Writing in Plain Language: Quick and Useful Tips

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What you’ll learn today

- The definition of plain language
- Why we want to use plain language in our communications
- Plain language principles and best practices
Plain Writing Act of 2010

President Barack Obama signed the Plain Writing Act into law on Oct. 13, 2010.
Plain language for government

plainlanguage.gov

Plain language, understand, and use easier for the public to read, understand, and use government communications.
What is plain language?

Communication that your audience or readers can understand first time they hear or read it.
Why use plain language?

• We’re all busy people.
• We don’t want to waste a lot of time trying to translate.
• Most of us are scrollers and scanners.
Why should WE use plain language?

• Shows customer focus
• Communicates effectively
• Eliminates barriers
• Reduces time spent explaining
• Lowers call/email volume
• Improves voluntary compliance
Seen on State Street on July 16, 2012 . . .
Main elements

• Common, everyday words
• Active voice
• Short sentences and paragraphs
• “You,” “we,” and other pronouns
• Lists and tables
• Easy-to-read design features
• Logical organization
NO PERSON SHALL, ON A FRIDAY, SATURDAY OR SUNDAY THE DAY PRECEEDING A PUBLIC HOLIDAY, OR ON A PUBLIC HOLIDAY, DRIVE OR CAUSE TO BE DRIVEN BETWEEN THE HOURS OF 6 P.M. AND MIDNIGHT, A MOTOR VEHICLE WHICH EXCEEDS 10.5 M IN LENGTH IN ALL MAIN ROADS
Vehicles more than 10.5 meters long are NOT allowed on main roads from 6:00 p.m. to Midnight on public holidays and Friday, Saturday, or Sunday before a public holiday.
Know your audience

• Think of why the user needs to read your document.
• Anticipate the kinds of questions the user might ask.
• Keep in mind the average user's level of technical expertise.
• Write to everyone who is interested, not just to experts (focus on the 90% of readers in the middle of the spectrum).
• Even an expert will prefer a clearly written document.
Know your audience

Default to 7th grade

From “Diary of a Wimpy Kid”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Don’t use this</th>
<th>Use this</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>promulgate</td>
<td>issue, publish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ascertain</td>
<td>find out, learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pursuant to</td>
<td>by, following, per, under</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>provide assistance</td>
<td>help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>utilize</td>
<td>use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whereas</td>
<td>because, since</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comply with</td>
<td>follow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with reference to</td>
<td>about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>under the provisions of</td>
<td>under</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**List of Simple Words and Phrases**
# The active voice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passive</th>
<th>Active</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your application was denied.</td>
<td>We denied your application.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mistakes were made.</td>
<td>We made mistakes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your application is being processed.</td>
<td>We are processing your application.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Still can’t tell the difference?

If you can add “by zombies” at the end of your sentence, it is passive.

From “The Walking Dead”
Passive voice
The gift was given to me by zombies.

Active voice
Zombies gave the gift to me.

Passive voice
I was driven to the airport by zombies.

Active voice
Zombies drove me to the airport.

From “The Walking Dead”
Short sentences

• Aim for 20 words per sentence or fewer.

• Limit a sentence to one idea.

8 words per sentence is the best number.
Short paragraphs

- Smaller “bites” of info are easier to digest.
- Limit a paragraph to one topic.

Aim for no more than 7 lines per paragraph.
Pronouns

• Pronouns sound more personal, less bureaucratic.
• Use pronouns such as “you/your” and “we/our.”
• When writing Q and A format, use “you” and “we” or “I.”
Remember . . .

Grammar, spelling, and punctuation count!
Design elements

• Bulleted lists
• Tables
• Headings and subheads to group information
• Graphics
• Easy-to-read fonts and font size
• Left justify (ragged right margins)
Tables and lists

Tables . . .

• save words.
• make it easy to locate specific items.
• make it easy to take in complex material at a glance.
• make your logic and structure clear.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NO.</th>
<th>EXEMPTIONS, EXTENSIONS, WAIVERS, ABATEMENTS</th>
<th>FOR MORE INFO, SEE...</th>
<th>RESIDENT OF VERMONT</th>
<th>NONRESIDENT OF VERMONT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Resident Full-Time Active Duty</td>
<td>Resident NOT Full-Time Active Duty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Property Tax Adjustment</td>
<td>Fact Sheet</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Renter Rebate</td>
<td>Fact Sheet</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Property Tax Adjustment for Disabled Veterans</td>
<td>Fact Sheet</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Out-of-State Military Pay Exemption</td>
<td>Page 5</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>In-State Military Pay Exemption</td>
<td>Page 6</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>In-State Unit Training Exemption</td>
<td>Page 6</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Education Loan Repayment Exemption</td>
<td>Page 7</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Combat Zone Duty Income Tax Extension</td>
<td>Page 7</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Combat Zone Duty Property Tax Penalty and Interest Exemption</td>
<td>Page 7</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Homestead Declaration Abatement</td>
<td>Page 8</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Combat Zone Property Tax Adjustment &amp; Renter Rebate Extension</td>
<td>Page 8</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tables and lists

Lists . . .

