**The Basics of Writing in Plain Language**

1. Think about your Audience:

One of the most popular plain language myths is that you have to "dumb down" your content so that everyone everywhere can read it. That's not true. The first rule of plain language is: write for your audience.

Use language your audience knows and feels comfortable with. Take your audience's current level of knowledge into account. Don't write for an 8th grade class if your audience is composed of PhD candidates, small business owners, working parents or immigrants. Only write for 8th graders if your audience is, in fact, an 8th grade class.

Make sure you know who your audience is – don't guess or assume.

Identify and write for your audience:

* Who is my audience?
* What does my audience already know about the subject?
* What does my audience need to know?
* What questions will my audience have?
* What's the best outcome for our audience? What do I need to say to get this

outcome?

1. **Organize**

Organization is key. Start by stating the document's purpose and its bottom line. Eliminate filler and unnecessary content. Put the most important information at the beginning and include background information (when necessary) toward the end.

People read documents and visit websites to get answers. They want to know how to do something or what happens if they don't do something and they want to gain this knowledge quickly. Organize your document to respond to these concerns.

Think through the questions your audience is likely to ask and then organize your material in the order they'd ask them. For regulations and other complex documents, create a comprehensive Table of Contents. Your Table of Contents should be a reliable road map that users can follow to quickly find the information they need.

**Chronological organization**

Regulations frequently address processes. Chronological organization is best for process information: you fill out an application to get a benefit; you submit the application; the agency reviews the application; the agency makes a decision on the application. Present the steps chronologically, in the order your user and your agency will follow them. The table of contents below is organized in a logical sequence for a grant program.

## General first, exceptions, conditions, and specialized information later

Another useful organizing principle is to put general information first, specialized information or exceptions to the general information later. That way the material that addresses most readers in most situations comes first. For some documents this will work well along with a chronological organization. In others, it may be the primary organizing principle.

1. **Writing**

Words matter. They are the most basic building blocks of written and spoken communication. Choose your words carefully – be precise and concise.

**Sentences.**

Choose your words carefully. Start with your main idea – don't start with an exception. Word order does matter, so place your words carefully. Keep it short; it's not a crime to use lots of periods.

* **Express only one idea** in each sentence. Long, complicated sentences often mean that you aren't sure about what you want to say. Shorter sentences are also better for conveying complex information; they break the information up into smaller, easier-to-process units.
* Sentences loaded with dependent clauses and exceptions confuse the audience by losing the main point in a forest of words. Resist the temptation to put everything in one sentence; **break up your idea into its parts** and make each one the subject of its own sentence.
* Paragraphs. Write short paragraphs and include only one topic in each paragraph.
* **Limit each paragraph or section to one topic** to make it easier for your audience to understand your information. Each paragraph should start with a topic sentence that captures the essence of everything in the paragraph.
* Putting each topic in a separate paragraph makes your information easier to digest.

# 4. Write for the web

To effectively communicate with your web users, you must use plain-language techniques to write web content. This section will explain the differences between print and web writing and how to create sites that work for your users.

People use the internet to easily find, understand, and use information to complete a task. Unlike print media, people do not read entire web pages. They scan instead.

## What do web users look at?

Since we know web users scan web pages, we need to learn what they look at.

Users often scan pages in an F pattern focusing on the top left side of the page, headings, and the first few words of a sentence or bulleted list. On average, users only read the first two words on each line. Also, users can decide in as little as five seconds whether your site is useful to them.

Think about how well your website allows customers to get something done.

* Customers come to your site to perform a task.
* They come because they expect to get self-service.

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

You need to identify the mission – the purpose – of your website, to help you clarify the top task your website should help people accomplish.

In order to write for your users, you need to know who they are! Here are some general tips to help you identify your users:

* Listen to user questions – what do your visitors ask when they send you an email or call your office?
* Talk to users and ask them what they want.
* Analyze your web metrics to figure out what people are looking for on your website:
  + What are your most-visited pages and where do people spend the most time?
  + What top search phrases do people use?

