



# Plain Writing for Success

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[plainlanguage.gov](http://plainlanguage.gov)



**JUST DO IT!**

Nike corporate slogan

While an occasional disinclination to exercise is exhibited by all age cohorts, the likelihood of positive health outcomes makes even mildly strenuous physical activity all the more imperative.”

Nike slogan, if written by a nonprofit executive

# Learning Objectives

- Learn why we use plain language.
- Learn principles of plain language.

What do you use writing for?

# Plain Writing Act of 2010

As of October 13, 2011, we must use plain language in all communications with the public that involve either a benefit or a mandate to the public. A communication may be “a letter, publication, form, notice, or instruction (whether in paper or electronic form).”

# In a plain language document, readers can...

- Find what they need
- Understand it the ***first*** time they read it
- Use what they find

# Plain language is not:

- Writing less precisely
- “Dumbing down”
- Writing to a certain grade level
- Attempting to be folksy or too informal
- Leaving out necessary technical terms

# Write for your audience

- Think of why the user needs to read your document
- Keep in mind the average user's level of knowledge
- Write to everyone who is interested, not just to experts
- Even an expert will prefer a clearly written document

# How do I write for my audience?

*Not...*

*But...*

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What do I want to say?

What does my audience need to know?

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How can I protect my interests?

How can I serve my readers' interests?

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What can I do to impress my readers?

How can I communicate what my readers need to know?

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# What are the six main elements of plain language?

- Logical organization
- “You” and other pronouns
- The active voice
- Everyday words
- Short, clear sentences and paragraphs
- Lists and tables

# How do I organize to serve my readers?

- Anticipate questions readers are likely to ask
- Organize your document to answer those questions in the order that readers will ask them
- Keep the question-- “So what?”--in mind throughout

# Tool for good organization: informative headings

- Vague, one- or two-word headings (“Introduction,” “Comments”) force your reader to work harder
- Each reader comes to your document with questions; make it easy for them to find the answers

# Example of Informative Headings

## **1. Program Scope and Assessment Methods**

1.1 Time Frame of Study

1.2 Countries Covered

1.3 Technical Sectors Studied

## **2. Improvements in Program Design**

2.1 Improving Problem Assessments

2.2 Improving Targeting within Countries

2.3 Improving the Integration of Program Interventions

# Be careful with question headings

Don't say:

Am I eligible for benefits if I am the widow of a veteran, have never remarried, and have no children?

Do say:

When am I eligible for benefits?

What are the main elements of plain language?



# Use "you" and other pronouns to speak directly to readers

- Familiar words increase readability
- Addressing the reader directly gets the reader's attention
- Using pronouns eliminates lots of words

# Using pronouns

- Use “we” to refer to your agency
- Use “you” for the reader
- Use “I” in question headings

Define “we” and “you” in the definitions section or in the text.

Note: Your organization may have its own rule on this!

## Third Person (Nouns)

If the Health Department finds that an individual has received a payment to which the individual was not entitled, whether or not the payment was due to the individual's fault or misrepresentation, the individual shall be liable to repay the Department the total sum of the payment to which the individual was not entitled.

(54 words)

## Second Person ("You")

# When pronouns won't work

- If you're addressing more than one audience, "you" may be confusing
- If you refer readers to more than one office within your organization, "we" may be confusing

What are the main elements of plain language?



# Avoiding Passive Voice

- Can disguise who does what: *The memo was written yesterday.*
- Is often awkward: *Consultation with respondents was implemented to calculate the estimated burden.*
- Is often wordy: *The application must be completed by the applicant and received by the financial office before the deadline set by that office.*
- Makes your writing drag: *The pace of your writing is slowed by the passive voice.*

# Sometimes (but not too often) passive is OK

Your car has been stolen.

Doer unknown

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Presidents are elected every four years.

Doer obvious

---

Her outfit was covered with glitter.

Doer doesn't matter

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# Move the doer in front of the verb

*Don't say...*

*Do say...*

---

The class will be taught by  
Susan.

