Three Seconds & Counting

*How to Write in Plain Language and
Keep the Audience Reading*

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Plain Language Is Not a New Thing

- Roosevelt, Truman, Lincoln, all the greats called for or demanded plain language

- Exec Orders have been in place since the 70s

- Wars on Gobbledygook I & II

- Plain Language Action and Information Network begins working toward actual legislation mid-1990s

- Plain Writing Act of 2010

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Most readers decide if something is relevant to their needs in 3 to 5 seconds

If I can't scan it and get the gist quickly…

If I don't understand, it doesn't matter if it's relevant to me. If it's not clear, hard to read, or confusing, I'm out.

Who Tells Your Story?

Stakeholders?

Media?

Congressional Staffers?

What Exactly Is Plain Language?

Plain language simply means communication that your audience or readers can understand the first time they hear or read it.

What Is Plain Language Supposed to Do?

The goals of plain language are to help readers:

- **Find** the information they need

- **Understand** the information they find

- **Use** the information (or **do** what we are asking)

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Plain Language Is Not

- An attempt to be folksy or colloquial, playful, politically correct, or "Facebook-y"

- Editorial polishing after you finish—**begin** with the aim of being clear and concisely delivering the message

- Dumbing down—you are not stripping out necessary technical and legal information or writing to grade level

- Readers have questions and need answers. Anticipate questions an informed reader is likely to ask.

- The first and most important is "WIIFM?" (other variations: So what? And? What are you talking about? Do I care about this?)

- Organize writing to answer questions in the order the reader will ask them

- Make sure you know what you're going to say to answer those questions—Always use an outline. Roman numerals not required.

Let Go of

- I need to impress you

- I need to impress the boss or do it the way he/she expects to see it

- I have to sound smart, official, federal, etc.

- I have to use the language of the attorneys to get it through legal

Plain Language Is About Serving the Reader

Serving the Reader Means

- Paying attention to tone. Plain language adopts a "professionally conversational" tone and is not officious, bureaucratic, and doesn't try to sound "smart."

- Making your message relevant for the intended audience.

- Respecting the reader's time, getting to the point quickly so they can decide if they need or want your information.

Inverse pyramid: **Most Important Information First**

Most important information (5Ws/H)

Facts, Figures

Nice to have but not vital

What Does the Reader Need to Know First?

- References (a) through (d) requested a review of Deepwater overhead transactions to ensure the expenditures in the Construction in Progress account complied with appropriations law. Reference (e) requested that each organization provide individuals to create a team to ensure the corrective actions were completed.

- The team was given a deadline of February 15th, 2013, to review all transactions and make all necessary corrections. The deadline was missed, however all corrective actions have been completed. Several corrective actions took longer to complete due to technical delays encountered with moving expenditures from one appropriation to a different appropriation and was further compounded by the departure of the original Contracting Officers from the Coast Guard.

- This team charter and reclassification matter is closed. All correspondence will be retained in the event of future review or audit. (133 words)

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Who Am I Writing for?

- WHO ARE YOU TARGETING WITH THIS MESSAGE?

- WWW – Anybody in the whole wide world can access this if it goes on the Web. Who's most likely to be the audience that finds it?

- Go with the **90-10 rule**. Focus on the 90 percent of readers in the middle (OR your target audience) but meet the needs of the 10 percent.

- Keep in mind the average user's level of technical expertise. Remember, even technical experts want things to be clear.

- Make sure you are clear first: What does the user need from your document ? What do they already know? What do they need to know?

Plain Language Is Spare, Elegant, Clear

- Get rid of EXCESS—anything not doing work, adding meaning

- Use concrete over abstract terms and avoid vague qualifiers – much, many, several, some, very

- Simple, clear words build simple, clear sentences, which build simple, clear paragraphs

Don't Smother Verbs or Use Cluttered Phrases

To "smother" or hide a verb means to take a strong active verb and transform it into a relatively weak noun by combining it with other words in a phrase (nominalization)

- Conduct an analysis
- Present a report
- Do an assessment
- Provide assistance
- Came to the conclusion of

Choose Simpler, Clear Words

Do a personal dictionary inventory:

- What crutch words and phrases do you routinely use that either add no meaning or that add to word clutter?

- Watch for creeping clutter phrases

Write Short Sentences and Paragraphs

- Treat only one subject in each sentence

- Avoid complexity and confusion—don't "back in" to sentences

- Aim for **20 words** per sentence or fewer.

  Max out at 33

I told you shorter was better! HA HA!

