

CASE STUDY

Plain language

How to get **better results**
from your website and marketing materials
by **switching** complex words
for simple words...
without dumbing it down!



SUMMARY

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The benefits of plain language are huge; the costs of complex writing are equally huge. This case study looks at how we can improve readability by just replacing a few common complex words with simpler alternatives. The results are impressive.

CONTEXT

Context

Over the past 20 years, government and business have made plain language central to their communications. Plain language brings several benefits:

- More people find the web page (55% more page views after a plain language edit)
- More people read your web page or report
- More people take action
- More readers understand your web page or report:
 - Example 1: took less than half the time to understand a web page after a plain languages edit
 - Example 2: half as many user errors after a plain language edit
 - Example 3: 2.4 times as many correct user actions after a plain language edit
- Fewer complaints or questions for you to answer (just 17% as many questions after a plain language edit).

Despite the efforts being made, some studies show that readability of health, legal, scientific and consumer information might actually be declining.

Plain language edits seem challenging to many people. They don't want their text "dumbed down". People are sometimes afraid of plain language.

The concept of plain language is not to dumb down a message, but to make it easier to read.

The average person reads at a grade six to grade eight level.

The [Canadian government's style guide](#) specifies that content should be written for Grade 8 or younger reading level.

The [US National Library of Medicine](#) recommends about a 7th or 8th grade reading level.

The [UK government's style guide](#) specifies that content should be written for age 9 reading level.


READABILITY

Levels

What's recommended in each country



"Aim for grade 8 or lower."



"Keep within a ... 7th or 8th grade reading level."



"We tell people to write ... for a 9 year old reading age."

Sources:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/government-communications/canada-content-style-guide.html>
<https://medlineplus.gov/etr.html>
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/content-design/writing-for-gov-uk>
Compiled by THGM Writers: <http://THGMwriters.com>



Highly educated people also read at that level, even if they are capable of reading well above. The easier a text is to read, the more people will read it, understand it and take action.

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One study showed that people typically read at most 28% of a web page. So anything you can do to make it easier for them to read more is to your advantage.

In many texts, there are big words that cannot change without dumbing it down. Some of those big words are actually a string of big words. For example;

- technical details
- chemical processes
- names of medical conditions
- names of committees or government bodies

This case study has a single goal: to demonstrate how readability improves when some unnecessarily complex words are replaced with simpler ones. We don't touch technical terms or official names.

DESIGN

Design

We wrote a fictional marketing text (see Appendix A) for a fictional company. The text is a mixture of complex terminology and plain language. It could easily be a web page, a direct mail piece or a brochure. The word count is 1,250.

In the text, we put four unnecessarily complex words that people often use. We can easily replace these words by simpler ones in almost every situation:

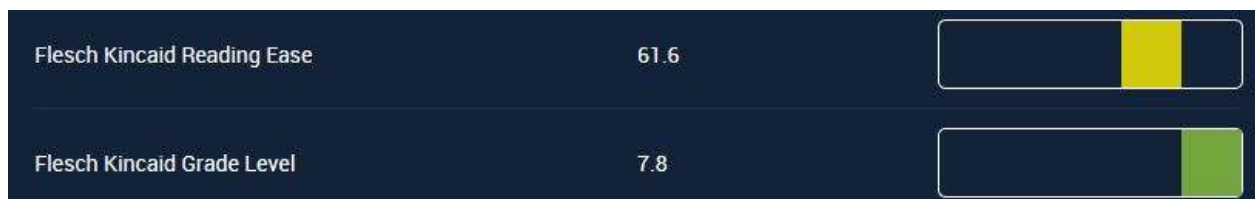
- utilize
- solution
- purchase
- assistance

Here is the distribution of the four words:

Original word	Occurrences	Replacement word
utilize	11	use
solution	15	tool
purchase (verb)	12	buy
assistance	10	help

Note that we did not touch technical terms. We did not remove names of organizations. We simply replaced four common words with simpler alternatives.

