Easy-to-Read NYC

Guidelines for Clear and Effective Communication

Mayor's Office of Adult Education

Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs

Easy-to-Read NYC

Guidelines for Clear and Effective Communication

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Introduction:

Achieving Clear and Effective Communication

Clear and effective communication is essential for City agencies to achieve their missions. However, the messages we want to communicate are often complicated and it is not always easy to reach our intended audience.

Approximately 25 percent of New York City adults 21 and over do not speak English well. Another 15 percent did not complete high school and, therefore, have reading levels well below the equivalent of 9th grade.

However, many government documents are written in English and at the 8th or 9th grade level or above.

These guidelines are intended to help you create documents that are clearly written, easily and accurately translated, and understandable by your intended audience.

They are not concrete rules that must be applied without discretion or judgment. On the contrary, the guidelines assume that you are a skilled writer and that your agency will use them to build on the successes you have already achieved.

GUIDELINES:

The following guidelines present nine principles associated with effective written communication that you can refer to when creating and revising documents:

1. Use a Plain Language Approach to Communications
2. Define the Purpose of Your Written Document
3. Only Include Important and Directly Relevant Information
4. Use Simple Language
5. Keep Sentences and Paragraphs Short
6. Make It Personal
7. Use the Active Voice
8. Use Easy-to-Read Design Techniques
9. Assess the Usability of Documents: Listen to Your Readers

Taken together, these simple strategies will help you write documents in plain language. Plain language communications are more effective than traditional government writing.

1. Use a Plain Language Approach to Communications

Plain language <u>is</u>:

A set of strategies and techniques – a mix of art and science – for good professional writing. A document written in plain language conveys information clearly and in easy-to-understand language. It is free from bureaucratic jargon or "legalese" language which may confuse or alienate our readers. Plain language writing helps readers get to the heart of the matter within the first paragraph.

Plain language is <u>not</u>:

Unprofessional, disrespectful, or inaccurate. It does not "dumb down" information for the public. In fact, using plain language is respectful because it values the readers' time.

Why should NYC government agencies adopt plain language communication strategies?

When government agencies adhere to plain language principles, the public is more likely to know how to access the services they need and act upon the information that we provide. Additionally, they will be able to more readily comply with the law and satisfy the requirements and requests of government.

Benefits of adopting plain language:

- **Reduce the amount of time it takes for individuals or organizations to comply with your instructions.**

  With plain language, New Yorkers can understand our message and instructions the first time they read our documents.

- **Cut down on the number of customer service phone calls, inquiries, and complaints.**

  When people don't understand the information we provide, they contact our front-line staff, hotlines, or government contracted service providers to understand how to act on the information we provide.

- **Increase the likelihood that we get the response we are seeking.**

  Some New Yorkers who receive confusing letters or unclear public documents may not do anything at all. Our letters or pamphlets may end up in the recycling bin or trash.

- **Achieve this Administration's language access goals.**

  Accurate and high quality translation starts with easy-to-read English-language documents. Translators will make fewer mistakes and better convey your message when they are translating plain language documents.

- **Increase government transparency and hold ourselves accountable for the messages we send the public.**

  Good customer service starts with us. We can improve our reputation as responsive and accessible by respecting our constituents' time –the time it takes them to understand our messages and get the services they need.

DID YOU KNOW?

State and local governments across the country are implementing plain language standards.

In 2003, Washington Department of Revenue created the "Straight Talk" program. They trained employees in plain language principles and rewrote 250 customer letters using plain language guidelines. The rewrite of one tax collection letter has resulted in the state collecting an additional $5 million to date and won a Governor's Award for Quality Performance in 2004.

One Washington Department of Licensing letter rewrite resulted in a 95 percent reduction in its hotline calls.

In 2005, in recognition of this success, Washington State Governor Christine O. Gregoire signed a "Plain Talk" Executive Order requiring all state agencies to use plain language in written communication.

