



September 28, 2011

PLAIN LANGUAGE AND WRITING FOR THE WEB

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1



Presenter

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2



Overview and Objectives

This webinar will provide an update on plain writing principles and the law. If you write for the web, the intranet, articles, e-newsletters, etc., this class will allow you to

- learn plain writing principles
- use strategies and tactics for making content plain
- see before-and-after examples
- hear how the Plain Writing Act of 2010 affects government agencies
- find where to get additional training
- discover the federal plain language community

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3



What is plain language?

Definition

Plain language is a style of writing that allows readers to:

- Quickly find what they need
- Understand what they read
- Use what they read to fulfill their needs the **first** time they read or hear it.

Plain language is particularly important on the web!

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4



What is plain language?

- Help the reader **find** the information
- Help the reader **understand** the information

Remember: If your document doesn't do both, it's not plain language.



What plain language is not

- Writing in baby talk, or trying to be folksy, playful, or politically correct
- Stripping out necessary technical and legal information
- Doing editorial "polishing" after you finish writing
- Writing imprecisely
- Using pronouns in a Q and A format
- Something the lawyers, Federal Register, or OMB will never go for
- Easy



Why use plain language?

Plain language is an essential part of open government. The final OMB guidance on the Plain Writing Act of 2010 states that creating documents using plain writing can reduce agency costs.

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



Veterans Benefits Form Letter Revision Results: Jackson, Mississippi, DVA Office

	Old Letter	New Letter
Calls per month per counselor	9.4	1.6
Calls per year x 10 counselors	1128	192



What governs plain language?

The Plain Writing Act of 2010

According to the Plain Writing Act of 2010, all new government documents that meet the following criteria must be written in plain language by October 13, 2011:

- Documents that are necessary to get government benefits or services, or for filing taxes
- Documents that provide information about federal benefits or services
- Documents that explain to the public how to comply with a federal requirement

The legislation applies to both paper and electronic letters, publications, forms, notices, and instructions.



What governs plain language?

Guidelines and Documentation

OMB Guidance

OMB provided final guidance on April 13, 2011.

The Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN)

PLAIN was founded in the mid-1990s with the goal of using plain language for all government communications. OMB guidance encourages agencies to follow the PLAIN guide (available on plainlanguage.gov) when implementing plain language.

Howto.gov

Howto.gov, an Office of Citizen Services and Innovative Technologies (OCSIT) website, recommends using plain language on government websites and gives guidelines on that and other best practices.



Plain Language = Customer Service

Executive Order--Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service

“Government managers must learn from what is working in the private sector and apply these best practices to deliver services better, faster, and at lower cost.”

“Such best practices include increasingly popular lower-cost, self-service options accessed by the Internet or mobile phone and improved processes that deliver services faster and more responsively, reducing the overall need for customer inquiries and complaints.”



Use plain language techniques

- Identify your audience and organize content for them
- Use design features such as headers, bulleted lists, and tables
- Keep your sentences and paragraphs short
- Use pronouns, active voice, and verbs
- Choose simple, everyday words
- Trim excess content



Critical techniques for web writing

We don't have time to talk about all the plain language techniques on the lists (and they aren't even all the techniques), so we'll focus on a few that are especially important to writing for the web.



People don't read on the web

People scan.

Nielsen and Morkes, in a famous 1997 study, found that 79 percent of their test users always scanned any new page they came across; only 16 percent read word-by-word.

A recent [study of people reading long-form text on tablets](#) finds higher reading speeds than in the past, but they're still slower than reading print.

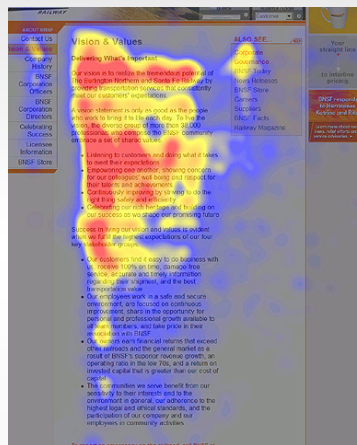


People rarely read dense text anywhere

- Eye tracking research shows how people deal with a page with dense text.
- The map on the next slide is from Jakob Nielsen's website, useit.com
- It shows the typical "F" pattern of reading. Red shows the most-read parts of the page.
- On average, users read the first 2 words on each line.



Heatmap example





Some sobering facts

- Based on an analysis of 45,237 page views, Nielsen found that people read an average of 18% of what's on a page.
- However, as the number of words on a page goes up, the percentage read goes down.
- To get people to read half your words, you have to limit your page to 110 words or fewer.



