

PLAIN LANGUAGE

A HANDBOOK FOR WRITERS
IN THE U.S. FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Richard Lauchman

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Lauchman Group
1324 Wild Oak
Rockville, MD 20852
301-315-6040
www.lauchmangroup.com

Because Writing Clearly Matterssm

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Preface

This handbook focuses on aspects of writing that are especially important to Plain Language. Grammar, punctuation, and the “mechanics” of English are not the issues here. Those wheels have been invented. All the rules and conventions governing the code of the language can be found in *The Government Printing Office Style Guide*, agency-specific style guides, the *Chicago Manual of Style*, and countless textbooks of English.

The organization of ideas, tone, word choice, point of view, format, and overall ease of reading – those are the issues here. Plain Language approaches each of these issues in a unique and fairly defined way. They are not, like grammar, matters of right and wrong, but are matters of judgment, so what I’ve tried to do is explain how to think about choices.

I’ve tried to make each section self-contained, so that if you’re primarily interested in guidance on format (for example), you can read that section and ignore the rest. That decision – to make each section self-contained – inevitably leads to some overlapping of ideas. If you read this handbook from cover to cover, you’ll probably notice the repetition of certain essential points. There’s no way around it. No discussion of the organization of ideas can ignore format; no discussion of format can ignore some treatment of the nature of reading.

Good writing is a seamless whole. An ideal format can’t overcome lengthy, difficult sentences, just as clear writing is thwarted by poor document design. If the words are unfamiliar to the reader, then question headings do not help; if tone isn’t handled with care, then the use of “you” backfires.

If you think about it, what the reader sees (on any given page) results from a thousand and one decisions. As writers, we have to decide what to say, when to say it, and how to phrase it. We have to decide when to end a sentence, when to start a new paragraph, and exactly what formatting devices would best guide the reader through the writing. This handbook shows you how to make practical decisions when you write. It shows you what can happen when your decisions are reader-directed and work in concert. That result is the one we’re after. It’s called Plain Language.

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Introduction

What Plain Language is

Plain Language is writing that communicates to *your* reader. It results when we bring three things to our writing:

- **practical attitudes** about what good writing looks like and sounds like, what the goal of writing is, and the writer's duty to the reader;
- **sensible assumptions** about how people really read our writing, the questions readers bring to any document, and readers' reactions to format, organization, and word choice;
- **good techniques** that result in inviting layout, an instant sense of how ideas have been organized, and text that is clear on the first reading.

What Plain Language isn't

It isn't writing in such a way that everyone can understand us. It's writing in such a way that our *intended* reader effortlessly does.

It isn't necessarily simple. When we write to other experts in our field, jargon is not merely okay, but may be preferable (so long as we use it in the same way that others in the profession use it). Jargon and terms of art are useful shorthand when we're writing to a specialized audience; often, if we don't use them, we won't convey what we're talking about. Our goal is not to oversimplify, but to avoid unnecessary complexity, regardless of the audience.

It isn't "dummied down." Plain Language doesn't require that we try to write everything for an 8th or 10th grade audience. Such an approach misses the point – what we are trying to do is convey ideas to the people who are really going to read what we're writing.

It isn't political. What's become known as Plain Language has been evolving since the Carter Administration (when it was called "Plain English"). President Clinton formalized the requirement in June 1998 with a Presidential Memorandum; President Bush, in his turn, has called for "Plain Speaking." It isn't political. It's just good sense.

How does Plain Language differ from ordinary good writing?

All good writing shares the same characteristics. Plain Language differs in what it emphasizes, and the heart of the matter is that it emphasizes the reader – not the writer, and not the message, but the reader. It stresses these aspects of writing:

- making the important information easy to find, understand, and use
- writing relatively short sentences and paragraphs
- being straightforward in the order of words
- using formatting and design elements to indicate how ideas are organized and to make the document attractive
- using pronouns such as “you” and “we” whenever appropriate

What should I write in Plain Language?

The Plain Language approach is especially useful when we communicate to the general public. We should use it when we write to explain how to comply with a requirement, or how to obtain a benefit or service. The approach works to everyone’s advantage in

- letters
- pamphlets, leaflets, and brochures
- forms of all sorts
- notices
- instructions
- regulations

Plain Language benefits readers of these documents too:

- directives
- policy statements
- joint-agency reports
- safety manuals

Not every document is a candidate for a full Plain Language “treatment,” but certain elements of the approach are useful in everything we write. We have to keep occasion in mind. For example, a personal tone would be inappropriate in the Patent Office’s *Office Actions* and the Pentagon’s *Preliminary Budget Decisions*.¹ But readers of these documents still benefit from good formatting decisions (headings, tables, and vertical lists), and the ideas should be organized in a reader-directed way.

¹ An *Office Action*, written to a patent attorney, is a patent examiner’s formal written response to a patent application. It becomes part of the legal record. A *Preliminary Budget Decision*, written to Congress, justifies a funding request.

1. How people read Government writing

The way people read Government writing differs from the way they read anything else. To illustrate a number of important points about what readers expect, what they need, and how they behave, here's an anecdote. It packs all the punch of a fable.

The geologist's trousers: a true story

Somewhere out west – New Mexico, maybe, or Colorado – a rancher reaches into his mailbox and pulls out a brown envelope. The logo on the envelope indicates that the letter has come from the United States Geological Survey. As he gazes at the envelope, the rancher wonders, *Why are they writing to me? Do I have to do something?*

With these questions in mind, he opens the envelope, takes the letter out, and glances at the text. He sees two fat paragraphs in a type so small that he has to squint in order to read it. There's no RE line² to indicate the point. Nothing is boldfaced or in any other way highlighted to grab his attention. There's nothing in the format of the letter to suggest that any idea is more important than another.

He notices that the salutation is "Dear Landowner." He's received many of these "Dear Landowner" letters before, and they've all been full of abbreviations, big words, and sentences that (to his way of thinking) sound as though they'd been written by a machine. Worse, all of them have been about things he's not interested in. He's wasted his time reading them, and he's come to regard them as junk mail.

But he's curious. He still doesn't know what the letter is about, and so – like readers everywhere – he reads the opening sentence:

Be advised that the United States Geological Survey (USGS), a component of the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), has completed Phase I of the Clearwater Canyon Area Ore Study (the Study).

The rancher's response to this sentence is *Okay. So what?* He doesn't see how that has anything to do with him. He reads the next two sentences:

As has been previously stated, the purpose of the Study is to undertake determination of deposit locations of ores of all kinds and varieties, including, but not limited to, uranium and aluminum. It is in the national interest for a determination to be made regarding the possible presence of such natural resources and the potential size of deposits thereof.

² See 3.15 for guidance on RE and REF.

He frowns at “thereof.” No one he knows ever uses that word. *Why don't they just say what they mean in English?* he wonders. And his response to the two sentences he's just read is again – this time a little more impatiently – *So what? What's any of this got to do with me?*

This rancher has better things to do than to stand there reading information he doesn't care about. He's also an independent fellow who is not especially fond of government interference in his day-to-day activities. He's read three sentences and still has no idea what the letter is about. He thinks, *Heck, if they wanted me to do anything, they'd have said so by now.*

He stops reading the sentences in order. He quickly scans the rest of the page. He looks for a dollar sign (which might mean he owes some sort of fee). He doesn't see one. He looks for numbers (which might mean a date by which something is due). He doesn't see any numbers either. But he glances at the last sentence to see what it says. He reads,

Your interest in the Study is sincerely appreciated.

But I'm not interested in it! he fumes. *Are they off their rocker?* He stuffs the letter into a pocket, thinking, *Well, I'll read it later, I guess.* Then he forgets about it.

Two weeks later, a geologist from USGS is terrified when he hears a loud *click!*, looks up, and sees a big-bore rifle cocked and pointed at his head. “What are you doing on my land?” the rancher angrily demands. “Soil samples!” the geologist squeals. “We sent you a letter! We told you we were going to visit your property!”

This happened.³ Similar (if not so dramatic) misunderstandings have happened more than once. The moral:

There's a big difference between getting the document and getting the point.

Believe it or not, the rancher behaved like a typical reader. And when everything goes wrong, as it did here, we can learn a number of important things. Let's retrace the way he behaved, point by point, and see what lessons we can apply to our writing.

³ The geologist was not shot, by the way, though he received the fright of his life.

1.1 He notices the logo on the envelope

The moment the rancher takes the letter from the mailbox, he glances at the envelope. The logo tells him that the letter is from the U.S. Geological Survey. As a result:

- *The letter should not have begun with an explanation of who was sending it.* Because the envelope itself tells him the source, the rancher already knows who sent it.
- *The logo on the envelope instantly raises a question in the reader's mind.* Because of the logo, the rancher knows that the letter is from the Government. Because Government writing can compel behavior, he instantly begins to wonder, *What's this about? Do I have to do anything?*

1.2 He takes the letter out and glances at the format

Before the rancher reads a word, he notices the format of the letter. Format is always the first thing any reader notices, and it can either encourage reading or suggest that the reader has his work cut out for him. In this case, the result was the latter.

- *The paragraphs are too long.* The two fat paragraphs – no one likes reading fat paragraphs – instantly suggest that he is not going to be treated well as a reader. Because the writer should know better than to write lengthy paragraphs, but wrote them anyway, the rancher leaps to the conclusion that there will be other impediments to reading as well. He's right.
- *Nothing is emphasized.* Nowhere on the page is there a boldfaced sentence, an italicized phrase, or an underscored word. No visual signal attracts his eye and lets him know that any idea is more important than another. Instead, format presents the rancher with something as mysterious – and as monotonous – as the ocean.
- *The type size is too small.* Empathy should tell us it's wrong to use a pitch so small that the reader has to squint in order to make out the words. Like fat paragraphs, tiny type vigorously implies either that we have little concern for making the text readable or that we just don't have a clue about what decent writing requires. Neither implication is especially attractive.
- *The first sentence is full of abbreviations.* First impressions are ruined in a big hurry when we glance at the page and see what many people call "alphabet soup." The mere presence of acronyms and abbreviations, which we note even before we read,

suggests, “Reader, this is not going to be easy – at least not for you.”

- *The writer doesn't make use of the letterhead.* None of the abbreviations in that opening sentence are necessary in the first place. The writer forgot that the stationery itself clarified the source of the correspondence. Because that's so, all he had to write was “we.” And of course there was no need to formally introduce “the Study.”
- *There is no RE line.* It's a good idea to use either a RE or REF line (above the salutation and centered on the page). RE and REF let readers know what the letter is about; the devices alert readers as to what information they should expect. In this particular case, it should have read:

RE: visiting your property to take soil samples

- *The salutation makes the reader think of junk mail.* “Dear Landowner” instantly lets the rancher know that the letter hasn't been written to him as an individual. He might be expected to react in the same way we react when we get correspondence addressed to “Occupant” or “Current Resident.” In this case, the problem is compounded by the history of the “Dear Landowner” letters. None of them have interested him; none have required any compliance. He might be expected to believe that this letter is similar to all the others.

That's what we can take away from the first consideration – format. It's impossible to overstate the importance of format. The way the page looks not only clarifies our organization of ideas and alerts the reader to ideas that are especially important, but *it biases the reading*. The bias here relates to the reader's general sense (which he gains in one instant) of whether the text has been made easy for him, or whether it's been made easy for the writer.

1.3 He reads the opening sentence

Everyone reads the opening sentence of any unexpected document. No matter how often our hopes are dashed, we stubbornly cling to the notion that the first sentence might reveal the point. And precisely because everyone reads the opening sentence, we should use that sentence to say something important.

Here comes a big fork in the road. When we talk about saying something “important” in the opening, we must recognize that it is the reader, not the

writer, who decides what's important. That may sound as though it goes against reason until we remember that the reader brings questions to the page.

The rancher is asking a question before he starts reading. Because this letter is from the Government, he's asking, *Do I have to do anything?* That's what he wants to know first; that's what's important to him. The blunt fact is that until he knows the answer to this question, he won't pay attention to anything else.

The opening sentence makes the rancher think, *So what?*

In terms of good organization of ideas, this is the kiss of death. When an opening sentence provokes *So what?*, it fails, and it fails for two reasons. It fails because the reader doesn't pay attention to it – he may read it, but the ideas don't sink in. It fails also because it can't lead to coherence. When the idea in the first sentence doesn't sink in, how can any idea follow logically from it?

“So what?” is never the response an opening sentence should provoke.

An opening sentence should never make the reader wonder, *So what? What's that got to do with anything?* Instead, it should answer the question that the reader is asking. When it does this, it usually also provokes a particular response – another question, which we can then address.

Contrast these two openings in terms only of how they grab the reader's interest by addressing his real concern.

Be advised that the United States Geological Survey (USGS), a component of the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), has completed Phase I of the Clearwater Canyon Area Ore Study (the Study).

A geologist may visit your property within the next month to take soil samples.

Isn't it true that if you were the reader, you'd prefer the second version? The second version lets the cat out of the bag, which is just another way of saying that *it answers the question the reader is asking.*

The second version also opens the door for coherent writing because it raises other questions. *What's involved in taking soil samples? Are you going to bring in a backhoe? Are you going to use dynamite? How long does it take? Will the activity disturb my crops or livestock? Do I have to be there while you do it?*

We want to provoke questions in the reader's mind. By provoking them, and then answering them right away, we can maintain his interest. Contrast the two developments of thought.

Be advised that the United States Geological Survey (USGS), a component of the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), has completed Phase I of the Clearwater Canyon Area Ore Study (the Study). As has been previously stated, the purpose of the Study is to undertake determination of deposit locations of ores of all kinds and varieties, including, but not limited to, uranium and aluminum. It is in the national interest for a determination to be made regarding the possible presence of such natural resources and the potential size of deposits thereof.

A geologist may visit your property within the next month to take soil samples. The sampling will last for no more than one day, and it consists of gathering surface soil by hand. No digging or blasting will occur, and the process will not disturb your livestock. Your involvement is not required, but you are welcome to observe.

The first version doesn't cohere well (the sentences have little to do with each other). The second version coheres because the writer is simply answering questions that the opening sentence provokes.

The tone of the opening is all wrong

Literally everything in a document contributes to tone. The poor formatting choices get things off to a terrible start because they strongly imply that the letter wasn't written with the reader in mind. Here are the other issues of poor tone in the opening.

- *"Be advised that."* The first words of the first sentence prepare the reader for news he's not going to like. "Be advised that" is never used unless the news is negative: *Be advised that you are now on probation for six months, Be advised that you must leave the country within seven days.* The reader is expecting bad news, but he doesn't get any. There was absolutely no reason to start with this phrase, and many good reasons not to.
- *The abbreviations.* Abbreviations hurt tone because they suggest that the writer has made things easy for himself at the reader's expense.
- *There are no pronouns.* Instead of using "we" and "you" (which not only create a personal tone, but also simplify things immensely), the writer used the "disembodied voice" approach.
- *The "disembodied voice" approach talks past the reader.* The rancher is an intelligent fellow, and he doesn't appreciate being

droned at. But that’s exactly what the opening does – it drones at him like an impersonal voice from a loudspeaker, preaching some sort of religion. There is little humanity in this voice. It is smug and carelessly self-centered.

1.4 He frowns at “thereof”

One of the enduring mysteries of life is why decent people sometimes turn into hoodlums when they write. As readers, we’re all Dr. Jekylls; we mustn’t as writers turn into Hydes. Since we prefer everyday words when we read, common sense demands that we use them when we write.

The rancher reads “thereof,” and he frowns. Why?

- *No one ever uses this word in speech.* It is used only by writers – certain kinds of writers, the writers who tend to make things difficult. It sounds artificial and pompous. Furthermore, any writer capable of using “thereof” is likely to affront simplicity in other ways. That may as well be a principle of physics.
- *“Thereof” is damned by association.* The “feeling” of any rarely used word is linked to the context of its use. “Thereof” is contaminated. The only documents in which it survives are legal instruments (the mortgage agreement, the power of attorney, the will, and so on). These documents are so forbidding – so unnecessarily tangled – that we have to hire lawyers to help us understand them.
- *The word is archaic,* no longer in common-enough use that it instantly conveys any meaning. In other words, it requires a moment’s thought. If we’re targeting our words to our reader, none should require a moment’s thought.

1.5 He starts scanning

The rancher doesn’t have to read the sentences in order if he chooses not to. He’s holding the page in his hands, and he can treat it in any way he wants. He’s free to scan, skim, or skip around.

People read from self-interest.

Readers are ferocious in their appetite for knowing the main point first. When a long report begins with the heading of **Background**, we all turn to

the last page to see what's written under **Conclusions**. If we're busy (and it's best to assume that all readers are), then the conclusions are what we want to know first. We'll read the background later *if we're interested*.

