



U.S. General Services Administration

A photograph of the interior of a grand, ornate dome, likely the U.S. Capitol. The dome features intricate carvings, a checkered pattern on the lower walls, and a series of arched windows. The lighting is dramatic, with light streaming in from the windows.

# Plain Language Basics

Digital Gov University  
Katherine Spivey

# Course Objectives

## You'll learn

- how to recognize plain language and write it yourself—and why
- how the Plain Writing Act of 2010 affects government agencies and what and how you write
- About the federal plain language community

# Definition

Something's in plain language if your audience can

- **Find** what they need
- **Understand** what they find the first time they read or hear it
- **Use** what they read or hear to meet their needs

Whether it's plain English, plain writing, clear communications ...

# Techniques

From the [Federal Plain Language Guidelines](#):

- reader-centered organization
- design features (tables, headers, lists)
- short sentences/paragraphs
- pronouns
- active voice/verbs
- less jargon/fewer acronyms

# The Law

- Plain Writing Act of 2010
- Executive Order 13563, Jan. 18, 2011
- Executive Orders 12866 and 12988

Learn more about [the Plain Writing Act of 2010 and other executive orders](#)

# Plain Writing Act of 2010

According to the Plain Writing Act of 2010, all new government documents that meet the following criteria must be written in plain language:

- Documents that are necessary to get government benefits or services, or for filing taxes
- Documents that provide information about federal benefits or services
- Documents that explain to the public how to comply with a federal requirement

The legislation applies to both paper and electronic letters, publications, forms, notices, and instructions.

# What Plain Language Is Not

- Writing less precisely
- Dumbing down
- Grammar
- Styleguide
- Writing to a certain grade level
- Folksy
- Leaving out **necessary** technical terms

# Identify your audience

- Who am I writing for?
- What is my purpose?
- Why do I want them to read this?
- What do they need?
- What do they already know?

# Write for your reader, not yourself #1

## **Instead of asking**

- What do I want to say or tell them?

## **Ask**

- What do they need to know?

# Write for your reader, not yourself #2

## Instead of asking

- How can I **protect** my interests?

## Ask

- How can I **serve** my audience's interests/needs?

