic within that community
- literacy levels if information will be produced in a text format
- the availability of qualified translators
- the capacity to provide services in that language to community members following up on the information

Community advisors and intermediaries, such as newcomer agencies, can give you useful input on the needs of their community members and on ways to get your information to them. They may also be able to suggest qualified translators and to review translations for readability and cultural sensitivity.

Tips on preparing text for translation

Keep in mind that translation usually adds to the length of the text. An increase of 25-30% in length is common. But for some languages, the text will be shorter. If you've chosen a format and you've budgeted for it, you need to make sure that the translation fits into that format.

Because translation projects can be time-consuming and costly, it may be a good idea to choose content likely to have a significant “shelf life”.

It's frustrating to have translated materials ready to launch only to discover that the law has changed and the information needs to be revised. While there is no way to ensure that this doesn't happen, it may be possible to minimize the risk. For legal information, a lawyer with expertise in the subject may be able to help.

Start with source texts in English that are written in plain language.

Section 2 – Creating better legal information

Tips for working with translators

It's best to use professional translators. Translation takes skills that go beyond just fluency in both languages. For some languages, it can be hard to find qualified professional translators.

If you're planning to have a community member review the translation, look for a translator who is open to feedback. Negotiate a process that includes this review and any revisions that flow from it.

Make sure the translator delivers the text to you in a format that you can use. For example, you may want a Portable Document Format (PDF) document that you can easily post online or print, or an MS Word document that you can format.

Explain the purpose of the document and the intended audience.

Consider any special instructions that you want to give the translator. Professional translators are trained to use “standard” language, avoid colloquialisms, and avoid editing the text. You may want to ask them to:

- use plain, everyday language rather than formal or academic language
- leave certain English words in the translated text, while providing a translation – for example, your audience may need to know the English name for a government program or agency

After the translation has been done

The goal of a translation project is to provide the information in a way that keeps the original meaning of the source text and can be understood by most members of the intended audience. There are different ways you can test whether you've achieved this goal.

Here are some of the things you can do:

- ask a community advisor to review the translation and give feedback on its readability

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- ask someone who's familiar with the subject matter and fluent in both languages to review the translation for accuracy
- have a bilingual community member read the translated text and say in their own words what it means, so that you can compare this to the English

If you plan to have the translation reviewed, decide ahead of time who makes the final decisions about the translated text. There are almost always different ways to translate the same text. Stylistic preferences and other differences of opinion can lead to conflict about how the translation should be worded.

With legal information, the most important thing is that the translation is accurate and that members of the target language community aren't misled or confused about their rights. So, you need to decide who the best person is to assure you about the quality of the translation. This may vary with the language and the project. It may be a professional translator, or it may be someone who's fluent in both languages and understands the subject matter well.

Before you publish the translated text

Make sure to include the English title, publication date, and the language it's been translated into. For example, you could put this in small type at the bottom of the last page in printed materials or with the credits.

This information in English lets people who aren't community members know the language and the topic so that they can pass it on to people who need the information.

SECTION 3 – AFTER YOU PRODUCE YOUR INFORMATION



Getting your information out there

Once you've finished producing your legal information, you may feel like the hard work is done. But your information still needs to be promoted and distributed to ensure it reaches your audience. It's important to plan and budget for this early in the project.

Using your own organization

Make sure that everyone in your organization knows about the information you've produced and how to direct people who make inquiries about it.

If your organization works directly with your target audience, you have an initial, ready-made distribution network for getting your information to them.

Using intermediaries

Other organizations can be very helpful in promoting or distributing your information. Doctors' offices, food banks, shelters, settlement agencies, libraries, police services, schools, courthouses, and government offices are just some of the many places that can help you reach people you might not otherwise have contact with. They may be happy to give out your information, as long as they can see how it relates to their own work or helps with a problem that their client group has.

They may also be able to include details of your information in their next email bulletin or newsletter. For example, if you've produced a

Section 3 – After you produce your information

pamphlet on divorce, you could promote it through family service organizations and counselling centres. If possible, write up a short announcement that they can use or customize.

Other ways to promote your information

As well as using the staff in your own organization and intermediaries to spread the word, here are a few other ways to go about it. What you do depends on what you can afford to spend, who the information is aimed at, what it's about, and what sort of organization you are.

Start a mailing list

You could set up an email distribution or mailing list to promote new or revised information. An email list can be easy to set up and update. But be aware of privacy laws and let people know how to get their name off the list.

