General guidelines

Here are Washington's guidelines for how to best use plain language writing and design principles on public-facing documents or websites. We updated these guidelines in 2024.

Outline

- **Know your audience**
- **Prioritize relevant information**
- **Use familiar terms**
- **Favor active voice**
- **Use personal pronouns**
- **Limit sentences and paragraphs**
- **Design clear pages**
- **More resources**
- **Trainings**

Know your audience

Find out who will be reading your material, what information they need and want, and how they will use the information.

How do I do this?

Interview staff members. Ask employees who directly work with your customers. They know the questions people have and the challenges they face.

Ask your customers. Reach out to your audience or customers with questions about how they use the information, what they need, what isn't helpful, and what needs to change. Try questionnaires or short interviews.

Do a usability test. Test your revised document or web pages with four to six customers to see if they can "use" it. This process will help you find glaring issues or confusing parts in your content. Learn about usability testing.

Do informal try-outs. Try your document out with a group of people who know nothing about the subject. They may be friends, family, or work colleagues.

Why do this?

Your writing will be more effective and direct when you understand who you are trying to reach. When you listen to people who read what you've written, it helps you understand what part is confusing and what phrases, words, or jargon doesn't work.

Include only relevant information

Your customers are looking for specific information. If you try to cover too many topics, you will frustrate them and muddle your message. Stick to the information **they** need to know, and don't describe every policy change or service you provide; only include the information your audience needs.

How do I do this?

Identify your main point. Decide what your document's most important topic is before you start writing. Put this main point near the top of the document.

Include only key information. Explain specifically what you want the customer to do, how to do it, and, if you have one, what the deadline is. If you can make this information stand out visually, this will help the reader.

Use attachments or links for further information. Direct your customer to online information or include an attachment if there's background or extra information you want your customer to be aware of. This way, you can keep your message short, but still include descriptions of other services, laws, and policies they may want more information about, or that you are required to give them.

Why do this?

- Customers will pay more attention if you only include what they really need to understand.
- They are more likely to comply with rules or instructions if the product is short and to-the-point.

Examples

Do	Don't
You must apply for at least three jobs each week that you collect benefits.	We have recently changed our policy regarding the requirements for people who collect unemployment benefits. Recipients are now required to make at least three job search contacts each week that they collect benefits.
If you do not pay your unemployment taxes, you will have to pay a penalty and you could go to jail. Read the law on the Washington State Legislature website.	According to RCW 50.36.020, any person who willfully fails to collect or truthfully account for and pay over such contributions, and any person who willfully attempts in any manner to evade or defeat any contributions imposed by this title or the payment thereof, is guilty of a gross misdemeanor and shall, in addition

	to other penalties provided by law, upon conviction thereof, be fined not more than five thousand dollars, or imprisoned for not more than one year, or both, together with the costs of prosecution.

Use words your customers already know

Choose words your customers normally use, not what attorneys or your coworkers use. If you must use a specialized term, define it for your readers. Remember, you write for the reader – not for yourself.

How do I do this?

Select the plain word, rather than the "formal" word. Imagine how you would briefly explain your work to an intelligent friend who knows nothing about your work. That's an example of how to communicate with someone in plain language. This isn't 'dumbing-down' the language. It is showing respect for busy people who aren't familiar with your specialized terms, saving them time and decreasing their cognitive mental load.

Ask your agency's customer representatives for help. These employees work with customers every day explaining your agency's policies and instructions. They know the problem phrases or words that customers mention, and will have valuable insight into what the customer really wants to know.

Listen carefully during usability tests. As you get customer feedback on a particular document or piece of content, listen for the words the customer uses to explain the concept or topic. These will most likely be conversational, user-friendly, common words or phrases that you can incorporate into the content.

Why do this?

- Your customers are more likely to pay attention to your message if the word choice is simple.
- People read plain, conversational language quickly and more patiently.
- Studies show people are more likely to follow simple instructions than complex ones.
- People have a right to readable language when it involves their legal rights.
- When people don't feel frustrated or confused, they're more likely to follow through on a task instead of stopping the task.

Examples

Do	Don't
Your need to submit your Employer's Quarterly Report and make a payment; both items are past due.	OUR RECORDS INDICATE YOU HAVE NOT SUBMITTED YOUR EMPLOYERS PREMIUM REPORT OF HOURS AND PAYMENT FOR THE PREMIUM STATED ABOVE. RCW 51.16.155 AUTHORIZES LABOR AND INDUSTRIES TO ESTIMATE AND COLLECT PREMIUM.

