

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a black fountain pen with a silver-colored nib. The pen is positioned over a document with faint, illegible text. The background is a warm, yellowish-green gradient. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the hand and the metallic sheen of the pen's nib.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Plain Language Initiative



Introduction

The way that we, as public servants, communicate with the people we serve goes a long way toward fulfilling our responsibility to them. That responsibility ranges from routine procedures to issuing instructions that can save lives.

Since it is impossible to speak personally with every citizen, it is vitally important that our methods of written communication be clear, concise, and free of needless verbiage. This includes presentations on agency websites, letters, notices, applications, reports, pamphlets and any other communication meant for public consumption.

We should, of course, be clear and concise in our verbal communications, but since we reach more citizens through the written word, the goal should be to answer the basic questions from the intended audience without those questions being asked. Meeting that goal will allow both human and operational resources to focus on other areas.

Each executive agency – or any agency or business that hears the call to assess their external communication with their customers – should do a thorough review of products and procedures.

Executive Order 07-01 calls upon each agency to “adopt a plan to implement Plain Language guidelines and standards.” Each agency is different, but the review process will enable agency secretaries, directors and their designees to obtain necessary knowledge to formulate those guidelines and standards.

The Executive Order was specific by requiring clear language containing only necessary information presented in a logical sequence. It further called for short sentences written in the active voice that make it clear who is responsible for what. Equally important was the attention to layout and design of a publication. This handbook is designed to assist the DOE in meeting the requirements of the Governor’s directive.




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In an effort to provide clear, concise language in all modes of communication, the Department of Education has devised the following guidelines to assist in preparing documents in language that is more comprehensive for all users.

Any questions related to plain language may be directed to Communications and Public Affairs at (850) 245-9863.





Write in Plain Language

No one wants to waste their time interpreting difficult, confusing and wordy documents. By providing materials in “plain language,” you could save time and money. Plain language is good customer service and reduces the burden we place on the public to understand our jargon.

Plain language enables the reader to clearly understand the document, which could potentially reduce the number of telephone calls, e-mails or other correspondence we may have with our constituents. Concise and clear instructions will help facilitate timely submission of applications, forms, etc., that our audience provides to us.

How can we be better writers?

- Know your reader/audience
- Write clearly
- Write in a visually appealing style
- Write in an active voice
- Use short sentences with strong verbs

Know your reader/audience

When you communicate to the reader, focus on their needs. They will be more receptive to your message if it is tailored to them. Identify the readers by defining their needs, outlining expectations and providing resolution if necessary.

When the document is written plainly, the reader will:

- Understand what you want and take appropriate action
- Focus on key information
- Believe that you are concerned with their needs

Write Clearly

Words

- Use the active voice – *For example (active):* The teacher created the lesson plan. (*Passive*) The lesson plan was created by the teacher.
- Use the simplest form of a verb
- Use “you” and other pronouns to speak directly to readers
- Spell out abbreviations on first reference
- Use short, simple words
- Omit unnecessary words
- Write clear definitions
- Avoid legal, foreign and technical jargon

Sentences

- Write short sentences
- Use active verbs
- Avoid using the passive voice, or use the passive voice sparingly
- Put statements in a positive form

Paragraphs

- Have a topic sentence
- Write short paragraphs
- Include only one issue in each paragraph

Other aids to clarity

- Use examples
- Use bullets
- Use tables to make complex material easier to understand
- Consider using illustrations
- Use emphasis such as **bold** or *italics* to highlight important concepts





Correct Spelling

- The word “e-mail” shall always be hyphenated in all instances.
- All instances of the word “Web site” shall be two words, with the word “Web” capitalized. It is short for the proper name World Wide Web.