- www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/government/WArules.cfm

2. Define the purpose of your document

Start by asking yourself:

- What is the purpose of this written document?
- What am I trying to achieve by writing it?

Be as specific as possible.

Examples include:

- Help low-income mothers enroll their children in public health insurance.
- Convince eligible immigrants to file for the Earned Income Tax Credit.
- Explain your agency's procedures for accomplishing a specific task or transaction.
- Warn a business that it is out of compliance with a law or regulation and that it will face penalties if it does not comply.

If you answer the questions about purpose with phrases like "educate the public about", "raise awareness of", or "provide public disclosure", try asking yourself a follow-up question:

- ❖ "How is this purpose connected to my agency's strategic goals?"

  ~ or ~

- ❖ "What do I want people to do once I have accomplished this purpose?"

After answering these follow-up questions, take another look at your document. Can you revise it to be more helpful to the reader and more action-oriented?

Then ask yourself:

Who is my target audience? Who am I trying to reach with this document? You may be trying to reach more than one audience. It is good to define the different audiences you are trying to reach and prioritize them: who is it most important that we reach with this message?

Examples include:

- African American men over 40 years old.
- Low-income tenants with limited English proficiency in designated neighborhoods.
- A new client/customer with a complaint.
- A long-term client/customer that is out of compliance with your rules and regulations.

If you answer these audience questions with phrases like “members of the public”, “constituents”, or “parents”, try asking yourself: “who among this group would I like to reach the most?” Precisely defining your priority population will help you develop a message that is relevant and helpful.

Once you have identified your intended audience, think about them as readers and try to answer the following questions:

- ❖ What will your audience’s reaction be when they receive the document? Will they be pleased, disappointed, frightened, etc.?
- ❖ Will readers likely take action, set the document aside, or throw it away?

- Is there anything you can do in your document to encourage the desired reaction?
- What background information are they likely to already know? Is that enough for them to take the desired action?
- Will they be familiar with the context of your document and your specific message to them?

Consulting with agency staff or non-profit partners who have day-to-day contact with your intended audience may help you answer these questions.

3. Only Include Important and Directly Relevant Information

Most readers have a short attention span and will not understand and retain large amounts of information. Most readers are likely to scan or skim your documents, instead of reading the entire thing word-for-word.

Therefore, you should try to include only information that is important to accomplish your purpose and that is relevant to the intended audience. It seems obvious, but we often include unnecessary information (especially in brochures and pamphlets) to make our documents look substantial and sound important.

It may be helpful to look at each section of your document and ask yourself:

- ❖ How does this information help achieve my purpose for the document?
- ❖ How does this information help the reader do what I want them to do after reading my document?
- ❖ Given what I know about my target audience and their circumstances, will this information really help them?

It may also be helpful to check with agency staff or non-profit partners who have direct contact with the intended audience to get their sense of what information would be important and relevant to your readers.

People with day-to-day contact with your intended audience also may help you understand what your readers might be confused about or unable to understand.

Don't bury important information.

Examples:

BEFORE

When a claim has been closed for over seven years (or ten years for eye injuries) only the director has the authority to grant time-loss benefits. The director may only grant these benefits in exceptional circumstances. I'm pleased to inform you that you are eligible for time-loss benefits effective Oct. 1, 2003

AFTER

Thank you for your letter requesting wage replacement benefits related to your earlier workplace injury or illness. After reviewing your claim, I have decided to grant you these benefits, effective Oct. 1, 2003.

- Courtesy of Office of the Governor, State of Washington and the Washington Department of Labor and Industries

BEFORE

There is much debate about changes in federal immigration laws. However, nothing has been decided on possible new laws.

AFTER

Do not be afraid to go to the doctor, the clinic, the hospital or the emergency room. The government has not passed any new law about immigrants.

- HHC's "An Open Letter to Immigrant New Yorkers"

TIP #1

Put the most important information first,
at the top of the page or in the first paragraph.

Make sure the information is in logical order. For example, if you are writing instructions, list the tasks in the order the person must do them.