Write Short Paragraphs

- Smaller bites of info are easier to digest—use informational graphics whenever possible

- Limit a paragraph to one subject or step. One sentence paragraphs are OK

- Use headers/subheads as visual transition markers

- Aim for about 7 lines deep on a standard page

(less (!) on websites)

I told you
shorter
was
better!
HA HA!
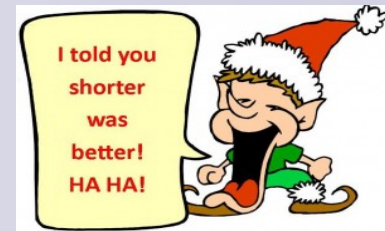
Use Active Voice

Active voice means writing using active verbs. A verb is active if it falls immediately after the subject doing the action and before the object or clauses in the sentence. Ex: **Jack rode** the bike to the store.

Verbs in the passive voice often include a form of the verb **to be**-- usually in past tense, but not always.

Understand Active Voice

- Jan examined the company's books each week.

This is active. The sentence structure is subject-verb-object. Note that the subject of the verb is also the subject of the sentence.

- The books of the company were examined each week by Jan.

This is passive. We don't know that Jan did the examining until the end of the sentence.

Voice versus Tense

Do not confuse voice with tense

- Tense indicates when something happens

- Voice has to do with the position of the subject and the verb

- Passive voice may also occur in future tense

Examples:

Fred will rent the beach cottage in may for the summer.

(active — subject, verb, object structure — future tense)

The beach cottage will be rented by Fred in may for the summer.

(passive structure; future tense)

Reduce Abbreviations & Acronyms or Avoid Them Altogether

Acronyms Gone Wrong

An OIC totaling $100,000 was submitted by two related breweries located in the southeast to settle **FAA & IRC** violations cited as a result of a **COLA Fraud** Investigation. The husband of the breweries' co-owner manipulated eleven **certificates of label approval (COLAs)** by changing information to make it appear that TTB had approved the COLAs. Some labels were not previously submitted to TTB for review on COLA applications and other labels that were submitted had been rejected. In addition, seven COLAs previously approved by TTB were altered to conceal qualifications and expiration dates to make it appear as if the COLAs were valid and without any limitation. These manipulated/altered COLAs were then submitted to various state regulatory agencies for purposes of brand registration filings. The breweries also sold malt beverages without obtaining a COLA or after an approved COLA had expired. The breweries shipped a combined total of 300,931 cases/kegs of malt beverages in violation of the FAA Act.

AWHFYBNG?*

1. Avoid abbreviations when possible, especially those that readers are not likely to know.

2. Don't make up new acronyms, use acronyms common to your specific world, or use established abbreviations to mean something new.

3. Use the rule of thumb of two abbreviations in a sentence <u>only when unavoidable—strive to keep it to only one abbreviation.</u>

4. Limit how many different acronyms fall in a single paragraph. Two to more than plenty

AWHFYBNG?*

- A good alternative to using acronyms/initialisms is using a shortened form of a term, such as system, agency, office, council, center, program

*Are we having fun yet boys and girls?

THE Good and the Bad-and-ugly

1. Necessary technical terms—define for the

   unfamiliar reader

   (NO OTHER WAY TO SAY IT)

2. Obscure insider lingo; often pretentious and

   marked by acronyms, long words, or phrases no

   one except those "in the know" understand. Get rid

   of these and use simple, clear language instead

Bad Jargon

One of the early deliverables of the public-private partnership, once it is formed, will be the selection of the initial design parameters for the NGNP demonstration plant and a re-evaluation of the hydrogen production technology selection conveyed to you in the April 2010 *Report to Congress*.

Instead of:

WCH will assign significant resources to provide individualized and specific assistance to employees for the purpose of identifying future positions with the parent company affiliates, other Hanford contractors, and other companies who may have an interest in available employees.

Why not just say:

We will help employees find new jobs either in other areas of the company, with Hanford contractors, or elsewhere.

Instead of:

The Department of the Treasury (Treasury) is the agency that has jurisdiction over the issuance and reclamation of Social Security checks. When a beneficiary alleges he did not cash his Social Security check, the Treasury makes a forgery determination. If the Treasury determines the situation involves forgery, that office reclaims the money from the presenting bank. If you have other questions about the Treasury's determination, you may contact that office at (202) 874-XXXX.

Instead of:

The Department of the Treasury is responsible for mailing Social Security checks. When someone claims they did not cash a Social Security check that they were due, Treasury investigates to find out if someone stole the check and forged the signature. If Treasury determines that happened, Treasury makes the bank that cashed the check repay the government. If you have other questions or believe you are in this situation and need help, please call at (202) 874-XXXX.

Design Your Document for Easy Reading

1. **Remember: Everything must be "scannable"**(easy to quickly scan and get the gist)

2. **White space is your friend!** White space directs the eye where to go next and draws it to the next piece of information

3. **Use headings and subheadings** to break up chunks of text

4. Images must support the text, text should expand on the information conveyed in images. **Don't repeat in text what the reader is looking at in the image.**

Use Text-based Tables

Tables--

- 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
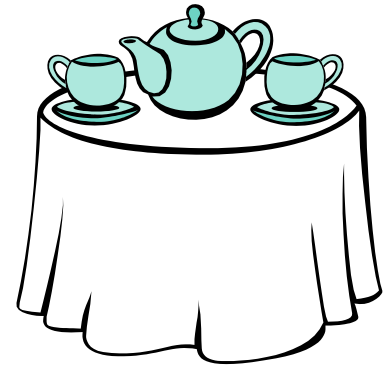
Example

We must receive your completed expense form on or before the 15th day of the second month following the month you are reporting if you do not submit your form electronically, or the 25th day of the second month following the month you are reporting if you submit your form electronically.