After identifying your users and their top tasks, it is time to actually write web content. If you think it would be easy to just duplicate information you've written for print documents, you are wrong. While the information is helpful, it's not in the right format for the web. Remember, people scan web pages and only read about 18 percent of what's on the page! This means you need to cut whatever you have in print form by 50 percent!

## Good web content uses:

* The inverted pyramid style. Begin with the shortest and clearest statement you can make about your topic. Put the most important information at the top and the background at the bottom.
* Chunked content. Don't try to pack everything into long paragraphs. Split topics up into logical sections separated by informative headings.
* Only necessary information: Use only the information your users need to achieve their tops tasks. Omit unnecessary information.

## Remember:

Your content is NOT clear unless your users can:

* Find what they need
* Understand what they find
* Use what they find to meet their needs

Don't cut and paste the text of print documents to create web content. People are more likely to leave your webpage, potentially costing you time and money, because they will not take the time to find what they are looking for.

Print writing is different from web writing. Print is very linear and narrative driven. In print, you can go into great detail about mundane things like eating breakfast. If you are a great writer, that can be an interesting story. But those interesting stories don't work on the web. Instead they slow down web users who are trying to accomplish a task.

Because the web is "action-oriented," you need to repurpose your print document.

Pick out necessary information in your print document that will help your web users and create a new web page.

* Keep the most important and clear message at the top of the web page
* Chunk your content into logical sections
* Use headings to help users navigate the content
* Highlight key facts in a bulleted list
* Explain complex instructions in a visually appealing If/Then table.

**Do not post numerous PDF Versions on your site**

Posting PDF versions (PDFs) of original documents on your site would seem to be an obvious alternative to re-writing your content in web-format. Unfortunately, this would work against your goal of retaining users. Posting too many PDF documents on your website can work against you. Many users hate PDF documents and try to avoid reading PDFs.

**PDF files:**

* Are slow to open and can sometimes crash a computer if they are too large
* Are difficult for some screen users to read
* Can make a user lose the website if they open in the same window

If you need to post a PDF use a PDF gateway page – a web page that includes information about the PDF, including.

* What it's about
* How large the file is
* Who might find the information helpful

Remember to follow 508-compliance guidelines when using PDFs. See [www.section508.gov](javascript:openWin('http://www.section508.gov');) for more information on 508-compliance.

# Use plain-language techniques on the web

We discussed plain-language techniques early in the guidelines. These techniques apply to web writing as well. Please refer to the specific section in the table of contents.

When writing web content - please use:

* **Logical Organization**
* **Informative Headings**: Do not make your Headings too long!

**Question Headings** are the most useful type of heading, but only if you know what questions your audience would ask. Most people come to government documents with questions. If you know those questions, use them as headings. They will help the audience find the information they are looking for quickly. Using the question-and-answer format helps your audience scan the document and find specific information.

**Statement Headings** are the next best choice because they are still very specific.

**Topic Headings** are the most formal; many times management is more comfortable with them. But sometimes they're so vague that they just aren't helpful. Topic Headings such as "General," "Application," and "Scope" are so vague they may confuse the user. For example, "Application" might mean an application to your agency from someone reading your document. But it might as easily mean what the document applies to.

* **Active Voice**

Active voice makes it clear who is supposed to do what. It eliminates ambiguity about responsibilities. Not "It must be done," but "You must do it." Passive voice obscures who is responsible for what and is one of the biggest problems with government documents. Don't confuse passive voice with past tense.

#### How do you identify passive sentences?

Passive sentences have two basic features, although both may not appear in every passive sentence.

* A form of the verb “to be.” (for example: are, was, were, could be) and
* A past participle (generally with “ed” on the end)

* Use Pronouns: Use pronouns to directly “speak” to the user. Pronouns help the audience picture themselves in the text and relate better to your documents. More than any other single technique, using "you" pulls users into your document and makes it relevant to them. When you use "you" to address users, they are more likely to understand what their responsibility is. Using "we" to refer to your agency makes your agency more approachable. It also makes your sentences shorter and your document easier to read.