People are more likely to act on instructions when they are informed clearly how to do so.

Example:

We have approved your claim. Before we can send your check, you must:

1) Fill out the enclosed form, indicating your:
   - Your social security number
   - Your address
   - Your signature

2) Mail the completed form to:
   Government Office
   P.O. Box 2222
   New York, NY 10002

3) Send it to us before:
   November 1, 2006

   After we receive your form, you should receive your check within 30 days.

Try to limit yourself to a few main points.

As mentioned above, most readers will be scanning your document and will not be paying close attention – no matter how important your communication is. You may have many important things to tell them, but remember that most readers will not understand, retain, and act upon more than a few points from any written document.

TIP #2

Keep the "fine print" information in fine print.

Use your main text to get your MAIN points across. Often, there is some information that your readers should have for reference, but you know that they are unlikely to read and use it.

In these cases, you can provide the information in "fine print" outside your main text and refer the reader to it.

You can also give your reader some explanation in your main text of what is in the fine print and why or when they should read it.

It is probably a good idea to prioritize the points that you want to communicate and present them in the order of importance or in the most logical sequence, as in the example above.

4. Use Simple Language

Plain language means writing in clear terms using common, everyday words whenever possible.

Use simple and straightforward language.

Example:

BEFORE

The purpose of New York City's Financial Disclosure Law is to provide accountability on the part of public servants, and to help ensure that there are no prohibited conflicts of interest between City employees' official responsibilities and private interests.

AFTER

The City's Conflicts of Interest Law prohibits public servants from using or appearing to use their City positions for their own personal benefit.

- NY Conflicts of Interest Law Covering NYC Public Servants

DID YOU KNOW?

Documents are generally easier to read when we already know the context of the information presented to us or have some relevant background knowledge.

On the other hand, when we do not understand the context, we usually have a much harder time understanding the document.

In fact, research shows that when readers do not know the context of written information they often read below their grade level. For example, an individual who can read at a 10th grade level would likely have trouble reading an auto mechanic's manual written at the 8th or 9th grade reading level.

Therefore, to make sure that your intended audience understands what you are writing, you should not assume that readers already know what you are talking about.

For more information on how prior knowledge affects reading comprehension, please visit: http://www.cast.org/publications/ncac/ncac_backknowledge.html

Avoid Using Jargon and Legalese.

Bureaucratic jargon – terms that are specialized to an organization, industry, or profession – can often be confusing, misleading, or intimidating. "Legalese" is also hard for most people to understand. Therefore, try to avoid using jargon or "legalese" whenever you can.

Examples:

BEFORE	AFTER
We have been notified that you did not receive the state of Washington warrant listed on the attached Affidavit of Lost or Destroyed Warrant Request for Replacement, form **F242-026-000**. The State Treasurer's Office has informed us that the warrant is outstanding and has not been cashed as of today's date.	**Have you cashed your check yet?** The State Treasurer's Office has informed us that a check we sent you has not been cashed. Review the attached legal form. It will show the amount of the check, what it was for, and the date it was issued.

BEFORE	AFTER
By this notice, demand is hereby made for you to exercise your right of election pursuant to RCW 51.24.070.	This is our formal demand for you to give us your decision. *- Courtesy of Office of the Governor, State of Washington and the Washington Department of Labor and Industries*

TIP #3

When you must use specialized language –

as opposed to simpler, plain language – always try to provide a clear explanation for the terms you use.

Your readers will appreciate you giving them a short definition for unfamiliar words within the body of your document.

Examples:

Medical terms:

Fracture	= break
Carcinogen	= causes cancer
Ailment	= sickness, illness

Legal terms:

Abet	= to help commit a crime
Executor	= person named to carry out the terms of the will

Ask yourself:

Do you have to use legal language or jargon?

- If the answer is no, use PLAIN LANGUAGE.

- If the answer is yes, DEFINE the legal language or jargon.

Make sure that your definition is correct.

If you choose to define legal language or jargon, always check definitions with your agency legal or program experts.