First, we measured the original text:



On the Fleisch-Kinkaid scale, it came it at:

- grade 7.8
- readability 61.6

This is actually pretty good, because most of the text uses simple language. But can we make it even easier to read, without losing any meaning, without "dumbing it down"? Let's see.

RESULTS

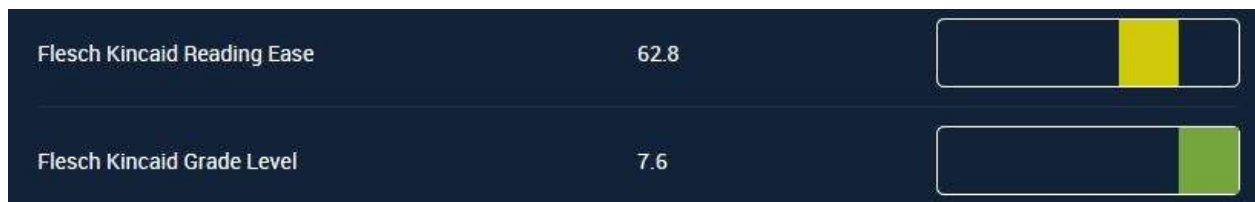
From the base measurement, we took six additional readings. We measured the effect of changing each of the four words, making no other changes.

Then we measured the effect of replacing all four words.

Finally, we did a complete [plain language edit](#).

Replacing “utilize” with “use”

We replaced “utilize” with “use”, then measured.

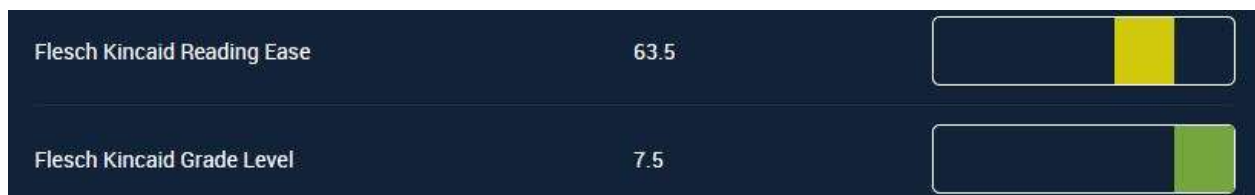


On the Fleisch-Kinkaid scale, it improved:

- from grade 7.8 to 7.6
- from readability 61.6 to 62.8

Replacing “solution” with “tool”

We replaced “solution” with “tool”, then measured.

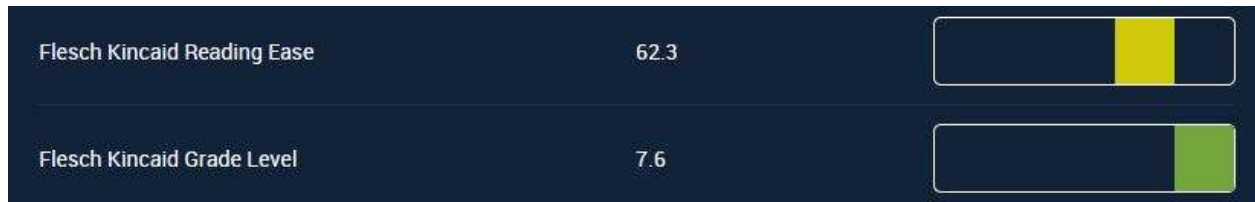


On the Fleisch-Kinkaid scale, it improved:

- from grade 7.8 to 7.5
- from readability 61.6 to 63.5

Replacing “purchase” with “buy”

We replaced “purchase” with “buy”, then measured.

