

INTRODUCING PLAIN LANGUAGE AND PLAIN ENGLISH

Introduction

The information below will help you understand plain language and begin to write in plain English. It comes from several sources. The sources that are quoted directly are identified in brackets. All the sources used for this document are web-based. They are listed at the end.

What is “plain language”?

The term “plain language” refers to a particular way of communicating. Similar approaches and terms include “plain English” and “clear English.” (The term you use is far less important than the concepts!) Here are some common definitions and descriptions of “plain language” with references.

“Plain language” is a way of “presenting information so it makes sense to most people. It is communication designed to meet the needs of the intended audience, so people can understand information that is important to their lives.

“Plain language writing is a technique of organizing information in ways that make sense to the reader. It uses straightforward, concrete, familiar words.

“Plain language matches the needs of the reader with your needs as a writer, resulting in effective and efficient communication. It is effective because the reader can understand the message. It is efficient because the reader can read and understand the message the first time.”

[See Garbl’s Plain Language Resources, <http://members.home.net.garbl/writing/plaineng.htm>]

“Plain language means writing in a way that:

- looks good,
- is organized logically, and
- Is understandable the first time you read it.”

[See SBA Plain Language, <http://www.sba.gov/plain/whatis.html>]

Plain language means writing that is clear and readable for your intended audience. It is “plain” because “it is language without a lot of extras like jargon, compound-complex sentences, polysyllabic words” – it is “frank, straightforward, and not pretentious.”

[See Frequently Asked Questions, <http://www.fog-free.com/faq.html>]

“Plain language is an approach to communication that begins with the needs of the reader. When you use plain language:

- What you write is determined by your purpose for writing.
- How you write is determined by your audience’s reasons for reading and their reading skills.

“There are many misconceptions about plain language. Plain language is not a simplified style of writing. It involves more than replacing jargon and complex language with shorter sentences and familiar words. Plain language looks at the whole message – from the reader’s point of view. Clear writing, effective organization, and inviting presentation are all keys to creating readable, informative documents.”

[See Introducing Plain Language, <http://www.web.ca/~plain/PlainTrain/Digest.html>]

How do I write in plain language or plain English?

Write for the reader. Consider:

- what needs the reader has
- what information is essential
- how it can be organized and expressed most clearly.

Before you begin to write, answer these questions:

- Who is the audience?
- Why am I writing this document?
- What do I want to say?
- How will my readers use this information?

[See Introducing Plain Language.]

When writing:

- **Engage your reader**
 - Identify your audience
 - Organize the document to meet your reader’s needs
 - Use question-and-answer formats – use questions for section headings, and then answer each question immediately
 - Use *you* and other pronouns to speak directly to readers
 - Use active voice (not *this will be done* but *we will do this*)
 - Emphasize the positive

➤ **Help your reader find information**

- Organize your thinking, then organize your document
- Include a detailed table of contents
- Explain how you organized the information by using an introduction
- Use clear headings throughout the document
- Use outline numbering (e.g., I., A, 1.) so readers can easily see which are the main headings and which are subheadings
- Include only one issue in each paragraph
- Put a topic or summary sentence at the beginning of each paragraph

➤ **Write clearly**

- Use short sentences (express only one idea in a sentence)
- Avoid the use of semicolons
- Write to one person, not a group (use single nouns, pronouns, and verbs)
- Use the simplest verb tense you can (avoid compound verbs)
- Use *must* to communicate requirements (use *must* for obligation, *may* for permission, *should* for preference, and *may not* for prohibition – avoid the ambiguous *shall*)
- Use simple, everyday words
- Cut out unnecessary words
- Avoid using more than one name for the same thing
- Don't be afraid to use contractions
- Avoid jargon
- Avoid or explain technical words
- Use acronyms carefully and **when in doubt, spell it out**
- Write, review, edit, and rewrite – it takes time to get used to plain language writing

➤ **Use a visually appealing style and layout**

- Use lots of informative headings
- Use short sections – “chunk” the information
- Use bulleted lists (like this one)
- Use **bold** or *italics* to highlight important points
- Avoid ALL CAPS and underlining because they are difficult to read
- Use larger font size for headings
- Use upper and lower case in headings
- Use boxes for examples
- Leave plenty of white space – lines between paragraphs, paragraph indents, wide margins
- Don't right-justify
- Choose a solid, plain typeface that is easy to read – a serif type like Times New Roman for body text and a sans-serif type like Arial for headings

- Choose graphics for clarity
- Put graphics and boxes as close as possible to the text they refer to
- Use only charts and tables that are easy to read
- Number charts and tables and refer to them in the text

How do I know I am really writing plain English?

Get feedback from people who are likely to use your document. Always have someone else read and comment on what you write.

For a Request for Proposals (RFP) or another document that will be widely circulated, conduct a field test among at least 2-3 people who represent your audience. Ask them:

- Does the document make you want to read it?
- Could you understand it the first time you read it?
- Can you use the document?

Use a computer program that checks grammar as well as spelling. Look for a computerized “fog index” or related software to determine the literacy level of your document. If you can’t find one, check several sections using a manual fog index. (See materials in this package.) Remember that these programs can provide only a rough guide to a document’s readability.

Sources

Be on the Cutting Edge: Learn These Seven Plain Language Principles Now!
<http://wwlia.org/plainlan.htm>

Frequently Asked Questions: <http://www.fog-free.com/faq.html>

Garbl’s Plain Language Resources: <http://members.home.net.garbl/writing/plaineng.htm>

Introducing Plain Language: <http://www.web.ca/~plain/PlainTrain/Digest.html>

SBA Plain Language: <http://sba.gov/plain/whatis.html>.

Writing User-Friendly Documents: <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/handbook>