We must never assume that the reader is a slave to any "imposed" organization of ideas. If we begin with explanatory information, he skips it, because what he wants to know is "Do I have to do anything?" The way the rancher reads the letter is a case in point.

He reads the first three sentences. By that time, he's sure that he's reading background. He has no idea where the writer is going, and his question hasn't been answered. Naturally, he thinks, *If they wanted me to do anything, they'd have said so by now*. (It's important to remember that none of the previous "Dear Landowner" letters have required him to do anything.)

When we don't come to the point, readers scan, skim, or jump to other parts of the document.

To be on the safe side – just in case there actually is a requirement buried somewhere in the text – he starts scanning. He looks for the same things we all look for when we scan – dollar signs, numbers, the word "you."

The rancher doesn't find any help when he scans, so he jumps to the last sentence. Nothing prohibits him from doing so. Like almost all readers, he assumes that if the point isn't stated early, then it'll be stated at the end. Instead what he reads is the non-helpful *Your interest in the Study is appreciated*.

If he has a minor tantrum at this, who can blame him? Who can blame him for concluding that the letter has no point at all – that it's nothing more than an update about something he has no interest in? Is it any wonder that he puts the letter into his pocket, thinking he'll get to it later? And is it any wonder that he forgets about it?

And there you have, in a nutshell, how people truly read. It's essential that we understand this behavior, and keep it in mind as we write, because what distinguishes Plain Language is that it is *reader-directed*. This phrase means much more than "directed to a particular reader." It also means *governed by an understanding of how people actually read*.

1.6 What to take away from this analysis

- The way people read Government writing differs from the way they read a novel, a magazine article, an essay, or anything else.
- When a document comes from the Government, it provokes an important question in the reader's mind: *Do I have to do anything?*
- When this question isn't answered quickly, the reader abandons the writer's intended organization of ideas and scans the text.
- When people scan, they can miss the point.
- People read from self-interest. No writer can control a reader's behavior. The best we can do is organize our ideas according to his interests and concerns.
- Readers notice the logo and understand who the source is. No further explanation is necessary. Unless you are answering correspondence that was initially addressed to someone else, "we" would suffice.
- Format counts. It's the first thing the reader notices, and it instantly suggests whether the text is reader-friendly or the opposite.
- At the first glance, readers also notice abbreviations. The "alphabet soup" look is notoriously off-putting.
- RE and REF are extremely useful to the reader, and it's a good idea (because it's reader-friendly) to include one or the other in a letter.
- Everyone reads the opening sentence.
- The opening sentence should never make the reader ask, *So what?*
- Tone counts. The "disembodied voice" tone so typical of old-fashioned Government writing is off-putting to most readers.
- Words matter. No word should distract. In this case, "thereof" distracted the reader. He started wondering about the writer, rather than remaining focused on the message.

2. Organizing your ideas

2.1 Before you write, answer six essential questions

We need to ask ourselves six questions in order to organize well. Before we write the first word, we should interrogate ourselves as follows:

- What am I writing?
- Why am I writing it?
- Who is my primary reader? Are there others?
- What points do I need to make?
- If I could say one sentence to my reader, what sentence would I say?
- How is the reader likely to react to that sentence?

2.2 Put yourself in the reader's shoes

Writing well requires that we empathize with the reader. We have to “become” the reader, to remember what we know and don't know about a situation, to imagine how we would approach reading a document, and to ask the questions the reader would ask (in the same order he'd ask them).

Every document begins as a mystery.

Good organization begins with this realization: *every document is, at first, a complete mystery to the reader.* The writer's job is to demystify it – to let the cats (there are lots of cats) out of the bag, and to let them out one by one. Here's how to do that.

2.3 Let the reader know what she's looking at

The first cat that should come out of the bag is the one that tells readers what kind of document they're looking at. Readers instantly recognize what a letter is; they instantly recognize the memo. But any document that wouldn't instantly be recognizable to the reader should reveal its nature at a glance. **Give it a clear title and make that title stand out.** Call it *NIH Grants Policy Statement*, *Examiner's Response to Arguments*, or *Request for Proposal*.

2.4 Walk the reader through the writing

Reader-directed writing not only answers your reader's main question immediately, but also enables her to *follow your reasoning* as she proceeds through the document. This aspect of writing is referred to as “flow” or “coherence.”

Writing is said to cohere when the ideas *stick together* well – when the reader has no trouble moving from one topic to the next, understands the relationships of the topics, and doesn't encounter any confusing repetition of ideas.

What good coherence requires

In any document, coherence requires that we

- set up the reader's expectations
- organize ideas sensibly
- answer a question as soon as we raise it
- provide transitional words and phrases
- indicate the relative importance of ideas
- format to indicate how we've organized

2.5 Prepare the reader for what to expect

- **In memos and email, be precise in the SUBJECT line.**

Vague: staffing meeting

Helpful: rescheduling the staffing meeting

- **In letters, include a RE line,** and say something helpful in it.

Vague: RE: Clearwater Canyon Area Ore Study

Helpful: RE: visiting your property to take soil samples

- **Start with a one-paragraph summary** in lengthy documents of any sort. Be sure to give it the heading of “Summary.” Don't call it an “Introduction,” because readers will be likely to skip anything under that heading.
- **Start with a summary statement.** In letters, this can be the same as the main-point sentence. In other documents, it's often helpful to write, *This pamphlet explains how to . . .* or *This analysis examines . . .* or *This report discusses a, b, and c.*

2.6 Deliver what you promise

Never begin with background. Compare the following openings. Notice how the writer lets the cat out of the bag in the second version.

The above application was submitted in accordance with the “Just-in-Time” (JIT) initiative of the National Institutes of Health. Under JIT, the collection of certain information, previously included in a competing application when submitted, is postponed until later in the application.

Our review of your application is entering its final phrase. To enable us to complete the review, please send us the following information.

Compare the following openings. Which would you rather read?

On December 21, 2001, Hull & Ostrovsky (“Petitioners”) filed a Petition for Reconsideration seeking: (1) reconsideration of the Wireless Telecommunication Bureau (“Bureau”) *Order* that denied Petitioners’ April 8, 2001 requests for declaration of a common fund and (2) thirty percent (30%) of the refunds payable to the Nationwide Narrowband Personal Communications Service licensees as part of their common fund claim.

In this *Memorandum Opinion and Order*, we deny the Petition for Reconsideration filed by Hull & Ostrovsky on December 21, 2001.

Let’s do it once more. Compare these. If you were the owner of the factory, which opening is the one you’d want?

As you are aware, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) performed an inspection of the above-referenced facility on August 17, 2008. The purpose of the inspection was to investigate an employee’s complaint about a possible hazard involving the height of the conveyor belt used in final packaging operations.

Our inspection of August 17 found no safety violations.

But what if the news is negative?

That’s a reasonable question from the writer’s point of view. If you’re the factory owner, however, you’d prefer the second version below.

As you are aware, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) performed an inspection of the above-referenced facility on August 17, 2008. The purpose of the inspection was to investigate an employee’s complaint about a possible hazard involving the height of the conveyor belt used for the final packaging of components.

The conveyor belt used for the final packaging of components fails to meet Federal safety standards. You must cease using it immediately.

There's a difference between (1) not liking the message and (2) not liking the message *and* having to hunt for it. The second version respects the way people read, and it treats the reader as an adult.

2.7 Use the “single-sentence” technique

In all of the examples you've just read, the better versions succeed because they answer the question, “If I could say one sentence to my reader, what sentence would I say?”

That question is one of the six we should ask ourselves before we write. Now you see why. Whatever that “core statement” is, it's the reason we're writing. It expresses our purpose; it states in a nutshell the main point of the document; it answers the reader's primary question.

2.8 Answer a question as soon as you raise it

When we raise a question in the reader's mind, we should answer it right away. If we're organizing well, then we begin by answering the reader's primary questions (*What's this about?* and *Do I have to do anything?*), but we must then be alert: in answering those questions, have we raised others?

Let's go back to the factory owner who needs to stop using a particular conveyor belt. It's essential to remember that *context shapes the reader's expectations*. In this case, here is what context enables the reader to bring to the document.

- The letter arrives by registered mail. This fact alone suggests that the matter is serious.
- The envelope tells the reader that the letter is from OSHA. The letterhead inside confirms it.
- The factory owner knows that there was an inspection a week ago, so he suspects that this letter has to do with the findings.
- There is a RE line on the letter. It says, in boldface, **Order to cease using the final-packaging conveyor belt.**

Here's how the letter began.

The conveyor belt used for the final packaging of components fails to meet Federal safety standards. You must cease using it immediately.

First of all, let's consider what the reader is not asking. He's **not** asking these questions:

- *Who are you?* The letterhead indicates OSHA as the source.
- *What do the letters O-S-H-A stand for?* If he's the owner of a factory, he knows what the abbreviation means. If he forgets, the letterhead spells it out for him. We're going to be using "we" anyway.
- *Did you do an inspection?* If he's the owner of the factory, he's aware that there was an inspection.
- *Why did you do the inspection?* There's no need to write, "In response to a complaint from one of your employees, we inspected . . ." Not only is this irrelevant, but it might result in later unpleasantness.

Those are a few of the questions the reader isn't asking. What is he asking? To determine that, we put ourselves in the reader's shoes. What questions would *we* have **right now**?

- *In what way does the conveyor belt fail to meet safety standards?*
- *Can the factory remain open until I get the problem corrected?*
- *Am I going to get hit with a fine?*
- *What penalties can be assessed?*

If these are the questions we would have, chances are good that they're the questions our reader has, too. We simply address them, in plain words, one at a time.

The conveyor belt used for the final packaging of components fails to meet Federal safety standards. You must cease using it immediately.

Federal regulations require that the surface of a conveyor belt be between 40 and 44 inches from the floor when an employee must stand to perform the work. The conveyor belt used in your factory for final packaging is 36 inches from the floor.

We are not ordering you to close your factory. Other than ceasing to use the final-packaging conveyor belt, you can continue operations as normal. The other two conveyor belts are not at issue because employees at those conveyor belts sit on adjustable-height stools.

No penalty will be assessed. You should be aware, however, that your company could be fined up to \$5,000 per day for each day of operation in violation of this order.

What else might the reader be asking? If you were the owner, you'd want to know what procedure to follow after you've taken care of the problem.

As soon as you have brought the height of the conveyor belt into conformance with Federal guidance, call us. We will inspect it, and you can then resume using it.

Write a strong closing

Let the last thing you mean be the last sentence on the page. In this instance, “Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter” would be like a policeman saying “Thank you” to us after he pulls us over for speeding. We like to be thanked for doing favors, but it seems strange to be thanked when our behavior is compelled.

“Feel free to call me at the number below if you have any questions” is needless to say, because the reader *will* call if he has questions. We never need to worry about that. What we should do is make it easy for him to contact us by typing our telephone number under our name and title in the signature block.⁴

2.9 Let the reader dictate the scope of the document

Some readers need more information than others. When a patent examiner at the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office writes to an experienced patent attorney, she states that the attorney must “elect a restriction” of the invention. The patent attorney instantly understands what this means. No additional explanation is necessary.

But when that same examiner writes to an inventor who hasn’t hired an attorney, she approaches the matter quite differently. Because chances are good that the inventor wouldn’t understand what “elect a restriction” means, the examiner explains it in detail.

Your application actually concerns two distinct inventions. By law, however, an application must be limited to one invention. You have to choose whether to pursue a patent for Claims 1-5 (which concern the apparatus) or Claims 6-14 (which concern the method of using the apparatus).

The examiner would then go on to explain exactly what steps the inventor has to take in order to comply with this requirement. She wouldn’t need to explain that to the patent attorney (the patent attorney knows what he has to do). But the inventor acting on his own behalf would naturally wonder, *“Do I have to file another application, or can I simply tell you to toss out Claims 6-14? Is there a deadline of any sort? Can we do this over the telephone, or do I have to submit a written statement? Are you going to impose an extra fee?”*

⁴ Some agencies prefer (and mandate) putting the telephone number in the text, as in “If you have questions about this matter, please call me on 202-555-1000.” This is not wrong, and it’s a decent way to get off the page. In terms of emphasis, though, it’s better to put your phone number under your title, because when you isolate it there, it’s easier for the reader to see.

Different occasions call for differing degrees of detail. Like any good writing, Plain Language requires that you adjust the scope of your document to account for what your reader knows and doesn't know.

2.10 Weigh the importance of every idea

What we leave out is just as important as what we include. There is simply no reasonable way to organize irrelevant ideas.

In the letter to the factory owner, we do not need to go into sentence after sentence of legal detail. In other words, there is no need to cite *30 U.S.C. 13(b)*. Let lawyers write such stuff to other lawyers. You are writing to the owner of the factory; if he hires an attorney to contest your order, your lawyers can cite law and precedent to his attorney.

Every idea you include – from the paragraph to the phrase – should pass the test of two questions:

- Does the reader need to know this?
- Am I sure the reader doesn't already know it?

Given the context (the realities of the situation that form the background for the reading), is it really necessary to begin with something like this?

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) conducted an on-site investigation of the above-referenced factory on August 17, 2008.

Given the purpose of the document, is the following idea relevant?

It is our job to ensure that the workplaces of the United States are safe not only in terms of being free of hazards, but also in terms of employees' long-term well-being.

Before you include any idea in your writing, ask yourself, "Do I really need to say this?"

2.11 Use plenty of transitional words and phrases

Use *therefore*, *as a result*, and *thus* to indicate that you're about to show an outcome. Use *on the other hand*, *however*, and *but* to indicate that the next idea differs in some important way from the one you've just written. In the paragraph below, notice how the writer uses *first*, *second*, *third*, and

in short to glue the sentences together and remind the reader that each sentence relates to the topic of the paragraph.⁵

We believe that the reasonable consumer would not expect the company to use anything other than the customary cents-per-minute pricing method. First, there is no clear language on the rate sheets indicating otherwise. Second, the only quoted rates are set forth in terms of minutes. Third, only vague references regarding the “call unit” rate are provided. In short, nothing in the company’s materials notifies the customer that the company will charge by “call units.”

2.12 Put supporting ideas in notes

Coherence requires that we *avoid interrupting* the flow of our major ideas. But interruption is inevitable – and emphasis is scattered – when we present minor detail as though it were as significant as the rest of the text.

In any document, some ideas are less important than others. **Consider using footnotes or endnotes** for information that merely clarifies a point or provides a reference. No, they may not be appropriate in every document, but they are not used often enough. They foster good coherence because they minimize interruption. Furthermore, they let the reader know, at a glance, that we have given thought to the relative importance of ideas.

⁵ This is from an FCC *Notice of Apparent Liability*. It concerns the misbehavior of a telephone company that misled consumers about how it would charge for the service.

3. Creating a reader-friendly format

Format (what the page *looks* like) is the first thing the reader sees, and it governs her first impression as to whether the document is going to be easy or difficult to understand. We all sigh when we look at a document that presents no visual guidance – supplies no clue as to what the pages contain – but instead presents immense, unexplored paragraphs. Make the page reader-friendly. Break things up. *Direct the eye.*

3.1 Isolate something to emphasize it

On the page, nothing is more emphatic than isolation. When you want the reader to pay particular attention to an idea, find a way to segregate it visually. *Make it stand out.* You might, for example, boldface the essential sentence or underscore a crucial distinction; you might grab the reader's attention with a centered table, a heading, or an italicized phrase.

3.2 Supply lots of headings and subheadings

Use headings and subheadings to indicate (1) where the important ideas are and (2) where major separations of thought occur. Think of headings as signs along the highway. Readers depend on such signs as much as drivers do. A 20-mile stretch of interstate highway without any signs would be spooky, as well as irritating.

There are three types of headings: question headings, statement headings, and topic headings.

- **Question headings** are phrased as questions (for example, *How do I Locate the Records I Want?*) and are particularly useful in pamphlets, regulations, and general instructions. Readers move through the document asking particular questions, and question headings guide them to the answers. Phrase your question headings from the reader's point of view. In other words, rather than *Will You Be Charged for the Service?* use *Will I Be Charged for the Service?* After all, this is the question the reader is asking.
- **Statement headings** are short declarative phrases (for example, *What to Do in an Emergency*) and are the next most engaging.
- **Topic headings** (the most common form) are considered the most "formal," so management is often most comfortable with them. Topic

headings consist of a word or phrase (such as *Permits*), but they are never engaging and, worse, they are often so vague as to be unhelpful.

3.3 Don't hesitate to use headings in any document

For some reason, a lot of people think it's wrong to use headings in letters. But when government communicates to the people, what is wrong is a document's requiring two readings.