When must I send my completed expense form?

If you send your form--	Then we must receive it by--
■ Electronically,	■ The 25th day of the second…
■ Paper or fax,	■ The 15th day of the second…

Use Bulleted and Numbered Lists

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 the structure of your document.

But don't make lists too long

- Longer lists are hard to navigate.

- Research suggests that seven items are the maximum that work well in a list.

Example

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).

One Possibility

CRC 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),

- Disability,

- Citizenship,

- Political affiliation or belief, or

- Status as a participant in a program or activity that receives financial assistance under Title I of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA).

Next Steps—You're Half-Way There

- 1. Awareness
- 2. Willingness
- 3. Understanding
- 4. Practice
- 5. Perfecting
- 6. Sharing

More Resources

- Federal plain language guidelines: www.plainlanguage.gov; @govplainlang

- Center for plain language: www.Centerforplainlanguage.Org

- Merriam webster's collegiate dictionary: www.M-w.Com

- Chicago manual of style www.Chicagomanualofstyle.Org

- Purdue online writing lab: owl.English.Purdue.Edu/owl/

- Daily writing tips: http://www.Dailywritingtips.Com/

- Grammar girl quick-and-dirty tips for better writing

- Grammarly.Com

Good reads
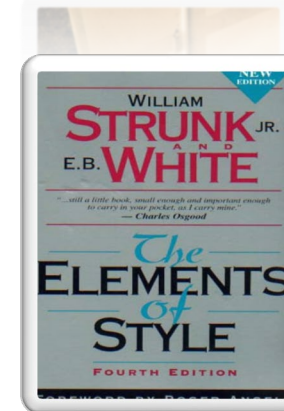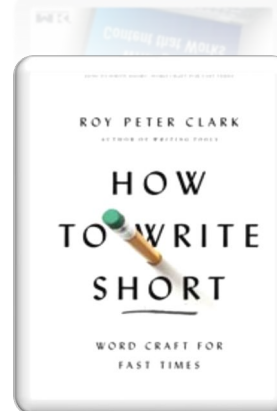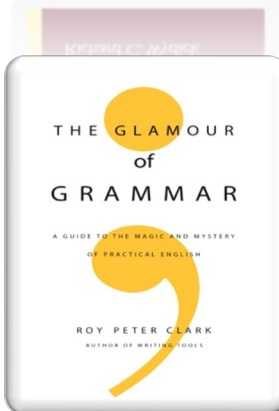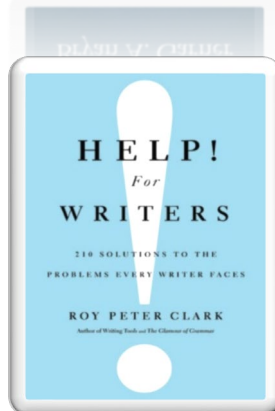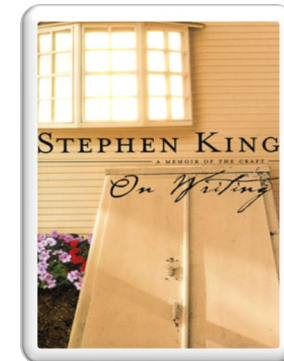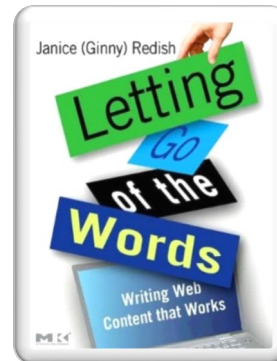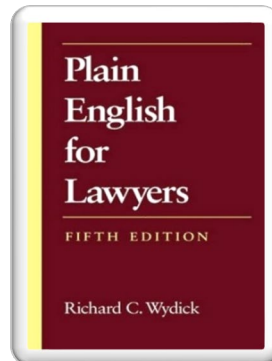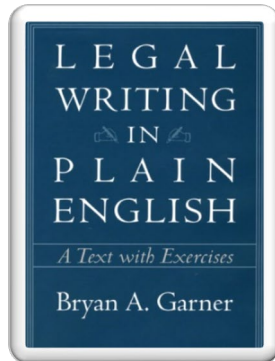
Need Help? Want More?

Federal Agencies—Free training through the Plain Language Action and Information Network, plus free group meetings each month

www.plainlanguage.gov

Need a Plain Language Consult or Have a Question?

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