Writing for an individual forces you to analyze carefully what you want the reader to do. By writing to an individual, you will find it easier to:

* Put information in a logical order
* Answer questions and provide the information that your reader wants to know
* Assign responsibilities and requirements clearly

Be sure to define “you” clearly.

* **Use Common Words**

Vocabulary choice is an important part of communicating clearly. While there is no problem with being expressive, most federal writing has no place for literary flair. People do not curl up in front of the fire with a nice federal regulation to have a relaxing read.

* Prefer the **familiar word** to the far-fetched.
* Prefer the **concrete word** to the abstraction.
* Prefer the **single word** to the circumlocution. Circumlocution is an ambiguous or roundabout figure of speech. In its most basic form, circumlocution is using many words to describe something simple. (e.g., using text such as “a tool used for cutting things such as paper and hair” – when the word scissors will work.)
* Prefer the **short word** to the long.
* **Use Lists and Tables**

Lists: Vertical lists highlight a series of requirements or other information in a visually clear way. Use vertical lists to help your user focus on important material. Vertical lists:

* + Highlight levels of importance
  + Help the reader understand the order in which things happen
  + Make it easy for the reader to identify all necessary steps in a process
  + Lists are an idea way to present items, conditions and exceptions.

Tables: Tables help your audience see relationships that are often times hidden in dense text. And for most readers, it's not necessary to understand all possibilities and conditions, only those that apply to the reader's situation.

The most useful type of table is the "if-then table." An "if-then" table organizes the material by a situation (if something is the case) and the consequence (then something else happens). "If-then" tables are clearer than the dense text it replaces and easier on the eye.

**Avoid:**

* **Avoid Jargon and legalese**

What do we mean by jargon? Jargon is unnecessarily complicated, technical language used to impress, rather than to inform, your audience.

When we say not to use jargon, we're not advocating leaving out necessary technical terms, but we are saying to make sure your other language is as clear as possible.

* **Avoid Hidden verbs**

Hidden verb is a verb converted into a noun. It often needs an extra verb to make sense. So we write, "Please make an application for a personal loan" rather than "Please apply for a personal loan."

Hidden verbs come in two forms. Some have endings such as *-ment*, *-tion*, *-sion*, and *-ance* or link with verbs such as *achieve*, *effect*, *give*, *have*, *make*, *reach*, and *take*. Often, you will find a hidden verb between the words "the" and "of."

* **Avoid Passive Voice**

Active voice makes it clear who is supposed to do what. It eliminates ambiguity about responsibilities. Not "It must be done," but "You must do it." Passive voice obscures who is responsible for what and is one of the biggest problems with government documents. Don't confuse passive voice with past tense.

* **Avoid Long sentences or paragraphs**

**Long Sentences:**

Express only one idea in each sentence. Long, complicated sentences often mean that you aren't sure about what you want to say. Shorter sentences are also better for conveying complex information; they break the information up into smaller, easier-to-process units.

**Long Paragraphs:**

Long paragraphs discourage your audience from even trying to understand your material. Short paragraphs are easier to read and understand. Writing experts recommend paragraphs of no more than 150 words in three to eight sentences. Paragraphs should never be longer than 250 words.

Vary the lengths of your paragraphs to make them more interesting.

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There is nothing wrong with an occasional one-sentence paragraph.

Using short paragraphs is an ideal way to open up your document and create more white space. In turn, this makes your writing more inviting and easier to read. It also gives you the opportunity to add more headings.

* **Abbreviations** – Minimize the use of abbreviations

Abbreviations were once intended to serve the audience by shortening long phrases. However, abbreviations have proliferated so much in current government writing that they constantly require the reader to look back to earlier pages, or to consult an appendix, to puzzle out what's being said.