# Write for your reader, not yourself #3

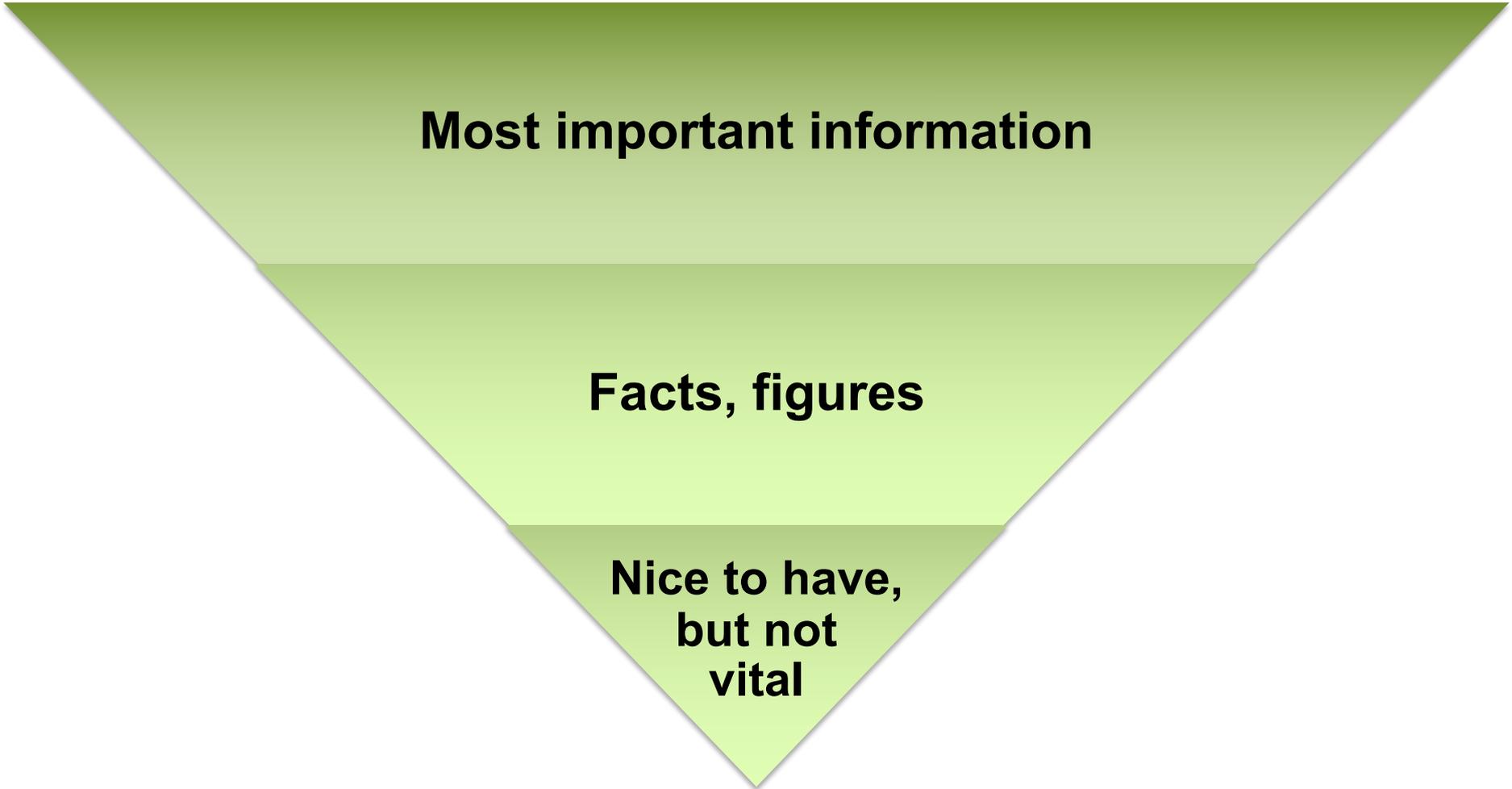
## Instead of asking

- What can I do to **impress** my audience?

## Ask

- What can I do to **help** my audience?

# Organize for your readers



**Most important information**

**Facts, figures**

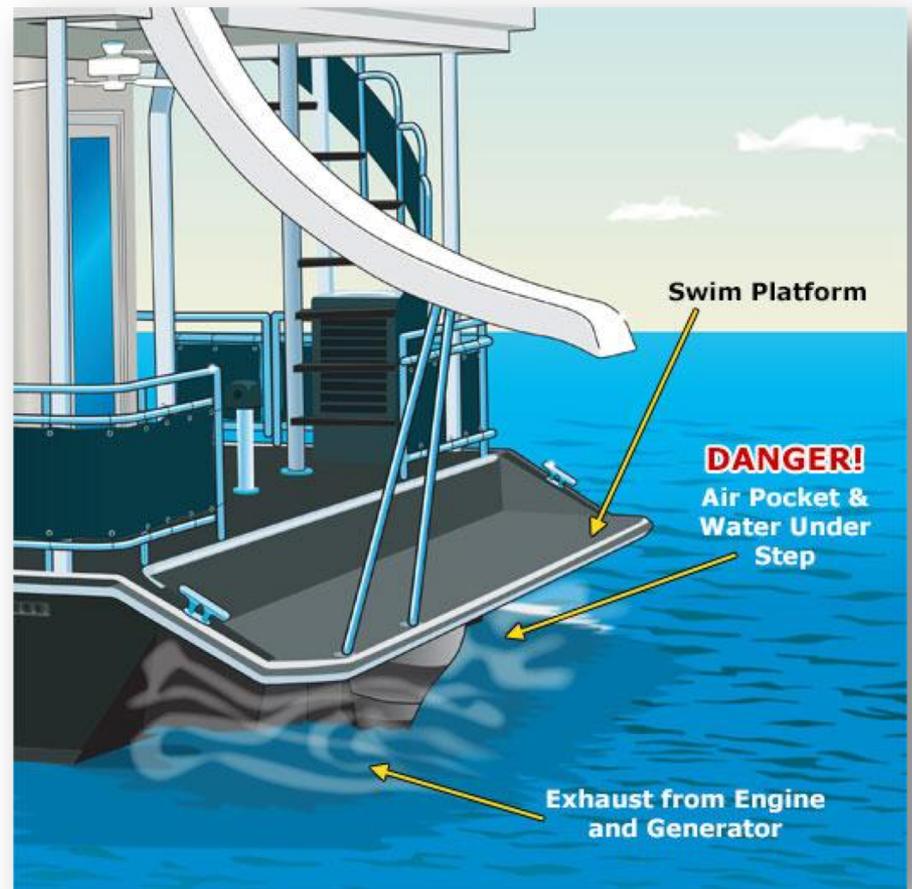
**Nice to have,  
but not  
vital**

## Original text: Coast Guard newsletter

The Coast Guard has conducted an investigation to determine what carbon monoxide (CO) detection devices are available to recreational boaters, such that, when installed and activated could reduce the risk of being exposed to high levels of CO, THAT SILENT KILLER. A variety of technologies is available for detecting the presence of CO on boats and should be considered by recreational boaters to reduce their risk of injury or death while boating.

# Coast Guard newsletter discussion notes

What should you include?



# Coast Guard newsletter rewrite #1

Carbon monoxide is a **silent killer**. The Coast Guard recommends that you use a carbon monoxide detection device on your boat to reduce the risk of being exposed to high levels of this deadly gas. You may choose from a variety of devices.

## Coast Guard newsletter rewrite #2

Carbon monoxide is a **silent killer**. Use a detection device on your boat. It will reduce your risk of being exposed to high levels of this deadly gas and injured or killed.

Choose from many devices.

# Design Tips: Headers

- Allows the reader to quickly find relevant information
- Breaks up the information
- Increases blank space on the page—allows page—and your reader—to breathe

# Headers: Types

- **Topic**

*How to write using plain language*

- **Statement**

*Plain language makes your documents clearer*

- **Question**

*Are you using plain language?*

# Question Headings

- If readers have similar questions in mind
- If the questions help readers relate to the information
- If the questions help you organize the information

# Question Headings Example 1

## **How do I know if I am eligible to extend my stay in the U.S.?**

You may apply for an extension of stay in the United States if:

- You were lawfully admitted into the United States as a nonimmigrant;
- You have not committed any act that makes you ineligible to receive an immigration benefit;

## Question Headings Example 1, cont'd

- There is no other factor that requires you to depart the United States prior to extending status (for example, a Customs officer may determine that you should obtain a new visa prior extending your status); and
- You submit an application for an extension of stay before the expiration date on your Form I-94. There are certain very limited circumstances under which USCIS will excuse a late submission.

