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@cybertext

# PLAIN LANGUAGE WRITING: Tips for delivering complex messages to a general audience

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# Quick bio

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## ❖ Early 1990s to 2008:

- technical writer in various industries (resources, IT, education, etc.)

## ❖ Since late 2008:

- editor for a large team (mostly environmental scientists writing internal documents and documents for State and Commonwealth regulatory authorities)
- edited ~2000 long, complex Word documents

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## What is plain language and why you should use it

# What is plain language?

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A clear concise message, written for the reader and in the right tone of voice

# What it's not

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## ❖ Plain language is not...

- patronising or overly simplified—it's not 'cat sat on the mat' writing
- about changing the meaning of your message
- an amateur method of communication
- as easy to achieve as you think!

# Plain language isn't new

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We should not speak [write] so that it is possible for the audience to understand us, but so that it is **impossible for them to misunderstand us.**

*Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (c. 35—c. 100), Book VIII, Chapter ii, 24*

# Why use plain language?

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## Reader benefits

- ❖ Helps your readers:
  - find what they need
  - understand what they find
  - use what they find to meet their needs
- ❖ Saves time and money:
  - faster to read
- ❖ Increases customer understanding and satisfaction

## Organisational benefits

- ❖ Saves time and money:
  - faster to write
  - less to print/translate
- ❖ Reduces complaints, support calls
- ❖ Creates a positive image (friendlier, more easily understood messages)
- ❖ Simplifies forms, procedures, paperwork
- ❖ Increases staff understanding and satisfaction

# Before the plain language treatment

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After you have done some work on your document, you should save it. Do this by clicking on “File” in the top right hand corner and then moving down to on “Save”. A window will open prompting you for a name for the file and a location in which to store it. Name the file, toward the bottom of that box, next to “File Name”. Name the file “Test1” or whatever you want to call it.



**At the top of that box, the words “Save In” are prompting you to determine where you want to put this file. If the folder name next to “Save In” does not say “My Documents”, click on the “Desktop” icon in the menu on the left of that box. The folder name “My Documents” will then appear in the window. Double click on “My Documents” to open this folder and then click “Save” in the bottom right hand corner of that window, or press “Enter”**

Long paragraphs

Too many words

Unnecessary quote marks

Instructions written as a warning



# After the plain language treatment

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To save your work:

1. Click **File > Save**.
2. Type a name for the file.
3. *Optional*: Select another network and/or folder to save to a different location.
4. Click **Save**.

Short sentences

As many words as needed and no more

Bold and italics used for emphasis

Instructions written as numbered steps

Optional step is clearly marked

# Plain language guidelines

## Summary:

- ❑ Keep it short
- ❑ Use active verbs as much as possible (say 'we will do it' rather than 'it will be done by us'); watch for passive zombies
- ❑ Talk to your reader; use 'you' and 'we'
- ❑ Use everyday words that are appropriate for your readers
- ❑ Delete vague, useless, redundant, unnecessary words
- ❑ Don't be afraid to give instructions
- ❑ Use lists where appropriate

# Keep it short!

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## Use short sentences

- Aim: average length of 15 to 20 words
- Vary your sentence length—mix short ‘punchy’ sentences with longer ones
- Break up most long sentences

## Use short paragraphs

- Aim (general public): fewer than 5 lines
- Aim (complex docs): fewer than 10 lines

# Exercise

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Short sentence exercise:  
5 minutes

# Avoid passive zombies

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- ❖ Active vs passive?
- ❖ Let's make it simple:
  - If you can add 'by zombies' after the verb, your sentence uses passive voice.
  - Example: *A report will be submitted.* becomes *A report will be submitted **by zombies**.*
- ❖ Active voice makes it clear who is doing the action—i.e. you can't add 'by zombies' to the verb
  - Example: *We will submit a report.*

# Examples of passive and active (1)

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Passive	Active
This matter will be considered.	We will consider this matter.
The mine had to be closed.	The safety inspector closed the mine.
Care should be taken when opening the door.	Take care when opening the door.
The outcome will be decided next week.	We will decide the outcome next week.
Repairs under warranty will only be accepted if proof of purchase is enclosed.	We will only accept your repair under warranty if you enclose proof of purchase.

