Writing in Plain Language: Quick and Useful Tips

PRESENTED BY
LYNETTE KEMP

TAX EDUCATION
SUPERVISOR

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VERMONT
DEPARTMENT OF TAXES

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: It's the law for federal agencies!

President Obama signed the Plain Writing Act of 2010 on October 13, 2010.

On January 18, 2011, he issued a new Executive Order, "E.O. 13563 - Improving Regulation and Regulatory Review." It states that "[our regulatory system] must ensure that regulations are accessible, consistent, written in plain language, and easy to understand."

Two other presidential executive orders (E.O. 12866 and E.O. 12988) cover the use of plain language in regulations.

There is no plain language law for Vermont government. It's good common sense for government and for the Vermont Department of Taxes. It's good practice because . . . Taxpayers must understand the instructions we give them before they can comply.

Plain language for government
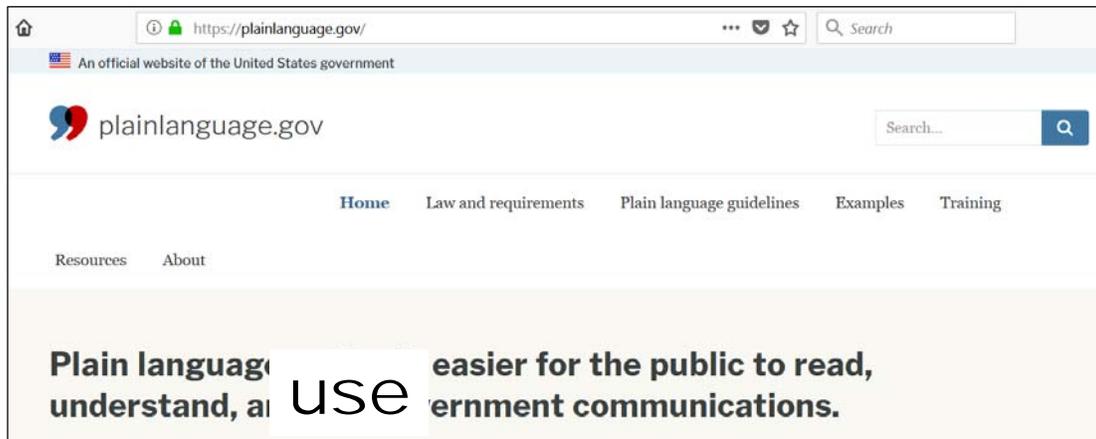
The operative word here is "use." When government communicates to the public, is often because we want the public to follow instructions, to DO something.

So, it makes sense to write in a way that the public understands. It's good practice because . . . People must understand the instructions we give them before they can comply.

What is plain language?

Communication that your audience or readers can understar **first time** they hear or read it.

Plain language in practical terms: You shouldn't have to read something more than once to get a pretty good understanding of the message.

Operative words: first time

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.

- Plain language fits our busy lifestyles. We're all busy people. Multi-taskers.

- We don't want to waste a lot of time trying to translate difficult, wordy documents, looking up what technical terms and jargon

- Most of us are "scanners" because of the internet and modern communication devices.

Why should WE use plain language?

- Shows customer focus
- Communicates effectively
- Eliminates barriers
- Reduces time spent explaining
- Lowers call/email volume
- Improves voluntary compliance

From the perspective of the Vermont Department of Taxes . . .

We want the taxpayer to DO something:

- Pay taxes now

- Send us information, documents

- Explain something to us . . . like why their return was filed late

Seen on State Street on July 16, 2012 . . .

VERMONT PROFESSIONAL TAX & FINANCIAL SERVICES

Confusing letter from Vt Dept of Taxes or IRS?

Call & I'll explain in English.

GERARD M. GALVIN, JD CPA

802-839-6929

max@vtprotax.com

OFFICE 2ND FLOOR

Sign observed on State Street on Lynette's first day of work.

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

Plain language is not easy—boiling down complex laws written in formal and bureaucratic or legal language to ordinary, everyday language is:

- The work of translation—using common, everyday words
  - Avoid jargon
  - Avoid acronyms. If you use acronyms, be sure to let people know what they stand for. They are only a few that need no explanation, such as IRS. On first reference, write Division of Property Valuation and Review (PVR), then use PVR after that.