Use headings wherever headings are helpful. In very short documents, there really is no need to supply them. In longer documents, however, they are crucial clarifying devices. Rather than tell yourself, "I can't use headings because this is a letter (or memo, or email)," just ask yourself, "Would headings help clarify how I've organized?" Remember, instant clarity is what we want because it's what the reader wants.

3.4 Highlight the lead sentence in a paragraph

Put your summary statement first and present it in boldface. (The paragraph you're reading now exemplifies the technique.) People who wish to read the remainder of the paragraph can do so; those who already know the explanation can skip it. You can use either boldface or italics to visually emphasize the topic sentence. Most readers believe that boldface is more emphatic than italics.

3.5 Keep your paragraphs relatively short

The principle of "unity" means that the paragraph discusses one idea, not two. But that principle does not mean that an idea developed with 20 sentences must result in a 20-sentence paragraph. Find places to break lengthy paragraphs.

If a paragraph is a long one, the writer will certainly have provided transitional terms in at least a few places. She will have started sentences with such words and phrases as *Next*, *Furthermore*, *In addition*, or *As a result*. Paragraphs can begin with these transitions too. Just make sure that the resultant smaller paragraphs are unified in themselves.

3.6 Use “block style”

We have a choice when indicating that we’re starting a new paragraph – we can either indent, or we can skip a line.⁶ Skipping a line is much more reader-friendly because it provides a clearer visual signal and increases white space.

3.7 Leave the right margin ragged

Readability research strongly indicates that most people read more quickly and with better comprehension when the right margin is ragged, as opposed to justified.

3.8 Leave plenty of white space

Readers are intimidated by dense blocks of text – and with good reason. Writers who format their ideas in page-long paragraphs clearly don’t know what their readers need, and these writers are likely to present other obstacles to reading as well.

Readers want visual reassurance that information has been organized into easily readable chunks, and they also want to see that there are frequent “resting places” – opportunities to synthesize one idea before going on to the next. White space provides both.

Establish reasonable margins (don’t crowd the text to within a quarter-inch of the sides of the paper), keep paragraphs short, use block style, supply headings, and employ bulleted lists to give the page an “open” appearance.

3.9 Use lots of bulleted lists

When we list ideas vertically, we help the reader in two ways. First, the format alone lets her know, at a glance, that we’ve organized well. Second, it’s easier to grasp ideas when those ideas are presented vertically.

First, here’s the expression in ordinary sentence form:

When you apply for a grant, you must send us a description of your experience in the area covered by the grant, copies of any material you have published relevant to the area of the grant, and a detailed account of how you intend to spend the grant funds.

⁶ A few organizations insist on both. This is like putting STOP STOP on a STOP sign. One signal is enough.

Here's the same expression formatted into a bulleted list:

When you apply for a grant, you must send us the following information:

- a description of your experience in the area covered by the grant
- copies of any material you have published relevant to the area of the grant
- a detailed account of how you intend to spend the grant funds

Listing ideas vertically also helps us eliminate unnecessary repetition. The following paragraph, from a trip report, unnecessarily repeats both *we* and *toured*.

On October 21, we toured Complex 17, where the boosters are assembled and mated. We then immediately toured Complex 24, the Atlas/Centaur launch complex. We also toured the Vehicle Assembly Building, where we observed the movable launcher. We ended the day by touring the test range and receiving station.

Formatting these ideas in a vertical list eliminates repetition.

On October 21, we toured the following facilities:

- Complex 17, where the boosters are assembled and mated
- Complex 24, the Atlas/Centaur launch complex
- Vehicle Assembly Building
- Test Range and Receiving Station

In terms of which device to use to itemize elements in a list,

- **use numbers** when (1) the items in your list are presented in order of priority or (2) you wish to reinforce the idea of how many items there are
- **use either numbers or letters** (a., b., c., etc.) when the items in your list must be done as steps in a process or any other sequence
- **use bullets** if you're not listing items in order of importance or as steps in a sequence

3.10 Use tables to present comparisons

Tables are easy to set up, interesting to the eye, helpful in breaking up the text, and far more concise than sentences can ever be. They instantly reveal relationships that would otherwise require many words to express.

Imagine that you're a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, and that you're reviewing a funding request from the Pentagon. Here's the comparative data, presented first in a paragraph and then in a table.

(When you read the following paragraph, please ignore the abbreviations. Just pretend that you know what they mean.)

Appropriate FY09 funding levels for the CTR, USBE, and NMD programs are \$3.2, \$2.4, and \$1.7 billion, respectively. These amounts reflect an increase of \$0.6 billion for CTR and \$0.3 billion for PMG over FY08 levels. Funding for NMD would be decreased by \$0.5 billion from FY08 levels.

Program	FY08 Allocation	FY09 Request	Difference (08 to 09)
CTR	\$2.6 billion	\$3.2 billion	+ \$0.6 billion (25%)
USBE	\$2.1 billion	\$2.4 billion	+ \$0.3 billion (14.3%)
NMD	\$2.2 billion	\$1.7 billion	- \$0.5 billion (22.7%)

No one would argue that the paragraph is badly written. What’s important, though, is the relative ease of understanding. And all of us would agree that we can more easily grasp the ideas in the table.

Here’s another example. This time you’re a decision maker at an intelligence agency, and you need to select a contractor to upgrade security systems at military bases worldwide. Again, the information is presented in text and then in a table. Which do you prefer?

Ferrier has 11 years of experience with Vigil technology, has bid \$29 million, and estimates completing the work in three years. Their key personnel have Top Secret clearance. Sokol has 5 years of experience with Vigil, has bid \$27.5 million, and estimates completing the work in 30 months, but their key personnel have only Secret clearance. Crane has 8 years’ experience with Vigil, had bid \$28.2 million, and estimates completing the work in three years. Crane’s key personnel have Top Secret clearance.

Vigil				
Contractor	Experience	Bid Price	Clearance	Completion
Ferrier	11 years	\$29 million	Top Secret	36 months
Sokol	5 years	\$27.5 million	Secret	30 months
Crane	9 years	\$28.2 million	Top Secret	36 months

Note: When formatting a table, it's a good idea to use a typeface that differs from the typeface of the surrounding text. Similarly, it's best to highlight categories (at the top of columns) in some way. Use larger pitch, boldface, or both to accomplish this.

3.11 Provide “If . . . Then” tables

Complex provisions don't look complex at all when we present them in an “If . . . Then” table. Here's how the IRS originally wrote the provision concerning immediate tax relief:

Immediate tax relief will be determined in the following manner. If the filing status on the return is “Single” or “Married Filing Separately,” the amount of the check will be the lesser of \$300 or 5% of taxable income. If the filing status is “Head of Household,” the amount of the check will be the lesser of \$500 or 5% of taxable income. If the filing status is “Married Filing Jointly” or “Qualified Widow(er),” the amount of the check will be the lesser of \$600 or 5% of taxable income.

The paragraph is not bad, exactly, but “bad” is always relative. Observe how much clearer the information becomes when it is placed in an “If . . . Then” table.

If your filing status on your return is:	Then the amount of your check will be the lesser of:
Single, or Married Filing Separately	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$300, or • 5% or your taxable income
Head of Household	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$500, or • 5% of your taxable income
Married Filing Jointly or Qualifying Widow (er)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$600, or • 5% of your taxable income

Below is another comparison – first text, then table. Everyone agrees that the side-by-side presentation of ideas is the better (simpler) option.

163.17 Deposit with bid

- (a) A deposit shall be made with each proposal for the purchase of Indian forest products. Such deposits shall be at least:
- (1) Ten (10) percent if the appraised stumpage value is less than \$100,000 but in any event not less than \$5,000 or full value whichever is less;
 - (2) Five (5) percent if the appraised stumpage value is \$100,000 to \$250,000 but in any event not less than \$10,000; and
 - (3) Three (3) percent if the appraised stumpage value exceeds \$250,000 but in any event not less than \$12,500

Better:

With your proposal to buy Indian timber, you must include a deposit that meets the conditions in the following table.

If the appraised stumpage value is . . .	you must deposit . . .	and the minimum deposit amount is . . .
less than \$100,000	10% of the stumpage value	\$1,000
between \$100,000 and \$250,000	5% of the stumpage value	\$10,000
over \$250,000	3% of the stumpage value	\$12,500

3.12 Use numbers in the sentence to separate ideas

When your sentence contains three or more parallel ideas, formatting the ideas in a bulleted list is always a good decision. But when the sentence contains only two such ideas, and each one is short and straightforward, you can use numbers (with parentheses on each side) to separate them. The technique improves both clarity and emphasis.

You must notify us, by registered mail, that you have applied to use timber from your lease. When you notify us, be sure to indicate (1) the amount of timber you wish to cut down and (2) the kind of timber you wish to cut down.

3.13 Use footnotes (and endnotes) for explanatory information

At a glance, the reader understands the relatively minor importance of footnoted material. How essential can it be if it's cast in small type and relegated to the bottom of the page? In terms of format alone, the mere presence of footnotes strongly suggests that you have organized and emphasized with care.

As is true with headings, footnotes may be used in any document – including letters – when they are appropriate. Determining whether they are appropriate is merely a matter of answering this question: *If I place this idea in my text, will it rupture coherence?* If the answer to that

question is yes, then you should put the idea either in parentheses or in a note.

3.14 Adjust established formats when necessary

We may have been writing a report, letter, or analysis in a certain format for the past 20 years, but that does not mean we have to worship the tradition. The whole purpose of format is to simplify the reader's job; when changes are necessary, make the changes. If the established format of a routine review complicates the reading, change the format. If the customary format of a report does not adequately fit the report you are now writing, create a new format.

3.15 Use "RE:" (about) or "REF:" (reference) in letters

In memos and email, the SUBJECT line focuses the reader's expectations. Too often, however, the letter presents no such focus in the format. Including *RE:* or *REF:* in your letter-template is not only helpful to the reader, but it also enables you to come to the point.

"RE:" is essentially the same as "subject." Use this one when you state what the letter is about. Use "REF:" when you refer to a document or to previous correspondence. Be sure to surround these devices with white space so that they are easily noticed. In the examples below, they are roughly centered.

Date

Ms. Mackenzie Gibson
1234 Chapel Oaks Drive
Bethesda, MD 20714

RE: your FOIA request

Dear Ms. Gibson:

Date

Mr. Peter Findley
Contracts Manager
Knight Communications
1900 M Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20062

REF: Purchase Order Number T-1845

Dear Mr. Findley:

3.16 Use different fonts for text, headings, and other sections

What a good writer tries to do, always, is *reinforce distinctions*. For example, supplying headings is a good thing, but if the headings are in the same font and size as the rest of the text, and if they are crammed down onto the following text, then they don't *look* like headings – and thus they don't behave as useful headings should.

In this handbook, all of the headings are in Arial, while the text is in Times New Roman. It helps that the headings are in bigger pitch than the text, and it helps that they “float” on the page, but *to reinforce the distinction*, I've also put them in a different font. All of these decisions help them stand out in the right way.

Similarly, if I want you to be able to easily distinguish the examples from the instruction, then I format the examples differently (in this case, by indenting them a bit further) – but I also put them in a different font, simply to reinforce the distinction.

3.17 Vary pitch

Varying the size of the typeface adds visual interest, but it also does something more important – it clearly indicates distinctions in the nature and function of varying parts of the text.

Good taste is essential here, because there are no rules governing the matter. No one can argue, with reason, that a given heading should be 14-point, 18-point, or any other size. We all have the right to our personal sense of what looks good, but the rule that should guide us when we vary pitch is this: *just enough to emphasize, not enough to distract*.

3.18 If your reader isn't Tiny Tim, don't use tiny type

For your main text, use a type size large enough to be easily read. Saving trees is important, but rather than making everything fit onto one page by reducing pitch, try cutting some cluttering words and ideas instead. We have all been subjected to official instructions in a pitch so small that we practically need a magnifying glass to read it, and this is just plain silly.

3.19 Use italics or quotation marks to show the reader that certain words are actually *terms*

The following sentence is certainly mysterious.

The phrase that comprises should be that includes.

We demystify it like this:

The phrase *that comprises* should be *that includes*.

or

The phrase “that comprises” should be “that includes.”

Use italics or quotation marks to alert the reader that certain words are to be seen as *terms*, and are not functioning in their ordinary grammatical sense.

Unclear: You means a loan applicant.

Clear: “You” means a loan applicant.

Unclear: Temporary disablement means . . .

Clear: *Temporary disablement* means . . .

3.20 Avoid writing in ALL CAPS

WE HAVE ALL BEEN VICTIMIZED BY TEXT IN ALL CAPITALS, LIKE THIS, AND WHILE WE MAY APPRECIATE THE WRITER’S INTENT TO EMPHASIZE THAT THIS TEXT IS IMPORTANT, THE FACT REMAINS THAT THIS PRESENTATION IS OVERWHELMING AND NEEDLESSLY DIFFICULT TO READ.⁷

ALL CAPS was a necessary evil a long time ago, when the only ways available to emphasize something were either to underscore it or put it in capital letters. These days, we have *much* better options – we can boldface a phrase, italicize a word, switch to a different font, vary the size of the font, or use color.

3.21 Use boldface and italics to emphasize a word, a phrase, or an especially important sentence

If we’re organizing well, then we shouldn’t have to rely on boldface or italics to reveal the whereabouts of the main point. But our writing often

⁷ Most readers report that they are “put off” by text in all caps, and this holds regardless of whether the idea in all caps is good news or bad.

contains important conditions and qualifications, and it's our job to ensure that the reader notes them.⁸

When you want to make sure the reader sees an idea, emphasize it with boldface or italics. **Your response is due by January 31** grabs the eye, as does "Please note that the waiver *must be signed by your personal physician.*"

Writers sometimes commit two errors here. The first is the use of quotation marks. Don't use quotation marks for emphasis and write something like

All invoices "must" comply with these requirements.⁹

The second error occurs when the writer suffers a lapse in concentration, misses his target, and emphasizes the wrong word or phrase, as in

Visitors **may park** in designated spaces only.¹⁰

3.22 Use a text box to isolate a particularly important idea

Use a text box to capture and visually isolate information that you want the reader to regard as especially important.¹¹

Take this matter seriously. Using any unauthorized computer to store classified files is grounds not merely for dismissal, but for criminal prosecution.

Use text boxes sparingly

The text box above grabbed your attention when you first looked at the page. It grabbed your attention primarily because the device isn't used often in this handbook. If there were two or three text boxes on each page, it would have struck you as ordinary, and would not have had the same effect. If there had been numerous text boxes earlier in the handbook, and the information in them hadn't been especially significant, you might even be inclined to ignore it. Remember the fable of the boy who cried *Wolf!*

⁸ For a living example of the technique, see the italics and boldface in 2.12.

⁹ Unless we use quotation marks to indicate someone's exact words, to show that words are terms, or to introduce an unfamiliar word, we make the reader wonder whether we intend irony. Consider, for example, the 1986 Tax "Simplification" Act and the infamous "safe" havens in Bosnia.

¹⁰ If anything should be emphasized here, it's "designated spaces."

¹¹ I'm reluctant to delve too deeply into matters of desktop publishing (matters that require expensive software and a lot of training). But almost all of us now use software that enables us, instantly and without effort, to create text boxes. Writers who don't use text boxes are depriving their readers of very helpful guidance.

3.23 Give the document a clear title

Whenever we write a non-routine document – a unique report, analysis, forecast, proposal, or anything else – we should always put a title on the top of the first page. If we’re writing well, we’ll make sure that the title is

- clear
- precise
- in larger pitch than the text
- surrounded by white space

Phrase it clearly

Be sure that the title is phrased clearly. *Temporary Air Traffic Controller Shortfalls* can be interpreted in a number of ways. Does “shortfall” mean “understaffing” or “mistake”? What does “temporary” refer to? Does it mean *temporary shortfalls* or shortfalls of *temporary air-traffic controllers*?

Make it precise

Make the title precise. Rather than *Standardized Test Findings*, which does no more than wave vaguely at a sprawling issue, nail it with *How American Schoolchildren of Varied Economic Backgrounds Score in Standardized Tests*. **Use as many words as you need.** Rather than the broad *Vulnerability Assessment*, use the more focused (and far more helpful) *Ten Ways in which the U.S. Capitol Is Vulnerable to Terrorism*.

Make sure the reader can see it

Always use a larger type size for the title. We want it to grab the reader’s attention. For exactly the same reason, make sure that it “floats.” Give it room on the page. Center it and isolate it. Surround it with white space so that it can’t be missed. Using a font that differs from the text-font is a good idea too.

