

# Plain Language Webinar Handout

## Webinar Objectives

After completing this webinar, you'll be able to do the following.

- Explain what writing in plain language means (and doesn't mean).
- Write concisely and cut the clutter.
- Choose when to use active or passive voice.
- Use the "GPO Style Manual" when it comes to matters of style.

## Plain Writing Act of 2010

President Obama signed the Act requiring agencies to write in **plain language**, especially when writing to the public.

**Question: What do you think writing in "plain language" means?**

**Answer:** Plain language is communication your audience can understand the first time they read or hear it. No one technique defines plain language. Rather, plain language is defined by results—is it easy to read, understand, and use.

## Plain Language Techniques

You can achieve plain language through many different writing techniques. Among the most common are listed below.

- Use pronouns (you and we) and speak directly to the reader.  
When you use "you" to address readers, they are more likely to understand their responsibility. Using "we" to refer to FWS makes our agency more approachable.
- Put your information in logical order.
- Use an easy-to-read format, including headings, lists, and tables.
- Don't overuse acronyms and cut jargon.
- Write concisely.
- Use active voice (when appropriate).

## Focus on the Audience

When you sit down to write, here's a tip that helps you focus on your audience (reader) and not yourself.

Don't ask, "What do I want to say?"

Ask, "What does my audience need to know?"

**Quiz Question:** To write in plain language, I have to write everything at an 8<sup>th</sup> grade level. True or False?

**Answer:** False. One of the most popular plain language myths is that you have to "dumb down" your content so that everyone everywhere can read it. That's not true. The first rule of plain language is to *write for your audience*. Use language your audience knows and feels comfortable with. Take your audience's current level of knowledge into account. However, when writing for the public remember they are not biologists. Distilling your information using words and concepts your audience can understand and relate to is very important.

## Write More Concisely and Cut the Clutter

### Use terminology your audience can understand.

Readers complain about jargon more than any other writing fault, because writers often fail to realize that terms they know well may be difficult or meaningless to their audience. Try to substitute everyday language for jargon as often as possible. An example of substituting jargon for everyday language was used in an Open Spaces blog post called "We Make Fishing Better." The writer substituted the term "aquatic animal drugs" with the more accessible term "fish medicine."

### Use an analogy your audience can relate to.

Using analogies is a great way to help your audience understand scientific or biological concepts. The analogy below is from the same blog post mentioned above and compares how sickness spreads among schoolchildren to fish in a fish hatchery.

"Lots of people get sick during cold and flu season, especially kids in school or daycare. When one child gets sick, unless they are sent home immediately, it's quite likely that they'll pass their sniffles on to the rest of the class. The same can happen in hatcheries, particularly among young fish that haven't yet fully developed their immune system. If one fish gets sick, the others are likely to come down with the same infection. We tell our kids to wash their hands, and we might give them a few rounds of cough syrup and decongestants when they're under the weather. For fish, it's equally important to prevent the spread of disease and help fish recover quickly."

### **Choose active, precise verbs.**

In the example below, notice that the precise verbs are already in the sentence, but they are hiding (or camouflaged) as nouns. These types of nouns are sometimes called hidden verbs. To uncover the hidden verb, you need to turn that noun into its verb form.

**They made a visit to Capitol Hill and had a meeting with the Natural Resources committee.**

The hidden verbs in this sentence are “visit” and “meeting.” Turn those hidden verbs (nouns) into verbs to make this sentence more concise and less wordy.

**They visited Capitol Hill and met with the Natural Resources committee.**

A lot of hidden verbs (nouns that can be converted to verbs) end in **-tion**, **-ant**, **-ance**, **-ment**, and **-ive** or link with verbs such as *achieve*, *effect*, *give*, *have*, *make*, *reach*, and *take*.

#### **Example:**

Please make an application for a special use permit.

Please apply for a special use permit.

Avoid using *is*, *are*, *was*, and *were* as the main verb of the sentence. Always try to find a verb that tells the reader what the subject does.

