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
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 …
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](#)
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?
Instead of asking

• How can I protect my interests?

Ask

• How can I serve my audience’s interests/needs?
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
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?
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.
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
• 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
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;
• 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.
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.
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.*
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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 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
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
Active voice
They discussed the topic.

Passive voice
The topic was discussed by them.
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.
Recast the sentence, putting the subject first:

**From**
The talking points were drafted by them.

**To**
They drafted the talking points.
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.
Passive Voice Video:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fs78WBOgxs0&list=PLADE80C67FDB39352&index=6&t=36s
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
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
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
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.
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
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).
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.
Each compact must contain:

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.
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
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If the irregularity is</th>
<th>Then an Accountable Officer may</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Up to $10K</td>
<td>Seek reconsideration by the Relief Authority or review by the Bureau Head where the irregularity originated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10-$50K</td>
<td>Seek reconsideration by the Relief Authority, or review by the Assistant Attorney General for Administration through the Director, Finance Staff, Justice Management Division</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than $50K</td>
<td>Seek reconsideration by the Assistant Attorney General for Administration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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.
Online readers read slower and focus on headings and bulleted lists

Nielsen Norman Group usability eye tracking test (2006)
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.
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.

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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.
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