U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
PLAIN WRITING TOOLS AND RESOURCES

OCTOBER 2011

USDA Plain Writing… It Matters

- Police Begin Campaign to Run Down Jaywalkers
- Enraged Cow Injures Farmer with Ax
- Farmer Bill Dies in House
- Teacher Strikes Idle Kids
- Miners Refuse to Work after Death
- Red Tape Holds Up New Bridges
- Typhoon Rips Through Cemetery; Hundreds Dead
- Iraqi Head Seeks Arms

| What is plain writing? | Writing for your audience. | Organizing your writing. | Tools and techniques for good writing. | Now write! |

The Plain Writing Act

The Plain Writing Act of 2010 requires Federal agencies to use "clear government communication that the public can understand and use."

Agencies are required to use plain writing in every paper or electronic letter, publication, form, notice, or instruction.

Our Pledge

Clear

Useful

Understandable

Plain Language

USDA's Plain Writing Pledge:

We at the Department of Agriculture (USDA) are committed to improving our service to the public by writing in plain language. By October 2011, we will use plain language in any new or substantially revised document that:

- Provides information about any of our services and benefits;
- Is needed to obtain any of our benefits or services; or,
- Explains how to comply with a requirement that we administer or enforce.

We pledge to provide information that is clear, useful, and understandable in every paper or electronic letter, publication, form, notice, or instruction we publish.

USDA Plain Writing Web Page:
http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=PLAIN_WRITING

What is plain writing?

Plain writing is communication that your readers can understand the first time they read it.

In a plain language document, readers can….

- find what they need,
- understand what they find, and
- use what they find to meet their needs.

What are the main elements of plain writing?

- Logical organization
- "You" and other pronouns
- Active voice
- Common, everyday words
- Short sentences
- Lists and tables

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Plain Writing is not –

- Writing less precisely
- "Dumbing down", playful, or baby talk
- Attempting to be folksy or too informal
- Leaving out necessary technical or legal terms

Why Use Plain Writing?

Plain writing:

- Shows customer focus
- Communicates effectively
- Eliminates barriers
- Reduces time spent explaining
- Improves compliance

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Write for Your Audience

- Think of why the user needs to read your document

- Keep in mind the average user's knowledge level

- Write to everyone who is interested, not just to experts

- Even an expert will prefer a clearly written document

- Anticipate questions readers are likely to ask

- Organize your document to answer questions in the order that readers will ask them

Use Headings

- Headings add visual interest and organizational elements to documents that:

  - Help the reader quickly find relevant information
  - Break up information
  - Increase "white space" on the page
  - Help the reader navigate the document

- Why should I try question headings?

  - Questions help readers relate to the information
  - Questions help you organize the information
  - Question headings help readers find what they are looking for more easily

How do I write for my audience?

Not...	But....
What do I want to say?	What does my audience need to know?
How can I protect my Interests?	How can I serve my readers' interests?
What can I do to impress my readers?	How can I communicate what my readers need to know?

Organizing Your Writing

Before you write…

- Begin with the End in Mind
- Put Important Material Up Front
- Keep Things Short

Begin with the End in Mind

- Remember what you want the reader to know or learn
  Write for the reader!

- Incorporate visual elements to help the reader focus and remember important points
  - Use bullets, <u>underline</u>, **bold**, *italics* and lots of white space
  - Don't overdo it!

- Use Informative Headings
  - Headers help the reader move through your document
  - Headers help the reader identify key points
  - Each reader comes to your document with questions; make it easy for them to find the answers

- Make your point clearly and concisely
  - Don't make the reader guess what you mean
  - Express, don't impress

Put Important Material Up Front

First…	Then….
General	Specific
Summary	Process
Conclusions	Analysis
Requests	Justifications

Keep Things Short

- Use short paragraphs
    - Limit a paragraph to one subject or step
    - Smaller pieces of information are easier to read and understand
    - Aim for no more than 7 lines

- Use short sentences
    - Address only one subject/thought/idea in each sentence
    - Avoid complexity and confusion
    - Aim for 20 words per sentence or fewer

Tools and Techniques for Good Writing

- Use pronouns
- Use active voice, not passive voice
- Avoid hidden verbs and excess words—cut the clutter!
- Use consistent terms
- Use common, everyday words
- Use short sentences
- Use lists and tables (when appropriate)

Use Pronouns

- Pronouns:
    - Speak directly to your readers
    - Make your writing relevant to your readers
    - Require less translation from your readers
    - Eliminate words

- Using pronouns:
    - Use "we" or "our" to refer to your agency
        *Example: **USDA's** mission serves the public.*
        *Better: **Our** mission serves the public.*
    - Use "you" for the reader
    - If you are using a Q&A format, use "I" in the questions and "you" in the text

- When pronouns don't work:
    - If you're addressing more than one audience
    - If you refer readers to more than one office within your organization

Use Active, Not Passive Voice

■ Active voice is more clear, concise, and direct

How do I write in the active voice?