#### **Example:**

This approach is an improvement on Smith’s design.

This approach improves Smith’s design.

#### **Quiz Questions:**

Rewrite the sentences to make them more concise.

You must perform an assessment of the policy and give the regional director a briefing on your findings.

To survive, the species is reliant on specific conservation interventions.

The findings were indicative of several reasons for the declining eastern gray squirrel.

#### **Answers:**

You must assess the policy and brief the regional director on your findings.

To survive, the species relies on specific conservation interventions.

The findings indicated several reasons for the declining eastern gray squirrel.

### **Eliminate unnecessary “it is” and “there are” constructions.**

If you write, “The tree bark has toothmarks in it,” the “it” stands for the tree bark. However, if you write, “It is the project manager who creates the schedule,” the “it” stands for nothing. You should have written, “The project manager creates the schedule.”

The same thing happens with “there.” If you write, “There is disagreement among managers about how to implement the policy,” the word “there” is unnecessary. You should have written, “Managers disagree about how to implement the policy.”

Ask, “who is doing what” and rewrite the sentence to improve precision and emphasis.

**Quiz Questions:**

Rewrite the sentences below to eliminate the unnecessary words.

There are two grammar rules you should never forget.

There is no historical data for this species.

**Answers:**

You should never forget these two grammar rules.

This species does not have historical data.  
 Historical data does not exist for this species.

**Cut wordy phrases and use simpler words.**

Whenever possible, cut these wordy phrases or use these simpler words in your writing.

Instead of	Try
a number of	some
accompany	go with
accomplish	carry out, do
accorded	given
accordingly	so
accrue	add, gain
accurate	correct, exact, right
additional	added, more, other
adjacent to	next to
advantageous	helpful
adversely impact	hurt, set back
advise	recommend, tell
afford an opportunity	allow, let
allocate	divide
anticipate	expect
apparent	clear, plain
appreciable	many
appropriate	(omit), proper, right
approximate	about
arrive onboard	arrive

Instead of	Try
as a means of	to
ascertain	find out, learn
assist, assistance	aid, help
at the present time	now
attain	meet
attempt	try
benefit	help
by means of	by, with
capability	ability
close proximity	near
combined	joint
commence	begin, start
comply with	follow
component	part
comprise	form, include, make up
concerning	about, on
concerning the matter of	about
consequently	so
considering the fact that	because, since, why
consolidate	combine, join, merge
constitutes	is, forms, makes up
contains	has
convene	meet
currently	(omit), now
deem	believe, consider, think
delete	cut, drop
demonstrate	prove, show
depart	leave
designate	appoint, choose, name
desire	want, wish
despite the fact that	although, even, though
determine	decide, figure, find
disclose	show
disseminate	give, issue, pass, send
due to the fact that	because, due to, since, why
during the period	during
effect modifications	make changes
employ	use
encounter	meet
endeavor	try
enumerate	count
equitable	fair
establish	set up, prove, show
evidenced	show
evident	clear
exhibit	show

<b>Instead of</b>	<b>Try</b>
expedite	speed up
expend	spend
expertise	ability
facilitate	ease, help
failed to	didn't
feasible	can be done, workable
finalize	complete, finish
for a period of	for
for the duration of	during, for, or throughout
for the purpose of	for, to
forward	send
frequently	often
function	act, role, work
furnish	give, send
has a requirement for	needs
has the ability to	can
has the capacity for	can
has the opportunity to	can
have an adverse effect on	hurt, set back
herein	here
heretofore	until now
herewith	below, here
however	but
identical	same
identify	find, name, show
immediately	at once
impacted	affected, changed
implement	carry out, start
in a situation in which	when
in a timely manner	on time, promptly
in accordance with	by, following, per, under
in addition	also, besides, too
in an effort to	to
in lieu of	instead
in light of the fact that	because, since, why
in order for	for
in order that	so
in order to	to
in reference to	about
in regard to	about, concerning, on
in relation to	about with, to
in the amount of	for
in the event of	if
in the event that	if
in the near future	shortly, soon
in the process of	(omit)