# Heading Sample 1

Please furnish medical evidence in support of your pension claim. The best evidence to submit would be a report of a recent examination by your personal physician, or a report from a hospital or clinic that has treated you recently. The report should include complete findings and diagnoses of the condition which renders you permanently and totally disabled. It is not necessary for you to receive an examination at this time. We only need a report from a doctor, hospital, or clinic that has treated you recently.

## Header Sample 1, cont'd

This evidence should be submitted as soon as possible, preferably within 60 days. If we do not receive this information within 60 days from the date of this letter, your claim will be denied. Evidence must be received in the Department of Veterans Affairs within one year from the date of this letter; the date of its receipt. *SHOW VETERAN'S FULL NAME AND VA FILE NUMBER ON ALL EVIDENCE SUBMITTED.*

*Privacy Act Information: The information requested by this letter is authorized by existing law (38 U.S.C. 210 (c) (1)) and is considered necessary and relevant to determine entitlement to maintain maximum benefits applied for under the law. The information submitted may be disclosed outside the Department of Veterans Affairs only as permitted by law.*

# Headers Rewrite 1

We have your claim for a pension. Our laws require us to ask you for more information. The information you give us will help us decide whether we can pay you a pension.

## **What We Need**

Send us a medical report from a doctor or clinic that you visited in the past six months. The report should show why you can't work. Please take this letter and the enclosed Doctor's Guide to your doctor.

## **When We Need It**

We need the doctor's report by [date]. We'll have to turn down your claim if we don't get the report by that date.

# Headers Rewrite 1, cont'd

## **Your Right to Privacy**

The information you give us is private. We might have to give out this information in a few special cases. But we will not give it out to the general public without your permission. We've attached a form which explains your privacy rights. If you have any questions, call us toll-free by dialing 1-800-827-1000. Our TDD number for the hearing impaired is 1-800-829-4833. If you call, please have this letter with you.

# Question Headers Rewrite 1

We have your claim for a pension. Our laws require us to ask you for more information. The information you give us will help us decide whether we can pay you a pension.

## **What Do We Need From You?**

Send us a medical report from a doctor or clinic that you visited in the past six months. The report should show why you can't work. Please take this letter and the enclosed Doctor's Guide to your doctor.

## **When Do We Need It?**

We need the doctor's report by [date]. We'll have to turn down your claim if we don't get the report by that date.

# Question Headers Rewrite 1, cont'd

## **What Are Your Privacy Rights?**

The information you give us is private. We might have to give out this information in a few special cases. But we will not give it out to the general public without your permission. We've attached a form which explains your privacy rights. If you have any questions, call us toll-free by dialing 1-800-827-1000. Our TDD number for the hearing impaired is 1-800-829-4833. If you call, please have this letter with you.

# Choose Your Words

- Choose shorter words
- Avoid jargon
- Reduce acronyms
- Use personal pronouns and contractions
- Use active voice
- Avoid hidden verbs

## Choose Shorter Words

- Anticipate—Expect
- Attempt—Try
- Commence—Begin or Start
- Demonstrate—Show or Prove
- Implement—Start
- Utilize—Use
- Submit—Send or Give
- Terminate—End or Cancel

# Avoid Jargon

- insider lingo
- often pretentious
- often marked by acronyms
- words or phrases only those “in the know” get
- excludes others

Make your point without it.