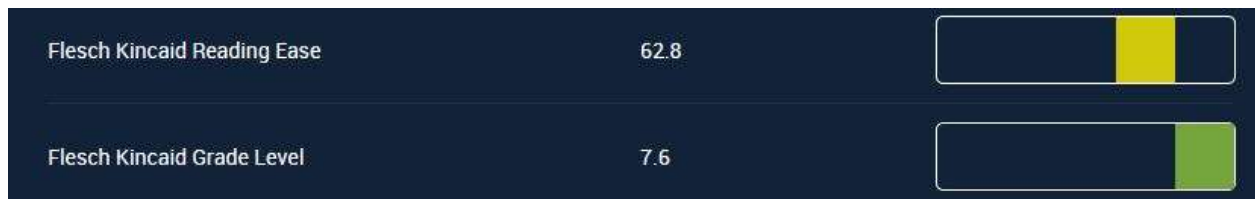


On the Fleisch-Kinkaid scale, it improved:

- from grade 7.8 to 7.6
- from readability 61.6 to 62.3

Replacing “assistance” with “help”

We replaced “assistance” with “help”, then measured.

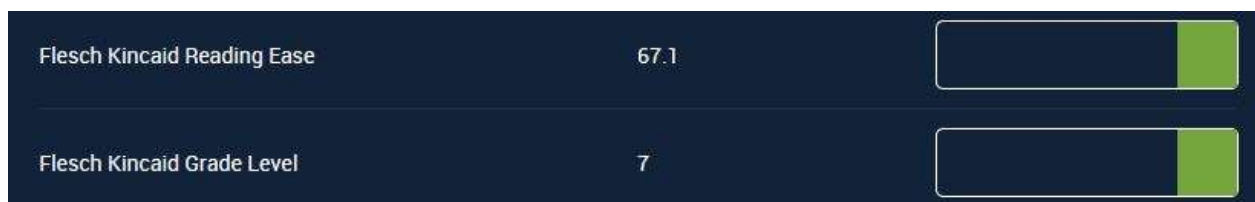


On the Fleisch-Kinkaid scale, it improved:

- from grade 7.8 to 7.6
- from readability 61.6 to 62.8

Replacing all four words

We replaced all four words, then measured.



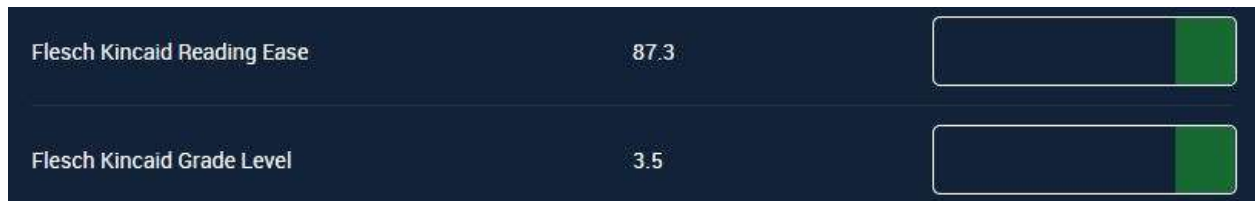
On the Fleisch-Kinkaid scale, it improved:

- from grade 7.8 to 7
- from readability 61.6 to 67.1

Of note, we made roughly a 10% improvement by replacing four common, unnecessarily complex words.

Complete plain language edit

We did a complete plain language edit (see Appendix B), then took a final measurement.



On the Fleisch-Kinkaid scale, it improved:

- from grade 7.8 to 3.5
- from readability 61.6 to 87.3

This is remarkably easy to read, even more than it needs to be. In real life, this almost never happens in business communications.