3.24 Provide a Table of Contents

Always include a table of contents in a document of any length. Just what “any length” means is a matter of judgment, but the practical writer thinks as follows. *Okay, I’ve written a 10-page report. If I were the reader, would it help me to have a table of contents? Would I use a table of contents as a sort of roadmap?*

Creating a table of contents can benefit the writer as well as the reader. After all, when we create a table of contents, we see instantly how we’ve organized. That enables us to rearrange any ideas that seem out of place.

Below is a table of contents from a well-organized regulation. The regulation itself is organized logically – it follows the order in which events occur and the order in which the reader would probably ask questions.

Part 791: Javits Gifted and Talented Students

Subpart A: How the grant program works

Section

- 791.1 What is the Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program?
- 791.2 Am I eligible for a Javits Grant?
- 791.3 What activities are appropriate for Javits Grant funding?
- 791.4 What funding priorities may the Secretary establish?
- 791.5 What other regulations apply to a Javits Grant?
- 791.6 What definitions apply to the Javits Grant?

Subpart B: How to Apply for an Award

Section

- 791.10 Where do I write to obtain a Javits Grant application?
- 791.11 What materials do I need to submit to be considered for a Javits Grant?
- 791.12 Where do I send my application?
- 791.13 When is my application due?

Subpart C: How the Secretary Makes an Award

Section

- 791.20 How will my application for a Javits Grant be evaluated?
- 791.21 What selection criteria are used to award Javits Grants?
- 791.22 What additional factors are considered?

3.25 Use format to reinforce good organization

The organization of ideas leads to formatting decisions; format reveals the organization of ideas. The two cannot be separated. And while there is no “ideal organization” that applies to all documents, here are two additional ways we can use format to guide the reader through even the most difficult material.

Start with a summary

If the document is more than two pages long, it may as well be a report. Regardless of whether it is a report, a proposal, an analysis, or even a letter, any document of more than two pages ought to begin with a summary. In the summary, which should be one short paragraph, you reveal (without going into any detail) the recommendation, the conclusion, the action required, or whatever is most important in the content.

Use **Executive Summary** as your heading if the document is to be read by executives. Otherwise, use **Summary**. Don’t use “Abstract.” That’s the

word we use when we summarize college dissertations and articles for publication.

Put lengthy but subordinate material in an appendix

Writing is best when it is linear – when it gets us from Point A to Point B with the fewest detours. When supporting material is so lengthy that it seems to take on a life of its own and actually interferes with the points we’re trying to make, we send our readers on detours. It’s much better to put such material in an appendix.

Suppose we work for the Food and Drug Administration, and our job is to write a report that brings readers up to date on the new technologies available to determine the toxicity of a compound. In such a case, our main task is simply to name the new technologies and describe what they do and how they do it. We would certainly need to indicate, as supporting material, the names of the manufacturers of the technologies, the owners of the patents to the technologies, and what users of the technologies have said.

If we intend to recommend the purchase of a new technology, then the last three ideas would belong in the body of the report. (We would also have to include information on cost, warranty, and required training.) But in this instance, where our primary purpose is merely to indicate what new technologies are available, including all of those details in the body of the report would interrupt coherence. Put them in an appendix at the end of the report. Call it **Appendix**. Don’t call it “Appendix A” unless you have other appendices (B, C, and so on).

3.26 Use discretion with design elements

In other words, don’t go overboard with text boxes, headings, leads, lists, boldface, italics, and so on. Too much of a good thing is a bad thing, and when writers overuse graphics, cartoons, lists, and text boxes, the result is a page that looks cluttered or “busy.” Remember that design elements should be helpful – never distracting, and never there merely for their own sake.

The trick is to know your options and to apply the techniques that work best in whatever you’re writing. When we talk format, we are in a gray area with no right and wrong. But we should recognize that there are degrees of clarity and ease of understanding, and whatever formatting decisions we make should result in heightening the degree of these two important goals.

4. On Choosing Words

Good writing requires that we choose sensible words. The words we choose either convey or (to some degree) conceal our meaning.

Both common sense and the Golden Rule argue for plain words.

Applicant's invention may have utility in the dexterous robotic end effector in Design Option 3 of Space Station Freedom is a sadly complicated way of saying, We may be able to use your flexible bolt in the space station's robotic hand.

Engage the reader, and choose words that help make your style "invisible."

What we want, ultimately, is a style that is both engaging and "invisible." When writing is engaging, the reader feels as though we are addressing him as an individual. When style is invisible, nothing distracts or intrudes – only the ideas are apparent, and they are clear on first reading.

Achieving such a style begins when we choose straightforward words. Here are the techniques for doing so.

4.1 Call things by their right names

What is it that provokes some people to refer to a pencil as a *manually mobile encrypting tool*, to shrapnel as *kinetic energy chunky fragments*, and to a toilet as a *human output receptacle*? Unless they're possessed by the devil, all we can say is that their main goal isn't to convey ideas.

If it's a pencil, call it a pencil. If it's a light, call it a light. Don't call it an *illumination source*. When the writer means that something is "exposed to the air," yet writes that it is *in direct communication with the ambience*,¹² what we have is an honest idea in a Frankenstein costume. Call things by their right names.

Distorted: All telephonic communications instruments shall bear signage indicating security status.

Plain: Each telephone must be clearly labeled "secure" or "non-secure."

Distorted: The vertical transportation system has been deactivated by a negative moisture event.

Plain: The elevator is shut down because of a leak.

¹² Patent examiners write this way, blaming patent attorneys for such phrasing. The patent attorneys blame the law. Everyone knows that such writing is ridiculous, but for reasons unfathomable it survives.

One thing is clear: anyone who can write *vertical transportation system* also knows the word *elevator*. And when you consider that the reader relies on you to understand what he is supposed to know, or to do – that ultimately he is completely at your mercy – then the choice becomes a moral one. We must be willing to reveal what we mean.

4.2 Use familiar words

We may know the word *salient*, but that doesn't mean it will communicate anything to our readers. We can write *the salient issue*, and leave half of our readers wondering what we mean, or we can write *the crucial issue*, or *the important issue*, and be confident that we've conveyed the idea.

Plain Language requires that we honor the homely, everyday words. They are the workhorses of communication. They must sound right to us. In fact, they must sound better to us than big words do. All good writing requires that we *do not complicate* what we are trying to convey.

What is an “everyday” word?

“Everyday” varies from profession to profession. A geneticist's everyday word could baffle a physicist. But we aren't talking here about the jargon used by specialists. We're talking about words we use when writing to the layman – the choice, for example, between “definitize” and the homely “define,” between “delineate” and the honest “outline,” between “locus” and the simple “starting point.” Everyday words are the words we all understand without effort because they're the words we use in our thinking. If we're writing about a link, we must use the everyday “link,” and not the little-known *nexus*.

Difficult: Charismatic megafauna¹³ may be observed at various locations.

Everyday: As you hike, you may see deer, elk, and bighorn sheep.

Difficult: A national foreign-sourcing imbalance occurs on an annual basis.

Everyday: Each year, the United States imports more than it exports.

¹³ I'm not making these things up. In the early 1990s, in the main lobby of Department of the Interior headquarters, a display was set up for the general public to enjoy. The title of the exhibit, in red letters two feet high, was the outrageous phrase “Charismatic Megafauna.” If you'd walked over to see what it really was, you'd have seen photographs of large animals native to the western United States.

4.3 Use the same term consistently to identify a specific idea

In other words, don't vary your terms unless you actually intend to draw a distinction. For example, if you use "senior citizens" to refer to a group, then employ this term consistently in the document. Don't shift to "the elderly" or to any other substitute, because readers will wonder whether you're referring to the same group. If you start with "permit," don't shift to "license." If you start with "leaseholder," don't then use "lessee" to identify the same individual. The terms are different, and the reader could easily think that they describe distinct legal entities.

4.4 Prefer the specific to the general

In *We lack the resources to undertake this project*, what exactly is lacking? Money? Staff? Technical expertise? Equipment? Some of those, all of those? No one knows. When precision matters, it's best to be precise: *We lack the funds to undertake this project*.

Precision is always helpful to the reader. Which of the sentences below tells you exactly what the writer wants you to do to?

All materials shall be secured prior to employee departure.
Before you leave, lock all documents in the safe.

Be sure to execute the form before forwarding it to this office.
Be sure to sign the application before mailing it.

4.5 Use "you" to engage the reader

"You" reinforces the idea that the document is intended for your reader. It grips; it captures interest. Besides, when we're writing *to* someone, it is simply the right word. When we're writing *about* a person or a group, "he," "she," or "they" is the appropriate point of view.¹⁴

Interested parties shall respond to this notice electronically and shall indicate a willingness to participate in the experiment.

Better: If you would like to participate, please fill out the attachment and email it to rjones@org.org.

¹⁴ The use of "you" can backfire when the context is negative. See 5.8.

A visitor's pass will be issued after the register is signed and photographic identification is furnished.

Better: You will receive a visitor's pass after you sign the register and show the guard a photo ID.

Any comments pertaining to the aforementioned Rule shall be submitted to and received by this office no later than September 30.

Better: If you would like to comment on the proposed rule, please do so by September 30. Send your comments to . . .

Note: Using "you" is one of the centerpieces of Plain Language. This word works wonders in clarifying and simplifying what we write. For writers used to the "disembodied voice" style, "you" may take some getting used to, but its importance can't be overstated.

4.6 When the reference is clear, use "we," "our," and "us" to stand for your organization or your particular office

Most of the time, we don't need to indicate what "we" refers to, because whatever we write contains plenty of signals identifying the organization we represent.

- **The envelope.** Mr. Smith takes the envelope out of the mailbox, glances at the logo, and instantly understands that the letter is from the National Imagery and Mapping Agency, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or the Bureau of Engraving and Printing.
- **The letterhead** makes it abundantly clear that we work for NIH, or IRS, or EPA (and it usually also indicates the precise office, division, or program). The reader understands that whatever's on the page comes from the organization specified in the letterhead
- **The sign-off.** Under our signature is our typed title, and that title usually indicates our division, office, or branch. *Director, Personnel Management* and *Manager, Information Technology* vigorously imply what "we" means.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA), Region III, Office of Water Quality Management (WQ) agrees to postpone the compliance date.

Better: We agree to postpone the compliance date.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission is appreciative of the time taken by individuals to provide information about possibly dangerous products.

Better: We appreciate your taking the time to write to us about the stroller.

Regrettably, the resources of the National Archives-Southeast Region do not include sources that will be of assistance in the location of an individual.

Better: Regrettably, our resources do not include information that will help you to locate an individual.

“We” is clear on announcements, notices, and information packets

These documents are always printed on stationery that indicates the source. You’ll never see an FCC Notice of Proposed Rulemaking that doesn’t have *Federal Communications Commission* boldly indicated on the first page. A formal announcement from OSHA that is to be read by employees at a factory is written on Occupational Safety and Health Administration stationery. Information packets from the IRS are impossible to mistake. In these and all similar cases, what “we” means is instantly understood.

“We” is clear on most memos

There’s a “From” line on the memo, and in that line the writer puts her name and her title. She writes “Susan Grant, Chief, Propulsion Division.” Unless she specifies otherwise, any “we” in the text will be understood to mean her division.

When “we” should be introduced

The only time you ever need to explain what “we” stands for is when context doesn’t make it obvious.

- In the case of letters, you need to introduce “we” if the envelope, letterhead, and signature block aren’t specific enough. If the letterhead says “Department of Transportation,” then the writer is obliged to write *At the Federal Highway Administration, we . . .* or *The Federal Highway Administration is asking for your help in solving a difficult problem. We . . .*

- Similarly, in memos (or in any other document) when the stationery itself doesn't instantly clarify what "we" means, discreetly introduce the word. *In the Office of Policy Management, we . . . The Classification Division has one concern with your recommendation. Our concern is . . .*
- In regulations, "We" means the Bureau of Land Management or "We" stands for the Federal Aviation Administration should be standard.

4.7 Try to avoid using "latinate" words

Anglo-Saxon words are always clearer (and shorter) than their Latin counterparts. We learn Anglo-Saxon words before we learn their Latin forms. All of us *walk*. A few overeducated people *perambulate*. And there's the difference. Everyone understands "walk," but not everyone is familiar with the Latin word. And regardless of how many degrees a person has, he doesn't look his sweetheart in the eye and ask her whether she wants to go for a perambulation in the lunar illumination. What he says is, "Let's go for a walk in the moonlight."

And that's how we should write. Look at the difference in the choices, and decide which you'd rather read:

Prior to the election of the species of grant appropriate to said research . . .

or

Before choosing the kind of grant that best applies to your research . . .

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

or

We find no reason to withhold payment.

4.8 Avoid legalisms and foreign words

Attorneys writing to other attorneys may convey their meaning when they use Latin phrases like *ad hoc*, *inter alia*, and *prima facie*, but the rest of us – and certainly attorneys too, when they write to the rest of us – should say what we mean in English.

The benefit shall be enforced nunc pro tunc.

In English: The benefit will be made retroactive.

Any distinction is de minimis.

In English: Any distinction is negligible.

Protecting the security of the nation is our sine qua non.

In English: The reason the Agency exists is to protect national security.

“Saying it in English” also means that we should shun *vis-a-vis*, *apropos*, and *per*, and say “regarding” or “about” instead. We may be fluent in French, but we mustn’t try to prove that by including *de temps en temps* in a report to Defense Intelligence Agency readers (“occasionally” would serve admirably). And we should write American, when our own variety of English differs from the British. In the United States, it is not a *lift*; it is an elevator, and “color” is spelled without the “u.”

The exception here is when a foreign word conveys a precise meaning to the readers of a particular document. Analysts at CIA and the State Department are intimately familiar with the important political nuances in *perestroika*, for example, and when someone at CIA writes to her counterpart at State, “perestroika” is the right word.

4.9 Use “living” words

Henceforth, *hereinafter*, *heretofore*, *therein*, *wherein*, and dozens of other “dead” words occasionally erupt from their graves for a short frolic in government writing. These words were perky in Shakespeare’s time, but they are no longer in common-enough use that they instantly convey our intent. In addition to being distracting, they ooze “officialness” and thus wreck tone.

Use living words. Write *from now on* instead of “henceforth,” *previously* instead of “heretofore,” and *where* instead of “wherein.” “Hereinafter” is always redundant.¹⁵ When we write “Herein enclosed is,” we are saying more than the reader needs to hear, because all we mean is *Enclosed is*.

- When the deadwood can be cut, cut it.

Maps indicating rights-of-way are attached ~~hereunto~~.
The matter is discussed ~~hereinunder~~ on page 9.
Always ask for a prospectus, and carefully read the information ~~therein~~.

- When it needs to be rephrased, rephrase it.

Pursuant to	As we agreed/As a follow-up
Herewith attached are	Attached are
The country whence	The country from which
Visitors beseech	Visitors beg/request/ask/want
They have met thrice	They have met three times

¹⁵ Decades ago, it was conventional to write *The Bureau of Land Management (hereinafter referred to as BLM)* . . . The current convention is simply to use parentheses. *The Bureau of Land Management (BLM)* . . .

4.10 Eliminate “shall” from your writing

Shun the ambiguous *shall*. The word is used vaguely in five distinct ways, and it requires interpretation. Good writing never forces the reader to interpret. What’s more, *shall* is notoriously off-putting. It is a “dead” word never heard in everyday conversation. And because your reader encounters it only in contracts, rules, regulations, and so on, it instantly suggests, “Reader, this is treacherous material.”

- For permission, use “may.”
Materials may (not “shall”) be used only in the research room.
- When recommending a course of action, use “should.”
You and your financial institution should (not “shall”) agree on how invoice information will be provided to you.
- When indicating the future, use “will.”
Our facility will (not “shall”) reopen on September 1.
- When something is fact, use “is.”
The contracting officer is (not “shall be”) responsible for ensuring that the terms comply with the Federal Acquisition Regulations.

How to indicate legal obligation

“Shall” has been interpreted in various ways by various judges; some say it means “must,” but others insist it’s just a recommendation, and means “should.” Never *suggest* legal obligation. *State* it.

To state legal obligation, use “must.” There is no ambiguity in this word.

Written notification shall be made to this office in the event that ownership of the invention has been transferred.

Better: You must notify us, in writing, if ownership of the invention changes.

All subcontractors shall be of bonded and insured status.

Better: You must ensure that any subcontractors you use are bonded and insured.

All employees shall receive compensation not less than the Federally established minimum wage.

Better: You must pay all employees at least the minimum wage established by Federal guidelines.

Forms shall be forwarded to the Office of the Inspector General.

Better: You must send the form to the Office of the Inspector General.

How to indicate other requirements

When a requirement is not a matter of law but of policy, let tone dictate your choice of words. Again, never use “shall,” but use *must*, *required*, *have to*, or *need to*.

- You must replace all records in their original order.
- Each applicant is required to pass a polygraph test.
- You have to send us this information before we can determine your eligibility.
- You need to complete this form to apply for benefits.