Spell out acronyms.

Acronyms can be helpful when the reader already knows what you are talking about. Acronyms can help you write shorter sentences and save space in your documents.

However, acronyms are impersonal and abstract. Readers who are not already familiar with an acronym will have no way of knowing what it means. In this way, acronyms can be intimidating and confusing to some readers.

If you feel it is important to use an acronym, always spell it out when you use it for the first time.

Example:

> **Supplemental Security Income (SSI)**
>
> This booklet explains what Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is, who can get it, and how to apply. It provides basic information and is not intended to answer all questions. For specific information about your situation, you should talk with a Social Security representative.
>
> \- *www.ssa.gov*

Be smart about disclosure requirements in your written documents.

Many government documents include mandatory disclosure of information that is complicated. We must provide certain information, but we know that many of our readers do not understand the information being disclosed and often do not even read it. Therefore, the purpose of the document – full disclosure of important information – has not been achieved.

You can comply with your disclosure requirements and still create effective, easy-to-read documents.

- ❖ You can write a plain-language summary to accompany mandatory language of the disclosure (i.e., "boilerplate language").
- ❖ You can explain why the information being disclosed is important and what readers should do with it.
- ❖ You can also invite people to call 311 to get in touch with you if they have any questions. (Make sure that you coordinate with 311 before doing this!)

5. Keep Sentences and Paragraphs Short

Short sentences, each containing one single thought, are easier to read than long sentences. Sentences should be simple, active, affirmative, and declarative.

If your sentences average 15 or more words, see where you can break them into two shorter sentences. Paragraphs should have three to four sentences. This approach will create smaller chunks of information that the reader will be able to absorb and act upon.

Remember, the more your writing deviates from this clear and to-the-point structure, the harder it will be to understand.

Examples:

BEFORE	AFTER
This is a reminder to all residents and business owners of the upcoming public hearing, to be held on January 17 in the Main Conference Room, regarding the proposed waterfront redevelopment project	**Public Hearing Reminder** Attention all residents and business owners: There will be a public hearing to discuss the proposed waterfront redevelopment project. The hearing will be held on January 17 in the Main Conference Room.

BEFORE

I understand that fees are due and payable on the date that services are rendered and agree to pay all such charges incurred in full immediately upon presentation of the appropriate statement.

AFTER

I agree to pay my bill on the same day that I receive the services.

- Based on materials from Health Literacy Studies,
Harvard School of Public Health
www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy

6. Make It Personal

Government writing often lacks the personal touch. In fact, sometimes we try to make our documents as impersonal as possible. But when we do, our readers are more likely to ask, “why should I care?”

This is why we need to make our writing more personal. Instead of talking about your agency in third-person perspective, write documents using words like “I, me, we, our, you, and yours.”

Create documents so the audience will feel as if you are talking to them as individuals. Avoid speaking as if you are a bureaucracy talking to an insignificant person.

Examples:

About the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)

Do you make less than $35,000 a year? You might qualify for as much as $6,000 from the EITC, just by filing your taxes. You can use your EITC money to pay bills or school tuition, buy a car or save some of it in a bank account.

- NYC Department of Consumer Affairs

NYC Restaurant Owners Manual

You’ve probably looked at the table of contents and hit your hand across your forehead exclaiming “Don’t I have enough to do running a restaurant in New York City? Do I have to learn all this too?”

Don’t be overwhelmed. You’re probably adhering to a lot of these laws already. With a few complicated exceptions, this stuff is pretty fundamental and you don’t have to sit down and read the whole thing at once.

You can use this as a resource to go back to if an issue arises and figure out what the appropriate steps to take are, or learn the right places to go for help.

- NYC Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs

7. Use the Active Voice

Don't be passive. Documents written in the passive voice tend to be both longer and less clear. The passive voice makes it difficult for your audience to figure out who is responsible for what. The passive voice can also give people the appearance that government officials are avoiding accountability.

This does not mean you should write every sentence in the active voice. It does mean that you should know why you are writing in the passive voice instead of the active voice.