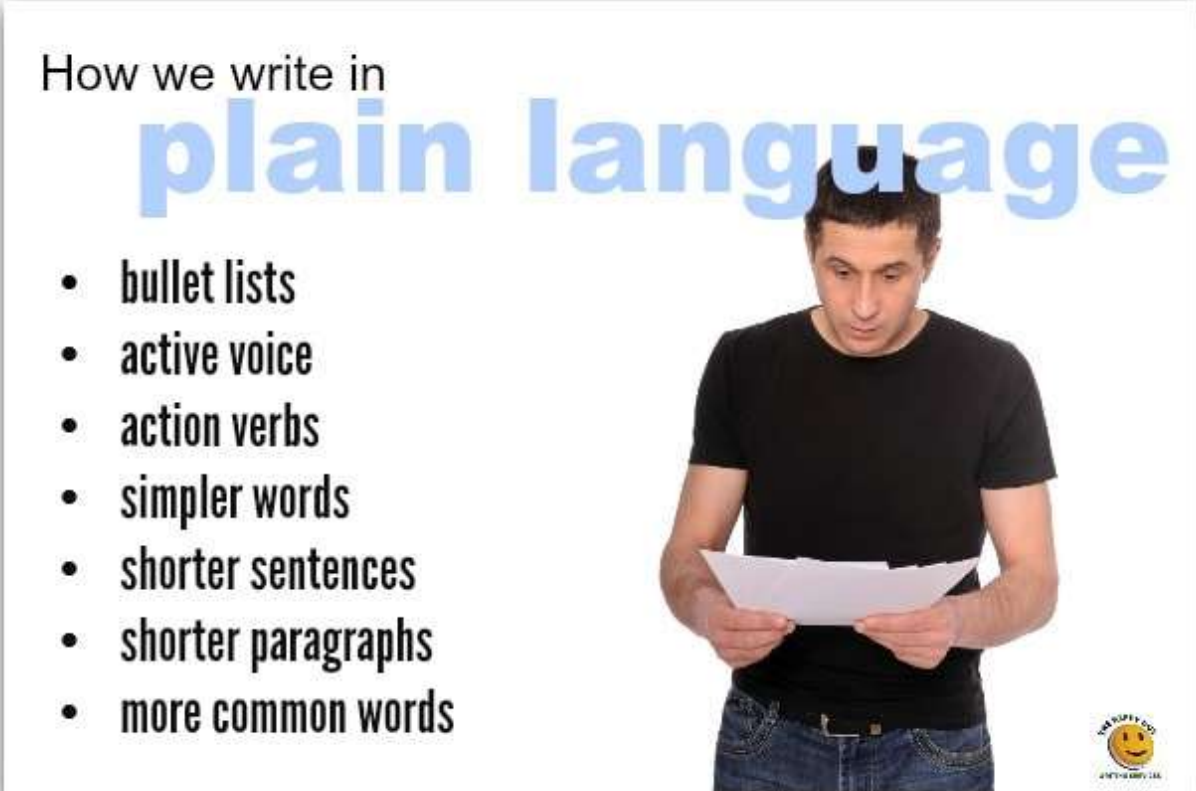
Worth noting that the text also went from 1,250 words to 1,100 words, as we removed redundant and trivial words.

CONCLUSIONS

Replacing each common complex word with an easier common word made our fictional text 1-3% easier to read. Replacing all four words made the text 10% easier to read.

This shows the value of doing a plain language edit, even if we don't touch any big scientific, medical, legal or academic terms.

A full plain language edit made the text more than 40% easier to read. That's still respecting terminology, but being a bit less repetitive. Here are some of the key things we do in a plain language edit.



How we write in

plain language

- **bullet lists**
- **active voice**
- **action verbs**
- **simpler words**
- **shorter sentences**
- **shorter paragraphs**
- **more common words**

A man in a black t-shirt and jeans is looking down at a piece of paper he is holding. In the bottom right corner of the infographic, there is a small logo for 'THE HAPPY GOD' with a smiley face and the text '© 2017-2018 THGM, LLC'.

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Caveats

There are always caveats. Here are three important ones.