Connect with other websites

Get in touch with any websites that deal with similar issues. Let them know about your new information and suggest that they include a link to it on their site or let their users know how to get it.

In Ontario, the Your Legal Rights website features legal information resources from organizations across the province. Visit www.yourlegalrights.on.ca and ask about including your information resource on the site.

Make it easier to find online

There are ways to increase the chances of your website coming up in Internet searches so that your information reaches more people. It can take a bit of effort to do this. Try learning more about search engine optimization (SEO) techniques. You may need to get help from someone who has experience doing this.

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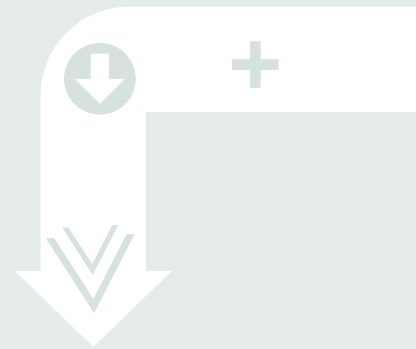
Use social media

Using social media like Facebook or Twitter is a cheap and easy way to promote your information. Post or tweet about your new information, who it's for, and how to access it. Include links to your website to help people find you.

Search engine optimization

If you're not sure about technology, go online to learn more. There is practical information about search engine optimization on www.pleiconnect.ca. PLEI Connect is for organizations across Canada interested in using technology in their public legal education and information (PLEI) work.

TechSoup Canada at www.techsoupcanada.ca also has a wide variety of practical information for nonprofits about using technology.



Contact traditional media

Depending on your resources and your audience, try to get your information out to other media, like newspapers or radio, that are popular with your target audience. This takes time and money, but it may be one way to reach people who won't otherwise see your information.

Develop other promotional materials

You may want to use promotional materials, such as bookmarks, postcards, posters, fridge magnets, or pens, to let people know about your information. Some of these methods are inexpensive and some more costly, but they are worth considering and including in your budget.

Section 3 – After you produce your information

Monitoring the use of your information

If you expect to make your legal information available for an extended period of time, it's useful to carry out monitoring activities on an ongoing basis. These activities can tell you who you are reaching and not reaching with the information.

You'll typically want to track how many pieces of print information you're distributing. For online information, you'll want to know about visits or downloads and can easily track that using a free tool like Google Analytics.

You may also want to track how people learned about your information to help with future promotion. If your intended audience is primarily service providers, it's helpful to track the types of organizations that are using the information.

Keeping your information up to date

Out-of-date legal information can make your readers' problems even worse by giving them wrong or misleading information. And it gives a bad impression of your organization. Whether it's in print or online, you need to make sure your material stays up to date for as long as you want to make it available.

If you're producing hard copies such as pamphlets, plan to produce only as many copies as you can use up before you need to review the content again. This number can be hard to estimate – too low, and you may have higher per-copy costs as well as have to pay to make extra copies. Too high and you're left with copies that you can't use.

If you're producing a new version of something you've distributed before, you can look at past demand as a guide. But there may be other factors you need to take into account, such as a heightened need for the information, or increasing use of online versions instead of print copies.

Section 3 – After you produce your information

It's easier with online information, but even then you need to budget for staff time to review the material and update it if necessary.

As we mentioned before, always include a date on your information, as well as a disclaimer.

When you update your information, send an announcement to anyone you know who distributes or links to the material. For print information, this is particularly important if the changes are so significant that the old version shouldn't be used at all.

Setting a review date

As part of the planning when you first start your legal information project, set a date when you'll review the content to make sure that it's still accurate. How often you review the material depends on how soon you expect the information to change. You may already know when that's likely to happen. For example, a new law being considered by the government may change the appeal process you're describing.

But in some areas of law things can change at any time, even without much warning, for example where important details are set in rules or regulations rather than statutes. And in most areas, the law can be affected by judicial decisions as well as legislative or regulatory changes. Experts and practitioners in the particular subject area can often give you an idea of how stable or changeable the area might be. This can help when you're trying to set a review date and decide how many copies to produce.

Making it someone's responsibility

Someone has to be responsible for making sure the review happens and that any necessary changes are made. It may be the person who coordinates all the publications for your organization, or there may be a different person for each piece of information.