Do	Don't
Stop	Cease
Use	Employ
Give	Furnish
Ask	Inquire
Before	Prior to
Get	Procure
Ask	Request
Send/pay	Remit
Keep	Retain
End	Terminate
Use	Utilize

Before: In general, full accreditation is awarded for those parameters for which the two most recent PT results, if applicable, were rated "acceptable."

After: Ecology will award you full accreditation if your two most recent, applicable Proficiency Testing (PT) results were rated "Acceptable."

Use active voice
The active voice shows 'who does what' and it helps people understand your message.

Passive voice: The bill was sent to you Sept. 1**.**

Active voice: We sent you the bill Sept. 1.

How do I do this?
Use personal pronouns, such as "I" or "we," or name the person doing the action.

Place the subject (the "doer") at the beginning of the sentence.

Add a verb so the sentence includes an action. Then, you can pair the person oir group with the action.

Look for the "deadly 7" verbs: am, is, are, was, were, be, and been. Using one of these words signals you might be using passive voice in your sentences, and may need to rework your sentences to be more direct.

For example: "It was decided…" is a passive statement. "We decided…" is an active statement.

Why do this?
- Your readers will know who is doing what, which will help them quickly grasp your message.
- Your sentences will be clearer and more concise.
- Research shows that customers translate passive sentences into active sentences in their heads anyway, which adds to the customer's cognitive mental load.
- Using active voice assigns responsibility to someone and clears things up.

Examples

Do	Don't
The director wrote the memo yesterday.	The memo was written yesterday.
Brad threw the ball.	The ball was thrown by Brad.
We require you to show identification.	Identification is required.
You must explain the delay.	The applicant must give an explanation for his or her delay.

Use personal pronouns
The personal pronouns "you" and "we" can take the place of nouns, such as "all citizens" and "the department." When the writer is an "I" or a "we" and the reader is a "you," the reader understands quickly who the message is for, who is delivering it, and who needs to do what.

How do I do this?
Establish the agency or person sending the letter, in the opening or on the letterhead. Then use "I" or "we." Assume the reader is the intended recipient and refer to him or her as "you."

The reader will be more committed to reading the message because they can more quickly understand how they fit into the message.

Do	Don't
We, I	the agency, the department
You	the worker, applicant, employee
We accept applications Monday through Thursday.	Applications are accepted Monday through Thursday.
I will send you the documents by Wednesday.	The department sends documents to applicants every Wednesday.

Keep sentences and paragraphs short

Your document will be easier to read and retain if you keep your sentences short. Try limiting them to fewer than 20 words and your paragraphs to fewer than six sentences.

How do I do this?

Cut out unnecessary words. Revise your draft multiple times. Each revision will produce a more succinct message.

Make one point per paragraph. Ideally, each paragraph should get across one main idea, and each sentence should cover one aspect of that idea.

Layer information. Shorten documents and web pages by removing information that applies to only a few readers. Put the more specialized information in an attachment or link, or use a dropdown menu to store more information.

Why do this?

- It is easier for customers to absorb information when they read one idea at a time.
- Brief, simple content helps the reader feel less overwhelmed.
- The reader can more easily find the information they need.

Do	Don't
Your responsibilities are in the job description we gave you on your first day of work.	The parameters of your responsibility and duties are included in the job description and person specification you received on your initial day of work at the Department.
The regional managers responsible for carrying out this policy don't seem to understand it well.	This policy does not appear to be well understood by service locations management in the regions, even though this group has primary responsibility for implementing the policy
Let us know if you want to speak at our Wednesday meeting.	Department stakeholders who have relevant issues to raise in our regular Wednesday meetings should verbally communicate their interest to us.

Design clear pages

The design of your page is as important to its readability as the words you have chosen. The right design will highlight your message so your customers can scan the document quickly.

How do I do this?

Pick one or two simple fonts. A 12-point font is easy for most customers to read and is recommended by the Americans with Disabilities Act. To help readers with dyslexia, opt to use a sans serif font, such as Calibri.

Use bolded headlines to break up the text. It will grab the reader's eye, be easier to skim, and feel less overwhelming.

Emphasize important information with boldface or italics – but sparingly. Use on important words and phrases, but not entire sentences or paragraphs. Stay away from underlining because readers might think an underlined phrase or word is a link.

