



## Basic plain-language principles for humanitarians

To increase the chance of meaningful two-way communication, humanitarian organizations should apply recognized plain-language principles.

### Clear communication uses plain language

A clear source message is essential. Plain-language principles provide a useful basis for testing if a message is likely to be clear. To maximize reader and listener comprehension, writers and speakers should use:

- the active voice
- simple verb tenses
- sentences with fewer than 20 words
- simple sentence structure, which is generally indicated by minimal punctuation
- terms that are familiar to the intended audience, or explanations of unfamiliar terms.

Providing information in plain language will help comprehension. That in turn improves the accuracy and efficiency of information flow from one language to another. Plain language reduces ambiguity, and so reduces the time needed to clarify and explain the information. That promotes faster translation and interpreting. When the information flow is efficient and effective, it is likely to increase trust and engagement in communication.

## **Plain language can lead to improved humanitarian outcomes**

There is evidence that information provided in plain language leads to positive behavioral responses among the people that receive that information. While commercial and government sectors provide most of this evidence, communicators in the humanitarian sector can expect to see similar positive responses if they follow plain language principles.

Consider a humanitarian information campaign in Rakhine State that promotes immunization of children. The original information is in English. Interpreters and translators convert it to Myanmar, then Rakhine, then Rohingya before most Rohingya mothers can understand it. To maximize the chance that a Rohingya mother immunizes her child, each person in the chain must understand the information and communicate it accurately to the next person. A clear source message increases the chance that translation is accurate. Inaccurate information can generate mistrust and rumors, which is unlikely to lead to increased immunization rates.

## **Testing messages builds knowledge and trust**

To prevent inaccurate information being shared, and to promote the desired response in recipients, it's important to test messages at various points between the originator and the recipient. There are several ways to do this including:

- back translation
- comprehension testing and
- basic online readability tests.