Section 3 – After you produce your information

Keeping track of changes in the law

Make sure someone is responsible for monitoring changes that affect your information. If you know that certain legal information changes on a particular date each year, you can make a regular calendar note to check and record this as soon as it changes. Other places to monitor are legal and government websites.

It's often useful to have spreadsheets or checklists covering each piece of information, so that you can keep track of when each was reviewed and what changes were made.

Major changes to laws that affect your information may mean that you have to completely rewrite some sections. If there have been no important changes, you still have to check everything. This is also an opportunity to see if contact information or web addresses have changed.

SECTION 4 – EVALUATING YOUR INFORMATION



Planning your evaluation

Evaluating your legal information can be helpful in many ways. It can improve the next phase of the project or the next project you do. It's also a useful tool for showing your board of directors, funder, or community that you met the goals of your project.

Evaluation is different from ongoing monitoring and from usability testing. Usability testing happens when materials are being developed and influences the final content or design. Evaluations typically happen when your project or a phase of your project is finished – they help you assess how well the project is meeting your goals.

An evaluation is most effective if you plan for it at the start of your project. You can evaluate a single brochure, section of a website, workshop, or video. You can evaluate one part of a larger project or you can evaluate all of the project components.

Evaluations come in many shapes and sizes. The scope of your evaluation is usually determined by what you committed to do in a project proposal or the original project plan.

Goals and deliverables

Usually, an evaluation is based on the goals or deliverables that you wanted to achieve when you started the project. Make sure your goals are as clear and specific as possible. A goal can relate to materials or information workshops that you plan to develop, or the process that you will use to develop them.

Section 4 – Evaluating your information

Performance measures or indicators

An evaluation explores key questions about whether and how the goals were achieved. It assesses whether the project achieved its goals by looking at numbers, feedback, behavioural changes, and other information that helps give an indication of whether the goal was achieved. These are often called performance measures or indicators.

For example, if a project aims to reach a large number of people in a specific community with a new print brochure, an evaluation would explore whether this happened. The number of copies picked up or mailed out would be indicators. An evaluation plan might include a target number of people that the project aims to reach.

Choosing your terms

In evaluation, many different terms are used to express similar concepts. For example, the terms goals, objectives, deliverables, or expected results have similar meanings. There's no right or wrong, as long as you choose terms that work for you.

Evaluation plan

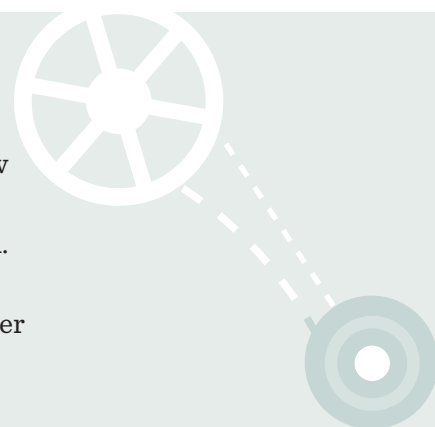
In your project proposal or plan, describe how you will evaluate whether your project met the identified goals. Your evaluation plan or description should identify:

- one or more goals that you plan to achieve
- the performance measures or indicators – how you will measure or assess whether you achieved the goals – and, if possible, the targets that you expect to reach

- the method you will use to collect information on the indicators, including the people responsible for collecting the information and for analyzing and reporting the information after it's collected
- the form of your evaluation report – for example, a chart with quantitative information about the number of materials distributed or downloaded, or a narrative report based on feedback that can't be quantified in numbers

Expect the unexpected

A good evaluation will show you things you didn't expect, or just didn't know about. For example, *who* is using the information and *how* may not be what you expected. Keep an open mind when you look at the data you've collected. And design your evaluation so that it allows these *unknowns* to emerge. For example, ask an open-ended question such as, "Did anything else change after you used the information?"



Evaluation methods

Once you select the goal that you want to evaluate, the indicators and the method of collecting the information will be easier to identify.

Evaluation is sometimes classed as either:

- **quantitative**, which looks at numbers – for example, how many people received the information
- **qualitative**, which looks at how things worked in a deeper way, by hearing from people about their experience – for example, how well the production process worked or what people thought of the information

The method you choose can look at one or both of these aspects.

Section 4 – Evaluating your information

The most common methods for collecting evaluation information include those listed below.