- A process of organizing material in a logical way

For many of us, it means rethinking how we currently write for the Department of Taxes.
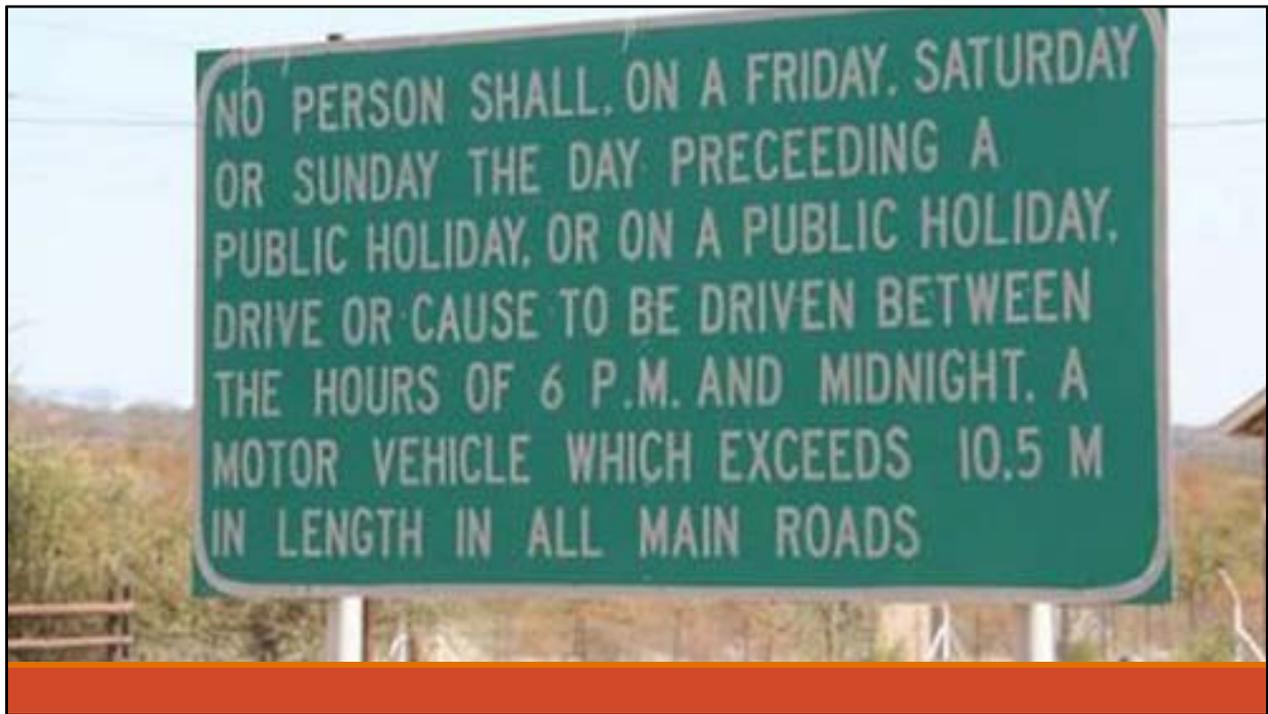
Take a moment to digest this sign. It looks as if it as done by committee. What are the problems?

- Spelling
- Punctuation
- Sentence structure or syntax
- All caps

Why write in plain language? Because it's dangerous . . . By the time you finish reading this and deciphering it, you may have rear-ended the car ahead of you.

Do a test: show variations of the sign and have people walk by them at a fairly rapid pace and let you know what they understood (not just what they read) from the sign.

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.

Before you begin writing, think about your audience.

Know your audience

Default to 7th grade

From "Diary of a Wimpy Kid"

When writing to the general public, default to level of 7th grade reading level.

Use common, everyday words	Don't use this	Use this
	promulgate	issue, publish
	ascertain	find out, learn
	pursuant to	by, following, per, under
	provide assistance	help
	utilize	use
	whereas	because, since
	comply with	follow
	with reference to	about
	under the provisions of	under

List of Simple Words and Phrases

Let's begin exploring the elements of Plain Language.

Examples of how the "don't use" words and phrases are used:

1. These objectives must be <u>promulgated</u> to the public.

2. We need to do the study to <u>ascertain</u> whether the drug is effective.

3. <u>Whereas</u> most PCs have several USB ports, older ones often have only one.

4. We are this letter to <u>with reference to</u> your recent income tax return.

We often see "pursuant to" and "under the provisions of" with a citation of law. Instead, write . . . "You must do XYZ under Vermont law at 32 V.S.A. § 4404."

The active voice

Passive	Active
Your application was denied.	We denied your application.
Mistakes were made.	We made mistakes.
Your application is being processed.	We are processing your application.

Active voice: you are doing something

Passive voice: something is being done to you.

Active voice flows better, is easier to understand, is more concise than passive voice.

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"

. . . by zombies

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

Short sentences

- Aim for 20 words per sentence or fewer.

- Limit a sentence to one idea.