There may be times when it is appropriate to use the passive voice. For example, when you want to emphasize who is the recipient of an action rather than who is doing the action.

Example:

> Schools won't be penalized for how well students perform when they first arrive.
>
> *- Chancellor's Letter to Parents of the New Accountability Initiative, June 2006*

You can decrease use of the passive voice by:

Identifying sentences that use the verb "to be" plus a past participle (i.e., was issued, is administered) or start with phrases like "there is" or "it was discovered that."

Examples:

- It is acknowledged that your application was received.
- Research will be presented at the community forum to be held on Thursday.
- There are experiments being conducted on the chemicals.

Try to rewrite the sentence in the active voice. Is it less clear if you do so? If not, then use the rewritten version.

Examples:

- We received your application.
- We will present our research findings to the community at the forum on Thursday.
- Scientists are conducting experiments on these chemicals.

Examples:

BEFORE

Tiny pieces of peeling or chipping paint are dangerous if eaten.

AFTER

Never let your child eat pieces of paint. The paint may contain lead. Lead is dangerous for your child. Even very small pieces of lead are dangerous for your child.

BEFORE

It is recommended that the wire should be connected to the terminal by the engineer when the switch-box assembly is completed.

AFTER

We recommend that you connect the wire to the terminal when you finish assembling the switchbox.

8. Use Easy-to-Read Design Techniques

Content means nothing if it is not displayed in a way that makes sense. Your audience will most likely scan your documents for relevance before they actually read the documents. Therefore, how you design your documents matters.

There are many ways that you can use the appearance of your document to make it easy to read, including:

- ❖ Use a layout consistently throughout your document that makes it easy for the reader to find the most important information.
- ❖ Include a document title that lets the reader know what she is reading and the purpose of the document.
- ❖ Use headings in bold print that summarize the main point for each topic in your document.
- ❖ Write short sentences and paragraphs. Present information in small chunks under a heading that summarizes the main point.
- ❖ Incorporate white space - don’t create a dense, dark, text-filled page.

- ❖ Add graphics where appropriate.
- ❖ Use bulleted lists.
- ❖ Use a font that is easiest to read, not the prettiest or most expressive.
- ❖ Don't over-format your document. Keep the emphasis on clear and easy-to-read.

Example:

BEFORE

(1998 Mayor's Management Report)

CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Among the City's foremost priorities is the need to enhance the quality and effectiveness of services to children and youth. This section reviews issues including safeguarding children's physical well-being; summer employment, training, and recreational opportunities; the juvenile justice system; library programs; and public education.

ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Enhancing Staff Quality. Since the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) was established as a separate agency, a primary focus of reform has been to increase the preparedness of staff in positions critical to the protection and welfare of children. Educational requirements for newly hired caseworkers have been enhanced, the training program has been expanded from four weeks to ten months, and entrance examinations have been made more stringent. In January 1998 Mayor Giuliani proposed new steps to enhance the quality of ACS staff. In exchange for requiring greater educational attainments and higher standards of performance, a system of merit pay increases will be instituted that rewards caseworkers and supervisors for positive job performance and advanced graduate school achievements.

Neighborhood-Based Services. In November 1997 ACS released a Request for Information to solicit comments about its proposed reforms for delivering neighborhood-based services to ACS clients. For the first time, contracts will require agencies to provide services in neighborhood-based foster care settings that allow for children to remain within their communities, when appropriate, in order to mitigate the trauma of parental separation, increase the family's involvement in foster care services, and expedite planning for permanency. ACS will release a Request for Proposals in March 1998 in order to begin providing these services during the early part of Fiscal 1999.

In order to promote a closer working relationship between ACS and the communities it serves, in April 1997 ACS's Manhattan field office began a pilot project that assigned caseworkers to cases in specific Community Districts, and permitted them to carry smaller caseloads. Findings from this pilot on operational details will be used to plan citywide implementation of this program, to begin in Summer 1998.