---

Qualified applicants are  
sought.

---

# Drop part of the verb

*Don't say...*

*Do say...*

---

Exercises are found at the  
back of the book.

---

That procedure is  
considered outdated.

---

# Change the verb

*Don't say...*

---

The new procedures are  
contained in the appendix.

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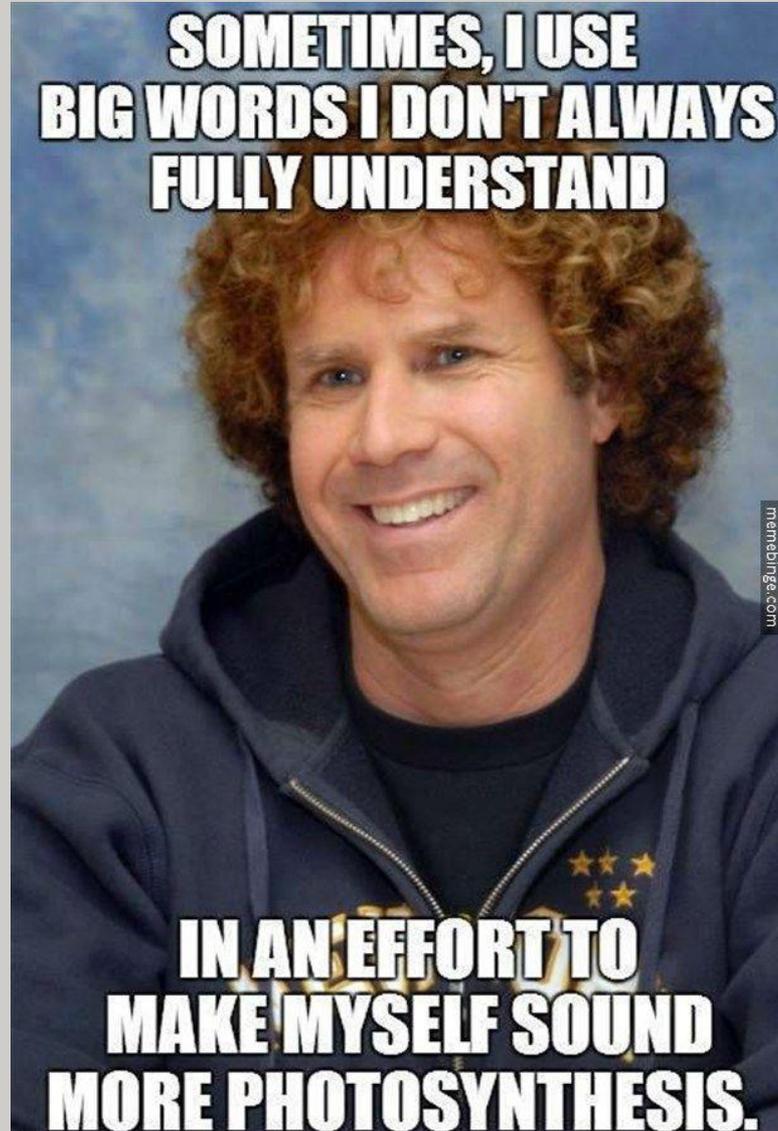
Your letter was not  
received.

---

*Do say...*

# Exercise

What are the main elements of plain language?



Instead of...

Use...

Prior to

Subsequently

Utilize

Implement

Initiate

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---

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# Avoid verbs disguised as nouns

*Don't say...*

*Do say...*

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Conduct an analysis

---

Present a report

---

Conduct an assessment

---

Provide assistance

---

Perform an evaluation

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# Avoid confusing words and constructions

- Don't use two different terms for same thing
- Be careful about strings of nouns
- Minimize abbreviations and acronyms; be sure to define them

# Careful about strings of nouns

Using nouns as adjectives (“attributes”):

- Can save space
- Can be helpful for clarifying relationships

*Example:* The firm produces sheet and film used for the packaging of products and other purposes.