1. The first applies to almost every study of its kind: each document is different. While we can draw general conclusions from this case study, specific numbers will vary with each text.
2. A second caveat is that readability and clarity are not the same thing. Readability is an algorithm. I could write nonsense with a high readability, and that would not make a text clearer. Readability is just one factor in writing effective content, marketing materials or other text.
3. Word complexity is not the only factor in readability. Sentence length, paragraph length, voice and other factors all make a difference, too. In fact, that is why we decided to take a sixth measurement of a complete plain language edit. It is presented here as a comparison.

REFERENCES

- <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/whyPL/benefits/bottomline.cfm>
- <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/content-design/writing-for-gov-uk>
- <https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/government-communications/canada-content-style-guide.html>
- <https://medlineplus.gov/etr.html>
- <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/04/07/study-finds-decline-readability-science-abstracts>
- <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/pdfplus/10.1108/17511061211259170>
- <http://www.uccs.edu/Documents/egreene/ACP%20Do%20people%20comprehend%20legal%20language%20in%20wills.pdf>
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20851373>
- <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-little-do-users-read/>

APPENDIX A

Full sample text

International Conglomerate Incorporated is pleased to introduce to you our new solution for fixing that problem you've been having. A demonstration might be in order. If you utilize it for just five days, we know you'll love it. You'll want to purchase it. In fact, you'll want to purchase crates of it. Our Technical Standards and Specifications Committee worked extremely hard to create this futuristic product.

Get ready by installing a bigger mailbox.

The first thing you'll notice about our solution is how shiny it is. Indeed, it's the newest, shiniest one we have ever made. And we've made a few.

We call this shininess "Comprehensive Luminescence Saturation".

Have you ever noticed how easy it is to buy those red, shiny apples? That's right, you pass right over those dull-looking organic apples. No zest. No life. Shiny is the way to go. That's the value we offer with Comprehensive Luminescence Saturation.

So we've polished up our new solution to maximize sales opportunities. You won't be able to resist our shiny new solution. You will have to purchase it.

Then you'll have a shiny apple and a shiny solution, thanks to Comprehensive Luminescence Saturation.

We are proud of the inherent usefulness of our latest technological innovation. We don't charge you a penny extra for useless bells and whistles. Just for shininess. It took us many expensive hours to research the exact wording that would sound most impressive, and we regret to inform you that we do have to pass these costs of our shininess on to consumers.

We invite you to utilize it free for a one-month trial. Utilize it first, purchase it later. We know you'll be hooked because it's the shiniest solution on the market.

You might wonder what this new technological solution accomplishes. Most people don't care, as long as it's shiny. That's simple psychology. But some people feel emotionally compelled to ask uncomfortable questions. And one of those questions,

which our sales representatives heard at least 3.63 times is, “What does it do? How do I utilize it?”

Our answer is simple. Yes, we have a cornucopia of units available for shipping today, and if you purchase now, we’ll send them all to you for half price. Not only that, but in appreciation for your enthusiasm, we’ll send you a free bottle of anti-dandruff shampoo and a lifetime supply of cordial salutations. Nothing is impossible for our customers.

In fact, that’s part of our philosophy of shininess.

By the way, have you the slightest notion how challenging it is to write 1,250 words? We are only at 426 words here, and we committed to writing 1,250 words on exactly why you should purchase the shiniest technological solution this side of the rapidly disintegrating Great Barrier Reef.

Let’s talk about what to do when you need assistance. We are standing by, we’ve polished our buttons with Comprehensive Luminescence Saturation and are manning the phones. Our buttons are shiny and so are our phones. Oh, yes, when you require assistance, we are available. Just make sure to utilize the handy 1-800 number at the bottom of this page. That way, one of our helpful and shiny customer service representatives will be able to provide the assistance you require.

The optimum way to utilize our special assistance is to call today. Why wait for the product to arrive? Pre-emptive calls can save time later. For instance, if something doesn’t work when the package arrives, you might think to call for assistance, but then you’ll remember: “I don’t have to call for assistance; I already called!”