# Reduce Acronyms

3Rs Recruitment and Relocation Bonuses and Retention Allowances AAALAC American Association for Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care AAP American Academy of Pediatrics AAPHP American Association of Public Health Physicians ACD Advisory Committee to the Director ACEP American College of Emergency Physicians ACGME Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education ACPM American College of Preventive Medicine ACSI American Customer Satisfaction Index ACWA Administrative Careers with America AD&D Accidental Death and Dismemberment ADP Automated Data Processing AFGE American Federation of Government Employees AI/ANO American Indian/Alaskan Native Organization AID Agency for International Development AIRIO Agency Intramural Research Integrity Officer AL Annual Leave AMA American Medical Association AMHPS Association of Minority Health Professionals Schools AMS Access Management System ANACI Access NACI AO Administrative Office/Officer AOS NIH Assembly of Scientists APAAO Asian Pacific Islander American Organization APHA American Public Health Association ARAC Administrative Restructuring Advisory Committee AREA Academic Research Enhancement Award ASAP As Soon As Possible ASBTF Assistant Secretary for Budget, Technology and Finance ASCD Administrative Skills Development Curriculum ASH Assistant Secretary for Health, PHS ASPER Assistant Secretary for Personnel Administration, DHHS ASPH Association of Schools of Public Health ASTHO Association of State and Territorial Health Officials ATC Area Team Coordinator ATM Above The Minimum ATPM Association of Teachers and Preventive Medicine ATSDR Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, PHS AWOL Absence Without Official Leave AWS Alternate Work Schedule B BC/BSS Blue Cross and Blue Shield BDR Budget Data Request BECON Biengineering Consortium (NIH OD) BI Background Investigation BI Business Intelligence BIB Bibliography BIG Blacks in Government BIQSFP Biomarker, Imaging and Quality of Life Studies Funding Program BISTIC Bioinformatics Consortium (NIH OD) BITS Background Information Tracking System BMBL Biosafety in Microbiological and Biomedical Laboratories BRAC Base Realignment and Closure BRAIN Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies BRASS Biomedical Research After-School Scholars BRDPI Biomedical Research and Development Price Index BRiDGs Bridging Interventional Development Gaps Program BRM Business Reply Mail (ORS) BSL Biosafety Levels BTP Biotechnology Training Program BTRIS Biomedical Translational Research Information System C CA Certification Authority CA(SF) Clinical Associate (Staff Fellow) CAN Common Accounting Number CAO Change of Appointing Office CAP Corrective Action Plan CAPS Commuting and Parking Services CBT Computer-Based Training C/CC Career/Career-Conditional CC Warren Grant Magnuson Clinical Center CC Commercial Core CC Commercial Competitive CC Carbon or CAO Copy CCOP Community Clinical Oncology Program CCR Center for Cooperative Resolution (NIH OD) CDC Communicable Disease Center, PHS CDP Candidate Development Program (SES) CDP Career Development Plan CE Continuing Education for Psychologists CEA Cost-Effectiveness Analysis CER Comparative Effectiveness Research CFC Combined Federal Campaign CFR Code of Federal Regulations CG Cooperative Group CGE Concur Government Edition CHIMP The NIH Chimpanzee Management Program CHUID Card Holder Unique Identifier CIT Center for Information Technology CJIS Criminal Justice Information Services CMAB Complaints Management and Adjudication Branch, OEO CME Continuing Medical Education CMP/ HMO Comprehensive Medical Plans/Health Maintenance Organizations CNACI Child Care NACI CO Commissioned Officer COB Close Of Business COI Conflict of Interest COLA Cost Of Living Allowance CONUS Continental United States COOG Continuity of Operations Group COOP Continuity of Operations Plan COP Continuation Of Pay COPR Council of Public Representatives (NIH OD) COTA Career Opportunities Training Agreement (HHS) CPDF Central Personnel Data File CPE Continuing Professional Education CPPF Cancer Prevention Fellowship Program CRIS Clinical Research Information System CRISP Computer Retrieval of Information on Scientific Projects CRTP Clinical Research Training Program CRM Customer Relations Manager CS Civil Service CSD Client Services Division CSR Center for Scientific Review CSRS Civil Service Retirement System CT Credit Time CTC Central Tenure Committee CV Curriculum Vitae CY Calendar Year D DATS Division of Amenities and Transportation Services dbGaP National Institutes of Health (NIH) database of Genotypes and Phenotypes DCMS Division of Mail and Courier Services (ORS) DCPSS Defense Civilian Pay System DCR Division of Career Resources, OHRM, NIH DDIR Deputy Director for Intramural Research DEA Division of Extramural Activities DEBUT Design by Biomedical Undergraduate Teams (DEBUT) Challenge DEC Deputy Ethics Counselor DEPC Division of Emergency Preparedness and Coordination DES Division of Engineering Services DFAS Defense Finance and Accounting Service DHHS Department of Health and Human Services DHRS Division of Human Resource Systems, OHRM, NIH DRG Division of Research Grants DIS Division of International Services DLS Division of Logistics Services DP Division of Police DS Division of Safety DSEIS Division of Scientific Equipment & Instrumentation Services (ORS) DSFM Division of Space and Facility Management DSO Division of Security Operations DSS Division of Support Services DTB Department of Transfusion Medicine (ORS) DVAAP Disabled Veterans Affirmative Action Program DWD Division of Workforce Development E EAP Employee Assistance Program EC Ethics Coordinator EC Executive Committee (NCI) ECFMG Educational Commission for Foreign Medical School Graduates EDI Electronic Data Interchange Edison Extramural Invention Information Management System EDT NIH Emergency Tier Designation EEO Equal Employment Opportunity EEOC Equal Employment Opportunity Commission EHR Electronic Health Record EHRP Capital Human Resources ELS Earnings and Leave Statement EOD Entry on Duty EOD Entrance on Duty eOPF Electronic Official Personnel Folder EPN Executive Plaza North EPS Executive Plaza South EPSS Electronic Performance Support Systems e-QIP Electronic Questionnaires for Investigations Processing ERA Electronic Research Administration ES Executive Secretariat (NIH OD) ES Executive Schedule ESG Executive Staffing Group, REPS, PMB, NCI ETSO Employee Transportation Services Office F FAES Foundation for Advanced Education in the Sciences FAI Fair Act Inventory FAIR Federal Activities Inventory Reform FAR Federal Acquisition Regulation FCRDC Frederick Cancer Research and Development Center FDA Food and Drug Administration, PHS FECA Federal Employees' Compensation Act FEGLI Federal Employees' Group Life Insurance FEHBP Federal Employees' Health Benefits Program FelCom NIH Fellows Committee FEORP Federal Equal Opportunity Recruitment Program FEPCA Federal Employees' Pay Comparability Act FERS Federal Employees' Retirement System FERS-FRAE Retirement System-Further Revised Annuity Employees FES Factor Evaluation System FFS Fee-for-service FIC John E. Fogarty International Center FICA Federal Insurance Contributions Act (Social Security) FIP Federal Information Processing FIPS 201-1 Federal Information Processing FISMA Federal Information Security Management FLSA Fair Labor Standards Act FMG Foreign Medical Graduate FOIA Freedom of Information Act FPM Federal Personnel Manual FR Federal Register FS Feasibility Study FTC Floor Team Coordinator FTE Full-Time Equivalent FTS Federal Telecommunications System FWP Federal Women's Program FY Fiscal Year FYI For Your Information G GAO General Accounting Office, Congress GDC Gaiter Distribution Center (supply warehouse) GFF General Fellowship Program GME Graduate Medical Education GOV Government-owned Vehicle GPA Grade Point Average GPP Graduate Partnerships Program (NIH OD) GPRA Government Performance and Results Act GR Guest Researcher GRC