<b>Instead of</b>	<b>Try</b>
in view of	because, since
inception	start
incumbent upon	must
indicate	show, write down
indication	sign
initial	first
interface	meet, work with
is able to	can
is applicable to	applies to
is authorized to	can, may
is in a position to	can
is responsible for	(omit), handles
it appears	seems
it is crucial that	must, should
it is essential	must, need to
it is important that	must, should
it is necessary that	must, should
it is possible that	may, might, can, could
it is requested	please, we request, I request
liaison	discussion
magnitude	size
maintain	keep, support
maximum	greatest, largest, most
methodology	method
minimize	decrease
minimum	least, smallest
modify	change
monitor	check, watch
necessitate	cause, need
no later than May 10	by May 10
not later than 8 a.m.	by 8 a.m.
notify	let know, tell
notwithstanding	in spite of, still
numerous	many
objective	aim, goal
observe	see
on the grounds that	because, since, why
operate	run, use, work
optimum	best, greatest, most
option	choice, way
parameters	limits
participate	take part
perform	do
permit	let
pertaining to	about, of, on
portion	part

Instead of	Try
possess	have, own
preclude	prevent
previous	earlier
previously	before
prior to	before
prior to	before
prioritize	rank
proceed	do, go ahead, try
proficiency	skill
provide	give, offer, say
provided that	if
provides guidance for	guides
purchase	buy
regarding	about, of, on
regardless of the fact that	although, even, though
relocate	move
remain	stay
remainder	rest
render	give, make
request	ask
require	must, need
requirement	need
reside	live
retain	keep
selection	choice
similar to	like
solicit	ask for, request
submit	give, send
subsequent	later, next
subsequently	after, later, then
substantial	large, much
successfully complete	complete, pass
sufficient	enough
terminate	end, stop
the possibility exists for	may, might, can, could
the reason for	because, since, why
there is a chance that	may, might, can, could
this is why	because, since, why
time period	either time or period
transmit	send
under circumstances in which	if
under circumstances in which	when
until such time as	until
utilize, utilization	use
validate	confirm
viable	practical, workable

Instead of	Try
warranted	call for, permit
with reference to	about
with regard to	about
witnessed	saw

## Choose When to Use Active or Passive Voice

The terms “active” and “passive” voice apply to verbs. When a sentence is in the active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action. Using active voice makes it clear who is doing what.

*Congress approved the budget. (active)*

A sentence is in the passive voice when the subject receives the action.

*The budget was approved. (passive)*

In this example, the performer of the action is in the sentence (object of the preposition); however, it is not the subject of the sentence. Rewriting the sentence in active voice as shown below and making the performer of the action the subject makes the sentence stronger and less wordy.

*The budget was approved by Congress. (passive)*

**Plain language guidelines suggest that you should write in the active voice whenever possible to eliminate ambiguity about responsibility.**

### Quiz:

Which sentence is written in active voice?

- A. Form 300 signed by your manager needs to be sent to Human Resources.
- B. You must send Form 300 signed by your manager to Human Resources.

### Answer:

Sentence B. The sentence is written in active voice and places “you” the “doer” as the subject.

**When is it okay to use passive voice?**

**The performer of the action is unknown, irrelevant, or obvious.**

*My laptop was stolen from my office.*

*Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" was published in 1962.*

*The monarch has been one of the most studied butterflies in the last decade.*

**The performer of the action is less important than the action.**

*The honeybees were kept in climate-controlled apiaries.*

*The solution was heated to 75°C and held at this target temperature for 10 minutes before allowing to cool.*

**The sentences could be converted to active voice by writing the following.**

*We kept the honeybees in climate-controlled apiaries.*

*The lab assistant heated the solution to 75°C and held at this target temperature for 10 minutes before allowing to cool.*

Nothing is inherently wrong about the passive voice. As the writer, you need to emphasize what is important to the reader.

**Quiz Question:**

Which sentence would you select if you wanted to emphasize the elephants?