4.11 Don't use five words when one will do

It is incumbent upon this office means “We must.” *In the vicinity of* means “near,” and *outside the realm of possibility* really means no more than “impossible.” If we write *the legal counsel for the prosecution*, all we mean is “the prosecutor,” and if we write *We are currently operating under the assumption that*, what we mean is “We assume.”

We speak with phrases, but we should write with individual words. We should *solve*, rather than “provide a solution,” and we should *decide*, rather than “make a decision.” The following wordy phrases all boil down to “because”:

in consideration of the fact that
in light of the fact that
in view of the fact that
given the fact that
due to of the fact that
owing to the fact that
on the grounds that
in as much as

4.12 Don't use one word when you need two

If we tell the reader that something is to be done *bimonthly*, we are begging for trouble, because this word has no fixed meaning.¹⁶ Readers interpret the word in three ways – as *every two months*, *twice per month*, and even *every two weeks*. If you mean “every two months,” then use the three-word phrase at first – and then you can use “bimonthly,” because you have implicitly defined it.

¹⁶ The same problem occurs with “biannually” and “biweekly.”

Don't take shortcuts that lead to confusion

The paleontologist at the Smithsonian knows the word “herbivorous,” but when she’s writing text for the museum exhibit, she uses two words – *plant-eating* – to describe the culinary preference of the dinosaur. If she’s a good writer (that is to say, concerned not with how she sounds, but with whether she conveys her ideas), she doesn’t use “quadripedal,” but *four-footed* to describe the animal’s orientation. She does so because she knows her readers (in this case, the general public) will not be familiar with the more “learned” words.

For economists: The U.S. economy is experiencing negative growth.

For non-economists: Our economy continues to grow, but at a slower rate.

For medical professionals: Atherosclerosis can contribute to infarctions.

For everyone else: Hardening of the arteries can lead to a heart attack.

4.13 Avoid yanking words out of ordinary grammatical use

Consider the sentence *Your application must be received timely*. Does that sound right to you? The dictionary tells us that “timely” can be used as an adverb – but it very rarely is, and when you do see it used that way, it’s almost always in old-fashioned legal writing. And anyway, what the dictionary says is beside the point if the way we use a word is distracting. We can have a *timely submission* or a *timely discovery*, but the application must be received *by the deadline*, or *by September 30*.

Use the right form of the verb

It’s especially important to use the right form of the verb, but too many writers are lax in this regard. *Patentability shall not be negatived by the manner in which the invention was made*¹⁷ uses “negatived” as a verb. But readers are accustomed to seeing “negative” as an adjective, as in *negative outcome*. And in any event, *A patent cannot be denied merely because of the manner in which the invention was made* is ever so much clearer.

Awkward: Reference the leaflet for pertinent information on registration.

Better: To learn how to register, please refer to the leaflet.

Misleading: To alleviate this concern, the project should be sited.

Better: To alleviate this concern, we should visit the site.

Bizarre: Action staff will be informationed on a daily basis at 0600.

Better: You will be briefed daily at 0600.¹⁸

¹⁷ 35 U.S.C. § 103(a).

¹⁸ Since this is a sentence for military readers, “0600” (rather than 6 a.m.) is conventional.

4.14 Use words in their everyday sense

*This position is encumbered by a qualified MC&G professional*¹⁹ is one whale of a sentence. What it means is that the position is temporary because the person who occupies the position is temporarily away. But what does the reader make of it? If the reader knows “encumbered” at all, he’s accustomed to its meaning a *burden*, or a *hindrance*. How, he wonders, can a position be burdened by a professional? The dictionary tells us that the *seventh* meaning of “encumber,” from ancient English law, is “to hold claim to.” Whoa! Is the reader supposed to know the seventh meaning of a word? *This position is temporary* is what the writer should have written.

Misleading: The issue of contaminated material ceased in 2001.
Clear: The outflow of contaminated water stopped in 2001.

Backwards: All excavations shall be permitted.
Clear: You must have a permit for any excavation.

Preposterous: The site shall be restored prior to vacation.
Plain: You must restore the site before leaving it.

4.15 Avoid “impact” and minimize the use of “affect” (as verbs)

As verbs, *impact* and *affect* may be correct, but they don’t mean anything in particular.

Because it sounds so “official,” *impact* infests government writing. But if I write, “The budgets of all Federal agencies will be impacted by the decision,” no reader can know whether I mean the budgets will be *increased* or *decreased* – and I could mean either one. I could mean *jeopardized*. I might even mean something on the order of *full funding will be delayed*. “Impact” is never a good choice as a verb. “Affect” suffers from the precisely same affliction.

“Affect” is used honestly when you ask a question. “How will the decision affect us?” “Will the contract be affected [in any way at all] by the proposed rule?”

The policy should positively impact economic conditions.
Better: The policy should stimulate the economy.

Homeowners impacted by the construction shall receive compensation.
Better: If you must relocate, we will compensate you.

¹⁹ “MC&G” stands for “Mapping, Charting, and Geodesy.” The sentence was in a vacancy announcement. More than one Federal organization uses the word “encumbered” in this context.

The policy will affect the amount of paperwork required.

Better: The policy will reduce paperwork.

or

The policy will increase paperwork.

4.16 Avoid euphemisms

Euphemisms are dishonest phrases that attempt to conceal an unpleasant truth. “Revenue enhancement” is a euphemism for *tax increase*. “The aircraft experienced an unintended impact with the ground” means that the plane *crashed*. “Servicing the target” means *killing the enemy and taking ground*. The honest writer spurns euphemisms. Sooner or later, the truth always surfaces, and it is better to be plain in the first place. The unpleasantness of a fact is not diminished, only temporarily hidden, by a cloak of words.

Our response to the disaster was negatively event-driven.

Straightforward: We responded too slowly to the disaster.

The base will undergo mandatory realignment in 2004.

Straightforward: The base will be closed in 2004.

4.17 Use contractions when they’re appropriate

In the move to simpler style, constructions that were once taboo are now becoming standard. When occasion allows, use contractions to foster a conversational tone.

This office shall put forth utmost effort to accommodate the needs of researchers.

Better: We’ll do our best to accommodate your research needs.

It is the hope of everyone at the Library that visitors have benefited from the tour.

Better: We hope you’ve enjoyed the tour.

Note: Be consistent within a given document, and avoid breeziness when breeziness is inappropriate. Clearly, contractions are best avoided in notices, directives, contracts, regulations, and policies. They may be used to advantage, however, in press releases, public announcements, pamphlets, information packets, and letters to individuals.

4.18 Use the idiom

The deadline is creeping up on us is an “idiomatic” expression – that is, a non-literal use of words that everyone in a given culture understands. No deadline is literally on its hand and knees, but we *say* that it is, for the sake of simplicity, and readers instantly understand our intent. The argument that “inanimate objects cannot act” is logically true but utterly beside the point. When we write “Figure 2 illustrates” or “Appendix B discusses,” readers don’t imagine a gesturing Figure 2 or a chatty Appendix B.

Plain Language calls for the use of idiomatic expressions because alternatives to them are unnecessarily wordy. *Figure 2 provides an illustration of* and *Appendix B contains a discussion of* are complex compared to their idiomatic equivalents. Good taste is crucial here: government writing should never bring reading to a screeching halt, and *The directive crucifies our plans* would do just that. Use common expressions (for example, *the report explains, the article suggests, the appendix amplifies*), but don’t invent attention-grabbing ones.

A complete review of this issue is presented in Appendix A.

Idiomatic: Appendix A thoroughly reviews this issue.

A description of the indigenous fauna is contained in the pamphlet.

Idiomatic: The pamphlet describes the local wildlife.

4.19 Use gender-neutral language

Many readers are sensitive to the implied sexual bias of words such as “chairman” and “mailman,” as well as to the possible bias of sentences such as *Each manager must submit his report by July 15*. In a world where girls join the Boy Scouts and boys join the Girl Scouts, we cannot get by even with a sentence such as *Every Girl Scout is expected to do her best*. Within reason, it’s best to defuse the situation by using gender-neutral terms. But this doesn’t mean we clutter things with “his or her.”

The six ways of avoiding “his or her”

- **Cut “his” from the sentence.**
Every writer must use ~~his~~ good judgment.
The applicant must be prepared to spend ~~his~~ weekends traveling.
Each security officer must use ~~his~~ discretion.

When cutting “his” results in an ungrammatical construction, here are our options. The original sentence reads, *Each researcher must bring his driver’s license or other photo identification*.

- **Use “you.”**
You must bring your driver’s license or other photo identification.
- **Make the first term plural, and then use “their.”**
All researchers must bring their driver’s license or other photo identification.
- **Use an article (“a,” “an,” or “the”).**
Each researcher must bring a driver’s license or other photo identification.
- **Write a passive construction.**
A driver’s license or other photo identification is required.
- **In a lengthy document, use “he” and “she” interchangeably.**

The last technique is distracting (and can be confusing) in a short document, but it’s particularly useful in longer works. It’s a technique employed occasionally in this handbook.

Avoid (s)he, s/he, and other monstrosities

We should use “his or her,” “his or hers,” and “he or she” as a last resort, and only after we’ve tried the six techniques mentioned above. In no case should we use “his/her,” “his/hers,” “he/she,” “s/he,” or “(s)he.” These concoctions distract most readers. They also wreck tone.

Try describing what the person does, as opposed to using a title

Gender bias can often be avoided if we say what a person *does* (as opposed to what that person *is*). Whether it’s better to use “Chairwoman,” “Chairman,” or “Chairperson” becomes moot if we say that someone *chairs* a committee.

When we must use the individual’s title (as opposed to saying what the person does), and when the gender of the individual is known, attempting to conceal gender makes little sense. It may be more honest to write *Chairwoman Helen Smith* than *Chairperson Helen Smith*.²⁰

²⁰ The only time that such a construction as “Chairperson Helen Smith” would be appropriate is when Ms. Smith prefers that title. If we know someone’s preference, we should respect it.

4.20 Distinguish “jargon” from “matrix”

As professionals, we use two different species of words in our writing. The first species is **jargon** – the terms of art, abbreviations, and specialized use of ordinary words unique to our profession. The second species is **matrix**. Matrix consists of everything other than jargon, and matrix words are the ones we should always make plain.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with using jargon when your readers are in the same profession and understand the specialized terms. But even when you’re writing to specialists, make the matrix plain. In the example below, “curing,” “substrate,” and “dielectric layer” are jargon in electrical engineering. Notice that those terms survive in the revision. In the revision, only the matrix is simplified – and that makes all the difference in the clarity of the expression.

Subsequent to the curing of the substrate, application of the first dielectric layer is performed.

After the substrate has cured, the first dielectric layer is applied.

“Subsequent to,” which is just an inflated way of saying “after,” has been changed to the simpler word. The other changes to the sentence also involve matrix words, and all we’ve done is presented the ideas concisely.

5. On tone in correspondence

Tone is the ghost that murmurs “between the lines.” No document lacks it. While tone is always subjective – that is, open to some interpretation – most people share a sense of whether text is cold or friendly, callous or caring, condescending or sincere.

Why try to sound like Oz the Great and Terrible?

Tone boils down to what the writing sounds like – to what it “feels” like. Too often, government writing sounds and feels like a pronouncement from some vast, disembodied intelligence that seems more intent on reminding us who’s in control than on saying anything clearly.²¹

All the artificial words and phrasing used in “traditional” government writing create the sense that we’re being talked down to by Oz the Great and Terrible. When we read “shall” (with its Biblical echoes of commandment by the Almighty) and such words as “pursuant,” “hereunto,” and “therewith” – words that no one ever uses in everyday speech – we cannot help but feel that we’re being “lorded over.”

All initial record requests shall be directed to the unit of record only subsequent to FOIA officer contact; or, in the alternative, shall be directed to the FOIA officer for forwarding to proper officials.

In too many Federal agencies, such a tone (full of self-important bluster) has become traditional. That’s unfortunate. It’s a bad tradition, at least if the writing is addressed to humans.

Every choice contributes to tone

Literally everything in a document contributes to tone – not merely the choice of words, but the choice of ideas, the organization of ideas, format, even design elements such as font, pitch, and the use of color. And although Plain Language doesn’t require a “buddy-buddy” tone, it does require that we create an atmosphere of trust.

The techniques recommended in this handbook contribute to the tone appropriate to most Federal writing. The ideas in this section are matters of tone alone, pertain to letters and email, and do not appear elsewhere. The few that are repeated here are especially important.

²¹ For a classic example of the “disembodied voice” style, please see page 67.

5.1 Vary tone according to purpose and occasion

The tone of regulations and contracts should be dispassionate and neutral, but the tone of letters and email should be more engaging. Just as we have to vary our choice of words depending on our audience, we have to vary tone depending on the nature and occasion of the document. Be jocular in an email to your friend, but be compassionate in a letter denying benefits to someone you don't know.

5.2 Respect the difference between text and subtext

“Text” consists of the words that are actually on the page. Tone derives at least as much from “subtext,” or what’s *behind* the words. *Subtext is what the reader infers about our attitudes* – our attitudes about her, about writing, and even about ourselves.

When we’re writing to a reader who has pointed out that she’s a recent widow, and we *don’t* include “We’re sorry to hear about the death of your husband,” she infers indifference. When we use words the reader doesn’t understand, she infers that (1) we don’t care about her, (2) we’re showing off, (3) we don’t know how to communicate, or (4) we really don’t care whether we’re understood. A minuscule type size implies that we have little concern for making the ideas easy to read. And the subtext of “Obviously, you need to contact your state’s highway authority” is *Reader, you’re a dunce*.

If we’re writing well, then subtext should suggest that we respect the reader’s intelligence, have some degree of empathy for her, and are doing our best to convey ideas.

5.3 Pay attention to the echoes of words

It was not by accident that the *War Department* was renamed *Department of Defense*.

As writers we’re responsible not only for the “dictionary meaning” of words, but also for their “associated meanings,” or *connotations*. We would much rather be called “firm” than be called *dogmatic*, *obstinate*, *stubborn*, or *muleheaded*. We would rather be called “flexible” than be labeled *spineless*.

Words reveal bias. If two issues are inseparable, the neutral writer says that they are *linked*. The writer who favors their being linked says that they are *intertwined*. The writer who wants them separated complains that they are *inextricably tangled*.

If all we want is an explanation, we shouldn't demand a *justification*. The latter word has an accusatory connotation of "Let's hear your excuse." If something is late, there's no need to call it *tardy* or *delinquent*. Words remind us of things, and those two remind us of truant officers. "Federal employee" is a neutral term, but *bureaucrat*, with its echoes of dogmatic adherence to a million little rules, is negative. Weigh words with care.

5.4 Use "speakers' words" to foster a personal tone

If something is to begin on January 1, you might write *Beginning January 1*, *Starting January 1*, *As of January 1*, or *Effective January 1*. The first three are conversational and thus "invisible" (meaning that they serve merely to transport thought and don't call any attention to themselves). "Effective," however, is rarely spoken; when we encounter it, we encounter it on the page. Not only does it have the connotation of being more "official" than the others, but because it's rarely spoken, it creates a distance between writer and reader. In effect, it pushes the reader away. This "pushing away" creates the tone we call "impersonal."

If you want to foster a personal tone in your correspondence, then avoid using words that are primarily "writer's words." Consider the difference in the connotations of *Be advised that* and *Please note*. "Be advised that" is a phrase used in writing, not in speaking, and when we read it, it is always followed by bad news. *Be advised that your property taxes will increase*, *Be advised that we are rejecting your claim*. When the news is neutral or positive, write *Please note*. Tone improves tremendously when we use the phrases of everyday speech.

5.5 Avoid "robotisms"

When the letter begins *Per telecom of 21 August*, the reader's jaw drops.²² Her jaw drops because people don't talk that way. Robots might, but people don't. What people say is something on the order of "In our telephone conversation of August 21," or "As we agreed on August 21."

²² The jaws of readers in the military (and intelligence) community may not drop at such a phrase. These readers are accustomed to robotic style, and to them it is more or less expected. But members of the general public are hardly accustomed to it, and they are instantly put off by it.

When the letter begins *Subject contract terms*, the reader sighs inwardly. Not only do people not speak that way, but the phrase forces her to glance up to where the “subject line” is – only it isn’t indicated as a “subject,” but is indicated as “RE” or “REF.” Three words into the document, the reader knows that the writer is treating her as an automaton.

Always try to use the words, rhythms, and idioms of ordinary speech. Rather than the robotic *Receipt is noted*, write “We’ve received.” Rather than *Applicant must elect*, write “You must choose.”