17



Identify your audience

DON'T

- Write for your supervisor or co-workers

DO

- Write for your audience
- Make a list of who reads your content
- Decide why they read it and what information they need
- Address your audiences' top tasks
- Check your search terms log



18



Print vs. Web

Print ...

- Tells a story
- Is linear — has a beginning, middle, and end
- Is often consumed in a relaxed setting
- Written in complete sentences

Web ...

- Easy to scan
- Quick, accessible source
- Minimal text
- User-friendly — Users may be stressed, impatient, skeptical, or disoriented
- Interactive



Page type

- Before you write content, identify the type of page you're working on.
- There are three main types of pages:
 - Homepages (portals)
 - Connector or pathway pages
 - Content pages
- The first two types should contain a *minimum* of text.



Writing content for page type

When you start thinking about content pages, keep these points in mind:

- Think topics, not stories.
- Have a conversation with your customer. Eliminate anything that's not part of the conversation.
- A very few content pages might contain more extensive information.



Remember!

- On average, visitors read about 18% of what's on the page.
- The more words you have, the lower the percent they read.



ORGANIZE TO SERVE YOUR READER

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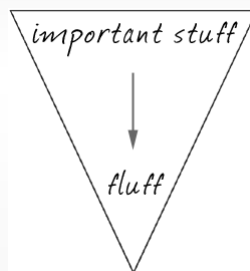
23



Foreground your content

Use the inverted pyramid. Begin with the shortest and clearest statement you can make about your topic.

Put conclusions and key info first, then background:



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24

Screenshot: How to get through the line faster



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25

Seconds count!

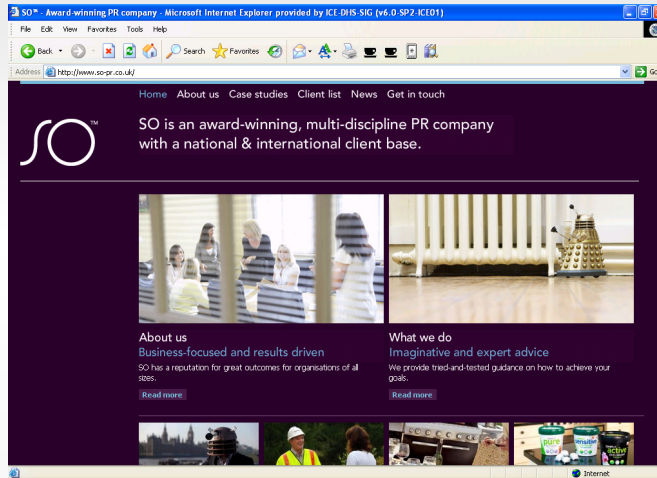
- First 11 characters of a page title most important
- People decide in 5 seconds if your site is useful
 - http://www.uie.com/articles/five_second_test/
- Divide information into small clear pieces ("Chunk Content")
 - Use headings to cluster or chunk similar content (great with similar or related topics)

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26



Screenshot: SO PR Company



27



Omit information your audience doesn't need

- Remember, your web content is a conversation with your customer. If material doesn't belong in the conversation, it doesn't belong on the web.
- Research what your customers really want.
- You aren't Santa Claus. You can't serve all customers. If you serve your top 3 or 4 customer groups, you're doing well.

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28



Content your customers probably don't want

- When your office was formed
- Who is the head
- What the head said the day he was sworn in
- What the head looks like
- What your annual report from 3 years ago looked like
- How the bureau is organized
- What you did for customers 5 years ago
- The text of a law that authorizes your office



Organize to serve the reader

- Anticipate questions an informed reader is likely to ask
- Organize writing to answer questions in the order the reader will ask them



Now what?

- Customers come to your site to perform a task.
- They come because they expect to get self-service.
- How well does your website allow customers to get something done?





Identify customers' top tasks


People come to your website with a specific task in mind. If your website doesn't help them complete that task, they'll leave.

Identify the mission—the purpose—of your website, to help you clarify the #1 top task your website should help people accomplish.



Check search terms. Consider usability testing.



DESIGN




33



Use headings

- Allow the reader to quickly find relevant information
- Increase white space on the page to break up information
- Use informative headings help the reader navigate the document



34



Try question headings

- Readers have questions in mind
- Questions help readers relate to the information
- Questions help you organize the information



How do I know if I am eligible to extend my stay in the United States?