- A. Thousands of elephants are killed each year by poachers for their tusks, their carcasses discarded like hair clippings on a barbershop's floor.
- B. Poachers kill thousands of elephants each year for their tusks, their carcasses discarded like hair clippings on a barbershop's floor.

**Answer:** Sentence A. *Thousands of elephants* is the subject in sentence A. In sentence B, *poachers* are the subject. If you want to emphasize something in a sentence, make it the subject.

## Use the “GPO Style Manual”

The “ [GPO Style Manual](#)” is a handbook produced by the United States Government Publishing Office. It has been adopted by government writers as the authority on matters of style, that is, questions of language that are not black and white but grey.

### Who Should Use the “GPO Style Manual”?

All federal government writers should use the “GPO Style Manual.” An exception is Public Affairs employees who write for the media. They are guided by the “Associated Press Stylebook.”

### A Sample of What’s in the “GPO Style Manual”

The “GPO Style Manual “is a reference book and is full of useful information.

- Chapters 3 and 4 explain how to capitalize proper nouns and adjectives.
- Chapter 6 describes the rules for joining nouns and adjectives either as compound words or with hyphens.
- Chapter 8 details the rules for punctuation marks, including the apostrophe, the colon, the comma, the dash, and the quotation mark.
- Chapter 12 provides the conditions under which a numeral should be spelled out or designated with a figure.

### **Quiz Question:**

Which sentence is punctuated correctly according to the “GPO Style Manual”?

- A. He opened the email, read it and noted its contents.
- B. He opened the email, read it, and noted its contents.

**Answer: B.** He opened the email, read it, and noted its contents.

Section 8.46. The comma is used after each member within a series of three or more words or phrases, letters, or figures used with *and*, *or*, or *nor*.

**Quiz Question:**

According to the “GPO Style Manual,” which of the numbers that appear within a sentence are written correctly? Select all that are correct.

- A. eighty votes
- B. about 40 employees
- C. Approximately six birds
- D. 10 times as large
- E. twelve jurors

**Answer:**

- B. about 40 employees
- C. Approximately six birds
- D. 10 times as large

Section 12.4. A figure is used for a single number of 10 or more with the exception of the first word of the sentence. (See also rules 12.9 and 12.23)

**Quiz Question:**

Which sentence is written correctly according to the “GPO Style Manual.”

- A. Each of the 15 major commodities (9 metal and 6 nonmetal) was in supply.
- B. Each of the 15 major commodities (nine metal and six nonmetal) was in supply.

**Answer: A.** Each of the 15 major commodities (9 metal and 6 nonmetal) was in supply.

Section 12.5. When 2 or more numbers appear in a sentence and 1 of them is 10 or larger, figures are used for each number.

Sections 12.1 – 12.29 (pp. 273 – 284) contain rules for the use of numerals.

**Resources**

- [www.plainlanguage.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov)
- *Federal Plain Language Guidelines*, Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN), March 2011. To download document, go to:  
<http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/guidelines/bigdoc/fullbigdoc.pdf>
- *GPO Style Manual*, U.S. Government Publishing Office, Washington, DC, 2016.

## Additional NCTC Classes

<b>Class Name</b>	<b>Class Code</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Note</b>
Writing With Clarity	CLM8201	January 11 – March 1, 2018	Online, instructor-led Meets once per week
Business Communications Bootcamp	CLM8134	March 26 – 29, 2018	Onsite at NCTC Teaches writing and speaking skills
Critical Writing/Critical Thinking	CLM3167	July 16 – 20, 2018	Onsite at NCTC Teaches how to write effective arguments
Scientific Writing for Publication Course and Clinic	CSP3182	Not on schedule for FY18; held every other year	Onsite at NCTC Bring a manuscript you are working on to be published in a scientific journal
Communicating Science: Distilling Your Message	CLM8204	December 4 – 6, 2018 and May 21 – 23, 2018	Onsite at NCTC Teaches scientists how to speak to non-scientists. Not a writing class, but you can apply the same concepts to your writing.