Clear and Concise Writing

*Clarity is the goal of a good writer. Brevity is the result.*

- State the document’s purpose and bottom line
- Eliminate filler and unnecessary content
- Place the most important information at the beginning and include background information (when necessary) toward the end

What is Plain Language?

It’s communication your audience can understand the first time they read it. Plain language is defined by results—it is easy to read, understand, and use.

If your customers don’t understand your documents, you may have to . . .
- answer phone calls
- write explanatory letters and/or documents
- litigate

Your goal is to be understood, not to impress.

What Plain English Isn’t

*It isn’t . . .*

- patronizing or oversimplifying.
- banning new words or removing all long words.
- communicating in an amateur way.
- as easy as you might think.

“Golden Rule of Writing”

“Write unto others as you would want them to write unto you.”
Problems with Writing

➢ Specific language - using language specific to your work that others may not understand; avoiding hidden verbs

➢ Passive voice - Object – Action – Actor (creates longer sentences)

➢ Lack of personal pronouns that engage the reader

➢ Strings of nouns

➢ Negative construction

➢ Sentences too long

Use specific language

* Use common words to communicate clearly

Buzzword users prefer the big vague words: "utilize" rather than "use"; "implement" rather than "do"; "facilitate" rather than "do, make possible, or make easy."

Government writing should be dignified, but it doesn’t have to be pompous. Everyday words are the “workhorses” of communication.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DON’T WRITE</th>
<th>WRITE</th>
<th>DON’T WRITE</th>
<th>WRITE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>construct, fabricate</td>
<td>make</td>
<td>utilize</td>
<td>use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>initiate, commence, implement</td>
<td>begin, start</td>
<td>afforded an opportunity</td>
<td>allowed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>terminate</td>
<td>end</td>
<td>substantial portion</td>
<td>large part</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BAD    Through utilization of this procedure, it is hoped that the anomaly is rectified.

GOOD   By using this method, we hope to correct the problem.

P    Financial compensation will be provided.
Uncover the Hidden Verbs – remove suffixes such as tion, sion, ment, ure, ability, al, able, ible, ance

*It forces you to rephrase your sentence and cut out wordy phrases.*

→ **Hidden Verbs:** If you cannot make the payment of the $100 fee, you must make an application in writing before you file your tax return.

→ **Uncovered:** If you cannot pay the $100 fee, you must apply in writing before you File your tax return. (22% fewer words)

**Common hidden verbs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Hidden Verb (Noun)</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Hidden Verb (Noun)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>accept</td>
<td>acceptance</td>
<td>complete</td>
<td>completion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pay</td>
<td>payment</td>
<td>introduce</td>
<td>introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>determine</td>
<td>determination</td>
<td>provide</td>
<td>provision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>approve</td>
<td>approval</td>
<td>fail</td>
<td>failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>decide</td>
<td>decision</td>
<td>arrange</td>
<td>arrangement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apply</td>
<td>applicable</td>
<td>investigate</td>
<td>investigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>document</td>
<td>documentation</td>
<td>inform</td>
<td>information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>separate</td>
<td>separation</td>
<td>apply</td>
<td>application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responsible</td>
<td>responsibility</td>
<td>submit</td>
<td>submission</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Uncover the hidden verbs in the following examples:

P It is the determination of this office that justification is lacking for the suspension of payment.

P The requirement of the department is that employees work seven and one-half hours a day.

**Active, direct verbs - avoid passive verbs**

“to be” (is, am, are, was, were, be, being, been)

*The simplest sentence structure is based on actor - action - object.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTOR</th>
<th>ACTION</th>
<th>OBJECT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Smith</td>
<td>investigates</td>
<td>claims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We</td>
<td>approved</td>
<td>your application.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Passive voice reverses the natural, active order of sentences. Passive construction is confusing.

PASSIVE: The regulation [object] was written [action] by the drafter [actor].

ACTIVE: The drafter [actor] wrote [action] the regulation [object].

