

Back to Basics

Plain Language Works Best

In General

1. Think about your audience. As the starting point and at every point, design and write the document in a way that best serves the reader. Your main goal is to convey your ideas with the greatest possible clarity.
2. Resist the urge to sound formal. Write as if you were speaking to the reader in person.
3. Omit unnecessary detail. Reduce the information to what your reader needs to know.
4. Use examples as needed to help explain your text.
4. Avoid noun strings—groups of nouns sandwiched together.
5. Use pronouns to speak directly to your reader. Using *you* pulls readers into your document and makes it relevant to them. When you use *you* to address readers, they are more likely to understand what their responsibility is.
6. Minimize abbreviations.
7. Omit unnecessary words.
8. Avoid doublets and triplets (*due and payable; cease and desist*).
9. Use definitions rarely and with caution. If needed, use common words familiar to your readers.
10. Use the same term consistently for specific thought or object.
11. Avoid legal and technical jargon (*hereby, therein, whereas*); unnecessary Latin (*i.e., e.g.*); slashes (*and/or*).
12. Give *shall* the boot; use *must* instead.
6. Use parallel structure for parallel ideas. Use a vertical list if your sentence contains multiple conditions or exceptions.

Organizing Your Document

1. Present the big pictures before the details. Present your steps chronologically in the order your reader will follow them.
2. Break your material into short, understandable sections.
3. Use descriptive headers and subheaders.

Words in Documents

1. Use active voice. Active voice makes it clear who is supposed to do what. It eliminates ambiguity about the reader's responsibilities. *You must do it; not It must be done.*
2. Use the simplest form of a verb. The simplest—and strongest—form of a verb is present tense. A document written in the present tense is more immediate and less complicated. Using the present tense makes your document more direct and forceful.
3. Don't turn verbs into nouns. Instead of *Please make an application for a personal loan*; write, *Please apply for a personal loan.*

Sentences in Documents

1. Write short sentences. As a guideline, keep the average length to about 20 words.
2. Express only one idea in each sentence.
3. Try to put the main subject and verb toward the beginning; make it the agent of the action in the verb; and don't pile up conditions or qualifiers before the main clause.
4. Keep the subject near the verb and the verb near the object. Avoid intrusive phrases, modifiers, and clauses.
5. Put conditionals such as *only* or *always* and other modifiers next to the words they modify. Write *You are required to provide only the following*; not *You are only required to provide the following.*

Paragraphs in Documents

1. Use a topic sentence to help readers follow your train of thought.
2. Cover only one topic in each paragraph.
3. Use transition words to bridge between paragraphs.
4. Write short paragraphs. Long paragraphs discourage readers from even trying to understand your material; short paragraphs are easier to read and understand. As a guideline, keep the average length to about 150 words in three to eight sentences.

Other Aids to Clarity

1. Use tables and illustrations to make complex material easier to understand.
2. Use ***bold and italics*** to make important concepts stand out. But limit emphasis to important information, otherwise you'll dilute its impact. Be consistent throughout the document.
3. Avoid using all-capital letters.
4. Minimize cross-references.
5. Design for ease of reading. Use ample white space in margins, between sections, and around headings and other special items.