Gerontology Research Center GS General Schedule GSA General Services Administration H HACU Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities HCFA Health Care Financing Administration, DHHS HEAR HHS Enterprise Architect Repository hEsc Human Embryonic Stem Cell HHMI Howard Hughes Medical Institute HHS Health and Human Services, Department of HIV Human Immunodeficiency Virus HQ Headquarters HR Human Resources HRIS Human Resource Information System HRSA Health Resources and Services Administration, PHS HSA Health Scientist Administrator HSPD-12 Homeland Security Presidential Directive 12 HSRB Human Subjects Review Board HTML Hypertext Markup Language I IAG Interagency Agreement ICD Institutes/Centers/Divisions ID Identification IDMS ID Management System IHS Indian Health Service, PHS ILO International Labor Organization ImmPort Immunology Database and Analysis Portal IMMOD Immediate Office of the Director IMPAC Information for Management, Planning, Analysis, and Coordination IMPACT Integrated Management of Personnel Administration through Computer Technology IMS/ADB Information Management System/Administrative Data Base System (DELPRO) INS Immigration and Naturalization Service IO Information Officer IOM Institute of Medicine, NAS IPA Interagency Personnel Act IPA Intergovernmental Personnel Act IPC Intellectual Patient Contact iPSC Induced Pluripotent Stem Cell IRA Individual Retirement Account IRB Institutional Review Board IRP Intramural Research Program IRTA Intrafamily Research Training Award ISB International Services Branch ISSO Information Systems Service Office ITAS Integrated Time and Attendance System ITMC Information Technology Management Council J JPAS Joint Personnel Adjudication System K KSA Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities Form KSAKF Knowledges, Skills and Abilities Supplemental Form (NIH-2252-3) L LABS Laboratory Automated Bibliographic System LACS Logical Access Control System LAN Local Area Network LBI Limited Background Investigation LIUNA Laborers International Union of North America LOE Level of Effort LRP NIH Loan Repayment Program (NIH OD) LSPRP Laboratory Specialist Promotion Review Panel LWOP Leave Without Pay M MAPS Medical Arts and Photography Branch MBI Minimum Background Investigation MCP Management Cadre Program MCRU NIH Metabolic Clinical Research Unit MEO Most Efficient Organization MHPF Minority Health Professionals Foundation ML Military Leave MMWR Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report MOU Memorandum of Understanding MPP NIH Merit Program Plan MPW Medical Pathological Waste MRA Minimum Retirement Age MSC Mail Stop Code MSPB Merit Systems Protection Board N N/A Not Applicable/Not Available NAC National Agency Check NACHO National Association of County Health Officials NACI National Agency Check and Inquiries NACIC NACI and Credit NARCH Native American Research Centers for Health NAS National Academy of Sciences NCCAM National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine NCMHD National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities NCAT NIH Certification & Accreditation Tool NCATS National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences NCI National Cancer Institute NCI National Crime Information Center NCR National Center for Research Resources NEAR NIH Enterprise Architect Repository NEH NIH Enterprise Directory NEI National Eye Institute NFC National Finance Center NHGRI National Human Genome Research Institute NHLBI National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute NIA National Institute on Aging NIAAA National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism NIAID National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases NIAMS National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases NIBIB National Institute of Biomedical Imaging and Bioengineering NICHD National Institute of Child Health and Human Development NIDA National Institute on Drug Abuse NIDCD National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders NIDDK National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases NIDCR National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research NIEHS National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences NIGMS National Institute of General Medical Sciences NIH National Institutes of Health NIHTC National Institutes of Health Training Center NIMH National Institute of Mental Health NIMHD National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities NINDS National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke NINR National Institute of Nursing Research NLM National Library of Medicine NLT Not Later Than NMA National Medical Association NOA Nature of Action NRC National Research Council NRSA National Research Service Award NSF National Science Foundation NTE Not To Exceed NTIS National Technical Information Service O OA Office Automation OA Office of Administration (NIH OD) OACU Office of Animal Care and Use (NIH OD) OAD HIV Office of the Associate Director for HIV/AIDS OAMP Office of Acquisition Management and Policy (NIH OD) OAR Office of AIDS Research (NIH OD) OASDI Old Age Survivor Disability Insurance OASH Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health, PHS OB Office of Budget (NIH OD) OBA Office of Biotechnology Activities (NIH OD) OBSSR Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (NIH OD) OC Office of Communications OCL Office of Community Liaison (NIH OD) OCPLE Office of Communications & Public Liaison ODO Office of the Director ODEO Office of the Director Executive Office (NIH OD) ODO Office of Disease Prevention (NIH OD) ODS Office of Dietary Supplements (NIH OD) OE Office of Education (NIH OD) OEO Office of Evaluation (NIH OD) OEC Occupant Emergency Coordinator OEO Office of Equal Opportunity (NIH OD) OEOODM Office of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Management (NIH OD) OER Office of Extramural Research (NIH OD) OF Optional Form OFACFP Office of Federal Advisory Committee Policy (NIH OD) OFM Office of Financial Management (NIH OD) OGOC Office of the General Counsel (NIH OD) OHR Office of Human Resources (NIH OD) OHRM Office of Human Resource Management (NIH OD) OHRP Office for Human Research Protections (NIH OD) OHSR Office of Human Subjects Research (NIH OD) OIR Office of Intramural Research (NIH OD) OIT Office of Information Technology (NIH OD) OITE Office of Training and Education OJT On-The-Job Training OLAO Office of Logistics and Acquisition Operations (NIH OD) OLAW Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare (NIH OD) OLPA Office of Legislative Policy and Analysis (NIH OD) OLRS Office of Loan Repayment and Scholarship (NIH OD) OM Office of Management (NIH OD) OMA Office of Management Assessment (NIH OD) OMAR Office of Medical Applications of Research (NIH OD) OMB Office of Management and Budget, White House OMSB Office of Medical Board Services OMS Occupational Medical Service OPDV Operating Divisions OPF Official Personnel File OPL Offices of Public Liaison (NIH OD) OPMP Office of Personnel Management ORD Office of Rare Diseases (NIH OD) ORFDO Office of Research Facilities Development and Operations (NIH OD) ORIA Online Rodent Import Application ORS Office of Research Services (NIH OD) ORWH Office of Research on Women's Health (NIH OD) OSE Office of Science Education (NIH OD) OSP Office of Science Policy (NIH OD) OSPM Office of Strategic Management and Planning (NIH OD) OSSP Office of Science Policy & Planning (NIH OD) OTT Office of Technology Transfer P P/TRP Promotion/Tenure Review Panel PA Personnel Assistant PACS Physical Access Control System PAHO Pan American Health Organization PCA Physicians Comparability Allowance PCG Privacy Coordinator GPCOR Patient-Centered Outcomes Research PCRM Program in Cellular Regulation and Metabolism PCS Permanent change of station PD Position Description PDF Portable Document Format PDP Physicians' and Dentists' Pay (also known as Market Pay) PEBS Policy, Employee Benefits, and Staffing Unit, PMB, NCI PHS Public Health