Choose bullets for lists when order isn't important. Stick to one bullet style, such as the small black circle, because it doesn't have other meanings (unlike the asterisk bullet or check mark bullet). The one we selected for this page works well. As a bonus, using lists in your document helps create white or negative space, which helps the reader feel less overwhelmed.

Use numbers for directions and outlines. This will show your reader the order of something or if they need to follow instructions. A numbered list may also indicate a level of importance.

Create white space. Make sure to keep at least a one-inch border free space in letters. This means keeping your margins set to "normal" and not extending margins to stretch across the page. Place white space between paragraphs to separate large blocks of texts or sections.

Align your text. Use a left-justified, ragged-right text alignment for letters. Doing so keeps the spacing between words consistent and is easier to read. Avoid using justified text.

Do	Don't
If you submit your payment: • **Electronically:** We must receive it by the 25th day of the second month after the month you are reporting. • **Other than electronically:** We must receive it by the 15th day of the second month after the month you are reporting.	We must receive your payment on or before the 15th day of the month after the month you are reporting if you do not send your payment electronically, or by the 25th day of the second month after the month you are reporting if you submit your payment electronically.
You must complete a certification form if you want to add a: • Spouse or same-sex domestic partner. • Student over age 19. • Dependent over age 19 with a disability. • Extended (legal) dependent.	You must complete a certification form if you want to add any of the following: a spouse or qualified same-sex domestic partner; a student over age 19; a dependent over age 19 with a disability; an extended (legal) dependent.
Please enclose with your application: 1. Birth certificate 2. Social Security number 3. College transcripts 4. Passport photography 5. Vaccination records	We can process your application, we will need you to forward us a copy of your birth certificate, your Social Security number, a copy of your college transcript, a photocopy of your passport and vaccination records.

Where do I read more about plain language requirements?

You can download to read [Executive Order 23-02](#) to learn about the plain language requirements that the governor has in place for agencies.

Plain language training

The Department of Enterprise Services (DES) is updating the plain language training it provides. This will give state employees more of the skills and tools they need to support this work.

What about readability formulas?

Readability tools such as the [Flesch-Kincaid test](), the [Fog Index](), and others can help. However, they generally track the length of words and sentences. They do not reflect whether you've met your customers' needs or designed a page that is easy to read, which are equally important. While they are a resource that agencies can use, we recommend using common sense in addition to the test to ask if the content makes sense.

JIM SUGGESTIONS:

One-liners:

- "I would have written a shorter letter, but I did not have the time." Blaise Pascal, 1600s physicist
- "The height of sophistication is simplicity." Clare Booth Luce, 1930s playwright
- "When you catch an adjective, kill it... They weaken when they are close together. They give strength when they are wide apart." Mark Twain
- "The finest words in the world are only vain sounds if you can't understand them." H.W. Fowler, 1800s lexicographer.
- "We should not write so that it is possible for the reader to understand us, but so that it is impossible for him to misunderstand us." Quintilian, first-century rhetorician.
- Off the cuff:
  - Verbosity blunts the point. Excess dilutes understanding.
  - It is the responsibility of the communicator to be understood.
  - Jargon buries purpose
  - A propensity towards Perfect Present Tense is poisonous.
  - Give the independent clause the liberty to stand alone.
  - Simple sentences have a subject, a verb, often an object and modifiers, and meaning.
  - Craft with purpose. Cut with abandon.

Research:

- An FCC study found that a regulation rewritten in plain language halved questions and doubled compliance. ([plainlanguage.gov]())
- Simplification of a shared information system for a financial services company improved productivity by 40% and decreased employee errors by 77.1%. ([plainlanguage.gov]())
- A specialty disclosure document authoring form found a 41% increase in retention of key information by switching to plain language ([Labradora Communications]())
- Individuals rate information to be more trustworthy—and tend to agree more often with corresponding knowledge claims—if it is presented in an easily comprehensible manner. ([cf. Scharrer et al., 2019]()).
- "Third, individuals experienced less negative and more positive emotions when reading plain language summaries instead of ordinary scientific abstracts and were also more likely to access the corresponding full texts" ([Kerwer et al., 2021]())

- *Hypothesis 2. Knowledge acquisition is higher for plain language summaries with subheadings compared to plain language summaries without subheadings (H2a1) and ordinary scientific abstracts (H2a2)*
    - *The rate of correctly answered items was higher for plain language summaries with subheadings (78.68 %) compared to plain language summaries without subheadings (75.91 %) and ordinary scientific abstracts (71.98 %).*