1. Keeping track of numbers, such as the number of:
 - materials produced or delivered
 - print materials ordered or distributed, overall or by sector or region
 - web pages visited or documents downloaded
 - views of a video
 - participants in workshops or activities
2. Feedback from users or service providers who work directly with users, through:
 - online or written surveys
 - phone or face-to-face interviews
 - group discussions or focus groups
 - anecdotal feedback
3. Feedback, usually from group discussions among the project team, on issues relating to the internal processes of planning and carrying out the project, such as:
 - whether various aspects worked or could be improved, such as the shipping of materials or posting of information on a website
 - how the project leaders or workshop facilitators felt about their own performance
 - how the project team felt about how decisions were made, work was allocated, and responsibilities were carried out



Combatting bias

Having someone who's not connected with your organization give the interviews or facilitate group discussions can help participants feel more comfortable sharing negative as well as positive responses. It also reduces the risk that you could bias responses by asking the questions in a particular way or leading participants to give an answer that you want.

Designing surveys and questionnaires

The questions you include in a survey or questionnaire or in interviews or discussion groups depend on what you want to find out. Before finalizing the questions, you should consider which questions are likely to get the most useful information for your evaluation.

Below are some tips for developing your surveys and questionnaires.

Encouraging responses

If you're asking people to complete surveys or questionnaires, ask 7 or 8 questions and definitely no more than 10 or 12. Asking a small number of questions, which take only a few minutes to answer, will increase the likelihood that people will respond.

If you're sending the questionnaire by email or posting it on a website, let people know how long it will take them to fill it out and the deadline for completing it.

People may also be interested in how their response will be used. Tell them that it's part of an evaluation and whether you'll send them a copy of the evaluation when it's finished or it will be publicly available.

If you're sending out a survey or questionnaire widely and want a high number of responses, give respondents the option of responding anonymously. If you're asking for people to give their name, which is the case with interviews or discussion groups, let them know if their name will be used in the report or responses will be aggregated. If you plan to use people's names, you need to ask them for permission.

Getting useful information

Limiting the questions to yes/no or multiple choice keeps it simple and easier to analyse but also difficult to cover everything. Give more possibilities by leaving a space for comments. And make sure to have a "Don't know" or "None of the above" option.

Section 4 – Evaluating your information

Include a small number of questions about the respondents themselves so you can compile and analyze the data in ways that are helpful. For example, you may want to ask if they are service providers or members of the public, in what part of the city or province they live, and where they came across your information.

Sample questions

Here are some examples of questions that could be included in a survey for service providers that are using and distributing a new legal rights booklet:

1. What type of organization do you work for?
(Make sure to give multiple options, with space for “other”.)
2. How did you use the booklet?
 - I gave copies to clients or members of my community.
 - I used the booklet in a workshop or presentation.
 - I put copies in the office pamphlet rack.
 - I read it to learn about the topic.
 - Other (please specify).
3. Was the information in the booklet helpful? If yes, how did it help?
If no, why not?
4. Were there things about the booklet that you liked a lot?
(For example, ask about length, level of detail, design, format, reading level, or anything else worth noting.)
5. Were there things about the booklet that you didn’t like?
(For example, ask about length, level of detail, design, format, reading level, or anything else worth noting.)
6. Do you have other suggestions or comments about the booklet?

Online survey software

Free software is available for creating simple online surveys or questionnaires. For more advanced features, you usually have to pay. For example, a couple of free tools are:

- www.surveymonkey.com
- www.iperceptions.com

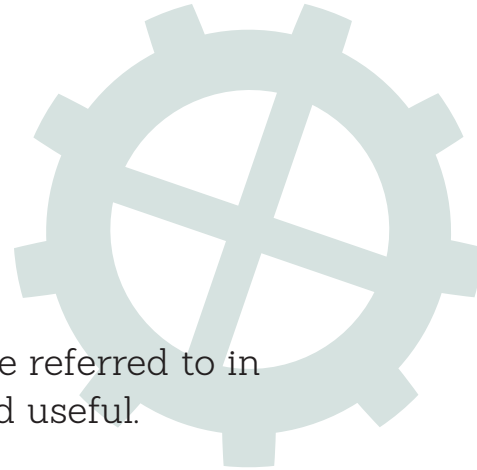
To help you decide which tool is best suited for your organization, check out www.pleconnect.ca or www.techsoupcanada.ca.