Interagency Coordination. The Coordinating Committee for Children, which is chaired by the ACS Commissioner, includes representatives from 21 different organizations who meet quarterly to develop programs that ensure coordinated services to children. In Spring 1998 the Agency's Queens field office will pilot an initiative whereby ACS will initiate case conferences within 72 hours when a child is removed from the home due to abuse and/or neglect. The conference participants will provide a multidisciplinary approach intended to help the Agency make more informed and expeditious decisions at an earlier point about the child's placement and permanency plan.

The protocol for Instant Response Teams, which was completed in November 1997, defines the Teams' role as sharing information between ACS and law enforcement agencies, handling joint investigations of severe physical and sexual abuse cases, and coordinating cases involving domestic violence. The first phase of this initiative, which will begin in March 1998, will focus on both cases of severe physical abuse involving children under the age of 11 and cases of sexual abuse involving children under the age of 18. The last phase of the initiative will be operational by Fiscal 1999 and will focus on other types of cases, such as those currently handled by the Police Department's Domestic Violence Prevention officers and youth officers. Training for the last phase will begin in late Spring 1998 for all ACS protective staff and NYPD patrol officers. ACS will create a new position of Response Team coordinator, responsible for making all necessary notifications to initiate a joint response and follow-up investigation, and to act as a single point of contact between agencies.

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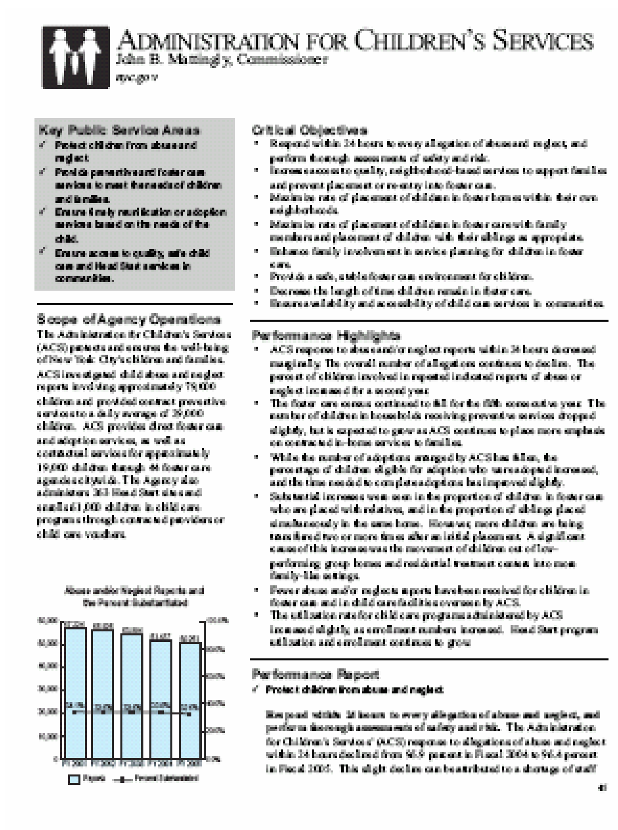
AFTER

(2005 Mayor's Management Report)



ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES

John B. Mattingly, Commissioner

nyc.gov

Key Public Service Areas

- ✓ Protect children from abuse and neglect.
- ✓ Provide preventive and foster care services to meet the needs of children and families.
- ✓ Ensure timely reunification or adoption services based on the needs of the child.
- ✓ Ensure access to quality, safe child care and Head Start services in communities.

Scope of Agency Operations

The Administration for Children's Services (ACS) protects and ensures the well-being of New York City's children and families. ACS investigated child abuse and neglect reports involving approximately 79,000 children and provided contract preventive services to a daily average of 29,000 children. ACS provides direct foster care and adoption services, as well as contractual services for approximately 19,000 children through 44 foster care agencies citywide. The Agency also administers 263 Head Start sites and enrolled 61,000 children in child care programs through contracted providers or child care vouchers.