Recognizing passive verbs – form of “to be” + an “ed” or “en” verb

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>a</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>c</th>
<th>d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>was written</td>
<td>will write</td>
<td>has written</td>
<td>is writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>shall deliver</td>
<td>may deliver</td>
<td>is delivering</td>
<td>is delivered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>has sent</td>
<td>were sent</td>
<td>will send</td>
<td>are sending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>should revoke</td>
<td>will be revoking</td>
<td>have revoked</td>
<td>to be revoked</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**P** The submission you filed will be reviewed by the judge.

**P** Additional information can be obtained by employees from our website.

*Passive voice is appropriate when the actor is unknown, unimportant, or obvious.*

**Use pronouns**

*Why are pronouns so important?*

- They engage the reader.
- They identify who will do what.
- They eliminate words.
- They make your writing more personal.

The Agency = we  The reader = you  The writer = I

As much as possible, call the reader “you.” You wouldn't use words like “the applicant” if you were speaking to someone across a desk from you.

**Examples:**

Applicants must send us . . . Please send us your . . .
We always tell customers before we . . . We will tell you before we . . .
Advice is available from . . . You can get advice from . . .

**Writer-focused** – To prevent us from losing money, our bank now requires identification when cashing large checks

**Reader-focused** – To protect your account, we ask for identification when cashing large checks.
Avoid strings of nouns

**POOR**  The plan contained detailed productivity, safety, Equal Employment Opportunity and Affirmative Action strategies.

**BETTER**  The plan contained detailed strategies on productivity, safety, Equal Employment Opportunity, and Affirmative Action.

**P**  The outdated file elimination procedures were sent by the Secretary of State’s office.

**Negative & Positive Language**

*Negative* phrasing and language . . .

- tells the recipient what can’t be done
- implies a subtle tone of blame
- may cause conflict and confrontation when it isn’t necessary or desired

*Positive* phrasing and language . . .

- tells the recipient what can be done
- suggests alternatives and choices available to the recipient
- sounds helpful and encouraging rather than bureaucratic

**Positive Statements** - write statements in *positive* form rather than negative form

**NEGATIVE**  A decision will not be made unless all information has been received.

**POSITIVE**  *A decision will be made when all information has been received.*

**Write for an average sentence length of 15 - 17 words**

- Mix short sentences with longer ones to create interest.
- Write readable sentences that are **simple**, **active**, **affirmative**, and **declarative**.
- Write simple sentences expressing one idea.
- Break complex information into bullets.
BAD 7-1-2121 Publication and content of notice – proof of publication

(10) If the newspaper fails to publish a second notice, the local government unit must be considered to have met the requirements of this section as long as the local government unit submitted the required information prior to the submission deadline and the notice was posted in three public places in the county that were designated by resolution and, if the county has an active website, was posted on the county’s website at least 6 days prior to the hearing or other action for which notice was required. 2015 MCA (87-word sentence)

BETTER 7-1-2121 Publication and content of notice – proof of publication

(10) A local government unit will meet proof of publication if it
(a) submits the required information to the newspaper prior to the printing deadline;
(b) posts the notice in three places in the county (designated by resolution); and
(c) posts the notice on the county’s website, if active, at least six days before the required action or hearing.

Create a Reader-Friendly Format

1. Use headings and subheadings
   - Question headings
     - How do I Locate the Records I Need?
     - Will You Be Charged for this Service?
   - Statement headings – short phrases
     - What to Do in an Emergency
     - How to Appeal this Decision
   - Topic headings – Most “formal” way to divide information
     - Permits
     - Forms

2. Highlight the lead sentence in a paragraph

3. Keep paragraphs relatively short
   - One idea per paragraph
   - Maximum length – 6 lines, if possible
4. Layout of correspondence

- Use block style – reader friendly and clear
- Leave right margin ragged
- Leave plenty of white space
- Use bulleted lists

References


- Easy to follow rules for grammar and punctuation.


- Required reading.


- First cousin to Strunk & White, this book has two sections: One on a general approach to writing, valuable in itself; the other on specific situations, such as technical writing, writing on the job, humor, even sports.