Can we talk about the box our solution comes in? It’s not shiny. Sorry. We considered that aspect as a possible packaging feature, but we decided that there were other technological innovations more important for the packaging. Squareness was one of those innovations. The box is a veritable treasure trove of right angles. Each corner is sharp (but not so sharp as to constitute a reportable safety hazard – please don’t worry). Each side is flat (but not so flat as to constitute a reportable safety hazard – please don’t worry).

Another important aspect of the packaging is color. Yes, after much debate and seemingly endless consumer and market research, including a plethora of delicious pie charts, we decided that our boxes should have color. You’ll be pleased to know that all our boxes have been fitted with this upgraded feature. They all have color as an optional accessory, available for a limited duration only. You can utilize that color as you see fit, but please order today, before this optional accessory is depleted. After all, color doesn’t grow on trees, right?

You can utilize the box, even without the optional color, in many ways. You can position it in front of your door to hold it open. You can position it under a potted plant so that it reaches more light. You can position it on a table to watch it, which is what Doctor Who did when so many boxes mysteriously appeared on Earth prior to an invasion.

We promise that our boxes arriving at your door are not a portent of imminent invasion. Rather, they are a portent of imminent assistance, as our innovative solution will momentarily be in your hot little hands. Your only responsibility is to open the box and remove it.

Please do not defenestrate the box. We put an enormous amount of effort into its design, and we prefer that the effort does not result in the demise of a person walking beneath your window.

Just one little detail to mention before you utilize it. You have to purchase our solution first, before removing it from the packaging. That's not hard to do, because we accept all major credit cards, cash payments and bricks of expensive metals. Just ship us your solid gold, which we prefer over flimsy and breakable credit cards, and we'll ship you our innovative square box with our even innovativer shiny solution inside.

If you are somehow still wavering, consider this fortunate consideration: your solar system desperately needs increased shininess. There are citations from the International Planetary Subcommittee on Desperation, as well as from the Multilateral Council for Application of Luminescence Regulations, indicating that shininess is a frequently undervalued commodity. Yes, it's true. Most of the world is painfully dull. The sky is dull. The lake is dull. Most TV acting is dull and of absolutely no assistance. But we bring a little shininess into your life. Don't you think that today is the day you should purchase one of our solutions?

So here's your plan: purchase our shiny solution, utilize it whenever you wish, then call for assistance. Please note, you do not have to need assistance to call. For instance, you might simply want to say "Hello". Most of our customer service representatives are human, and they need human contact, too. So don't be shy to call.

Or you might want to experience Comprehensive Luminescence Saturation before our product actually arrives, something we totally understand.

Now that we are approaching 1,250 words, it's time to wrap things up, to bring it all to a rousing crescendo and deliver a solid call to action that will compel you to buy a crate of our solution, which you and everybody you know can utilize.

Purchase one for yourself. Purchase one for your neighbor. Purchase one for your neighbor's dog. Make the world around you shinier with new "Wonder Shine"!

Is your credit card ready? Call 1-800-UTI-LIZE.

Appendix B

Full text after plain language edit

Here is a new tool to fix your problem. Would you like a demonstration? If you use it for just five days, we know you'll love it. You'll want to buy it. In fact, you'll want to buy crates of it. Our technical Standards and Specifications Committee worked hard to create this futuristic product.

Get ready by installing a bigger mailbox.

The first thing you'll notice about our tool is how shiny it is. Indeed, it's the newest, shiniest one we have ever made. And we've made a few.

We call this shininess "Comprehensive Luminescence Saturation", or CLS for short.

Have you ever noticed how easy it is to buy those red, shiny apples? That's right, you pass right over those dull-looking organic apples. No zest. No life. Shiny is the way to go. That's the value we offer with CLS.

So we polished up our new tool to boost sales. You won't be able to resist our shiny new tool. You will have to buy it.

Then you'll have a shiny apple and a shiny tool, thanks to CLS technology.