Don't feel daunted by the prospect of carrying out an evaluation. Identify one or two goals that you want to assess, and choose activities that you think you can realistically manage.

More resources about planning and doing effective evaluations are available on the PLE Learning Exchange at www.plelearningexchange.ca/evaluation.

SECTION 5 – RESOURCES



This list includes the resources that we referred to in the handbook and others you may find useful.

Plain language writing and design

The Designer’s Guide to Presenting Numbers, Figures, and Charts, Sally Bigwood and Melissa Spore, 2013, Skyhorse Publishing. ISBN: 9781621532668 (available November 2013)

A Guide to Creating and Evaluating Patient Materials: Guidelines for Effective Print Communication, MaineHealth, 2010. Available free at www.mainehealth.org/workfiles/MH_LRC/MH_Print%20Guidelines_Intranet.pdf

Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works, 2nd edition, Janice (Ginny) Redish, 2012, Elsevier, Inc. ISBN: 978-0-12-385930-3. Excerpted chapters available free at <http://redish.net/books/letting-go-of-the-words>

Literacy – why it matters!, Community Literacy of Ontario, 2013. Available free at www.communityliteracyofontario.ca/resource/literacy_why_it_matters.pdf

The Non-Designer’s Design Book, 3rd edition, Robin Williams, 2008, Peachpit Press. ISBN: 978-0-321-53404-0

A Plain Language Handbook for Legal Writers, Christine Mowat, 1998, Carswell. ISBN: 0-459239-7-4 (new edition in 2014)

Plain Language in Plain English, Cheryl Stephens, 2010, PlainLanguageWizardry.com, LuLu.com. ISBN: 978-0-557-53787-7

Plain Train, www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/plaintrain/

Section 5 – Resources

Word substitution lists:

“Plain Words”, *Caps and Spelling*, 20th edition, The Canadian Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-920009-48-2

www.eastendliteracy.on.ca/ClearLanguageAndDesign/thesaurus/

www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/wordsuggestions/simplewords.cfm

Testing and evaluating

Reading Effectiveness Tool, Clear Language and Design. Available free at www.eastendliteracy.on.ca/ClearLanguageAndDesign/readingeffectivenessstool

“Effectiveness of public legal assistance services: a discussion paper”, *Justice Issues Paper 16*, October 2012, Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales. ISSN: 1834-7266. Available free at [www.lawfoundation.net.au/ljf/site/templates/justiceissues/\\$file/JI_16_Effectiveness_web.pdf](http://www.lawfoundation.net.au/ljf/site/templates/justiceissues/$file/JI_16_Effectiveness_web.pdf)

Reaching your readers: A field testing guide for community groups, Penny Goldsmith, Gayla Reid, and Sidney Sawyer, 2nd edition, 2007, Legal Services Society, BC. ISBN: 978-0-7726-5825-8. Available free at www.lss.bc.ca/assets/communityWorkers/reachingYourReaders.pdf

Public legal education research and tools

The PLE Learning Exchange has research, tools, and other information to help community organizations do their legal information work. Visit www.plelearningexchange.ca

PLEI Connect is for organizations across Canada interested in using technology in their public legal education and information (PLEI) work. Visit www.pleiconnect.ca

Technology

TechSoup Canada has a wide variety of practical information for nonprofits about using technology. Visit www.techsoupcanada.ca

SECTION 6 – PROJECT PLAN BUILDER



We've included the Project Plan Builder to help you get started with your legal information projects and to help you stay on track throughout the process. You may want to print off and use a copy from the online version at www.plelearningexchange.ca.

1 Planning your legal information project			
ASK YOURSELF	ACTIONS OR TECHNIQUES	FIND OUT HOW	✓
What's the issue and how does it affect your audience?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • research the problem • scan popular media • ask intermediaries • ask experts 	page 10 page 11 page 12 page 12	
Are there existing resources on your topic?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • research what's already available (use the checklist in the handbook) 	page 10	
What are you trying to achieve?	Decide on your goals, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • raise awareness • increase understanding and knowledge • guide people through a process 	page 13 page 14 page 15	
Who is your audience?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • find out about your audience by talking to audience members and intermediaries • do research about demographic factors and barriers your audience may face, such as literacy and disability • create an audience profile 	page 15 page 16 page 16	