You may apply for an extension of stay in the United States if:

- You were lawfully admitted into the United States as a nonimmigrant;
- You have not committed any act that makes you ineligible to receive an immigration benefit;
- There is no other factor that requires you to depart the United States prior to extending status (for example, a USCIS officer may determine that you should obtain a new visa prior extending your status); and
- You submit an application for an extension of stay before the expiration date on your Form I-94. (There are certain very limited circumstances under which USCIS will excuse a late submission.)



Use lists

- Make it easy for the reader to identify all items or steps in a process
- Use numbers for steps in process, bullets for everything else
- Add blank space for easy reading
- Help the reader see how you've structured your document
- Make items parallel



Use parallelism in lists

Make sure items in a list match:

- Use command voice (second person)
- Put the verb first
- Get to the point
- Make it clear what readers have to do
- Keep your bullets short



Don't make lists too long

- Research suggests that seven items are the maximum that work well in a list.
- Longer lists are hard to navigate.



Example: How easy is this to read?

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is expanding its Direct Mail Program to provide that filings of Form I-800A, Application for Determination of Suitability to Adopt a Child from a Convention Country, Form I-800A Supplement 1, Listing of Adult Member of the Household, Supplement 2, Consent to Disclose Information, Supplement 3, Request for Action on Approved Form I-800A, Form I-800, Petition to Classify Convention Adoptee as an Immediate Relative, Supplement 1, Consent to Disclose Information, for the Hague Adoption Convention be filed at a designated Chicago, Illinois lockbox facility for initial processing.



Revision in list format

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is expanding its Direct Mail Program to include the following forms:

- **Form I-800A, Application for Determination of Suitability to Adopt a Child from a Convention Country**
- **Form I-800A Supplement 1, Listing of Adult Member of the Household**
- **Form I-800A Supplement 2, Consent to Disclose Information**
- **Form I-800A Supplement 3, Request for Action on Approved Form I-800A**
- **Form I-800, Petition to Classify Convention Adoptee as an Immediate Relative**
- **The Form I-800 Supplement 1, Consent to Disclose Information.**

Mail these forms to the Chicago Lockbox facility.



Revision in Table Format

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is expanding its Direct Mail Program to include the following forms:

Form Number	Form Name
1-800A	Application for Determination of Suitability to Adopt a Child from a Convention Country
1-800A Supplement 1	Listing of Adult Member of the Household
1-800A Supplement 2	Consent to Disclose Information
1-800A Supplement 3	Request for Action on Approved Form 1-800A
1-800	Petition to Classify Convention Adoptee as an Immediate Relative
1-800 Supplement 1	Consent to Disclose Information



Exercise: Lists

1. The Superintendent or Area Director will provide you a written notice specifying the action that we will take under this part and explaining the reason(s) for the action. The notice will be delivered to you by certified mail or in person. The notice will include your appeal rights under § 70.10



Exercise: Lists

1. The Superintendent or Area Director will provide you a written notice
 - specifying the action that we will take under this part
 - explaining the reason(s) for the action.
 - delivered to you by certified mail or in person
 - including your appeal rights under § 70.10



Exercise: Lists

1. The Superintendent or Area Director will provide you a written notice that
 - specifies the action that we will take under this part
 - explains the reason(s) for the action.
 - includes your appeal rights under § 70.10

We will deliver the letter to you by certified mail or in person.



45



Exercise Lists

2. If you determine the value of your oil under this subpart, you must retain all data relevant to the determination of royalty value. You must be able to show how you calculated the value you reported, including all adjustments for location, quality, and transportation, and how you complied with the requirements of this subpart.



46



Exercise: Lists

2. If you determine the value of your oil under this subpart, you must retain all data relevant to the determination of royalty value. You must be able to show
 - how you calculated the value you reported, including all adjustments for location, quality, and transportation, and
 - how you complied with the requirements of this subpart.



Why 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



Sending expense forms

We must receive your completed expense form on or before the 15th day of the second month following the month you are reporting if you do not submit your form electronically, or the 25th day of the second month following the month you are reporting if you submit your form electronically.



Answer: sending expense forms

If you send your form	Then we must receive it by
electronically	The 25th day of the second...
Paper or fax	The 15th day of the second...



Exercise: Tables

1. If the estimated stumpage value of the forest products offered does not exceed \$50,000, the advertisement shall be made for not less than 15 days; if the estimated stumpage value exceeds \$50,000 but not \$250,000, for not less than 30 days; if the estimated stumpage value exceeds \$250,000, for not less than 60 days.