# Limit Acronyms and Initialisms

- Don't use acronyms/abbreviations for infrequent phrases
- Don't invent new acronyms or abbreviations—they burden your reader
- Don't let one acronym mean more than one thing

## Use Alternatives

- Try another style (the council, the agency, the office, the department, the program). Use “we” for your agency.
- Make acronyms pronounceable — STARS, TRACON, FIRE.
- Re-define an acronym that you haven’t used for a while.

# Use Pronouns

Pronouns replace nouns in sentences. They

- speak directly to readers—they establish a relationship
- make your writing relevant to your reader
- eliminate extra words
- keep you from repeating the same words over and over  
“The office ... the division ... the agency”

# How and When to Use Pronouns

- Use “we” to refer to your agency
- Use “you” to refer to the reader
- Use “I” and “you” in Q&A formats (see headers)

## Use contractions

Contractions combine nouns and verbs, usually with an apostrophe:

- We are—We're
- We will—We'll
- I will—I'll
- She had planned—She'd planned

# Active and Passive Voice

Active voice is the easiest way to show who is responsible for an action. In an active voice sentence, the person or agency taking an action is the subject of the sentence.

## **Who does what**

Subject + verb + object = sentence

# Passive Voice

In passive voice, the person or item that is acted upon is the object. Passive sentences often do not identify who is doing the action.

Who has had something done to them?

Object + verb + [by] subject

# Passive Voice Example

## **Active voice**

They discussed the topic.

## **Passive voice**

The topic was discussed by them.

# Passive Voice: How to Spot

Can you add “by zombies” to the end?

The store was entered.

The store was entered + “by zombies”

Who entered the store? Zombies.

Zombies entered the store.

# Passive Voice: How to Fix

Recast the sentence, putting the subject first:

## **From**

The talking points were drafted by them.

## **To**

They drafted the talking points.

## Passive Voice: BUT

Passive voice is **grammatically correct**. Sometimes you want to emphasize who or what received the action:

The city was bombed. (Maybe you don't know who bombed it.)

The idea was not encouraged. (Maybe you do know, but don't want to say.)