The best solution is to find a simplified name for the entity you want to abbreviate. This gives readers meaningful content that helps them remember what you're talking about. It may be a bit longer, but the gain in clarity and ease of reading is worth it.

## If everyone knows an abbreviation, use it without explanation. There's a short list of abbreviations that have entered common usage. When you use them, don't define them, you're just taking up space and annoying your user. But make sure the abbreviation you're using is on the list. Examples include IBM, ATM, BMW, PhD, and CIA.

There are some situations in which you can't avoid an abbreviation. Always define an abbreviation the first time you use it, for example, "The Indian Health Service" (IHS). Limit the number of abbreviations you use in one document to no more than three, and preferably two. Spell out everything else.

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When you are considering whether to use an abbreviation, or how many you can get away with in a document, remember that they should make it easier for your users. If they make it harder, you have failed to write for your audience.

* **Unnecessary Words**

Nothing is more confusing to the user than long, complex sentences containing multiple phrases and clauses. Unnecessary words come in all shapes and sizes, and it's difficult to put them into distinct categories. To address the problem, writers must become more critical of their own writing - consider whether you need every word.

One place to start working on this problem in your own writing is to watch out for "of," "to," "on," and other ***prepositions***. They often mark phases you can reduce to one or two words.

* **Information the user doesn’t want**

Organize your document. Organization is key. Start by stating the document's purpose and its bottom line. Eliminate filler and unnecessary content. Put the most important information at the beginning and include background information (when necessary) toward the end.

* **Avoid Meaningless Formal language**

Many government websites and letters contain meaningless formal language such as flowery welcome messages and "we hope you get a lot out of our program" messages. Using this type of language wastes space and your users' time. It conveys the impression that you are insincere. Don't waste your users' time. Instead, get directly to the point. Remember, time is money on the web. Keep your important information at the top of a web page. Don't bury it under fluff messages.

Here is a brief list of meaningless filler phrases:

* Thinking outside the box
* Value added
* Best practice
* For all intents and purposes
* Touch base
* Integrating quality solutions
* Promoting an informed and inclusive multicultural society
* Strategically engaging schools, community organizations, and so on …

Links are about both content and navigation. Effective link names are key to satisfying your customers. Links written in plain-language are the most effective. Plain-language links are written clearly so that the user understands exactly where the link will take them.

* Link names should be the same as the page name linked to.
* Don't use the full name of a document or program as a link name.
* Be as explicit as you can-too long is better than too short.
* Make the link meaningful. Don't use "click here" or "more."
* Don't embed links in text. It just invites people to leave your text!
* Add a short description when needed to clarify the link.

Remember, some of your users might be visually disabled. Do not use "Click Here" or "Click the green button" links. Make sure your links are accessible to all users. You want to use links that clearly explain the content of the page it links to. If your link says "Annual Reports," then destination page must be titled "Annual Reports."

**5. Test**

Testing your documents should be an integral part of your plain-language planning and writing process, not something you do after the fact to see if your document (or your website) is a success.

You can use several techniques to help you improve your document so that the final version will be successful

* Paraphrase Testing: individual interviews, best for short documents, short web pages, and to test the questions on a survey
* Usability Testing: individual interviews, best for longer documents and web sites where finding the right information is important; also best for forms — see [www.usability.gov](javascript:openWin('http://www.usability.gov');).
* Controlled Comparative Studies: large scale studies where you don't meet the people but you collect statistics on responses; use paraphrase testing and usability testing on a smaller scale first.

Focus groups are discussions in which you learn about users' attitudes and expectations more than about whether they can find and understand information. Therefore, they are more relevant to understanding your audience before you write than to testing. For more on focus groups, see: [www.usability.gov/methods/analyze\_current/learn/focus.html](http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/guidelines/FederalPLGuidelines/openWin('http:/usability.gov/methods/analyze_current/learn/focus.html');).