# Examples of passive and active (2)

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Passive	Active
The problem could not have been foreseen.	We could not have foreseen the problem.
35 sites were visited in three weeks. Procedures were being properly followed at the sites visited.	We visited 35 sites in three weeks. At the sites we visited, we found that staff were following procedures properly.
Overheads were not kept under control despite an awareness of the budgetary situation.	Managers did not keep overheads under control, despite knowing about the budgetary situation.

# Sometimes it's OK to use passive

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- ❖ To be less hostile:
  - *This bill has not been paid* (passive) is softer than *You have not paid this bill* (active)
- ❖ To avoid taking the blame:
  - *A mistake was made* (passive) rather than *We made a mistake* (active)
- ❖ When you don't know who/what is doing the action:
  - *The Australian Olympic team has been picked*
- ❖ If it simply sounds better.



# Exercise

17

Passive voice exercise:  
5 minutes

# Talk to your reader

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- ❖ Write for your reader, not you:
  - Why do they need to read the document?
  - What do they know already? (don't assume!)
  - What do you need to tell them?
  - Is the action/next step clear?
  - Who else might read the document? ('secondary audience')
- ❖ Imagine you're talking to your reader:
  - Write sincerely, personally, in a suitable style for the primary audience, and with the right tone of voice

# Be personal

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- ❖ *You* and *we* have a greater impact on the reader:
  - *you* directly addresses the reader → more likely to understand what they have to do
- ❖ Define who *you* and *we* are at the beginning of the document:
  - any organisation can become *we*
  - the customer/client/patient/reader becomes *you*
- ❖ If *you* feels wrong at first, would you use words like *the applicant* or *the supplier* if you were speaking to someone?

# Examples of impersonal and personal

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<b>Impersonal</b>	<b>Personal</b>
A helpline is operated by the company for the convenience of customers.	We have a helpline Call our helpline
Applicants must send us...	You must send us... Send us...
Advice is available from...	You can get advice from...
It was found that...	We found that...
This adult nasal spray is for local application in the nose to give symptomatic relief of nasal congestion (including in colds), perennial and allergic rhinitis (including hay fever) and sinusitis.	Only use this spray on adults. It helps relieve a stuffed-up nose, inflamed sinuses, and hay fever. Spray directly into the nose.

# Bonus!

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- ❖ If you write with your reader in mind, you'll find it easier to:
  - put information in a logical order
  - answer likely questions and provide the information that your reader wants to know
  - clearly specify requirements (what has to be done) and assign responsibilities (who does it)
- ❖ And your documents will be easier to translate

# Use everyday words (1)

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- ❖ Say exactly what you mean, using the simplest and most appropriate words for your readers
- ❖ Write to communicate, not impress:
  - use everyday words
  - prefer short words—big words don't impress

*use NOT utilise*  
*describes NOT provides a description of*  
*if NOT in the event that*  
*me/you NOT myself/yourself*  
*death NOT fatality or mortality*  
*most NOT the majority*

# Use everyday words (2)

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- ❖ Don't use jargon unless you *know* your readers use the same jargon:
  - In messages for the public: Avoid legalese, foreign phrases, abbreviations, Latin, and specialist words where possible.
  - Always explain any technical terms that your readers may not understand.
- ❖ Get rid of any unnecessary words; watch out for:
  - Repetition
  - Vague words ('it', 'this', etc.)
  - Words with multiple meanings ('as' vs 'because').