Answer: Tables

Estimated Stumpage Value	Number of Days Advertised
Less than \$50,000	<15
\$50,000 - \$250,000	30
Over \$250,000	60



Exercise: Tables

2. If an action or decision on your request was made by an Agency Superintendent, you should appeal to the Area Director. If an action or decision on your request was made by an Area Director, you should appeal to the Commissioner. If an action or decision on your request was made by the Commissioner, the action or decision is final and you may not appeal.



Answer: Tables

If action or decision was made by	Then you may appeal to
Agency Superintendent	Area Director
Area Director	Commissioner
Commissioner	You may not appeal further/decision is final.



SHORT PARAGRAPHS AND SENTENCES



Keep things short

- No one wants to read material like the next slide.



Executive Order 12988

With respect to the review of existing regulations and the promulgation of new regulations, section 3(a) of Executive Order 12988, "Civil Justice Reform," 61 FR 4729 (February 7, 1996), imposes on Executive agencies the general duty to adhere to the following requirements: (1) Eliminate drafting errors and ambiguity; (2) write regulations to minimize litigation; and (3) provide a clear legal standard for affected conduct rather than a general standard and promote simplification and burden reduction. With regard to the review required by section 3(a), section 3(b) of Executive Order 12988 specifically requires that Executive agencies make every reasonable effort to ensure that the regulation: (1) Clearly specifies the preemptive effect, if any; (2) clearly specifies any effect on existing Federal law or regulation; (3) provides a clear legal standard for affected conduct while promoting simplification and burden reduction; (4) specifies the retroactive effect, if any; (5) adequately defines key terms; and (6) addresses other important issues affecting clarity and general draftsmanship under any guidelines issued by the Attorney General. Section 3(c) of Executive Order 12988 requires Executive agencies to review regulations in light of applicable standards in section 3(a) and section 3(b) to determine whether they are met or it is unreasonable to meet one or more of them. DHS has completed the required review and determined that, to the extent permitted by law, this final rule meets the relevant standards of Executive Order 12988.



Executive Order 12988 (Revised)

- This rule meets the requirements found in sections 3(a) and 3(b)(2) of Executive Order 12988.



Use short paragraphs

- Limit a paragraph to one subject or step
- Smaller “bites” of info are easier to digest
- Aim for ***no more than*** 7 lines



How to shorten this?

- There is no escaping the fact that it is considered very important to note that a number of various available applicable studies ipso facto have generally identified the fact that additional appropriate nocturnal employment could usually keep juvenile adolescents off thoroughfares during the night hours, including but not limited to the time prior to midnight on weeknights and/or 2 a.m. on weekends. (62 words)



One option

- More night jobs would keep youths off the streets.
(9 words)



61



Exercise: Paragraph example

The members, representing a wide spectrum of fisheries, environmental, academic, state, tribal, consumer and other related national interests, draw on their expertise and other appropriate sources to evaluate and recommend priorities and needed changes in national programs, including the periodic reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens, the Endangered Species and the Marine Mammal Protection Acts.



62



Exercise: Paragraph example

The members represent a wide spectrum of:

- fisheries,
- environmental,
- academic, state,
- tribal,
- consumer, and
- other related national interests.

They use their expertise and other appropriate sources to evaluate and recommend priorities and needed changes in national programs. These programs include the periodic reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens, the Endangered Species, and the Marine Mammal Protection Acts.



Exercise: Paragraph Example

OSF works to manage fish stocks important to commercial, recreational, and subsistence fisheries by providing guidance to our Regional Offices and Regional Fishery Management Councils; facilitating effective communication between and among constituents; and supporting safe seafood.



Answer: Paragraph Example

OSF works to manage fish stocks important to commercial, recreational, and subsistence fisheries by:

- providing guidance to our Regional Offices and Regional Fishery Management Councils;
- facilitating effective communication between and among constituents; and
- supporting safe seafood.



Use short sentences

- Treat only one subject in each sentence
- Avoid complexity and confusion
- Make your sentences, on average, no longer than 20 words, or fewer, in documents, and 15, or fewer, on the web.



Exercise: Use Short Sentences

1. The initiative works to educate specific underserved communities to recognize and report intolerance and hate crimes, to assist victims in assessing culturally and linguistically services, and to advocate on behalf of victims for institutional changes that can reduce hate crimes.



Exercise: Sentences

1. This initiative works to educate specific underserved communities to
 - to recognize and report intolerance and hate crimes
 - assist victims in assessing culturally and linguistically services
 - advocate on behalf of victims for institutional changes that can reduce hate crimes.