But they can be hard to follow if overdone:

*Example:* United States Requests Dispute Settlement Panel in Tuna Dolphin NAFTA Choice of Forum Dispute

# Avoid legal or technical jargon

- Replace “pursuant to” with “under” or “in accordance with”
- Replace (or drop!) “herewith,” “thereof,” “aforementioned,” “howsoever,” and the like.
- Replace most Latin with English (*inter alia* → among others)
- Replace technical words with simpler ones **or** explain them (adjudication → the legal process in which a judge reviews evidence and argument and decides a case)

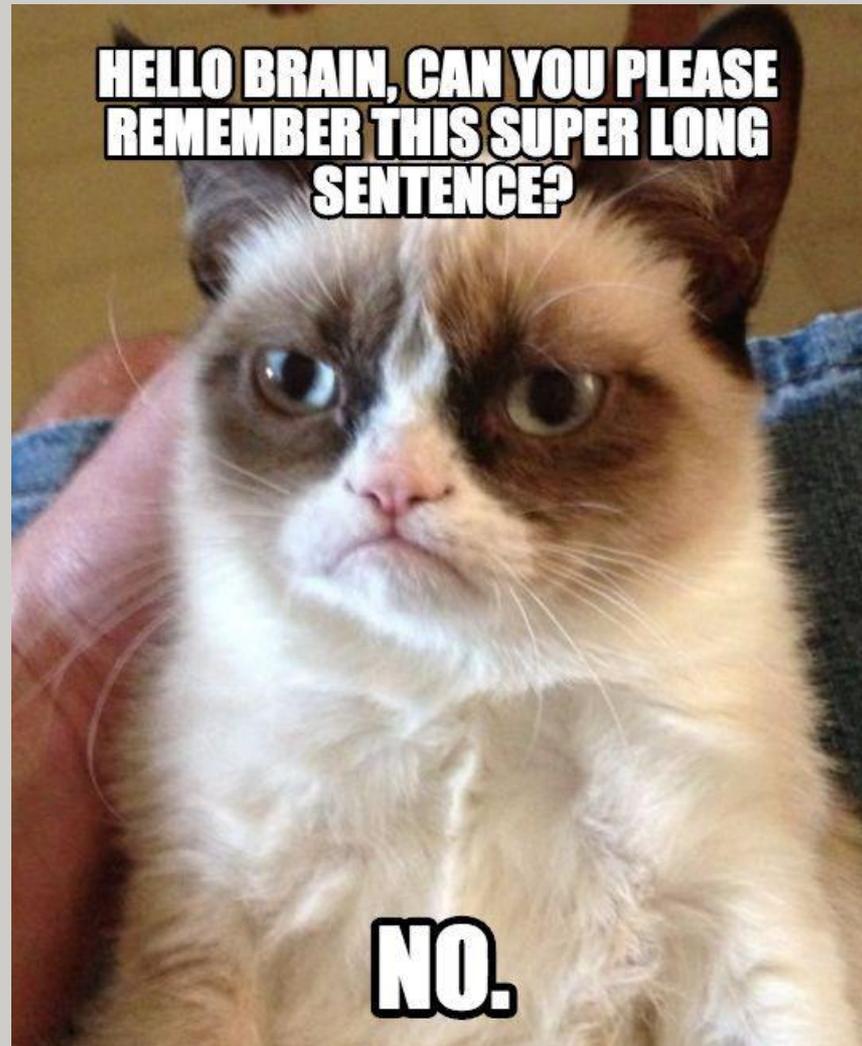
# Find shorter ways of saying...

- At the present time ...
- Due to the fact that ...
- Effect modifications ...
- In a timely manner ...
- In the event that ...
- Set forth in ...
- Until such time as ...

# Find a shorter way of saying...

The regulations in this part do not invalidate, modify, or impose any additional restrictions or permitting requirements on any activities permitted at any time under the general mining laws.