Commonly Misspelled Words

- **accommodate** – the word has a double "c" AND a double "m"
- **a lot** – two words
- **believe** – “i” usually comes before “e” except after “c,” or when it is pronounced like “a” as “neighbor” and “weigh” or “e” as in “their” and “heir”
- **calendar**
- **changeable**
- **conscious**
- **conscientious**
- **discipline**
- **exhilarate**
- **exceed**
- **grateful**
- **immediate**
- **independent**
- **inoculate**
- **liaison**
- **license**
- **maneuver**
- **misspell**
- **occasionally**
- **personnel**
- **recommend**
- **relevant**

Commonly Misused Words

its/it's - The apostrophe marks a contraction of "it is." Something that belongs to it is "its."

principal/principle - The spelling principle to remember here is that the school principal is a prince and a pal (despite appearances). A "principle" is a rule.

their/they're/there - They're all pronounced the same but spelled differently. Possessive is "their" and the contraction of "they are" is "they're." Everywhere else, it is "there."

your/you're - Possessive is "your." "You're" is the contraction for you are. For instance, "You're welcome" and "your book."

Write In A Visually Appealing Style

We want documents to help the reader get information, comply with requirements and complete forms easily. Visually appealing documents are easier to understand than ones that are done carelessly or with mistakes.

Often times, traditional government documents can be heavy and confusing. Replace blocks of text with headings, tables and more white space. You will help the reader by making the main points readily apparent and grouping related items together. Consider using bullets to quickly communicate key information for the reader. By using a clear, uncluttered presentation, the reader will be more likely to understand what you are saying.

Although various government requirements and formats may limit you, plain language provides you the freedom to make your documents more visually appealing to the reader. A visually appealing layout will help direct the reader's attention to the specific information they need to know.



Write In An Active Voice

The active voice is usually more direct than the passive voice. If the passive voice is necessary, it should not be completely discarded. Not only does the active voice lend itself to more accurate information, it tends to condense sentences and helps to avoid confusion for the reader.

Examples of active and passive voice

Active: I shall always remember to write in active voice.

Passive: The active voice shall be used by me.

Use Short Sentences With Strong Verbs

The main objective is to aid the reader in understanding the message you are trying to convey. If you are asking the reader to take action, state the appropriate steps that are necessary to fulfill your request. Be sure to keep your sentences short and concise. Use strong verbs where appropriate.

Examples:

- Please **submit** your form by Wednesday, January 1.
- We regret to inform you that your application was declined.
- To ensure that your certification process is complete, please submit the following.

Tips for Writing Better E-mails

Recent reports show that nearly 2.8 billion e-mail messages are sent on a daily basis. Of those messages, at least 30 percent of all corporate/business e-mail traffic will be sent to customers and outside parties.

E-mails are one of the single most used methods of current communication. It is a valuable and fairly inexpensive tool for all users. Following are a few guidelines to ensure your e-mail message is properly prepared for your intended audience:

Subject Line

- Include specific, concise information in the subject line so the reader knows what the e-mail is about and can prioritize.
- Identify the purpose of the e-mail.
- When forwarding e-mails, be sure your subject line is still relevant. Edit or update the subject line as needed. Remove forward (FW) and add new subject line.

Content

- All e-mails are subject to a public records request. You can be held legally responsible for content.
- Write concise messages. Make action request clear (who, what, when, where and why).
- Include your contact information on your e-mail messages, such as organization name, address, telephone number, office/suite number, etc.
- Avoid cyber-slang or jargon.
- On first reference, spell out acronyms. If additional information is needed to explain the acronym, be sure to include.





Attachments:

- When replying or forwarding e-mail, delete unnecessary attachments.
- Be aware of attachment size, including graphics and photograph size.
- Briefly describe e-mail attachments.

General Tips:

- Avoid using fancy signatures with illegible fonts, background images, or other images that may cause a delay for the user to receive your message. These types of images may also prevent your message from being delivered altogether because of SPAM filters.
- Avoid using the “reply to all” option when one or two parties can resolve the issue.
- Confirm receipt of e-mail on critical items.
- If the subject matter is highly tense in nature, walk away and formulate your thoughts later. Once your message is sent, it is not possible to retrieve it.
- Count to 10 before you send. Double-check your e-mail message.
- Always use a spell-checker or grammar tool to ensure your message is not filled with errors. If the message is detailed, you may wish for another set of eyes to review it before sending.

Tips for Better Presentations

Department staff is often asked to provide additional information to various audiences. This may include providing presentations on a subject matter to legislators, informing parents, teachers or students on a new program, discussing technical materials to district personnel or administrators, or even updating other staff on new procedures.