PRONOUNS, ACTIVE VOICE, VERBS



Use pronouns

- Research shows that people relate better to information that talks directly to them by using pronouns.
- Using general nouns such as “beneficiary” or “purchaser” requires the audience to “translate” before they can be sure you are talking to them.



Use pronouns

Remember! Your reader is a person, not an entity.

Use pronouns to:

- Speak directly to readers
- Make your writing relevant to readers
- Require less work from your readers
- Eliminate words



Use pronouns

- Refer to your agency as “we.”
- Refer to the reader as “you” in the text and as “I” in questions.
- Don’t use he/she or his/her



Pronoun exercise

1. Copies of tax returns must be provided.
2. Loan applications will be reviewed to ensure that procedures have been followed.
3. The applicant will be the primary source of information regarding his or her circumstances for the purposes of determining eligibility and need.



Answers: Pronoun exercise

1. You must provide copies of tax returns.
2. We will review loan applications to ensure that you have followed procedures.
3. You will be the primary source of information regarding your circumstances for determining your eligibility and need.



Use pronouns

Example 1: Freeing a stuck vehicle

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.

See more examples at [plainlanguage.gov/examples](https://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples).



75



Use pronouns

- Use **“we”** to refer to your agency
- Use **“you”** for the reader
- If you are using Q&A format, use **“I”** in the questions and **“you”** in the text



76



Examples from GSA

Before:

What can be expected upon concluding the SOW review is a short turn-around time, determination on whether the Small Business GWAC Center deems the requirement a good fit for the VETS GWAC, and which Functional Area is appropriate based on the information that has been presented. The OCO will still be required to complete acquisition planning, work with legal and technical advisors if appropriate or required, conduct the procurement, perform due diligence, etc.



<http://www.gsa.gov/portal/content/102475>

77



Examples from GSA

After:

What you can expect:

- a short turn-around time
- yes-or-no decision on whether the Small Business GWAC Center deems the requirement a good fit for the VETS GWAC
- decision on which Functional Area is appropriate

You will still need to

- complete acquisition planning
- work with legal and technical advisors if appropriate or required
- conduct the procurement
- perform due diligence
- and other necessary steps.



<http://www.gsa.gov/portal/content/102475>

78



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



Strong, clear writing

Passive verbs, hidden verbs, and complex verb forms make your writing weak and confusing.

In passive verbs, the subject of the sentence is not the actor. The actor comes later, often in a prepositional phrase, or there may be no actor identified at all.



What is passive voice?

- The person doing the action usually follows the verb.
Example: Arlene **was promoted** by her boss.
- The verb has two parts: The verb “to be” plus the past participle of another verb.
Example: The house **will be leased** by Fred.



Examples: passive voice

**The training was originally developed for employees of L.A. County by the Office of Human Resources.
(Office of Human Resources is the actor)**

**This website has been created to acquaint you with the county's purchasing and contracting programs.
(no actor identified)**



Use active, not passive voice

- Active voice is more clear, concise and direct
- Passive is a characteristic of bureaucratese (not plain)
- “Mistakes were made.”
- The best sentences follow the model you first learned in school:
 - Subject, verb, predicate – Who, does what, to what or whom



Why avoid passive voice?

Passive Voice

Can disguise who does what:

The memo was written yesterday.

Active Voice

Makes it clear who does what:

The director wrote the memo yesterday.



Exercise: Passive to Active Voice

1. Excess and/or unauthorized expenses, delays, or luxury accommodations and services will not be reimbursed by the company, but will be borne by the employee.
2. Your application has been denied by the Department of State.
3. The submission you filed will be reviewed by the judges.



Exercise answers

1. The company will not reimburse you for
 - unauthorized expenses,
 - delays, or
 - luxury accommodations and services.
2. The Department of State has denied your application.
3. The judges will review your submission.



Avoid hidden verbs

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



Rescuing hidden verbs

- Conduct an analysis
- Present a report
- Do an assessment
- Provide assistance
- Came to the conclusion that
- Analyze
- Report
- Assess
- Help
- Concluded



Use your customer's language

- Avoid bureaucratic and legal language
- Limit jargon and acronyms
- Avoid foreign and Latin terms
- Avoid abbreviations
- Use contractions
- Use everyday words



Avoid bureaucratic and legalistic language

- integrating quality solutions
- promoting an informed and inclusive multicultural society
- strategically engaging schools, community organizations, and so on . . .
- instill in each employee the necessity to effectively appreciate . . .

