

Tips for Using Plain Language

Certain qualities characterize plain language. These include common, everyday words, except for necessary technical terms. Other qualities include the use of personal pronouns; the active voice; logical organization; and easy-to-read and understandable design features, such as bullets and tables.

1. Engage Your Readers.

- First, consider who your readers are.
- Consider what your readers need to know and want to know. Organize content to answer their questions.
- Write at a reading level that is appropriate to your intended audience.

2. Write Clearly.

Use common, everyday words whenever possible.

Word Choices:

- Use common, everyday words but avoid slang.
- Use personal pronouns such as "you."
- Use "must" instead of "shall."
- Avoid using undefined technical terms.
- Use positive rather than negative words.
- Avoid using gender-specific terminology.
- Avoid long strings of nouns.

Verb Forms:

- Use active voice.
- Use action verbs.
- Use the present tense whenever you can.

Structure:

- Use parallel construction.
- Be direct.
- Avoid unnecessary exceptions.

3. Display Material Correctly

Appearance is an important aspect of clear communication. If a document is pleasing to the eye, it will be more likely to attract your readers' attention. Appearance can also be an aid to readers, improving comprehension and retention.

- **Organization.** Strong, logical organization includes an introduction followed by short sentences and paragraphs. Organize messages to respond to your readers' interests and concerns.
- **Introduction.** In lengthier documents, use an introduction and a table of contents to help readers understand how a document is organized.
- **Short Sentences and Paragraphs.** Sentence length should average 15-20 words. Sentences that are simple, active, affirmative, and declarative hold readers' interest. Generally, each paragraph should contain only one topic. You may wish to use a series of paragraphs if you need to express complex or highly technical information. The more writing deviates from a clear and to-the-point structure, the harder it will be for readers to understand what you are trying to convey.
- **Layout.** Layout includes margins, headings, and white space. Provide white space between sections to break up text and to make it easier for readers to understand. Use headings to guide readers; the question-and-answer format is especially helpful. Try to anticipate your readers' questions and pose them as a reader would. Use adequate margins.

- **Tables.** Tables make complex information readily understandable. They can help readers see relationships more easily, and they may require fewer words than straight text.
- **Typography.** Typography relates to fonts and typographical elements used for emphasis, such as bullets or italics. Limit the number of fonts you use. It is usually best to stick to one font for headings and another for text. Use typographical elements consistently throughout your document – and avoid overusing any one element.

4. Evaluate Your Document.

To ensure that you are communicating clearly, evaluate the document or, better yet, have another person read it and offer suggestions for clarification. Look over the document for:

- Word choice, verb forms, and structure;
- Correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation;
- Inclusion of appropriate devices, such as dating, page numbering, and consistency;
- Visual appeal;
- Consistency and effectiveness of layout and typographical devices; and
- Line breaks that inadvertently separate part of a name or date in a way that reduces clarity.