

The Executive Order states that “rules...should be written so that they are easy to comprehend.” Summarized below are some practical tips on how to write plain English documents which can assist the writer in communicating most effectively.

Plain English Writing Tips Executive Order 2008-04S

The Audience

- Start by identifying your audience — the readers of the document. Determine their familiarity with the subject matter and their need for the information.
- Design and write the document for your audience. Your goal is to convey the information to them with the greatest clarity.
- Write the document as if communicating with one person.
- Include only information the reader really needs; omit redundant information. However, if your reader needs complex, legal, or technical information, do not omit it just to make the document simpler.
- Use proper grammar and punctuation. These are the conventions of language and facilitate effective communication.
- Test your document with its users, whenever possible. Test early in the drafting process before the document becomes difficult to modify.
- Take into account possible judicial interpretations — as well as reader understanding — when drafting rules, permits, and other legally-enforceable documents.

Document Organization

- Group related information together.
- Order the material in a logical sequence.
- Place more important information before less important information. Put the information most important to the reader at the beginning.
- Address the general before the specific. Summarize complicated topics before presenting details.
- Introduce and summarize what follows, including the conclusion, at the beginning of the document and major sections. For longer documents, explain how the document is organized.
- Write in short sections. Subdivide longer ones.
- Use descriptive headings and subheadings generously.
- Organize the document to, and otherwise minimize, cross-references.
- Minimize definitions. If you have more than a few, put them in a separate section. Never put substantive material in a definitions section.
- Consider using a question and answer format for consumer and informational documents.

Paragraphs

- Write short paragraphs. Limit your paragraphs to one topic.
- Use a topic sentence to establish the subject matter of the paragraph or a series of paragraphs.
- Develop the information through a logical sequence of sentences.
- Use transition words to link topics and introduce new ones.
- Use examples to explain and to eliminate text.

Sentences

- Write short sentences. Set your average length to about 20 words.
- Write in the present tense.
- Write in the active voice. Use direct language.
- Write in subject-verb-object order, the common phrasing of English.
- Put the subject near the beginning, put the verb near it, and put the object near the verb. Avoid intrusive words and clauses.
- Place the main idea before exceptions and conditions. But use “if-then” conditionals where it would help the reader.
- Write in the positive. Avoid double negatives and exceptions to exceptions.
- Place words carefully to avoid ambiguities. Connect modifying words to the words they modify.
- Avoid stringing together too many nouns.
- Write in parallel structures, and use parallel parts of speech. Use a list for complicated matters. Put the list at the end of the sentence.

Words

- Use words that are short, simple, common, and familiar. But do not do so at the expense of accuracy.
- Avoid legal, bureaucratic, and technical jargon. Avoid unfamiliar acronyms and abbreviations.
- Avoid colloquial words or phrases.
- Omit unnecessary words. Replace wordy phrases.
- Use defined terms sparingly.
- Use the same term for the same thing throughout the document.
- Use technical terms only where you have to use them. Explain them if your audience is not familiar with them.
- Use “must” rather than “shall” to convey requirements.
- Use first and second-person pronouns.
- Do not use nouns for verbs.

Useful References

Many useful guides and tutorials are available on line and in print for writing in plain language in the governmental context. You can locate many of them by using search terms such as “government plain language.” Some of the materials consulted in writing this document include:

- U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, Office of Investor Education and Assistance, *A Plain English Handbook: How to Create Clear SEC Disclosure Documents* (August 1998), available at www.sec.gov/pdf/handbook.pdf
- Plain Language Action and Information Network, *Federal Plain Language Guidelines*, available at www.plainlanguage.gov.
- Kimble, Joseph, *The Elements of Plain Language*, *Michigan Bar Journal* (October 2002), available at www.michbar.org/journal/pdf/pdf4article499.pdf
- Lauchman, Richard, *Plain Language: A Handbook for Writers in the U.S. Federal Government* (2007), available on line at www.lauchmangroup.com/PDFfiles/PLHandbook.PDF
- Office of the Federal Register, *Plain Language Tools*, available at www.archives.gov/federal-register/write/plain-language.