

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

Plain Language Writing

Introduction

Plain language writing is reader-focused writing. But what makes something plain language? The ***Center for Plain Language*** defines “plain” in terms of people’s *behavior*: Can the people who are the audience for the material quickly and easily: find what they need understand what they find act appropriately on that understanding?

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."

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.

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.

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

#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.

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#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 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 jargon, foreign terms, latin terms, legal terms.

Replacing complex words with simpler words lets your readers concentrate on your content. Using simple and familiar words doesn't insult your readers' intelligence. It emphasizes clarity rather than formality. Save longer or complex words for when they are essential.

Readers often skip over terms they don't understand, hoping to get their meaning from the rest of the sentence. 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.

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

#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.”

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.

Placing words carefully within a sentence is as important as organizing your document effectively. 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.

RESOURCES OF MORE INFO

www.plainlanguage.gov is not the only source of indepth guidance on how to write plainly. It's a premier 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

<http://plainlanguage.nih.gov/CBTs/PlainLanguage/login.asp>

Plain Train

<http://www.web.net/~plain/PlainTrain/>

Plain Language Wizardry

<http://plainlanguage.com>

Plain English Campaign

www.plainenglishtraining.com

Plain Language Association International

www.plainlanguagenetwork.org

Center for Plain Language

www.centerforplainlanguage.org

Readability Formulas

www.readabilityformulas.com

Style Writer's Readability Calculations

www.stylewriter-usa.com/readabilitycalc.html

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