- herein
- hereafter
- hereby
- pursuant to
- in accordance with
- shall (use "must" instead)



Two kinds of jargon

- Necessary technical terms
Example: Habeas corpus, plaintiff
- Obscure and often pretentious language marked by circumlocutions and long words
Example: Hereby, Wherefore, ab initio



Use consistent terms

- Avoid “**Shall.**” It is ambiguous and is not used in everyday speech
- Use “**must**” for an obligation
- Use “**must not**” for a prohibition
- Use “**may**” for a discretionary action
- Use “**should**” for a recommendation



Bryan A. Garner on “Shall”

In just about every jurisdiction, courts have held that “shall” can mean not just “must” and “may,” but also “will” and “is.” The [U.S. Supreme] Court has [in various decisions]:

- Held that a legislative amendment from “shall” to “may” had no substantive effect
- Held that “shall” means “must” for existing rights, but that it need not be construed as mandatory when a new right is created
- Acknowledged that, “legal writers sometimes misuse ‘shall’ to mean ‘should,’ ‘will,’ or even ‘may.’ ”



Limiting acronyms and abbreviations

- Use “we” for the agency
- Do not use “The GSA”
- Don’t use acronyms/abbreviations for infrequent phrases
- Try another style (the Council)
- Make them pronounceable (STARS, TRACON, FSDO)



Use everyday words

- anticipate
- attempt
- commence
- demonstrate
- implement
- in the event that
- submit
- terminate
- expect
- try
- begin, start
- show, prove
- start
- if
- send, give
- end, cancel



Place words carefully

- Keep subjects and objects close to their verbs.
- Put conditionals such as "only" or "always" next to words they modify.
- Don't misplace modifiers.
- Put exceptions and long conditions after the main clause, not before or in the middle.



Word placement makes a difference

- Yesterday a mad dog bit five men and women in the south end.
- This section applies to appeals of orders involving the reporting and payment of royalties or other payments due under federal oil and gas leases pending on the date this rule becomes effective.
- This rule proposes the spring/summer subsistence harvest regulations in Alaska for migratory birds that expire on August 31, 2003.



TRIM EXCESS CONTENT



Delete excess content

There are two major sources of excess content:

- Excess words in written material.
- Content that shouldn't be there at all.



Delete excess content, continued

- **Learning to recognize and get rid of excess words will always be a challenge.**
- **Bureaucratic writing tends to include many unnecessary words, probably because people think adding words makes material look authoritative.**
- **The web especially is full of many many many unnecessary words.**



Unnecessary words: the usual suspects

Some common sources of wordiness:

- Passive voice
- Redundancies
- Prepositional phrases
- Hidden verbs
- Unnecessary modifiers



Failure to use pronouns

101



Redundancies – excess content

Redundancies are words or phrases you don't need because you already said the same thing.



102



Redundancies

Instead of ...

- At a later time
- During that time period
- Worked jointly together
- Level of coverage
- Will plan in the future
- At least 12 years of age or older



Use

- Later
- During that time or then
- Worked together
- Coverage
- Will plan
- At least 12 years

103



Prepositional phrases

- Did you notice that a lot of the previous examples included prepositional phrases?
- Suspect prepositional phrases as a source of excess words
- Try to reduce these phrases to one or two words



104



Prepositional phrases

Instead of

- For the purpose of
- At this point in time
- In relation to
- On the grounds that
- On a monthly basis

Use

- For, to
- Now
- About, in, with
- Because
- Monthly



Prepositional phrases

You can also use contractions when you edit prepositional phrases:

For example, instead of “the needs of the customer”
use “the customer’s needs”

Instead of “the mission of the agency,” use “the agency’s mission”



Unnecessary modifiers

- **English speakers use many excess modifiers in our writing and in our speech.**
- **They pad our writing, and often don't make sense:**
 - totally unaffected
 - completely finished
 - really pregnant
 - an absolute success!



Common excess modifiers

- absolutely
- completely
- totally
- really
- Very

Using excess modifiers weakens your writing.