• make it easy for the reader to identify all items or steps in a process and in proper order.

• add white space for easy reading.

• help the reader see the structure of your document.

• should be fairly short, if possible.
Example of using a list

Who Is Eligible To File A Claim?

In order to file a property tax adjustment claim, you must meet ALL of the following eligibility requirements:

- Your property qualifies as a homestead, and you have filed a Homestead Declaration for the current year's grand list.
- You were domiciled in Vermont for the full prior calendar year.
- You were not claimed as a dependent of another taxpayer.
- You have the property as your homestead as of April 1.
- You meet the household income criteria (see form for current year income limit).

Learn more about how to determine household income.

From “Property Adjustment Claim” at tax.vermont.gov
Writing letters

- Identify the key message.
- Identify your audience.
- Organize the letter to meet the needs of the reader.
- Establish a tone that is professional, yet compassionate.
- Don’t bury bad news—it should appear in the main message.
- If you need to apologize, do so.
- Use best practices for plain language.
Logical organization

How to organize a letter:

1. State the problem or issue.
2. Provide details of the problem or issue.
3. Tell the recipient what is needed to correct the problem. If the recipient does not have to do anything, say so.
4. Provide contact information so the recipient may call or email with questions.
Formatting and style

To make letters easier to read, do the following:

• Use ragged right margins—left justify.

• Use a serif font if there is a lot of text (Palatino Linotype or Times New Roman).

• Use a 10-point font and above—12-point is preferred.

• Use all capital letters, italics, boldface, and underlining for emphasis only—and sparingly.
State of Vermont fonts

**Georgia**: State of Vermont letterhead and business cards

**Franklin Gothic**: Headlines, sub-heads, captions, footnotes, disclaimers

**Palatino**: Body copy
Beware of “fun” fonts

Comic Sans: A font inspired by lettering in comic books.

Brush Script: Script is hard to read, especially when you consider cursive is not even taught in some schools today.

Broadway: All Caps is the only option.

Snap ITC: Are you kidding me?

Elephant: It’s a serif font, but hard to read.
RE: Immediate Action Required – payment in full is due

Dear Taxpayer:

We are sending you this letter because despite prior communications, you failed to submit taxes you collected from customers or withheld from your workers. The Vermont Department of Taxes considers the $10,000 balance due on your Sales and Use Tax account(s) to be a serious matter requiring your immediate response.

When the Vermont Department of Taxes issued a license authorizing you to collect or withhold taxes, it became your duty to collect and submit the right amount of tax. Taxes collected and held in trust cannot be used for other purposes. These tax receipts must be remitted to the Department when due under the schedule established for you.

What You Need to Do

*Take Immediate action.* You must pay the balance due in full **within 10 days** from the date of this notice. To make a payment in full, please pay electronically through myVTax at myvtax.vermont.gov. You may also mail your payment to the Vermont Department of Taxes, P.O. Box 429, Montpelier, VT 05601-0429.

If you are unable to pay the full amount in one payment, you must contact us by calling (802) 828-2518 **within 10 days** from the date of this notice.

*Be proactive.* We strongly recommended that you take the following two steps to ensure the taxes you collect from customers or withhold from your workers on behalf of the State of Vermont are submitted when due:

1. Establish a separate deposit account for collected or withheld taxes that you must pay to the Department of Taxes. This will ensure state funds are not co-mingled with other operating funds.
2. Make payments throughout the reporting period, in advance of the due date. This will ensure the funds are available when the return is due. Making payments can easily be …
1. Let verbs be verbs. “Appear,” not “make an appearance.”

2. Beware of the curse of knowledge.

3. Omit needless words.

4. Read it aloud.

5. Find the best word, which is not always the fanciest word.
Resources

Visit These Websites
www.plainlanguage.gov
www.centerforplainlanguage.org
www.plainlanguagenetwork.org

Word Substitutions
http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/wordsuggestions/simplewords.cfm

Checklist of Plain Language Elements
http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/quickreference/checklist.cfm

Checklist for Writing for the Web
http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/quickreference/weblist.cfm

Letters
http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/guidelines/letters.cfm
Contact

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