# Avoid nominalisations

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- ❖ Nominalisation: Turning a verb into a noun
- ❖ Examples:
  - *complete* (verb) → *completion* (noun)
  - *provide* (verb) → *provision* (noun)
- ❖ Often:
  - used instead of the verb
  - followed by *of* (e.g. *the provision of, a description of*)
- ❖ Too many make your writing dull and hard to read



# Examples of nominalisations

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<b>Before (with nominalisation)</b>	<b>After (without)</b>
We had a discussion about...	We discussed...
The report made reference to....	The report referred to....
The decision to ... was taken by the Board.	The Board decided to ...
The implementation of ... has been done by the team.	The team implemented ...
The provision of PPE to personnel is the employer's responsibility.	The employer provides PPE to all staff.

# Exercise

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Nominalisation exercise:  
5 minutes

# Delete useless words

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- ❖ Unnecessary words weaken your writing

## Original

- *At the present time, the Agency will in accordance with new regulations on a monthly basis conduct random security checks in the event that there is a yellow threat level.*

## Revised

- *Under the new regulations, if the threat level is yellow, the Agency will conduct monthly random security checks.*

# Example

28

## Before (105 words)

- Another climate change related issue pertaining to individual MPAs where marine planning is pertinent, partly as it concerns areas outside of MPAs, is a required change in boundary or even in site location in response to climate change. Whilst it may seem premature to raise the potential for such changes when the process of identifying let alone designating all sites and providing conservation advice is still underway, it is appropriate when looking ahead over a 20 year (or more) time horizon. Indeed it is understandable why there is such a 'gap' in the current process given the amount of requirements and considerations to work through.

## After (19 words)

- In relation to MPAs and marine planning, climate change effects may result in future boundary or site location changes

# Delete unnecessary qualifiers

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- ❖ Most qualifiers:
  - add no additional meaning to a sentence
  - have no place in business writing
- ❖ Examples:
  - **totally** unrealistic
  - **completely** convinced
  - **definitely** worth experiencing
  - **very** unique

# Delete redundant words

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- ❖ Don't state something in as many ways as possible
- ❖ Two similar words? Use the more powerful one
- ❖ You can often delete *of* and *the following*

## Original

- As a graduate, we expect you to **help aid** the **new incoming** undergraduates find their way around **the campus grounds and buildings**.

## Revised

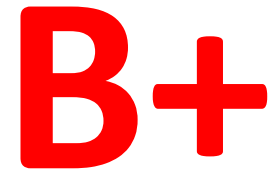
- As a graduate, we expect you to **help incoming** undergraduates find their way around **campus**.

# Exercise

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Everyday and useless  
words exercise:  
8 minutes

# Be positive



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- ❖ Always try to emphasise the positive
- ❖ Change a negative statement into a positive if you can do so without changing meaning

## Negative

- *If you don't send your payment, we won't be able to renew your membership.*

## Positive

- *Please send your payment so that we can renew your membership.*



# Don't use multiple negatives

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- ❖ Save your readers from unnecessary mental work!

## Original

- *No changes will be made to the Department's regulations unless the Minister reviews them and concludes that they are not lacking any important information.*

## Revised

- *The Department's regulations will be changed only if, after reviewing them, the Minister concludes they are lacking important information.*

# Exercise

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Be positive exercise:  
2 minutes

# Use lists

35

- ❖ Split complex information into lists where you can
- ❖ Inline or vertical?
  - inline for a few short items (about 4 maximum)
  - vertical for several items or long/complex items
- ❖ Bullets or numbers?
  - bullets if the order doesn't matter
  - numbers if the steps must be done in order

# List example

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## Before (inline)

*This initial workshop identified the work scopes and phasing generated several different sourcing strategies for those work scopes and proposed selection criteria to compare the sourcing strategies to best benefit the [project].*

## After (vertical)

- This initial workshop:*
- *identified the work scopes and phasing*
  - *generated several different sourcing strategies for those work scopes*
  - *proposed selection criteria to compare the sourcing strategies to best benefit the [project].*