What are the main elements of plain language?



# Keep it short

- Aim for an **average** length of 20 words per sentence
- Maximum sentence length: 40 words
- Use your computer to count words (click “tools,” then click “word count”)
- Shorten sentences by using plain language (everyday words, unsmothered verbs)

# Keep it short

## Use short paragraphs

- Limit a paragraph to one subject or step
- Aim for no more than 7 lines (10 in technical reports)

*And in longer texts . . .*

## ... Don't subdivide too much

Adding headings, etc., to group your text into smaller pieces helps greatly. But too many levels:

- Confuse the reader
- Make it easy to lose sight of the main point
- Result in lengthy citations

# Place words carefully

- Put subjects and objects close to their verbs
- Put conditionals such as "only" next to words they modify
- Put all other modifiers next to the words they modify
- Put exceptions and long conditions after the main idea, not before or in the middle

# Don't start with a long exception or condition

Except to the extent that directives of the United States Coast Guard have expressly or implicitly preempted inconsistent state laws and regulations or as otherwise provided by subsection (a), vessels and their operation on all waters subject to NPS jurisdiction are governed by non-conflicting boating safety laws and regulations of the State within whose interior boundaries a park area or portion thereof is located.

# Exercise

What are the main elements of plain language?



# List, list, O list ...

Lists come in two major types: (1) run-in lists or (2) stacked (vertical) lists.

Hmmm.

Lists come in two major types:

- run-in lists or
- stacked (vertical) lists.

# List, list, O list

- You can separate the pieces of a run-on list from each other using numbers or letters.
- You can separate the pieces of a basic stacked list using numbers, letters, or bullets. Bullets are much more flexible.

# Why use stacked lists?

Stacked lists make it easy for the reader to identify all items or steps in a process, add blank space for easy reading, and help your reader to see the structure of your document.

# Why use stacked lists?

Stacked lists:

- Make it easy for the reader to identify all items or steps in a process
- Add blank space for easy reading
- Help your reader to see the structure of your document

The items in your list must flow grammatically from the lead-in

**Let's try an example.**

Each compact must contain:

- Provisions required by the Clean Water Act;
- Are in compliance with other applicable Federal laws; and
- Are consistent with this part.

# Corrected Text

Each compact must ~~[contain]~~:

1. Contain provisions required by the Clean Water Act;
2. Comply ~~[are in compliance]~~ with other applicable Federal laws; and
3. Be ~~[are]~~ consistent with this part.

# Exercise

# Why use tables?

Tables:

- Make it easy to take in complex material at a glance
- Make it easy to locate specific provisions
- Diagram your idea and make its logic and structure clear
- Save words

# How can I spot a potential table?

Look for:

- A series of conditions and results (“ifs” and “thens”)
- Short or repetitive sentences about a single subject
- A very involved list that includes qualifications or conditions

# Example

## **§ 50.30 What must I include in my FOIA request?**

Your initial FOIA request for information must be in writing and must include all of the following:

- (a) A description of the records you seek, as required by § 50.31;
- (b) Information on whether and how you will pay any processing fees, as required by § 50.32;
- (c) Your complete mailing address, as required by § 50.33; and
- (d) Additional information to assist us in processing your request, as required by § 50.34.

# We can make it into a table

§ 50.30 What must I include in my FOIA request?

Your initial FOIA request for information must be in writing and must include all of the following:

<b>Your request must include...</b>	<b>as required by...</b>
(a) A description of the records you seek	§ 50.31
(b) Information on whether and how you will pay any processing fees	§ 50.32
(c) Your complete mailing address	§ 50.33
(d) Additional information to assist us in processing your request	§ 50.34

# Our main tools – Use as many as you can

- ✓ Logical organization
- ✓ “You” and other pronouns
- ✓ The active voice
- ✓ Common, everyday words
- ✓ Short sentences and paragraphs
- ✓ Lists and tables