Tell your reader **who does what** – in that order.

Examples:

- You must submit your application by November 10.
- The Hiring Official will decide on your eligibility within 30 days of receiving your application.
- We will not consider any comments that we receive after the deadline.

Two Ways to Identify
Passive Voice

- The person doing the action usually follows the verb

    Example: Arlene <u>was promoted</u> by her boss.

    Better*: Arlene's boss promoted her.*

- The verb has two parts: The verb "to be" plus the past participle of another verb

    Example: The house <u>will be leased</u> by Fred.

    Better: Fred will lease the house.

Why Avoid Passive Voice?

Passive voice	Active voice
• Can disguise who does what:	• Makes it clear who does what:
Example: *The memo was written yesterday.*	*Better:* *The Director wrote the memo yesterday.*

Why Avoid Passive Voice? – cont.

Passive voice	Active voice
• Is awkward:	• Is concise:
Example: *Consultation from respondents was obtained to determine the estimated burden.*	***Better:*** *We must receive your completed application by the deadline that we establish.*

Why Avoid Passive Voice? – cont.

Passive voice	Active voice
• Is wordy:	• Is natural:
Example: *The application must be completed by the applicant and received by the financial office at the time designated by that office.*	*Better:* *We consulted with respondents to determine the estimated burden.*

Why Avoid Passive Voice? – cont.

Passive voice	Active voice
• Makes your writing drag	• Makes your writing move
Example: *The pace of your writing is slowed by passive voice.*	*Better:* *Passive voice slows the pace of your writing.*

Sometimes (But Not Often) Passive is Okay

Your car has been stolen.	**Doer unknown**
Presidents are elected every four years.	**Doer obvious**
Her outfit was covered with glitter.	**Doesn't matter**
All annual leave has been canceled.	**Doer better left unnamed**
The report should have been done by now.	**Avoids direct attack**

Avoid Passive by Moving the Doer in Front of the Verb

Don't say....	Do say...
The class will be taught by Susan.	Susan will teach the class.
Qualified applicants are sought.	We're seeking qualified applicants.

Avoid Passive by Dropping Part of the Verb

Don't say….	Do say…
Exercises are found at the back of the book.	Exercises are at the back of the book.
That procedure is considered outdated.	That procedure is outdated.

Avoid Passive by Changing the Verb

Don't say….	Do say…
The new procedures are contained in the appendix.	The appendix includes the new procedures.
Your letter was not received.	Your letter didn't arrive.

Avoid Hidden Verbs

Hidden verbs are verbs disguised as nouns. They are generally longer than their true verb forms.

Instead of…	**Try…**
• Conduct an analysis	• Analyze
• Present a report	• Report
• Do an assessment	• Assess
• Provide assistance	• Help
• Come to the conclusion of	• Conclude

Eliminate Excess Words

- Eliminate "clutter" in your writing—get rid of excess words

- Eliminate words that are pretentious and long

- Limit jargon and acronyms and unnecessary technical terms
  - Define scientific/technical terms—don't assume the reader knows what you mean

- Use contractions—they aren't bad

- Some common sources of wordiness:
  - Passive voice
  - Redundancies
  - Prepositional phrases
  - Hidden verbs
  - Unnecessary modifiers
  - Failure to use pronouns

Use Consistent Terms

- Avoid "**shall**." It is ambiguous and is not used in everyday speech. There are many alternatives that clarify "shall."

To express:	Use:
Is required to - obligation	Must
Is required not to/is not allowed to - prohibition	Must not
Is permitted to – discretionary action	May
Is not permitted to	May not
Ought to - recommendation	Should
Future	Will
From Richard Wydick, *Plain English for Lawyers,* 5th edition (2005).	

Use Common, Everyday Words

Instead of…	Try…
• anticipate	• expect
• attempt	• try
• commence	• begin, start
• demonstrate	• show, prove
• implement	• start
• in the event that	• if
• submit	• send, give
• terminate	• end, cancel

Use Lists

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

- Don't make lists too long
  - Research suggests seven items are the maximum that work well in a list
  - Longer lists are hard to navigate

Use Tables

Tables:

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

Now Write!

- Writing should communicate quickly and easily what you want the reader to know or understand

- Writing should be clear and concise

- Remember, plain writing uses:
    - Logical organization
    - "You" and other pronouns
    - Active voice
    - Common, everyday words
    - Short sentences
    - Lists and tables

Resources

- USDA Plain Writing Web Site

  http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=PLAIN_WRITING

- Plain Language: Improving Communication from the Federal Government to the Public

  http://www.plainlanguage.gov

- SEC Website: Handbook for legal and technical documents http://www.sec.gov/pdf/handbook.pdf

- Federal Register Guide

  http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/write/plain-language/

- Helpful Training tool from the NIH http://plainlanguage.nih.gov/CBTs/PlainLanguage/login.asp

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