5.6 Refrain from using “obvious” and “obviously”

Tone plummets in flames when these words are used in a bullying way, as in *Obviously, we do not have the resources to investigate every minor complaint* or *It’s obvious that you do not quality for the increased benefit*.

Things that are obvious to some people are not necessarily apparent to others. And when the reader of an unclear regulation writes to ask which category he belongs in, it is condescending in the extreme to reply, *Obviously, you fit into Category 2*. Such a sentence reduces the reader because it practically shouts, “You dummy, I shouldn’t have to waste my time explaining this, because anyone with any brains would understand it!” The professional response would be, *Given the information you’ve provided, you belong in Category 2*.

5.7 Use – but don’t overuse – the reader’s name

When the letter begins, “Dear Ms. Jones,” Ms. Jones knows that she’s the one being written to. If in the second paragraph the writer uses “direct address,” and writes, *Ms. Jones, we appreciate your concern about the environment*, Ms. Jones may actually like it. If in the third paragraph the writer does it again, and writes, *Unfortunately, Ms. Jones, Federal law permits open-seam mining in the area*, she’s going to hesitate a moment, wondering why she’s being addressed again. If in the fourth paragraph she reads, *Open-seam mining actually benefits many individuals in your community, Ms. Jones*, she’s going to ask, “Are they being sarcastic?” And if the letter ends with *Ms. Jones, we hope this satisfactorily answers your question*, she’s going to wonder, “Why are they treating me like a child?”

Limit “direct address” to once per document

Using the reader’s name in the body of the letter or email is actually a good technique for fostering a personal tone. But in a short letter or email, doing it once is enough. If we do it more than once, most readers wonder why. We don’t want them wondering about our motives; we want them merely to read and understand.

A good place to use “direct address” is at the end of the correspondence. *Ms. Jones, we appreciate your taking the time to write, and we hope that this fully answers your question.*

5.8 Avoid using “you” in a negative context

Readers like to be engaged, but not when the news is negative. The word “you” backfires in phrases such as *you failed*, *you neglected*, *you didn’t*, and *you forgot*.

We can’t process your claim because you failed to include the estimate is clear, but tone improves when we eliminate the finger-pointing: *We will process your claim as soon as we receive the estimate.* Tone improves when we stop scolding with reader with *Your application is being returned because you didn’t fill out Form 1019*, and instead say something positive: *Please resubmit the application with a completed Form 1019.*

You did not write your mailing address legibly.

Better: We’re unable to determine your mailing address.

You failed to mention when the Prime Minister will be arriving.

Better: We need to know when the Prime Minister will arrive.

5.9 Come to the point

Letters and email either answer readers’ questions or direct readers to do something. In either case, the point should appear in the first paragraph. Putting it there is not merely polite, but it respects the way people actually read. If we begin with background, the reader will skip it. If he wants to know the background, he’ll read the section later, but what he wants initially is to know (1) the answer to his question or (2) what we want him to do.

5.10 When the occasion requires an apology, give it up front

If you're writing to correct a mistake your agency made, begin by apologizing for the error. And rather than offer an apology that sounds blithe, as in *An error was made in the calculation of your benefit*, admit that your agency actually erred: *We made an error when calculating your monthly benefit. We apologize for this mistake.*

Then start a new paragraph and come to the point. The reader now knows that something about his income has changed. So the question he's asking at this moment is "Will I get more or less money each month?" The second paragraph should answer the question immediately.

5.11 When delivering bad news, use "We regret" or "Unfortunately"

Consider the difference in tone between *You do not qualify for the position* and *Unfortunately, the position requires more experience*. Consider the difference in tone between *Your appeal has been denied* and *We regret to inform you that your appeal has been denied*.

All you have to do is ask yourself which one you'd prefer if you were on the receiving end: *Your request for benefits increase is rejected* or *Unfortunately, your benefits will not be increased*.

5.12 Reserve the "Thank you" for the end of the letter

Many writers like to begin correspondence with phrases such as *Thank you for writing to inquire about* or *Thank you for sharing your concerns about*. Thanking the reader is usually a good idea. But unless the sole purpose of your correspondence is to thank her for something, then thanking her in the first sentence actually backfires.

Thank you for your letter of July 14 certainly gets things going – but what do we say after that? Now we're tempted to remind the reader of what she said or asked. But she knows what wrote. She's not interested in that. She's interested in the answer to her question, and she impatiently skips the "thank you." In other words, it doesn't even register.

Put the "thank you" at the end of the correspondence. That's where it belongs in terms of its relative importance. It's a nice idea to leave the reader with – more importantly, when you put it at the end, the reader notes it.

5.13 Express sympathy when the occasion demands it

A 75-year-old man writes to DoD's Office of Health Affairs. He explains that his wife, a retired Air Force colonel, died two weeks ago, and he wants to know whether he will still be covered under her medical insurance. How do we respond?

In an extreme situation (such as the death of a spouse), ordinary decency argues that we should at least acknowledge another's suffering. Here are four ways – and I'm not making these up, I've seen them all in Federal correspondence – of expressing sympathy.

Spouse death noted.

It is understood that your spouse died two weeks ago.

This office is aggrieved to learn of the tragic death of your loved one.

We're sorry to hear about the death of your wife.

The bereaved man didn't lose a "spouse," or an abstract "loved one." He lost his *wife*. That fact alone should be enough to recommend the fourth option. The first is so terse and frigid that it sounds inhuman, the second is as matter-of-fact as a sports score, and the third (with its use of "this office," "tragic," and "loved one") strikes the reader as boilerplate.²³

Where to place the expression of sympathy

End the letter with it.

Some Plain Language guidance suggests opening with the expression of sympathy. I don't think this is a good idea, and here's why.

1. If we begin with *We're sorry to hear about the death of your wife*, what do we write next? In terms of coherence, there's nowhere to go except to continue on that topic. We don't want to continue on that topic, but any change is likely to seem abrupt.
2. While expressing condolence is appropriate, it isn't the reason we're writing, and it isn't the reader's main concern.
3. Talk is cheap, and anyone can say sympathetic words. What matters is whether behavior backs up the talk and makes the words sound sincere – and "good behavior," in this situation, means addressing the reader's primary concern before we do anything else. Ultimately, we *earn sincerity by behaving sincerely*.

²³ "Boilerplate" is text (usually stale) that is used over and over. It's also called "canned language," "form paragraphs," and "form expressions."

4. If we begin with the expression of sympathy, how do we close? We'll be tempted to repeat the idea with *Again, we're sorry to hear about the death of your wife* – but does the reader actually wish to hear this twice in a short letter?

These are four powerful arguments for beginning the letter to the recent widower with *You remain fully covered under your wife's medical insurance*. Then, if he needs to do anything, we tell him what he needs to do. At the end, *We're sorry to hear about the death of your wife* not only sounds sincere, but leaves the reader with the right impression.

5.14 Use “I” and “me” – except in very particular circumstances

Inquiries concerning the abovementioned should be directed to the below-named.

That's not Plain Language. Frankly, it falls short of sounding like human speech. It's artificial, and it's icy in terms of tone.

If we're going to call things by their right names, then we mustn't use *this analyst, this writer, this observer, this desk, the undersigned*, or any other contrivance to refer to ourselves as individuals. What we should write is “me” and “I.” The only time these pronouns are inappropriate is when the writer shouldn't be emphasizing himself.

When “we” is better than “I”

“We” is the right word when you're writing about official actions your agency performs as an arm of the Federal government. “We” and “us” stand for your agency in such sentences as *We will inspect the site on February 12* and *You must send us proof of citizenship*.

When you intend to be understood as representing the viewpoint of your agency, *Thank you for bringing this matter to our attention* is more appropriate than *Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention*. When what you write is to be understood as the official stance of your agency, *We remain committed to clean air* is more appropriate than *I remain committed to clean air*, which sounds as though it comes from the President.

When “I” and “me” are the right words

But there is a big difference between *We will inspect the site on February 12* and *All telephone inquiries should be directed to the undersigned*.

In the former sentence, whether you as an individual will inspect the site should be irrelevant to the reader. What matters is that OSHA will officially inspect the site on February 12, so “we” is the right word.

But in the latter sentence, *the undersigned* is nothing but an old-fashioned, legal-sounding, off-putting, silly, cold, and ultimately preposterous way to say “me.” *If you have any questions, please call me on 202-555-2997* is how it should go.

The distinctions to keep in mind

- When it’s important for the reader to understand that you, as an individual, are responsible for something, then “I” is the right word.

This employee is the point of contact for coordination of project-related matters.

Better: I am your point of contact for this project.

- When you alone are going to do something, then “we” would be misleading, and “the agency” would make no sense.

We look forward to meeting you next week

The fact: I look forward to meeting you next week.

- When you intend to express an opinion that is yours alone, express it in plain words. Opinions are not made more “objective” – are not magically transformed into fact – by burying “I” in a phrase.

This desk is of the current belief that Libya, not Afghanistan, is harboring the fugitive.

Better: I believe that the fugitive is being harbored by Libya.

- When you are in a high-level position, and you are expected to be accountable for your decisions, not using “I,” “me,” and “my” can suggest an attempt to deflect responsibility.

It was the agency’s decision to abort the mission.

Honest: I okayed the request to abort the mission.

- When you are expressing a sentiment that only an individual can feel, it makes little sense to pretend otherwise.

We hope that the information contained in this letter is of use to you.

Better: I hope that this information proves helpful.

This analyst, this writer, the undersigned – these artificial ways of saying “I” conspire to create the slushy, evasive tone we are trying to avoid. Probably the best rule of thumb is this: when you are tempted to write one of those euphemisms, then “I” is the word you should use.

5.15 Be careful with exclamation points

Telecommuting will soon become a reality! The nightmare of being stuck in traffic will be a thing of the past! All employees are eligible!

Don’t you feel as though you’ve just been frisked by a heavy-handed pickpocket? Such breathless overexcitement puts tone in a hand basket and whisks it to a place that doesn’t freeze over.

Guilt by association

We see the exclamation point abused too often. No writer can compel a reader to be overjoyed. But that doesn’t stop advertising copywriters from trying. *Save up to 70% and more! Limited-time offer!! No money down!!!*

Because the exclamation point is abused this way by hucksters and used-car salesmen, readers associate it with phoniness. When we use it too often, or when we put three or four exclamation points in a row, readers are tempted to think we’re trying to sell them something they really don’t need to buy.

We can’t compel excitement

There is something naive, even childish, in the assumption that we can artificially impose excitement on our readers. As readers, we have the right to choose what to be excited about. We don’t want the writer to tell us what to be excited about, and we most certainly don’t crave to know what she’s excited about.

It’s better to state facts calmly and let the reader decide whether those facts thrill him. *A five percent pay increase will take effect in January!* gives goosebumps to the writer, who had been dreading only a four percent increase. But what if the reader had been hoping for six percent?

Below is a living example of overheated writing.

Plain language saves every taxpayer time, effort, and \$\$\$\$!

Instead of wading through pages of legalese and bureaucratic gobbledygook, small businesses can simply get down to business!

BUT

You need to THINK CLEARLY to WRITE PLAINLY!

SO – here are a few tips to help you WRITE PLAINLY:

- Reach out to your readers!
- Know your audience!
- Organize to serve your reader!
- Write to one person!
- Use "you!"
- Use questions and answers!
- Use the active voice!
- Use "must!"
- Appeal to the reader visually!
- Use headings that inform!
- Use vertical lists (like this one)!
- Avoid confusing terms!
- Use clearer words!

It's difficult to see the ideas there because we're pummeled by the presentation of the ideas. The exclamation points provoke a host of needless questions, such as *What is so all-fired exciting about knowing who the audience is? Why is the writer having convulsions about all this stuff? What's the writer like as a person?*

This is not to say that exclamation points should be considered taboo in all workplace writing. ***Sign up today!!!!*** may be attention-grabbing, but we should reserve such excess for corkboard notices pertaining to joining the bowling team, starting a bridge club, or attending the potluck dinner. Because exclamation points call for an emotional reaction, they have no place in any document addressed to the intellect.

5.16 Try to minimize the use of abbreviations

A shortcut for the writer can become a roadblock for the reader. Pages bristling with acronyms and abbreviations look forbidding to most readers. Even if the writer takes pains to introduce the abbreviations, what the reader sees, at first glance, is a page littered with strange groups of

capitalized letters – and that first glance tells him he’s got his work cut out for him. This is hardly an encouraging first impression.

Again, we’re not talking about writing to experts now, but about writing to the general public. Use abbreviations when you write to experts; experts understand and expect the abbreviations. But please realize that tone improves when we remove obstacles – not just obstacles to understanding (such as imprecise words and difficult sentences), but the visual signals that we are not making things easy for the reader. To the layman, a glance at a page cluttered with acronyms suggests just that.²⁴

5. 17 How all this stuff works in concert

The guidance in the previous section, “On Choosing Words,” is especially important in terms of tone. Contrast these two sentences:

Applicant shall be notified in the event that RBIE underexceeds the threshold requirement.

We will notify you if you need to make additional royalty payments.

All of us will agree there’s a tremendous difference in the tone of the two sentences above. In the second sentence, the use of “we” and “you,” the use of “will” (instead of the deadly “shall”), and the use of “royalty payments” instead of “RBIE” create the tone we all prefer. *Underexceeds* (the writer’s spur-of-the-moment invention) is ridiculous when all the writer means is “falls short.” *In the event that* is a costume for “if.”

We can’t measure tone. It isn’t quantifiable; it’s a feeling we get from the words. We would all rather read the second sentence, but – and this is simply the blunt truth – some people still prefer to write the first one. No one knows why.

²⁴ For suggestions on alternatives to the “alphabet soup” look, see 6.9.

6. On being clear

Clarity begins with the choice of words – but then we have to arrange those words into sentences and paragraphs. Even the plainest of words can result in confusion if those words aren't sensibly arranged.

An anecdote

Shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Franklin Roosevelt appointed James M. Landis to head the Office of Civilian Defense. Mr. Landis, who had been the Dean of Harvard Law School, wrote the Federal policy on how to darken Washington, D.C., in case of an air raid at night. Here's a one-sentence excerpt:

Such obscuration may be obtained either by blackout construction or by termination of the illumination.

What this means is that we should *cover the windows or turn off the lights*. Reporters actually laughed out loud when this sentence was read to them at a press briefing.

The sentence quoted above is the epitome of what we are trying to avoid. It takes a simple idea and warps it into something grotesque. In its use of big words, it serves more to suggest things about the writer than it does to convey anything to the reader. It is the classic “show off” sentence, concerned with emphasizing that the writer has a broad vocabulary, but unconcerned about the people who have to read and act on the guidance.

Anyone who can write “by blackout construction or by termination of the illumination” can also write *cover the windows or turn off the lights*. The question is, why didn't he?

He wrote the complicated sentence because he had the wrong attitudes about writing – about what it should look like and sound like, and what it should accomplish. He also had the wrong attitude about where the writer fits in the scheme of things: he put himself first. If we are to write well, we must put the reader first, the message second, and ourselves last. Our attitudes and assumptions about writing dictate our style.

If we bring the right assumptions to the act of writing, then all we need is technique. Here are the Plain Language techniques that are especially important to clarity.

6.1 Prefer the active voice

One of the major weaknesses of Government writing is the overuse of the passive voice. When we write, “If you are determined to have a disability, we will pay you as follows,” the sentence says to the reader, *If you really and truly want to have a disability . . .*

Clarity can improve when we use the active voice

Passive (and ambiguous): Security shall be provided at the site.

Active (and clear): You must provide security at the site.

Active (and clear): We will provide security at the site.

Economy can improve when we use the active voice

Passive: It is hoped by both parties that further delays can be avoided.

Active: Both parties hope to avoid further delays.

Tone can improve when we use the active voice

Passive: The privacy of the applicant will be respected in the review process.

Active: We will respect your privacy when we review your FOIA request.

The active voice is not always right, though, in terms of emphasis. In the examples below, the passives are better because (1) they emphasize the word we’re really talking about (*smoking, form, and Lincoln*) and (2) who is performing the actions is either irrelevant or understood. Honestly, who but Lincoln’s mother would have given birth to him?

Passive (appropriate emphasis): Smoking is prohibited in the library.

Active (weak emphasis): We prohibit smoking in the library.

Passive (appropriate): The form must be notarized.

Active (weak): You must have a notary public notarize the form.

Passive (appropriate): Abraham Lincoln was born in a log cabin.

Active (weak): Abraham Lincoln’s mother bore him in a log cabin.

Use the active voice and pronouns to clarify responsibility

When you write about requirements, *make sure the reader understands exactly who is responsible* for doing something.

Unclear: All vehicles shall be inspected prior to delivery.

Clear: We will inspect all vehicles before we accept delivery.