The most important part of a presentation is to ensure that your audience walks away with the information they need. If your presentation covers a lot of material, try to focus on three main points. Whatever the case may be, there are common tips to help facilitate your message.

1. Know Your Audience

- Who am I communicating with?
- Think from your audience's point of view.
- Use the right words for the specific audience. Avoid technical words.
- Speak at an appropriate speed, volume, tone and pitch to target audience or key individual listener.

2. Know Your Message

- What is my main aim/purpose?
- Have I checked the facts?
- What action do I want?
- Rehearse your presentation to ensure you are knowledgeable about your topic.
- Tell the audience what they need to know and why.
- Avoid reading your presentation slides to the audience.
- Provide handouts only if they complement your presentation. Be sure they are clear, concise and legible. Poor photocopies should be avoided.

3. Ensure Feedback

- Find a way to get your audience to explain what they think you said.
- Be willing to hear different opinions and new ideas.
- Listen carefully to all responses.
- Will I need to follow-up?





4. Verbal Communication

- Speak clearly and at a volume that can be heard. When presenting to a large group, use a microphone.
- Match speaking length to allotted time. Shorter is better.
- Present single ideas in a clear, concise, organized and persuasive manner.
- Use stories/examples to add to listeners understanding and retention.

5. Non-Verbal Communication

- Be mindful of your non-verbal action. Your face and body convey much more than your words.
- Communicate with the appropriate facial expressions and gestures.
- Express confidence without being intimidating or superior.

6. Meetings

- Ensure dates, times and locations are clear. Be sure that participants are notified.
- Distribute an agenda well in advance.
- Open all meetings by clearly explaining the purpose of the meeting.
- Ask for ideas, feedback and questions.

7. Follow up

- If necessary, have meeting minutes or presentation materials available for distribution within a week of your presentation.
- Provide your contact information via business card or other method to allow participants to make contact with you following the meeting.

Plain Language (PL) Checklist

PLEASE PRINT OR TYPE

Name of document: _____

CHECK ONE:

- | | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Press Release | <input type="checkbox"/> Notice | <input type="checkbox"/> Brochure |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Letter | <input type="checkbox"/> Flier | <input type="checkbox"/> Web site |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Newsletter | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ | |
-

1. Does the document speak clearly to the intended audience?

- YES NO

If not, what is your PL improvement plan? _____

2. Is the information presented in a logical, fluid sequence?

- YES NO

If not, what is your PL improvement plan? _____

3. Is the material written in a positive, active voice with strong verbs?

- YES NO

If not, what is your PL improvement plan? _____

4. Can longer sentences be broken down into shorter sentences?

- YES NO

If not, what is your PL improvement plan? _____

5. Is the text arranged neatly with simple fonts, minimal bold/italics and good use of white space?

YES NO

If not, what is your PL improvement plan? _____

6. Can the text be broken down into sub-headings, simple tables or bulleted lists?

YES NO

If not, what is your PL improvement plan? _____

7. Are short, common words used instead of legalese and jargon?

YES NO

If not, what is your PL improvement plan? _____

8. Does the document clearly state the point of contact (i.e. person, office, phone numbers, and [e-mail] addresses) for questions, comments and/or concerns?

YES NO

If not, what is your PL improvement plan? _____

Reviewer: _____

Office: _____

Phone number: _____

Proofreaders' Marks

Symbol	Meaning	Example
☞ or ☞ or ☞	delete	take it out
⊂	close up	print as <u>one</u> word
⊃	delete and close up	close up
^ or > or h	caret	insert here <i>(something)</i>
#	insert a space	put one here
stet	let stand	let marked text stand as set
tr	transpose	change <u>order</u> the
/	used to separate two or more marks and often as a concluding stroke at the end of an insertion	
[set farther to the left	too far to the right
]	set farther to the right	too far to the left
~	set as ligature (such as æ)	encyclopaedia
=	align horizontally	alignment
	align vertically	align with surrounding text
x	broken character	imperfect
¶	begin a new paragraph	
Ⓟ	spell out	set <u>5 lbs.</u> as five pounds
cap	set in CAPITALS	set <u>nato</u> as NATO
lc	set in lowercase	set South as south
ital	set in italic	set <u>oeuvre</u> as oeuvre

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