Tipsheet:

1

Writing in plain language is harder than you think but easier for everyone in the long run—especially your readers!

Plain language is a way of communicating so that everyone in your audience can easily understand. But what makes something plain language? According to the Center for Plain Language:

> A document, web site or other information is in plain language if the target audience can:
> * read it;
> * understand what they read; and
> * confidently act on it.[1]

In 1998, President Clinton made plain language a major government initiative. He wrote:

> By using plain language, we send a clear message about what the government is doing, what it requires, and what services it offers…. Plain language documents have logical organization; common, everyday words, except for necessary technical terms; 'you' and other pronouns; the active voice; and short sentences.[2]

Today, all of us who write can find immediate guidance on the principles of plain language at the government's website called plainlanguage.gov. The info in this tipsheet comes directly from its how-to's, tools, checklists, and examples, sometimes even verbatim.

Hard writing makes easy reading.

An old adage.

Update, May 2022

Of course, we've only tapped the surface of what you can find with a visit to plainlanguage.gov. You'll also find info and guidance on writing in plain language for the sake of your readers by visiting the resources we've listed on page 7. Enjoy!

And here are 10 plain-writing tips for starters.

#1 Write for the average reader.

Know the expertise and interest of your average reader, and write to that person. Don't write to the experts, the lawyers, or doctoral candidates, unless they're your intended audience.[3]

To communicate with the average reader, we need to write at the 6th to the 8th grade reading level.[4]

#2 Organize to serve the reader's needs.

The two most useful principles to remember about organizing your info to serve the reader:

• Put the most important material first and the exceptions last

• Organize material chronologically.

#3 Use helpful headings.

Headings help the reader find the way through your material. Headings should capture the essence of all the material under the heading—if they don't, you need more headings! You should have one or more headings on each page.

p.s. If you're writing for the web, use even more headings with less info under each. People skim and scan to find the answers to their questions quickly. Headings help them do this.

#4 Use "you" to speak to your reader.

Using pronouns pulls the reader into the document and makes the info more meaningful.

Use "you" for the reader ("I" when writing question headings from the reader's viewpoint) and "we" for your agency.

#5 Use active voice.

The single most powerful change we can make in writing is to use active voice, not passive. Active voice makes it clear *who* is doing *what*.

Active voice is generally shorter and clearer. Active sentences put the actor first (the subject), then the verb, then the object of the action. This direct structure propels the reader through your writing.

Examples

Passive: The tray of food was dropped by the waiter.

Active: The waiter dropped the tray of food.

Passive: Your request for funding has been denied by the review committee.

Active: The review committee denied your request for funding.[5]

Occasions to use the passive voice, not the active

Sometimes you will want to use the passive voice *intentionally*:

- when you don't know the actor ("John was murdered.")

- when the actor is unimportant to the point you're making ("The "senator was reelected.")

- when the emphasis is clearly not on the actor but on the acted upon ("The little girl was rescued.")[6]

#6 Use short sentences and short sections.

To help your reader get through your material, use short sentences, paragraphs, and sections. Readers get lost in long dense text with few headings. Chunking your material inserts white space, opening your document visually and making it more appealing.

Before:

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends a half hour or more of moderate physical activity on most days, preferably every day. The activity can include brisk walking, calisthenics, home care, gardening, moderate sports exercise, and dancing.

After:

Do at least 30 minutes of exercise, like brisk walking, most days of the week.

#7 Use concrete, familiar words.

Big words don't impress people, they just confuse. Define (and limit!) your abbreviations. Avoid foreign terms, latin terms, and legal terms.

Definitely avoid jargon! Readers complain about jargon more than any other writing fault. Every profession, trade, and organization has its own specialized terms. While we all complain about jargon, everyone writes it. We hate everyone else's jargon, but we love our own.

Replace complex words with simpler words, so your readers can concentrate on your content. Using simple, familiar words doesn't insult your readers' intelligence. It shows you care about being clear. So save longer or complex words for when they are really needed. Readers often skip over terms they don't understand, hoping to get their meaning from the rest of the sentence.

Plain language does not ban jargon and other specialist terms. But you need to understand your readers and match your language to their needs.

Check out this list of complex and simple words for the same thing!

Instead of….	Try…
a and/or b	a or b or both
accomplish	carry out, do
accorded	given
accordingly	so
addressees	you
advantageous	helpful
afford an opportunity	allow, let
apparent	clear, plain
assist, assistance	aid, help
commence	begin, start
comply with	follow
implement	carry out, start
in accordance with	by, following, per
in order that	for, so
in the amount of	for
in the event of	if
it is	(omit)
promulgate	issue, publish
subsequently	after, later, then
the use of	(omit)
this activity, command	us, we
utilize, utilization	use

Want the full list?

Visit plainlanguage.gov's list
(which includes the "dirty dozen"—the 12
words most likely to weaken your writing):

https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/
words/use-simple-words-phrases/

#8 Omit excess words.

Eliminate excess words. Challenge every word—do you need it? Pronouns, active voice, and base verbs help eliminate excess words. So does eliminating unnecessary modifiers. For example, in "HUD and FAA issued a joint report" you don't need "joint." In "this information is really critical" you don't need "really."