# When Passive Voice Works

Your car has been stolen—Doer unknown

Presidents are elected every four years—Doer obvious

Her outfit was covered with glitter—Doer doesn't matter

All annual leave has been cancelled—Doer best left unnamed

The report should have been done by—Avoids direct attack

# Passive Voice: When to Use

Whatever you do, do it on purpose! Use passive voice when appropriate; don't just fall into it by habit.

Don't leave it to your audience to figure out who's doing what in your sentences; they might get it wrong.

BREAK

**Passive Voice Video:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fs78WBOgxs0&list=PLADE80C67FDB39352&index=6&t=36s>

# Rescue Hidden Verbs

A hidden verb is a verb converted into a noun. It often needs an extra verb to make sense.

- Conduct an analysis of—analyze
- Present a report—report
- Do an assessment of—assess
- Provide assistance to—assist, help
- Came to the conclusion—concluded
- Attain compliance—comply
- Had a conversation—converse, speak, talk, say

# Words to Sentences

When writing sentences, remember to:

- Cut out redundancies and cliches
- Reduce clauses to phrases and phrases to words
- Leave out unnecessary words
- Use concrete rather than vague language—say what you mean
- Pay attention to word order

# Sentences to Paragraphs

Begin new paragraphs when you

- introduce a new idea
- contrast information or ideas
- want to give your readers a break
- are ending your introduction or starting your conclusion
- realize one paragraph is two pages long

# Be obvious

As journalists say, don't bury your lede!

## **Example of a hard-lead paragraph**

NASA is proposing another space project. The agency's budget request, announced today, included a plan to send another mission to the moon. This time the agency hopes to establish a long-term facility as a jumping-off point for other space adventures. The budget requests approximately \$10 billion for the project.

# Be obvious; don't bury the lede

## **Example of a soft-lead sentence**

Humans will be going to the moon again. The NASA announcement came as the agency requested \$10 billion of appropriations for the project.

# Step Back and Look Again

- You've considered your audience
- You've organized and wrote your content
- Ask yourself if you can present the information in a better way
- Ask someone else to review

# Design: Bulleted Lists

- Make it easy for the reader to identify all items or steps in a process
- Add blank space for easy reading
- Help the reader see your document's structure and the relationship between ideas and specifics

# Bulleted List Example 1

The laws that CRC enforces forbid discrimination on the following bases: race, color, national origin (including limited English proficiency), religion, age, sex (including pregnancy and gender identity), disability, citizenship, political affiliation or belief, and status as a participant in a program or activity that receives financial assistance under Title I of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA).

# Bulleted List Rewrite

**The Civil Rights Center enforces laws that do not allow discrimination because of:**

- Race
- Color
- National origin (including limited English proficiency)
- Religion
- Age
- Sex (including pregnancy and gender identity)

## Bulleted List Rewrite, cont'd

- Disability
- Citizenship
- Political affiliation or belief
- Status as a participant in a program or activity that receives financial assistance under Title I of the Workforce Investment Act.

# Parallelism: List

Each compact must contain:

1. Provisions required by the Tribal Self-Governance Act of 1994;
2. Are in compliance with other applicable federal laws;  
and,
3. Are consistent with this part.

# Parallelism: Sentences

- Each compact must contain provisions required by the Tribal Self-Governance Act of 1994.
- Each compact must contain are in compliance with other applicable federal laws.
- Each compact must contain are consistent with this part.

# Parallelism Applied in a List

Each compact must

- 1. Contain** provisions required by the Tribal Self-Governance Act of 1994;
- 2. Comply** with other applicable federal laws; and,
- 3. Be consistent** with this part.

# Design: Tables

Tables can clarify text. They also

- Save words
- Make it easy to locate specific provisions
- Make it easy to take in complex material at a glance
- Make your logic and structure clear—often if/then statements

# Example: Table

If the irregularity is	Then an Accountable Officer may
Up to \$10K	Seek reconsideration by the Relief Authority or review by the Bureau Head where the irregularity originated
\$10-\$50K	Seek reconsideration by the Relief Authority, or review by the Assistant Attorney General for Administration through the Director, Finance Staff, Justice Management Division
More than \$50K	Seek reconsideration by the Assistant Attorney General for Administration

# Reading on the Web

People read slower on the Web and they scan.

Online readers focus on headings and bulleted list information.