# Use parallel phrasing

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- ❖ Each point should follow logically and grammatically—in *parallel*—from the introduction
- ❖ Tips:
  - bullet list the items
  - make sure each bullet item reads well with the intro
  - one ‘ing’, all ‘ing’
- ❖ Example of non-parallel phrasing:
- ❖ *The [organisation] will not be able to complete the new facility until they*
  - *show funding is increasing*
  - *make the board understand the cost benefits of the facility*
  - *about contracts that are still being discussed*
  - *that the employees are backing the decision.*

# Parallel example: Before and after

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## Before

In an emergency, the Area Warden's main functions include:

- ❖ Assisting and directing persons ...
- ❖ Wardens to either evacuate or shelter-in-place patrons
- ❖ Positively control the movement of persons ...
- ❖ Designated areas are checked ...
- ❖ Persons are not to gather ...
- ❖ Preventing unauthorised persons from ...

## After

In an emergency, the Area Warden's main functions include:

- ❖ **assisting** and **directing** personnel ... to safe locations (evacuate or shelter-in-place)
- ❖ **controlling** personnel movement ...
- ❖ **checking** their designated areas ...
- ❖ **ensuring** personnel do not gather...
- ❖ **preventing** unauthorised people from...

# Exercise

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Lists and parallel phrasing  
exercise:  
3 minutes

# The sky won't fall in if you...

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Start a sentence with *and, but, because, however, or so*

Split an infinitive—yes, you can *boldly go*

End a sentence with a preposition

Repeat a word in a sentence if you can't find a better word



# Be consistent

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- ❖ Use the same term for the same thing—every time
  - using different words for the same thing makes your message harder to understand
  - consistency reduces confusion
- ❖ Examples:
  - Gas Treatment Plant, GTP, LNG plant, LNG facility, LNG Plant, the Plant, LNG Treatment Plant, gas plant...
- ❖ You may find it boring, but your readers won't

# Don't be afraid to instruct

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- ❖ Commands are the most direct way to instruct
- ❖ Write in terms of *do this* (*you* is implied), instead of *you should do this*
  - If you think the command sounds too harsh, add *please*
  - BUT: If the action **must** be done, don't use *please* as it gives the reader the option to refuse
- ❖ Examples:



Click Save.



You can then click the Save button to save your work.

Please send xxx to me.

I would be grateful if you would send xxx to myself.

# Instructional writing example

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- ❖ **Original (narrative):** The packet should be removed from the box. The contents should then be placed in the oven.
- ❖ **Revised (commands; *you* is implied; make sure ALL steps are covered):**
  1. Heat the oven to 200 °C.
  2. Remove the packet from the box.
  3. Open the packet and tip its contents into a 30 cm non-stick pan.
  4. Put the pan on a middle shelf in the oven.
  5. Cook for 20 minutes until brown.

# Test your document

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- ❖ Test your plain language document on typical readers to help you identify if your document:
  - is user-friendly and easily understood
  - needs further editing
  - needs changes in organisation and design
  
- ❖ ALWAYS ALWAYS ALWAYS test documents that many people will use/read:
  - e.g. forms, standard letters, regulations, web content
  
- ❖ Finally, always check that your writing is clear, helpful, human, and polite

# Your task...

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- ❖ Apply at least one of these plain language principles to one document tomorrow/next week
- ❖ This set of slides (but not the exercises) will be available on SlideShare (<http://www.slideshare.net/rbracey/presentations>) and my website (<http://cybertext.com.au/tips.htm>) next week

# Helpful links/resources

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- ❖ <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/>
- ❖ <http://www.plainlanguage.gov>
- ❖ <http://www.plainenglish.org.nz/>
- ❖ <https://www.plainenglishfoundation.com/free-writing-tools>
  
- ❖ Kimble, Joseph 'Wrong—Again—About Plain Language': <http://www.michbar.org/file/barjournal/article/documents/pdf4article2233.pdf>
- ❖ Write tighter to save millions: <http://writing.rocks/write-tighter-get-to-the-point-save-millions/>

# Thank you...

Any questions?

Contact me:

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