Common excess modifiers

- It is **absolutely** essential that you contact me at once.
- It is imperative that you contact me at once.
- **You must contact me at once.**
- ***Or* Contact me immediately.**

- I had a **really** good time at your party.
- **I had a wonderful time at your party.**



Doublets

- In English, we love to repeat words, especially in legal forms:
 - Cease and desist
 - Due and payable
 - Begin and commence
 - Knowledge and information



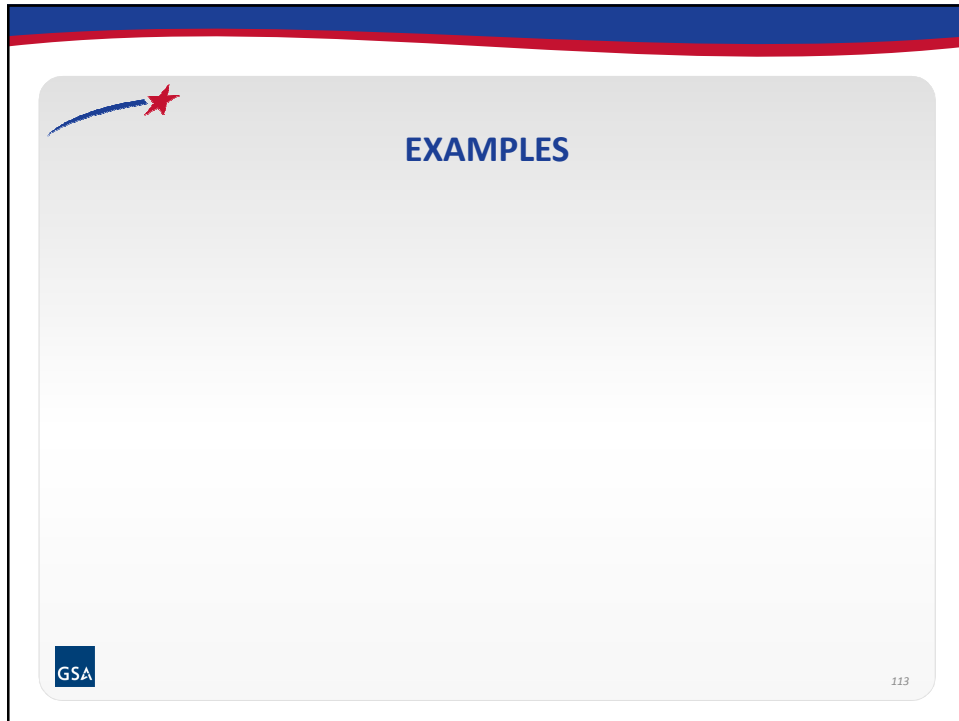
Help for cutting out wordy phrases

For a list of wordy phrases and suggested alternatives, see www.plainlanguage.gov



Meaningless formal language

- Meaningless formal language wastes space and your reader's time.
- It conveys the impression that you are insincere.
- Bureaucratic letters often contain this language, especially in the first and last sentences.



Plain writing examples from other agencies

Example 2: When state and local regulations apply to tribal lands

Before:
Under 25 CFR §1.4(b), the Secretary of the Interior may in specific cases or in specific geographic areas, adopt or make applicable to off-reservation Indian lands all or any part of such laws, ordinances, codes, resolutions, rules or other regulations of the State and political subdivisions in which the land is located as the Secretary shall determine to be in the best interest of the Indian owner or owners in achieving the highest and best use of such property.

After:
Section 1.4(b) of 25 CFR allows us to make state or local laws or regulations apply to your off-reservation lands. We will do this only if we find that it will help you to achieve the highest and best use of your lands.

See more examples at plainlanguage.gov/examples

GSA 114



Examples from GSA website

Example 1: SATCOM-II Overview

Before:

In structuring the SATCOM-II acquisition, the government defined and included all services that are under the GSA Satellite Services Program will also be available under SATCOM-II. currently available under the GSA Satellite Services Program. The realization of this goal will facilitate a smooth transition from the existing satellite contract(s) to the SATCOM-II contract.

After:

To transition smoothly, all services that were available under the GSA Satellite Services Program will also be available under SATCOM-II



Example 1: <http://www.gsa.gov/portal/category/25320>.

115



Examples from GSA website

Example 2: GWAC Overview

Before:

Protests are not allowed on task orders under \$10 million except on the grounds that the order increases the scope, period of performance, or maximum value of the GWAC.

After:

You may not protest task orders under \$10 million unless the order increases:

- the scope,
- the period of performance,
- the maximum value of the GWAC.



116



Examples from GSA

Category 1 – Equipment & Services

Before:

Typical equipment and associated services include multiplexers, video codecs, voice mail systems, channel service units, concentrators, routers, switches, gateways, firewalls, repeaters, virtual private network equipment, site preparation, power systems, alarms, microwave systems, wiring, cabling and cross connects. Services in this category are limited to those that would specifically support the equipment (e.g., installation and ongoing maintenance).