Clear: Before we will accept delivery of any vehicle, you must have it inspected by a company on the enclosed list.

Let people do things. In terms of indicating responsibility, we cannot help but be clear if we use *you*, *your*, *we*, *us*, and *our*. If we write, “The application must include a transcript,” but what we mean is *We must receive a transcript directly from your college or university*, we are relying on the reader’s clairvoyance. Few readers can read minds; all we should ask of them is that they read the words on the page.

Ambiguous: All cattle shall be inspected prior to interstate movement.
Clear: You must have all cattle inspected by an accredited veterinarian before transporting them across a state border.

or

Clear: You may not transport cattle across a state border until we have inspected them.

6.2 Define “you” when writing to multiple audiences

Sometimes a document has more than one audience, and requirements that apply to some readers don’t apply to others. In such a case, we have to specify which reader we’re addressing with “you.” Here are four simple ways of doing so.

1. Define “you” with a heading:

If you are requesting non-classified materials

If you are requesting classified materials

2. Define “you” in the text:

Lessees and operators are responsible for restoring the site. If you are the operator, you must conduct all operations in a way that minimizes damage to the environment. If you are the lessee, you must monitor the operator to ensure that . . .

3. Define “you” at the beginning of a subpart:

This subpart tells you, a loan applicant, how to apply for an SBA loan.

4. Define “you” in the *definitions* section:

“You” means an applicant for disaster relief.

6.3 Keep your sentences relatively short

Readers process information easily when it is presented in short sections, or “chunks.” Short sentences have the same result.

This directive establishes an internal directives system for the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and provides policy and

procedures for preparing and issuing internal directives as defined in this directive.

Here is our policy on preparing and issuing internal directives.

In the example above, the point is buried under unnecessary words and ideas – in other words, the original sentence is too long because it is simply “cluttered.” Choosing precise words automatically results in brevity.

Shorten your sentences by picking precise words

Government writing should be concise. We can shorten a sentence by using precise words instead of windy phrases. In the example below, the revision contains exactly one-half the words of the puffed-up original.

Inflated: On two different occasions, the project manager made the attempt to provide documentation of the problem, but neither of the two attempts was regarded as satisfactory by Headquarters.

Concise: Twice, the project manager tried to document the problem, but neither attempt satisfied Headquarters.

Shorten your sentences by excluding unnecessary ideas

We can shorten a sentence by excluding ideas that either are already understood or are irrelevant. Deciding what is understood or irrelevant is always a matter of judgment, and it involves (1) remembering who our readers are and (2) respecting what those readers bring to the page.

Assume that the only readers of the following sentence are employees of the National Archives at College Park, and that the date on the memo is June 30, 2009.

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Building II, in College Park, Maryland, will be closed for the week of August 10-16, 2009.

This building will be closed from August 10 through August 16.

The revision respects – and uses – what the reader brings to the sentence. The entire first line need not be said at all. *By default*, “this building” must refer to the one in College Park, and the reader knows that College Park is in Maryland. That a 10th through a 16th constitutes a “week” is not necessary to say. And “2009” is *by default* the year the writer is talking about. Otherwise he would have to specify, yes, but specifying the obvious is called redundancy. Respect what the reader brings to the page, and honor the “default” understanding.

Break your sentences apart to emphasize ideas

A sentence can be concise – every word mattering – and still contain too many ideas for the reader to grasp at once. In such a case, we break it up to present ideas in easily-understood units. *We isolate ideas to emphasize them.*

The applicant shall be notified by registered mail in all cases where the permit applied for is not granted and shall be given thirty (30) days within which to appeal such decision.

We will notify you by registered mail if we reject your application for a permit. If you wish to appeal, you must file an appeal within 30 days.

6.4 Pay attention to your phrasing

After the execution of the program manager, the form must be forwarded to Procurement. Readers (especially program managers) gasp at this sort of thing. What the writer is trying to say is “After the program manager signs Form 1200, please forward it to Procurement.”

In The agent states that he was approached by the lamp post in Parking Lot D, what we have is an oddly behaving lamp post. What we mean is *near* the lamp post.

Pick words with care and put the words in the right order

In English, meaning derives from (1) the words and (2) the order of words, so we must be sure to pick the words we mean and put them in sensible order. Descriptive words and phrases must be placed right beside the word they describe, nowhere else.

The first sentence below sounds as though Ms. Jones is the harasser. The second sentence is what the writer meant.

Serious allegations have been raised regarding sexual harassment by Ms. Jones.

Ms. Jones has raised serious allegations about sexual harassment.

The first sentence below sounds as though it is to be read by tortoises. Phrasing the idea differently removes the unintended humor.

The leopard tortoise is prohibited from entering the country.

Better: The leopard tortoise may not be imported.

or

Better: Importing the leopard tortoise is prohibited.

6.5 Minimize the use of “not”

Clarity is best served when we say what something is or does (as opposed to what it is not or doesn't do). “Not” frequently forces the reader to interpret an expression. If you write *Many scientists do not believe in the existence of quarks*, the reader may understand you to mean that many scientists *doubt* the existence of quarks – or she may think you mean they *question, deny, or even refute* the existence of quarks. All of those interpretations are reasonable, but there's a tremendous difference between doubting and refuting.

Ambiguous: The information was not included for relevance reasons.

Clear: The information was excluded because it is irrelevant.

Clear: The information was included for [some other] reason.

If we write *All of these details are not relevant*, half of our readers will think all the details are irrelevant and half will think some of the details are irrelevant. We can prevent this confusion by avoiding “not.”

Ambiguous: All of the votes are not valid.

Clear: All of the votes are invalid.

Clear: Some of the votes are invalid.

6.6 Put lengthy conditions after the main idea

Phrases beginning with “if” and (often) “when” tell the reader what is true in certain circumstances. Clarity generally improves when these phrases follow the main idea.²⁵

If you own more than 50 acres and cultivate grapes, complete form 9-123.

Better: Complete form 9-123 if you own more than 50 acres and cultivate grapes.

When any of these safety procedures cannot be followed, contact your manager

Better: Contact your manager when any of these safety procedures cannot be followed.

²⁵ An added advantage of this construction is that it speeds reading. When we start with a conditional idea, we have to put a comma after it, but when we put the conditional idea last, no comma is required. Punctuation slows things down, so (consistent with our intended emphasis) we should organize sentences in a way that minimizes the need to punctuate.

Short conditional phrases can come first without damaging clarity. *If you agree to these terms, please sign and return the form* is fine, as is *If you spot an inconsistency, please notify the editors*.

6.7 Address the individual, not the group

“You” can be singular or plural, but when you write, always imagine the individual. *Identification badges will be issued to you after the briefing* makes the reader wonder how many badges he has to wear. *You will receive an identification badge after the briefing* not only clarifies the matter, but reinforces the reader’s sense that you’re writing directly to him.

Surprising: Your cars will be screened when you arrive.

Better: Your car will be screened when you arrive.

Misleading: After you have passed the physical exams, you will be scheduled to take polygraph tests.

Clear: After you’ve passed the physical exam, you will be scheduled to take a polygraph test.

6.8 Write of the singular, not of the plural

Rather than *Instances of violations must be documented*, write *Each instance of a violation*. The reader can more easily grasp the singular than the plural because she can more readily visualize it. Rather than *We will rescind permits if*, write, *We will rescind a permit if*.

Confusing: Applications for loans must be accompanied by statements from banks attesting that . . .

Clear: An application for a loan must be accompanied by a letter from your bank. The letter must state . . .

Confusing: Proposals to buy Indian forest products must include deposits.

Clear: You must include a deposit with each proposal to buy Indian forest products.

6.9 Use common sense when introducing abbreviations

Few aspects of government writing are more frustrating to readers than the overuse of abbreviations. People refer to the practice disparagingly as

“alphabet soup,” and they complain, with justice, that it dehumanizes the writing.

Acronyms and abbreviations should be introduced *only if you need to use them repeatedly* (and fairly soon) in the document. The conventional way to introduce an abbreviation is to spell the entire phrase and then put the abbreviation in parentheses.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) . . .

The Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program . . .

Try using a key word instead

A much more reader-friendly way to refer to something is by using a key word. For example, rather than *the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL)*, you could simply use the word “Laboratory” (capitalizing it) to refer to the organization. Instead of *the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC)*, you could use “the Commission” (capitalizing it) or, if the reference is clear, “we.”

Try using the “implicit introduction” approach

In cases where most of your readers would understand the abbreviation, but a few would not, the best way to introduce it is to spell out the phrase and then, without further ado, use the abbreviation in the following sentence. (This is the practice at the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*.) For example, you would write *The Bureau of Land Management regulates certain uses of Federal land. The major responsibilities of BLM are. . .*

Introduce abbreviations gradually

If you have a sentence that contains four things you need to abbreviate, don’t introduce all four abbreviations in that sentence. Instead, introduce one (or at most two). There’s no rule that says you have to introduce an abbreviation at the first opportunity. To ease the burden on the reader, introduce them gradually.

Include a glossary

In an extreme situation, where (1) we must use lots of abbreviations, and (2) our readers differ widely in their familiarity with the abbreviations, including a glossary is more than a polite gesture. It is essential. All the glossary has to do is define what the terms mean.

6.10 Give examples

A potentially confusing concept can be clarified when you provide an example. This handbook is loaded with them. In the section on honoring the reader's default understanding – a concept bursting with qualifications – this example helps to clarify the point.

If you work for the Federal Communications Commission and you're writing a letter on FCC letterhead, chances are 100% that the reader would understand "we" to mean FCC.

You can do the same in any document you write at work.²⁶

Ways of introducing examples

- **You can write "for example."**
Several previous patents already use the antenna for this purpose. For example, in the patent to Jacobsen, the antenna is used . . .
- **You can use "including."²⁷**
We will pay the full cost of your lodging, but you are responsible for other costs, including transportation and meals.
- **You can use "if" or "suppose" to suggest a scenario.**
Suppose that one month you pay royalties on your full share of production but take less than your entitled share. In this case, you may balance your account in one of two ways.
- **You can use "e.g."²⁸**
The Secretary of the Interior may permit zoos to acquire surplus animals (e.g., buffalo, moose, wapiti) from federal lands.
- **You can simply provide examples without fanfare.**
Hotels such as Embassy Suites and Marriott are located nearby.²⁹

6.11 Use "in other words" and "that is"

These are terrific clarifying devices. Use them to (1) point out something that the reader otherwise might not notice, or (2) paraphrase an idea that might be a little confusing. Here are three good examples.

²⁶ This includes regulations.

²⁷ Please note that this does not say "including, but not limited to." *Including* is the right word.

²⁸ Please be careful with "e.g." Many readers confuse it with "i.e." (which means "in other words"). Consider too that it is an abbreviation, and abbreviations work against a personal tone.

²⁹ This sentence is the helpful variation of "Lodging is available nearby."

Human error contributed to the accident at Chernobyl. In other words, the technology was only partly to blame.

The deduction will be a percentage of the gross proceeds (in other words, the price we get from the buyer).

The deadline is creeping up on us is an “idiomatic” expression – that is, a non-literal use of words that everyone in a given culture understands.

6.12 Use as many words as you need

There’s a big difference between being concise (where the sentence is free of clutter) and being brief. Sheer brevity often results in ambiguity. The first sentence below is short, but it has two meanings. We add a word to make the expression clear.

Ambiguous: We must modernize our obsolete nuclear weapons tracking system

Clear: We must modernize our system for tracking obsolete nuclear weapons.

Clear: We must modernize our obsolete system of tracking nuclear weapons.

In the phrases below, note how the addition of “to” and “of” clarifies the writer’s intent:

confusing regulation revisions =
confusing revisions to the regulation, *or*
revisions to the confusing regulation

preliminary design review =
a review of the preliminary design, *or*
a preliminary review of the design

6.13 Use the question-and-answer format

As writers, we know what we want to say, and we know that we need to get the reader from Point A to Point B. An excellent way to do that is to use the question-and-answer format.

The reader brings a series of questions to the document. If we can anticipate what those questions are, and in what order the reader will ask them, we can easily guide him through even the most difficult material.

Imagine, for example, the individual interested in starting an oil-drilling operation on Federal land. He will have a few unique questions (and we answer the unique ones in a letter), but he will also have the questions any reader would be asking:

Can I drill for oil or gas on Federal land?
How do I apply for a lease?
How do I apply for a permit?
What royalties do I owe the government?

One question gives birth to another

In the example above, the answer to the first question is “Yes, but you need to have a lease and a permit.” Once we say that, we must understand that we’ve provoked two new questions: *What’s involved in getting a lease?* and *Well, how do I apply for a permit?*

When we raise questions in the reader’s mind, we should answer them *immediately*. Doing so is more than a matter of mere coherence. It is also a matter of good faith. If you asked me what my name is, my good faith answer would be “Richard,” not “Before I get to that, let me point out that given names influence destiny.” Worse would be my ignoring the fact that you’d asked.

Questions the reader doesn’t know he has

You can use the question-and-answer format not only to respond to questions the reader has, but also to indicate points that otherwise the reader wouldn’t know (and therefore wouldn’t have questions about).

The individual inquiring about drilling for oil on Federal land needs to understand that he’d owe a royalty to the government. He may or may not wonder about this, but we need to make sure he hears it. We can phrase the matter as a question, “What royalties do I owe the government?” We can use the same technique for any point we wish to make sure the reader sees.

6.14 Be precise in the SUBJECT line

When reading memos and email (and in letters too, with the use of RE), we glance at the SUBJECT line to answer the question, “What’s this about?” The entire purpose of the SUBJECT line is to answer that question and focus the reader’s expectations. But expectations can’t be focused when the information in the SUBJECT line is broad, vague, or imprecise. Be as precise as you can, and *use as many words as you need*. The only restriction is that you not write a complete sentence.

Simply consider the SUBJECT lines presented below. The brief versions are so vague that they don't do a good job of preparing the reader for what follows. The longer versions are much more helpful.

SUBJECT: staffing concerns

SUBJECT: why we need to hire ten people immediately

SUBJECT: policy revisions

SUBJECT: request for feedback on revisions to the no-smoking policy

6.15 Observe the mechanics of English

Clarity isn't a matter of a few things going right. It's a *concert* of everything going right.

I could use every technique in this handbook and still write a terribly confusing document if I didn't make sure my pronouns had clear references, that my ideas were presented in parallel form, that I used tenses logically, and so on. Such issues are not covered here because they are not truly unique to Plain Language. But they matter.

Avoid the avoidable errors

“Little” errors (a typo, a subject-verb disagreement, an apostrophe in the wrong place) may not wreck clarity, but they certainly undermine the credibility of the organization. They also undermine the reader's sense of the importance of the issue and erode her willingness to comply.

“Treating the reader well” means writing in an invisible style, but little errors distract. They call attention to the boxcar, when we want the reader to be considering the cargo. So please pay attention to punctuation, grammar, spelling, and all the other mechanics of the language. *Proofread your writing*. No software will point out that “in the pubic domain” is suspicious. If you mean “in the public domain,” make sure that's what's on the page.

Hey, I'm only human

I know, but there are better ways of proving we're human than by making mistakes. These better ways include empathizing with the reader, picking plain words, writing short sentences, and coming to the point.

6.16 Beware the limitations of readability formulas and style checkers

It is dangerous in the extreme to let any software become the final arbiter of your style. Clarity cannot be measured. Let me simply quote from *A Plain English Handbook: How to create clear SEC disclosure documents*:

Readability formulas [attempt to] determine how difficult a piece of writing is to read. However, you should be aware of a major flaw in every readability formula.

No formula takes into account the content of the document being evaluated. In other words, no formula can tell you if you have conveyed the information clearly. For the most part, they count the number of syllables and words in a sentence and the number of sentences in the sample. . . . [K]eep in mind that by some formulas' calculations, Einstein's theory of relativity reads at a fifth grade level.

Some computerized style checkers analyze your grammar and identify the passive voice. They may suggest ways to make your writing more "readable." Take their suggestions as just that – suggestions. The final test of whether any piece of writing meets its goal of communicating information comes when humans read it.

This happens to be very good advice. People who insist that everything is measurable naturally assume that clarity can be measured too. It can't be. Here's the proof:

- A writer at the American Association of Retired Persons wrote to a prospective member, *The annual AARP membership fee is \$10, which includes a spouse at no extra charge*. AARP was using some form of style-checking software at the time, and that sentence passed all "readability" tests with flying colors. The only problem is that it promises the reader a free spouse, and that wasn't at all what the writer meant.
- A writer at the Food and Drug Administration wrote, *Aspartame is a potential hazard* – and to the software, that short sentence looked just fine. The only problem is that what the writer meant by it was "Currently, we are unsure whether Aspartame is hazardous."
- Style-checking software would love such a sentence as *The Department of Energy (DOE) has received your letter* – it's short, the words are familiar, and it's in the active voice. Good. But the sentence is irrelevant because context makes the idea clear, and the software doesn't understand that. It doesn't know what you need to say, what you need to avoid saying, and how you should order your ideas.