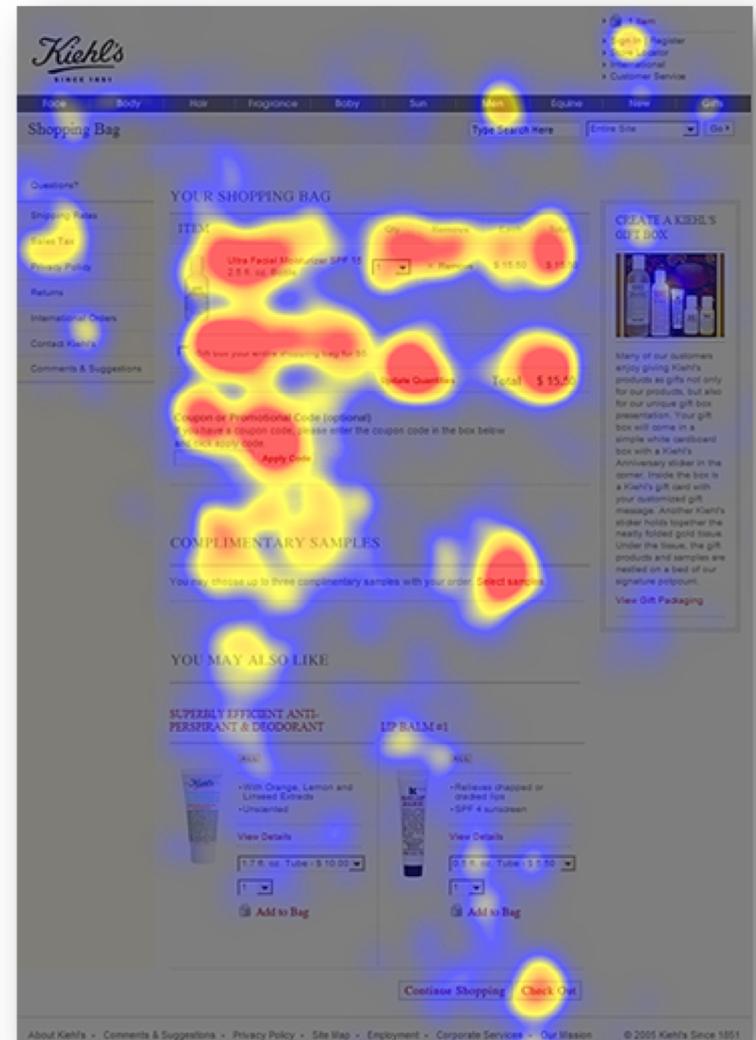
Make the information count—cut your content.

But it's not the only goal. Aim for clarity, not word count; be clear even if you end up adding words.

# Reading on the Web graphic

Online readers read slower and focus on headings and bulleted lists

Nielsen Norman Group usability eye tracking test (2006)



# Example: Executive Order 12988 #1

With respect to the review of existing regulations and the promulgation of new regulations, section 3(a) of Executive Order 12988, “Civil Justice Reform,” 61 FR 4729 (February 7, 1996), imposes on Executive agencies the general duty to adhere to the following requirements: (1) Eliminate drafting errors and ambiguity; (2) write regulations to minimize litigation; and (3) provide a clear legal standard for affected conduct rather than a general standard and promote simplification and burden reduction. With regard to the review required by section 3(a), section 3(b) of Executive Order 12988 specifically requires that Executive agencies make every reasonable effort to ensure that the regulation: (1) Clearly specifies the preemptive effect, if any; (2) clearly specifies any effect on existing Federal law or regulation; (3) provides a clear legal standard for affected conduct while promoting simplification and burden reduction; (4) specifies the retroactive effect, if any; (5) adequately defines key terms; and (6) addresses other important issues affecting clarity and general draftsmanship under any guidelines issued by the Attorney General. Section 3(c) of Executive Order 12988 requires Executive agencies to review regulations in light of applicable standards in section 3(a) and section 3(b) to determine whether they are met or it is unreasonable to meet one or more of them. DHS has completed the required review and determined that, to the extent permitted by law, this final rule meets the relevant standards of Executive Order 12988.

# Example: Executive Order 12988 #2

With respect to the review of existing regulations and the promulgation of new regulations, section 3(a) of Executive Order 12988, “Civil Justice Reform,” 61 FR 4729 (February 7, 1996), imposes on Executive agencies the general duty to adhere to the following requirements: (1) Eliminate drafting errors and ambiguity; (2) write regulations to minimize litigation; and (3) provide a clear legal standard for affected conduct rather than a general standard and promote simplification and burden reduction. With regard to the review required by section 3(a), section 3(b) of Executive Order 12988 specifically requires that Executive agencies make every reasonable effort to ensure that the regulation: (1) Clearly specifies the preemptive effect, if any; (2) clearly specifies any effect on existing Federal law or regulation; (3) provides a clear legal standard for affected conduct while promoting simplification and burden reduction; (4) specifies the retroactive effect, if any; (5) adequately defines key terms; and (6) addresses other important issues affecting clarity and general draftsmanship under any guidelines issued by the Attorney General. Section 3(c) of Executive Order 12988 requires Executive agencies to review regulations in light of applicable standards in section 3(a) and section 3(b) to determine whether they are met or it is unreasonable to meet one or more of them. DHS has completed the required review and determined that, to the extent permitted by law, this final rule meets the relevant standards of Executive Order 12988.

## Example: Executive Order 12988 #3

With respect to the review of existing regulations and the promulgation of new regulations, section 3(a) of Executive Order 12988, “Civil Justice Reform,” 61 FR 4729 (February 7, 1996), imposes on Executive agencies the general duty to adhere to the following requirements:

1. Eliminate drafting errors and ambiguity;
2. write regulations to minimize litigation; and
3. provide a clear legal standard for affected conduct rather than a general standard and promote simplification and burden reduction.

# Example: Executive Order 12988 Final

This rule meets the requirements found in sections 3(a) and 3(b)(2) of Executive Order 12988.

# Self-Editing Steps

- Take a break
- Choose your method
- Concentrate
- Take your time
- Check for flow, clarity, logic, message
- Share with others
- Review edits for patterns

# GSA Starmark

