



# Diversity, Inclusion & Sensitivity

## Plain Language: Use It to be Inclusive

By Lourdes Venard

**W**hat would you do, if anything, if you were editing a document with these phrases or mentions?

*A newspaper writes a story that mentions a blended family is like the Brady Bunch.*

*You come across a mention of a victory garden in a general audience document.*

*A writer ends an online post with “May the odds be ever in your favor.”*

I’ll let you know later in this article what happened in real life.

You may wonder where plain language and inclusivity merge, or what plain language even means.

### Plain Language

Many people think that the use of plain language means you are oversimplifying the written word—and talking down to readers. But that is far from the truth. Instead, plain language is reader-focused. It’s thinking like the reader so the writer can anticipate and answer any questions that readers may have. It’s making one’s message clear to everyone and, in this aspect, it also makes language more inclusive.

The three principles of inclusive language are that it helps readers:

*Find what they need.*

*Understand what they find.*

*Use that information (act on it).*

For this article, let’s focus on that second point and how, as editors, we can help readers understand what they find.

The common guidelines for achieving this principle focus on several techniques, such as being concise, addressing the audience directly (using “you,” for example), and using familiar words. (See the resources below for more information on all the guidelines.)

**Making one’s message clear to everyone also makes language more inclusive.**

### Familiar Words

It’s the last point—familiar words—that really helps us edit for inclusiveness. Readers may not understand a phrase because they come from another country (as in these funny social media responses). But phrases may also be unfamiliar because of age, a regional difference, the field that one works in, literacy levels, and even a reader’s knowledge of the topic.

Familiar words also make a message more accessible, cognitively, for neurodivergent readers and those with disabilities. Journalist and content creator Shelley Travers writes that “neurodivergent readers may struggle with processing and understanding complex language or metaphors,” as well as with lengthy prose, technical jargon, and large blocks of text.

She points to this meta-analysis of studies, which found that individuals with autism spectrum disorder also may have trouble understanding other types of figurative language, such as idioms and irony.

But neurotypical readers also often have issues with figurative language. For one thing, it may not always translate well on the page. For another, what is familiar to one person won’t be familiar to another.

My husband, for instance, loves to use the phrase “the \$64,000 question…” While his twentysomething sons had some idea of what it meant in context, they were always confused about why it was worth \$64,000. (A few of us may remember or know that The \$64,000 Question was a game show from the 1950s.) Maybe in context it is understandable—but does it leave a lingering question in a reader’s mind? It might cause a reader to lose focus on what the writer is trying to say.

### Jargon

Another type of possibly unfamiliar language is jargon. I work for an education nonprofit and often see terms such as “scaffolding,” “inquiry-based learning,” “backward design,” and “differentiated instruction.” If we’re writing for instructors only, then it’s fine to use such words, as they are well-known teaching practices. But if the writer’s message is going out to parents or the general public, those readers might wonder what a building material like scaffolding has to do with teaching. As editors, we’ll have to ask our writers to explain these terms or use other wording.

### Real-life Examples

Back to the examples at the beginning. Maybe you thought they were all fine. Who hasn’t heard of The Brady Bunch, victory

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gardens, and that often-repeated Hunger Games expression?

Well, a lot of people, potentially.

The Brady Bunch question was a debate in a newsroom I worked in; the copy desk manager decided, in the end, to add the explanation that this was a sitcom from the 1960s–’70s. Was that the right call? Some copyeditors disagreed, but it was decided to err on the side of caution and assume some (younger) readers might not know.

At one of my workplaces, a copyeditor had not heard the term victory garden. I knew what it meant, perhaps because I read a lot of historical British mysteries. During the world wars, home gardens were planted throughout the United Kingdom, United States, and other countries, as fresh food was scarce. They became known as victory gardens. But that term fell into disuse, at least until the COVID pandemic brought it back. Still, not everyone knows the term. It would be right to query the writer or offer a suggested rewording, as this copyeditor did. If the article is online, a hyperlink to a definition also works. Much depends, of course, on the readership. Gardeners and history buffs likely will know the term, so an explanation might not be necessary in a gardening magazine.

In one of the online copyediting classes I teach, one student posted about the Hunger Games expression: “Oh, I always thought that was just some sort of millennial catchphrase.” Although the books and movies were a hit, not everyone has read or watched the Hunger Games series. A reader might still understand what the phrase means, but it might fall flat if the writer is using it in a jocular way.

Your actions regarding the above—querying, regarding, leaving the text alone—are part of the editorial judgment you exercise as an editor, always taking into account the audience. But if we want to be inclusive of everyone, we should stop and consider what they might know—and not know.

### Resources

For more on plain language, see the following:

Plainlanguage.gov and its [checklist](#)

Center for Plain Language: [Five Steps to Plain Language](#)

National Institutes of Health: [Plain language training](#)

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