These three examples amply demonstrate the limitations of computerized style checkers. Consider what the software suggests, but remember that the reader is the one who decides whether something is clear. We are people writing to people, and our judgment is what counts.

6.17 “Audience-test” the document

In the case of documents that are used for large numbers of people (application forms, brochures, consent forms, and so on), it’s a very good idea to “*audience-test*” the document before releasing it. Gather some people who actually represent the audience of the document, have them read it, and get their feedback on organization, format, clarity, and overall ease of reading.

In the case of a short document, *have another person read it*. That “fresh pair of eyes” can spot gaps in reasoning, unclear phrasing, and other problems in our writing that we can’t detect.

7. On being concise

Conciseness pertains not to the overall document but to the individual sentence. A sentence is said to be concise when every word counts. It is said to be “cluttered” when it uses more words than necessary to express an idea. Extra words (1) complicate reading, (2) dilute emphasis, (3) camouflage the writer’s intent, and (4) frequently damage tone.

The keys to being concise

Know the meanings of words, pick words with care, and let definitions do the work for you. A writer who knows the meaning of “twice” never writes “on two occasions”; a writer who picks words with care uses “assess,” never “perform an assessment of”; a writer who respects the definition of “cooperate” never writes “joint cooperation.”

Remember what the reader already knows. If the date on the letter is “January 5, 2001,” and the reader lives in Philadelphia, then *The meeting will be held on January 20, 2001, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania* is a cluttered sentence. Both “2001” and “Pennsylvania” are unnecessary to say.

Don’t try to be brief; strive to be clear

For a good writer, brevity is never the goal. Clarity is. However, when you use exact words and respect what the reader already knows, brevity results automatically.

Many everyday patterns of language contribute to cluttered writing. Here they are, along with the techniques to overcome them.

7.1 State what the subject does, not what it is

Another way to say this is, *Try to find a clearer verb than some form of “to be.”* If you write *this is indicative of*, what you mean is *this indicates*. If you write *these techniques are conducive to*, you mean *these techniques foster*.

The submission is in compliance with the requirement.

Better: The submission complies with the requirement.

We are of the opinion that additional storage space will be necessary.
Better: We believe that more storage space will be necessary.

7.2 Write with the verb, not with the noun

If you write, *We took a tour of the site and did a study of the reforestation process*, you're using "tour" and "study" as nouns. Economy and precision improve when you use them as verbs: *We toured the site and studied the reforestation process*.

We conducted a survey of employees at the regional offices.
Better: We surveyed employees at the regional offices.

The researcher made a visit to the library on only one occasion.
Better: The researcher visited the library only once.

7.3 Avoid nouns ending in *-ion*, *-ment*, *-ance*, and *-ive*

Words ending in these suffixes are usually "smothered verbs." What that means is that they are verbs that have been paralyzed into nouns. Since we want to write with the precise verb, we should recognize that *imply* is better than *make the implication that* and *represents* is better than *is the representative of*.

They came to the conclusion that	They concluded
They performed an assessment of	They assessed
She provided assistance in	She assisted
The research is suggestive of	The research suggests

7.4 Minimize the use of *make*, *do*, *give*, *have*, *provide*, *perform*, and *conduct*

When you use these verbs, chances are excellent that you can be more precise. In most cases, the word you should use as a verb is already in the sentence, but behaving as a noun. For example, if you write, *We conducted an interview of*, you mean *We interviewed*, and "interview" is already there. If you write *They performed an analysis of*, you mean *They analyzed* – and "analysis" is already there.

We made the decision to	We decided
They did a study of	They studied
This gives the indication that	This indicates

This has the tendency to
He performed another test of
She conducted a review of

This tends
He retested
She reviewed

7.5 Avoid the false subjects *It is* and *There are*

Emphasis, clarity, and economy improve when we pick words with care, and of all the words in the sentence, the subject is the most important. Yet when we write, *It is the applicant's prerogative to refuse the drug test*, the word "It" is the subject of the sentence. "It" is a pronoun and should stand for another word, but in this case it doesn't. The "it" in the italicized sentence above is a kind of grammatical ghost called a "false subject." *You have the right to refuse the drug test* is the flesh-and-blood sentence.

When we speak, we frequently use "it" and "there." In ordinary, relaxed conversation, we say things like *It's the committee's position that flextime will increase productivity* and *There's no doubt that simplicity benefits everyone*. But the major way in which good writing differs from speech is that writers pick words with greater care. *The committee believes* and *Clearly, simplicity benefits everyone* are what we should put on the page.

It is argued in the report that it is essential to simplify the tax code.

Better: The report argues that simplifying the tax code is essential.

There was no consideration given to the suggestion by the committee.

Better: The committee failed to consider the suggestion.

It is her opinion that there are several issues that need to be resolved.

Better: She believes that several issues need to be resolved.

7.6 Avoid "intruders"

An intruder is a word that is "tacked on" and contributes nothing to meaning. Worse, it is the vampire of emphasis, sucking the vitality out of a noun and transforming it into a lifeless adjective. In *The launch was postponed because of high wind conditions*, "conditions" is an intruder. *The launch was postponed because of high winds*.

Common intruders are *program*, *event*, *effort*, *conditions*, and *activity*. In the sentences below, the needless words have been struck through.

Our relocation ~~activity~~ will begin in 2003.

We should increase funding for our recruiting ~~program~~.

Records are endangered by fluctuating temperature ~~conditions~~.

The new policy simplifies reporting activities.
The declassification effort is proceeding on schedule.

7.7 Write with a word, not with a phrase

Given the fact that is clear, but “because” is concise. *On two separate and distinct occasions* is clear, but it becomes something of a Sunday drive when we consider that it means “twice.” In the writing we do at work, it’s best not to take the reader on a scenic tour. Get her to the destination by the quickest possible route – and that means using a word instead of a phrase.

In everyday English, there are literally thousands of packaged phrases whose meaning could be presented in a word. No resource could possibly list them all because writers are forever inventing new ones. If we’re alert, though, we continually ask ourselves, “Is this precisely what I mean?” When we do that, and we read “bring to a minimum,” we rescue *minimize*. When we’re alert, and we read “notwithstanding the fact that,” we rescue *although*.

7.8 Avoid redundancy; let definitions do the job

When we write *the month of October*, or *advance planning*, we’ve forgotten something: the reader knows that by definition October is a month and that all planning must be “in advance.” Such phrases, where the writer supplies words that are in the definition, are called redundancies.

It’s best to let definitions do their job. Rather than write about a *forecast for the future*, respect the definition and write about the forecast. Rather than *intervals of time*, respect what an “interval” is by definition.

As is true of wordy phrases, we use thousands of redundant expressions in everyday speech, but remember – unlike the speaker, the writer has time to be precise. The speaker may say *completely destroyed*, but the writer should write “destroyed.”

What is redundant depends on what the reader knows

What is redundant for some readers is helpful to others. Consider the phrase “polygraph test.” In the intelligence community, “test” would be redundant – *Your polygraph is scheduled for March 31* is conventional for

those readers. (Some shorten it further to *poly*.) For readers who know what “polygraph” means but do not hear the word often, *Your polygraph test is scheduled for March 31* would do. For the layman, we should write *Your lie-detector test is scheduled for March 31*.

7.9 Don’t “double” terms

The phrase “cease and desist” is an example of a *doubling*. Both words mean the same thing; for some reason the writer is telling us the same thing twice. “Cease and desist” is cluttered, but because readers know the meaning of both words, it remains clear. The major problem with doublings occurs when readers believe that the words mean different things.

In *Please send us your findings and conclusions* by November 30, how many things does the writer want – one, or two? It looks as though we have to submit two sets of ideas. But in this case, no, all the writer wants is our conclusions. It’s just that he likes the phrase “findings and conclusions,” likes the way it sounds, and never stops to question whether it may be misleading.

Doublings suggest distinctions where no distinctions exist. This is the problem. If we mean “The feedback must be evaluated,” then we mustn’t write *The feedback must be assessed and evaluated*, because for all the reader knows, “assess” means something different from “evaluate.”

each and every
conforms and complies
measure and breadth
mêtes and bounds

use one or the other
use one or the other
the right word is *scope*
the right word is *scope*

7.10 Minimize the use of “not”

“Not” is a hoodlum of a word. It wrecks tone, undermines clarity,³⁰ and forces wordiness. Research on readability consistently shows that readers have a much easier time understanding assertions (where you say what something is) than negations (where you say what something is not).

³⁰ For examples of how “not” wrecks clarity, see 6.5

How “not” bruises tone

You were not selected because your references did not recommend you amounts to punching the reader in the eye. *We selected another contractor with more experience* doesn’t massage the reader, but it doesn’t punch him out, either. *The Freedom of Information Act does not entitle you to read classified documents* wags a finger in the reader’s face. *Under the Freedom of Information Act, classified documents remain protected* states the fact without drawing the reader into it.

How “not” creates clutter

When we write *did not remember*, we mean “forgot.” When we write *did not bother*, we mean “neglected.” If we write *He insisted he would not*, what we mean is “He refused.” Rather than say *not on time*, say “late.” Assert what something is, rather than say what it is not. When a thing is *not accurate*, call it “inaccurate,” and when something is *not possible*, the right word for it is “impossible.”

When to use “not”

Reserve “not” for emphatic denial. Consider *The senator has been accused of doing nothing illegal*. Huh? That can’t be right. No one is ever “accused” of doing nothing illegal. The point is, he hasn’t been accused at all. So when a reporter asks, “Is it true that the senator has been accused of obstruction of justice?” the staff member should respond, *The senator has not been accused of doing anything illegal*. That’s emphatic denial, and it’s what “not” is for.

7.11 Beware *basis, manner, fashion, and way*

When these words come at the end of prepositional phrases, they signal wordiness. If the satellite is behaving in an unusual way, then it is behaving *unusually*. If someone is behaving in a professional manner, then she is behaving *professionally*. When a task must be done on an annual basis, then that it must be done *annually*. Rescue the adverb.

in a rapid manner	rapidly
on a routine basis	routinely
in an brisk fashion	briskly
in an unpredictable way	unpredictably

7.12 Avoid “noun strings”

If our goal is to be clear, then we shouldn't put nouns side by side. Nouns resent being in the role of adjectives – they squirm, and the meaning squirms with them. On first reading, *inferior component labeling procedures* suggests that the procedures are inferior.

If we write *outdated file elimination procedures*, how is the reader supposed to know what “outdated” refers to? We might be referring either to the files or the procedures. What we should do is use “little” words to show how the nouns relate: *procedures for eliminating outdated files* or *outdated procedures for eliminating files*.

When a noun is used as an adjective, even a very brief phrase can be ambiguous. The phrase *new policy guidelines* is brief, but what's new? The policy, or the guidelines? Rather than be confusing with three words, be clear with five: *new guidelines for the policy* or *guidelines for the new policy*. Remember, brevity is not the goal. Clarity is.

classified mission records =
classified records of missions, or
records of classified missions

new permit application process =
new process for applying for a permit, or
process for applying for a new permit

7.13 Respect – and use – the idiom of the profession

A patent examiner in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office can write “Johnson teaches a strap,” and his readers understand this to mean *The patent that's been issued to someone named Johnson contains a strap identical to the one you are trying to patent*. The readers here are patent attorneys who understand the idiom of the profession, and this enables the writer to say in four words what would require 21 words for a layman.

An archivist at the National Archives and Records Administration can write “We have accessioned the collection,” and other archivists understand this to mean *The collection of historical materials has gone through all the stages of processing and has been formally designated as an “archive.” We are now responsible for its safekeeping*. To experts, she can say in five words what would require 28 words for a layman.

When we're writing to others in our profession, we should take the shortcuts made available to us by the conventions of that profession. Remember, our job is not to be clear to everyone, but to be clear to the people who are going to read this particular document.

7.14 Honor the reader's default understanding

Another way of putting it is qualify only when necessary. Remember what the reader infers; don't state what's understood.

If we write *The embassy in Paris, France, is vulnerable to terrorism*, we are ignoring something important: when the reader hears "Paris," he thinks "France." Because *France* is the default³¹ for Paris, including "France" is unnecessary. Only if I were referring to a different (non-default) Paris would I need to say so: *We are opening an office in Paris, Virginia*.

If I write *The satellite remains in orbit around the earth*, I'm forgetting that "earth" is the default here. I should write *The satellite remains in orbit*. Only if it's orbiting elsewhere do I need to qualify: *The satellite remains in lunar orbit* or *The satellite remains in Mars orbit*.

Defer to the letterhead

If you work for the Federal Communications Commission and you're writing a letter on FCC letterhead, chances are 100% that the reader would understand "we" to mean FCC – in other words, the letterhead establishes "FCC" as the default for "we". This means it's unnecessary to write *The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is pleased to inform you that*. All that is required is *We are pleased to inform you that*.

Defer to the date

Another default that's often overlooked is the date, especially in letters, memos, and email. In these documents, the date – including the year – is always indicated at the top of the page. To repeat it is to clutter the sentence. If the date on the letter is February 9, 2009, then *We will decide on a contractor by February 28, 2009* unnecessarily specifies the year. *We will decide on a contractor by the end of the month* is crystal clear. Only when we are writing about a year that differs from the one indicated on the document do we need to specify. If we're writing in November 2010, for example, we would need to write *The office was closed in October 2009* or *We must receive the request for extension by April 15, 2011*.

³¹ For a related discussion of the default, see 6.3.

If we lived five miles from Paris, Texas, then our default for "Paris" would certainly be the one in Texas. This is true. But even so, does the United States have an embassy in Paris, Texas? Wouldn't the word "embassy" trigger a different default?

Defer to the RE line

If we're formatting well, then every letter will contain either a *RE* or a *REF* to indicate the main point. (All emails contain a SUBJECT line for this purpose.)

If the REF line says "your letter of May 21," then there is no need to repeat this idea, as in *In your letter of May 21, you ask whether. . .* Instead just answer the reader's question.

But suppose, in her letter of May 21, the reader asked, "How can my father get assistance under the Disaster Relief program?" If we want to be as helpful as possible, we don't use REF, we use RE, and we write *RE: applying for Disaster Relief assistance*. Then in the first sentence of the letter, we begin answering the reader's question: *Here are the steps your father must take in applying for assistance*.

What we do **not** have to do is begin by saying "This is in response to your inquiry about the procedures involved in qualifying for Disaster Relief assistance." The RE line has accomplished this for us.

7.15 Don't explain abbreviations that your reader understands

"You must never introduce an abbreviation without first spelling out the phrase" is conventional wisdom, but it isn't wise. There is never a need to explain what the reader understands.

Chances are 100% that everyone within the Department of the Interior understands what "DOI" stands for. When you are writing to those readers, then writing *The U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI)* is tremendously cluttered. For those readers, "DOI" would do. When an abbreviation is familiar, regard it as an ordinary word and handle it accordingly. *Funding will be increased by 7% in FY11.*

Introduce only the unfamiliar abbreviations

Only when you believe your readers don't know the meaning of an abbreviation should you introduce it. Within the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA), many readers are familiar with *BARF*. However, *BARF* is not as commonly understood as *EPA* or *NASA*, and if the DLA writer were writing to Congress, then he should introduce the abbreviation before using it: *We are requesting \$25 million to refurbish the Best Available Retrofit Facility (BARF) in Monterey, California.*

Different readers, different decisions

Believe it or not, the following sentence is Plain Language to readers within the Office of the Comptroller in the Department of Defense:

This PBD addresses the appropriate funding levels for the USBE program and for the inspection requirements associated with the SAR portion of SALT.

It's not the writer's job to make things plain to everyone. It's the writer's job to make things plain to her intended readers. If this idea were addressed to the Senate Appropriations Committee, then common sense argues for a different approach:

This Preliminary Budget Decision addresses appropriate funding levels for

1. the Ukrainian Strategic Bomber Elimination program
and
2. the inspection requirements associated with the Strategic Arms Reduction portion of the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty.

Your comments are welcome

This handbook is updated continually as certain aspects of style fall from grace and other aspects become acceptable. I welcome feedback from readers who have suggestions on how to improve the 2009 version. You don't have to be a Federal employee in order to comment. All you have to be is a reader.

Is any guidance unclear? Does anything seem contradictory? Do you know of better examples? Has anything important been left out? Is the organization logical enough? Can the format be improved? Does the tone go wrong in places? What can be done to make the text more reader-friendly?

Please send comments to:

richard@lauchmangroup.com

Note to Webmasters

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