Section 6 – Project Plan Builder

1 Planning your legal information project			
ASK YOURSELF	ACTIONS OR TECHNIQUES	FIND OUT HOW	✓
What information does your audience need?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • think about their situation and if they are under stress or experiencing trauma • think about what actions they'd be capable of doing and feel comfortable taking • talk to audience members and intermediaries 	<p>page 17</p> <p>page 17</p> <p>page 18</p>	
What formats will you choose?	<p>Consider what best suits your audience and your message:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • print • online • video • online game or quiz • mobile format 	<p>page 18</p> <p>page 19</p> <p>page 20</p> <p>page 22</p> <p>page 23</p>	
Who do you need on your project team?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • think about the expertise and skills you need to get your project done • have clear roles for team members 	<p>page 24</p> <p>page 26</p>	

2 Producing your information			
ASK YOURSELF	ACTIONS OR TECHNIQUES	FIND OUT HOW	✓
What information will you include?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • think about what most members of your audience need to know • consider the purpose of your information and what you're trying to achieve • consider how much detail to include and the risk of both including and leaving out information 	<p>page 26</p> <p>page 26</p> <p>page 26</p>	
How will you choose the right language?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • think about your audience and purpose • decide on the right reading level • choose the right tone • use plain language • choose the right words and be careful with numbers (follow the writing guidelines in the handbook) • consider hiring a plain language editor 	<p>page 27</p> <p>page 27</p> <p>page 28</p> <p>page 29</p> <p>page 29</p> <p>page 37</p>	
How will you structure the information?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • organize from your audience's point of view • use clear headings and subheadings • repeat what's important 	<p>page 38</p> <p>page 39</p> <p>page 39</p>	
How will you make sure that your information is accurate?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work with legal experts and reviewers • check legal and other facts • put a date on your information 	<p>page 39</p> <p>page 40</p> <p>page 41</p>	
How will you present your information?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • decide what method or methods best suit your audience, budget, and resources • consider how to make important information stand out • vary your approach using: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > graphics and images > flow charts > decision trees > case studies and examples > questions and answers 	<p>page 42</p> <p>page 43</p> <p>page 43</p>	

Section 6 – Project Plan Builder

2 Producing your information			
ASK YOURSELF	ACTIONS OR TECHNIQUES	FIND OUT HOW	✓
How will you design your information?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use a clean and uncluttered look • choose font styles and sizes that your audience will find easy to read • use techniques to emphasize important text • leave ample white space and space between lines of text • have a readable line length • for online information: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > present information in short chunks > make it easy to scan > use lots of headings > make keywords stand out 	<p>page 47</p> <p>page 48</p> <p>page 48</p> <p>page 49</p> <p>page 50</p> <p>page 51</p>	
How will you test the usability of your information?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • revise your information based on feedback • choose your test method • decide what questions to ask • decide who you will include in the testing 	<p>page 52</p> <p>page 52</p> <p>page 53</p> <p>page 53</p>	
How will you translate your information?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • decide which languages your audience needs • start with content that's written in plain language • make sure that the translated text fits in your chosen format • check that the translated content will be understood by your intended audience • check that the translated content is accurate 	<p>page 56</p> <p>page 57</p> <p>page 57</p> <p>page 58</p> <p>page 59</p>	

3 After your information is produced			
ASK YOURSELF	ACTIONS OR TECHNIQUES	FIND OUT HOW	✓
How will you promote and distribute your information?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work with intermediaries • start a mailing list (hard copy and electronic) • connect with other websites • make it easy to find online • use social media like Facebook or Twitter • contact traditional media • develop other promotional materials like bookmarks or fridge magnets 	page 61 page 62 page 62 page 62 page 63 page 63 page 63	
How will you monitor the use of your information?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • track distribution of print materials • track visits or downloads of online information • find out how people learned about your information 	page 64 page 64 page 64	
How will you keep your information up to date?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • set a review date when you start the project • keep track of changes in the law • update readers and intermediaries when your information changes 	page 65 page 66 page 65	
How will you evaluate your information?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • set clear and specific goals at the start of your project • choose performance measures or indicators • decide how you will collect information • prepare surveys or questionnaires 	page 67 page 68 page 69 page 71	



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Éducation juridique communautaire Ontario

Visit www.plelearningexchange.ca for a Portable Document Format (PDF) version of the handbook with active hyperlinks. You can view it online, print it off, and order additional copies.

Publication design: Art Kilgour writedesign.ca

Illustrations: iStock Photo

ISBN 978-1-77163-000-9