<http://www.gsa.gov/portal/content/104356> (Connections)



117



Examples from GSA

Category 1 – Equipment & Services

After:

Typical equipment and associated services include

- multiplexers
- video codecs
- voice mail systems
- channel service units
- concentrators
- routers
- switches
- gateways
- firewalls
- repeaters
- virtual private network equipment
- site preparation
- power systems
- alarms
- microwave systems
- wiring
- cabling
- cross connects

Services in this category are limited to those that would specifically support the equipment (e.g., installation and ongoing maintenance).



<http://www.gsa.gov/portal/content/104356>

118



Examples from GSA

- multiplexers
- video codecs
- voice mail systems
- channel service units
- concentrators
- routers
- switches
- gateways
- firewalls
- repeaters
- virtual private network equipment
- site preparation
- power systems
- alarms
- microwave systems
- wiring
- cabling
- cross connects



Examples from GSA

Socioeconomic Credit

Before:

Claiming Socioeconomic Credit – DoD

The following information is an excerpt from the FPDS-NG User's Manual at Section 3.4 captioned "PURCHASER INFORMATION". In a nutshell, when an agency is reporting its own task orders, it must fill in the contracting office agency ID and contracting office ID, and when the record with its socioeconomic credit is completed it will be tied to the organization when the rest of the task order information is matched up as an order against the applicable VETS GWAC contract number (referenced IDV). For DoD Agencies, the task order takes on all of the characteristics of the parent GWAC (referenced IDV). When ordering for a customer agency, fill out the contracting office agency ID and contracting office ID, and **also** fill in the funding agency ID and funding office ID for the customer agency to transfer the socioeconomic credit to the customer. For additional guidance, please view the DoD policy on [Reporting Funding Organization Data to FPDS](#) (PDF, 144k).

<http://www.gsa.gov/portal/content/102921>



Examples from GSA

Socioeconomic Credit

After:

Claiming Socioeconomic Credit – DoD

The following information is an excerpt from the FPDS-NG User's Manual at Section 3.4 captioned "PURCHASER INFORMATION". In a nutshell, when an agency is reporting its own task orders, it must fill in the contracting office agency ID and contracting office ID, and when the record with its socioeconomic credit is completed it will be tied to the organization when the rest of the task order information is matched up as an order against the applicable VETS GWAC contract number (referenced IDV).

For DoD Agencies, the task order takes on all of the characteristics of the parent GWAC (referenced IDV). When ordering for a customer agency, fill out the contracting office agency ID and contracting office ID, and **also** fill in the funding agency ID and funding office ID for the customer agency to transfer the socioeconomic credit to the customer. For additional guidance, please view the DoD policy on [Reporting Funding Organization Data to FPDS](#) (PDF, 144k).

<http://www.gsa.gov/portal/content/102921>



121



Examples from GSA

Socioeconomic Credit

After:

Claiming Socioeconomic Credit

DoD Agencies

The task order takes on all of the characteristics of the parent GWAC (referenced IDV).

When ordering for a customer agency, fill out the following to transfer the socioeconomic credit to the customer:

- contracting office agency ID
- contracting office ID
- funding agency ID
- funding office ID for the customer agency

For additional guidance, please view the DoD policy on [Reporting Funding Organization Data to FPDS](#) (PDF, 144k).

<http://www.gsa.gov/portal/content/102921>



122



Styleguide principles

- Use numerals for numbers
- Keep the user's trust: no spelling or grammatical errors, no broken links or images
- Use timeless text (no "Today blah, blah")
- Only use bold when needed
- Avoid all-CAPS
- No blue or underlined text (reserved for links)



123



Checklist for web content tasks

Have you?

- Identified your most frequently visited pages or documents?
- Identified what type of customer reads or uses this content - and are you writing for that customer?
- Removed or explained jargon (including program names, acronyms, technical words, GSA org-speak)?
- Have you removed or archived out-of-date content (over 1-2 years old, unless essential for compliance)?
- Written to make it easy for customers to complete their task (most important content first, numbered instructions, bulleted lists, clear start point, contact information, white space)?
- Have you removed all the text or content that you can and still retain usefulness?





Your next steps

- Work on key content first—public-facing documents
- Read and apply the federal plain language guidelines
- Join the Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN)
- Attend PLAIN's monthly meetings (or call in)

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Additional resources

Federal Government Resources

- [Federal plain language guidelines](#)
- Howto.gov
- Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN) @ www.plainlanguage.gov
- National Institutes of Health plain language course
- ***Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works*, by Janice (Ginny) Redish**

GSA

126



Additional Resources

Not-for-profit, non-federal

- Center for Plain Language
- Clarity International
- Plain Language Association International



127