We are proud of how useful this tool is. We don't charge you a penny extra for useless bells and whistles. Just for shininess. It took us many hours to research the exact wording that would sound most impressive. That cost us money. Sorry, but we have to pass on these costs.

You may use this tool free for a one-month trial. Use it first, buy it later. We know you'll be hooked because it's the shiniest on the market.

You might wonder what this new tool does. Most people don't care, as long as it's shiny. That's simple psychology. But some people feel the need to ask questions. And one of those questions, which our sales staff heard at least 3.63 times is, "What does it do? How do I use it?"

Our answer is simple. Yes, we have a lots of units ready to ship today. If you buy now, we'll send them all to you for half price. We love your enthusiasm, so we'll also send you:

- a free bottle of anti-dandruff shampoo
- a lifetime supply of cordial salutations

Nothing is impossible for our customers. In fact, that's part of our philosophy of shininess.

By the way, do you know how hard it is to write 1,250 words? We are only at 426 words here, and we said we would write 1,250 words on why you should buy the shiniest gadget this side of the Great Barrier Reef.

Let's talk about what to do when you need help. We are standing by, we've polished our buttons and are manning the phones. Our buttons are shiny and so are our phones. Oh, yes, when you need help, we'll be there. Just make sure to use the handy 1-800 number below. One of our helpful and shiny customer service reps will be able to help you.

The best way to get help is to call now. Why wait for the product to arrive? Pre-emptive calls can save time later. For instance, if it doesn't work when it gets there, you might think to call for help. But then you'll remember: "I don't have to call for help; I already called!"

Can we talk about the box our tool comes in? It's not shiny. Sorry. We thought about making it shiny, but we chose to focus on other things. Squareness was one of those things. The box has lots of right angles. Each corner is sharp (but not sharp enough to hurt you – please don't worry). Each side is flat (but not flat enough to hurt you – please don't worry).

Another key aspect of the packaging is color. Yes, after much debate and market research, we decided to give our boxes color. You'll be pleased to know that color is an option on all our boxes. This offer is for a limited time only. Use the color as you wish, but please order now, before this option is gone. After all, color doesn't grow on trees, right?

You can use the box, even without optional color, in many ways. You can put it in front of your door to hold it open. You can put it under a potted plant to reach more light. You can put it on a table to watch it. That's what Doctor Who did when so many boxes appeared from nowhere prior to an invasion of Earth.

Our boxes arriving at your door are not a sign of a coming invasion. Rather, they are a sign of help, as our tool will soon be in your hot little hands. All you have to do is open the box and take it out.

Please do not throw the box out the window. We worked hard to design it, and we don't want that effort to end up killing somebody beneath your window.

Just one small detail before you use our tool. You have to buy it first. We make it easy. We accept all major credit cards, cash and bricks of precious metals. Just ship us your solid gold, which we like more than flimsy credit cards, and we'll ship you a box of our shiny tool.

If you are still unsure, think about this: your solar system really needs more shininess. Even the International Planetary Subcommittee on Desperation says so. So does the Multilateral Council for Application of Luminescence Regulations. It says that shininess is often undervalued. Yes, it's true. Most of the world is painfully dull. The sky is dull. The lake is dull. Most TV acting is dull and of absolutely no help. But we bring a little shininess into your life. Don't you think that today is the day you should buy our tool?

So here's your plan:

- buy our shiny tool
- use it whenever you wish
- then call for help

Please note, you don't have to need help to call. You might just want to say "Hello". Most of our customer service staff are human, and they need human contact, too. So don't be shy to call.

Or you might want to see what Comprehensive Luminescence Saturation is like before our tool actually arrives. We totally understand this.

We are almost at 1,250 words, so it's time to wrap things up with a bang. Buy a crate of our tool, enough for you and all your friends.

Buy one for yourself. Buy one for your neighbor. Buy one for your neighbor's dog. Make the world around you shinier with new "Wonder Shine"!

Is your credit card ready? Call 1-800-UTI-LIZE.