    8 words per sentence is the best number.

Plainlanguage.gov website says 20 words per sentence or fewer.

Washington DOR says 8 words per sentence is best!

Simple test: Read the sentence out loud. If you have to take a breath, it's way too long.

BUT . . . Be careful that your sentences within the paragraph don't sound too choppy or robotic.

Short paragraphs

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.

Readability Test in Word:

- Words per sentence – number of words per sentence

- Flesch Reading Ease – goal is 100%

- Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level – goal is 7th grade

- Passive Sentences – percentage of passive sentences in the document

Do the spelling and grammar check first, and then the readability scores should show

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!

In the era of texting and social media, we tend to lose our English skills.

Resources Lynette likes to use:

https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html

Use the AP Stylebook for news releases: https://www.apstylebook.com/ (this is not free)

"Elements of Style" by Strunk and White

Design elements

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

Plain language also is how words appear on the page, how they are grouped in a logical and organized manner

Be consistent!

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.

NO.	EXEMPTIONS, EXTENSIONS, WAIVERS, ABATEMENTS	FOR MORE INFO, SEE . . .	RESIDENT OF VERMONT		NONRESIDENT OF VERMONT	
			Resident Full-Time Active Duty	Resident NOT Full-Time Active Duty	Nonresident Full-Time Active Duty	Nonresident NOT Full-Time Active Duty
1	Property Tax Adjustment	Fact Sheet	✓	✓		
2	Renter Rebate	Fact Sheet	✓	✓		
3	Property Tax Adjustment for Disabled Veterans	Fact Sheet		✓		
4	Out-of-State Military Pay Exemption	Page 5	✓			
5	In-State Military Pay Exemption	Page 6			✓	
6	In-State Unit Training Exemption	Page 6		✓		✓
7	Education Loan Repayment Exemption	Page 7	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Combat Zone Duty Income Tax Extension	Page 7	✓		✓	
9	Combat Zone Duty Property Tax Penalty and Interest Exemption	Page 7	✓	✓		
10	Homestead Declaration Abatement	Page 8	✓			
11	Combat Zone Property Tax Adjustment & Renter Rebate Extension	Page 8	✓			

Example of using a table

From "Vermont Tax Guide for Military and National Services" at tax.vermont.gov

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.

This is a list.

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.

Often see ALL CAPS to emphasize a sentence (or more), but a sentence in all caps is harder to read.

All caps is like yelling at someone in texting and social media.

If you emphasize too much text, you emphasize nothing.

State of Vermont fonts

Georgia: State of Vermont letterhead and business cards

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

Palatino: Body copy

Serif fonts have the little strokes or feet or tails.
Sans serif fonts do not have these features and appear much cleaner.

Serif versus sans serif: serif fonts are known to be the easiest to read, but now that is disputed. Most books with a lot of text are written using serif fonts. But I have read that sans serif fonts look more "modern." Most books are printed using a serif font as it is easier on the eye.

State of Vermont branding standards family of fonts

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.

Stay away from decorative or "fun" and "funky" fonts except when you want to be decorative or fun, such as an invitation to a party. They are hard to read and detract from the serious nature of your communication.

Pet peeve: do not use Comic Sans in a professional communication.

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 …

Example of a letter

"Demand Letter" (as submitted to our developers—in progress). Still some work to do here.

Writing and plain language is a process. There is still room for improvement for this letter!

Organization:
1. State the problem
2. State details of the problem
3. What the recipient needs to do
4. Instructions how to do it
5. Contact information is not shown, but it is at the bottom of the letter

Formatting and Style
1. Ragged right margin
2. Font at 11-point
3. This shows a serif font, but the Department's letters are in a sans serif font
4. Headings and subheadings
5. Boldface for emphasis—but minimal

Tips from an Expert

Steven Pinker
Psychologist and linguist, Harvard University

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.

From https://www.inc.com/jessica-stillman/a-harvard-linguists-13-simple-tips-for-becoming-a-great-writer.html

- Steven Pinker has written dozens of articles for scientific journals, magazines, and newspaper and books.

- Has his own website at https://stevenpinker.com/

- Beware of the Curse of Knowledge: when you know something, it's hard to imagine what it's like not to know it. Minimize acronyms & technical terms. Use "for example" liberally. Show a draft around, & prepare to learn that what's obvious to you may not be obvious to anyone else.

- Find the best word, which is not always the fanciest word. Consult a dictionary with usage notes, and a thesaurus.

Questions?

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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

Lynette Kemp
Tax Education Supervisor

Division of Policy, Outreach
& Legislative Affairs

Lynette.Kemp@vermont.gov

(802) 828-2502

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