Excess words	Plain Alternatives
as a means of	to
as prescribed by	in, under
at a later date	later
at the present time	now, currently
constitutes	forms, makes up
for the purpose of	to, for
heretofore	until, now
on a monthly basis	monthly
pertaining to	of, about
related to	of
so as to	to
should it appear that	if
with regard to	about

Examples, You Say?

Before:
When the process of freeing a vehicle that has been stuck results in ruts or holes, the operator will fill the rut or hole created by such activity before removing the vehicle from the immediate area.

After:
If you make a hole while freeing a stuck vehicle, you must fill the hole before you drive away.

Before:
If the location of the land is in a state other than the state in which the tribe's reservation is located, the tribe's justification of anticipated benefits from the acquisition will be subject to greater scrutiny.

After:
If the land is in a different State than the tribe's reservation, we will scrutinize the tribe's justification of anticipated benefits more thoroughly.

#9 Place words carefully.

Place words carefully within a sentence. Keep subject, verb, and object close together. Put exceptions at the end. Place modifiers correctly—"we want only the best" not "we only want the best."

#10 Use no more than 2 or 3 subordinate levels.

Readers get lost when you use more than two or three levels in a document. If you find you need more levels, consider sub-dividing your top level into more parts.

Blueprint for building a plain language document from the ground up[7]

- **Foundation:** Get to know your audience—who they are, what you want them to learn or do, and why you are writing to them.

- **The frame:** Organize your information in a way that is logical to your readers.

- **Ground level:** Draft and edit the text using plain language guidelines.

- **Second level:** Test the text for readability and suitability for the audience.

- **Exterior design:** Design the document using plain language design criteria on everything from typeface to whitespace, from color to stock.
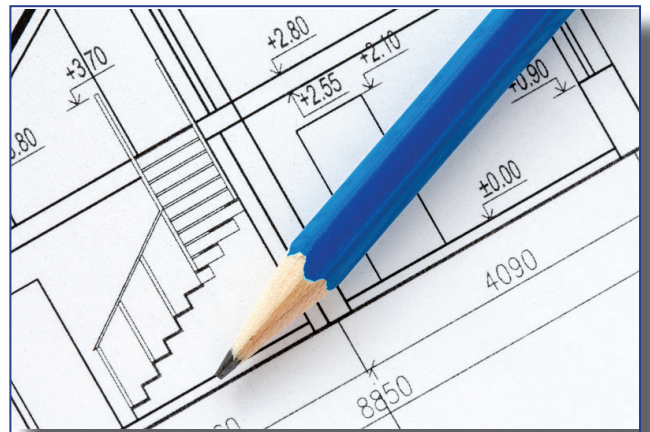
Resources of More Info

plainlanguage.gov is not the only source of indepth guidance on how to write plainly. It's a terrific one, to be sure, but here are other sites you can consult to learn more, find excellent examples, and take self-paced lessons. We've also thrown in two on readability formulas, which can help you calculate the reading level of your writing.

- NIH Plain Language Online Training https://www.nih.gov/institutes-nih/nih-office-director/office-communications-public-liaison/clear-communication/plain-language/training

- Center for Plain Language https://centerforplainlanguage.org/

- Plain Language Association International https://plainlanguagenetwork.org/

- Readability Formulas https://www.readabilityformulas.com/

- Style Writer's *Readability Calculations* https://www.stylewriter-usa.com/stylewriter-editing-readability.php

References

We would like to express our thanks to **plainlanguage.gov** for its excellent materials, freely used here unless noted below.

[1] Center for Plain Language. (n.d.). *Five steps to plain language.* Retrieved April 24, 2022 from https://centerforplainlanguage.org/learning-training/five-steps-plain-language/

[2] Locke, J. (2004). *A history of plain language in the United States government.* Online at: https://www.plainlanguage.gov/about/history/plain-language-in-the-government/

[3] plainlanguage.gov. (n.d.).*Document checklist for plain language.* Online at: https://www.plainlanguage.gov/resources/checklists/checklist/

[4] DuBay, W.H. (2004). *Principles of readability.* Online at: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED490073.pdf

[5] The Quality Writing Center. (n.d.). *Choosing between active and passive voice verbs when writing.* Online at: https://success.uark.edu/get-help/student-resources/passive-voice.php

[6] Bailey, E.P. (1996). *Plain English at work.* New York: Oxford. Quote from page 52.

[7] Stephens, C. (2000). *Blueprint for building a plain language document from the ground up.* (No longer available.)

We invite you to visit the Center for Parent Information and Resources, which supports the network of Parent Centers nationwide who serve families whose children have disabilities.

We have a great deal of information to share about disabilities, special education law, and parent rights. If you're interested in effective dissemination strategies, including how to write in plain language and how to write for the web, do visit us!

https://www.parentcenterhub.org

Questions? Concerns?
Contact:
Carolyn Hayer
CPIR Project Director
chayer@spanadvocacy.org

**Need information
on disabilities and the systems of
help that are available?**
Visit CPIR!
https://www.parentcenterhub.org

IDEAs
that
Work

Office of Special Education Programs
U.S. Department of Education