Abuse and/or Neglect Reports and the Percent Substantiated

Reports — Percent Substantiated

Critical Objectives

- Respond within 24 hours to every allegation of abuse and neglect, and perform thorough assessments of safety and risk.
- Increase access to quality, neighborhood-based services to support families and prevent placement or re-entry into foster care.
- Maximize rate of placement of children in foster homes within their own neighborhoods.
- Maximize rate of placement of children in foster care with family members and placement of children with their siblings as appropriate.
- Enhance family involvement in service planning for children in foster care.
- Provide a safe, stable foster care environment for children.
- Decrease the length of time children remain in foster care.
- Ensure availability and accessibility of child care services in communities.

Performance Highlights

- ACS response to abuse and/or neglect reports within 24 hours decreased marginally. The overall number of allegations continues to decline. The percent of children involved in repeated indicated reports of abuse or neglect increased for a second year.
- The foster care census continued to fall for the fifth consecutive year. The number of children in households receiving preventive services dropped slightly, but is expected to grow as ACS continues to place more emphasis on contracted in-home services to families.
- While the number of adoptions arranged by ACS has fallen, the percentage of children eligible for adoption who were adopted increased, and the time needed to complete adoptions has improved slightly.
- Substantial increases were seen in the proportion of children in foster care who are placed with relatives, and in the proportion of siblings placed simultaneously in the same home. However, more children are being transferred two or more times after an initial placement. A significant cause of this increase was the movement of children out of low-performing group homes and residential treatment centers into more family-like settings.
- Fewer abuse and/or neglect reports have been received for children in foster care and in child care facilities overseen by ACS.
- The utilization rate for child care programs administered by ACS increased slightly, as enrollment numbers increased. Head Start program utilization and enrollment continue to grow.

Performance Report

✓ Protect children from abuse and neglect.

Respond within 24 hours to every allegation of abuse and neglect, and perform thorough assessments of safety and risk. The Administration for Children's Services' (ACS) response to allegations of abuse and neglect within 24 hours declined from 96.9 percent in Fiscal 2004 to 96.4 percent in Fiscal 2005. This slight decline can be attributed to a shortage of staff

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9. Assess the Usability of Documents: Listen to Your Readers

How can you tell if your attempts at plain language have worked? How can you increase the likelihood that your communication will be effective and achieve its goal? Listen to your readers.

Conduct a focus group or two with real members of your intended audience to test your documents. Don't be afraid to revise an existing document or write another draft of a new document based on feedback you receive.

How to conduct a focus group to assess your documents.

Some agencies routinely test their written materials with their intended audiences. Here are some suggested steps for conducting a focus group:

- ❖ Gather a sample of 6-10 individuals from your intended audience who agree to read the documents and give you feedback. They should represent the range of ages, educational backgrounds and occupations of your intended audience.

  If you are writing or revising a document for existing clients, recruit existing clients. If the purpose of your document is to convince someone to do something (e.g., apply for benefits, utilize your agency resources), recruit individuals who are <u>not</u> currently doing that thing. Explain the goal and what their role is. Be sure to convey the session is not intended to test *them.*

- Have the group members read the documents. It is often helpful to test more than one version of the same document and to present information with different levels of complexity.

- Ask your readers to explain what the document means in their own words, including what the reader is expected to do based on the document. You can also ask them what their reaction would be and what they would do if they received that document from your agency.

- Try to identify any conflicts in the understanding among the focus group participants. Remember, this is not a test of whether they “got it.” It is a chance for you to understand what your audience is thinking and how they will react to what you have written

- Ask the readers what would make the communication more helpful to them.

- Use your readers’ feedback to revise the document.

Focus groups can help you determine if your documents need to be revised. While this is a suggested step before finalizing your documents, testing and revising your documents should be something that is done repeatedly over the life of the document.

The City’s adult education system can be helpful to you in arranging focus groups with individuals who are not necessarily clients of your agency. You can contact the Mayor’s Office of Adult Education for assistance at www.nyc.gov/adult-ed.