

Writing Tip: Use Plain Language

Adapted from *Writing to Get Things Done*® seminar

Clear writing is clear thinking, framed for the reader, in plain language. Previous *Business Writing Tips* have focused on thinking clearly and framing ideas in one of three reader-friendly models. The next several *Business Writing Tips* will focus on using plain language.



Stan Berry

A Simple Test

Plain language is easy to read. It's simple, clear, and concrete. It's the language you use at home with friends and family. In fact, the easiest test for plain language is to read your writing as though you're talking at the dinner table. If your language sounds appropriate to use in that setting, it's appropriate to use in your business writing.

Remember, readers have three needs: speed, comprehension, and retention. Readers want language that they can read quickly, understand effortlessly, and remember easily. The reader's version of the KISS principle is a plea to the writer to, "Keep It Simple, Stupid." (Though stupid is a harsh word, it conveys the reader's frustration with having to read formal language.) Unfortunately, writers either don't know how to write simply, or don't think it's professional to do so.

The Elements of Plain Language

Many people avoid using plain language, from senior executives to office support staff. Writers often embellish their work beyond recognition. The solution is to use these elements of plain language:

- short sentences (average length of 15 to 20 words).
- short words of one or two syllables (*about* instead of *approximately*).
- verbs rather than nouns or hidden verbs (*use* instead of *utilization*).
- active voice (the subject is active).

Examples of Formal Language and Plain Language

You can see the use, and misuse, of these elements of plain language in one of the most famous examples of gobbledygook:

An aide to President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote about air raid preparations:
Such preparations shall be made as will completely obscure all Federal Buildings occupied by the Federal Government during an air raid for any period of time from visibility by reason of internal or external illumination. Such obstruction may be obtained either by blackout construction or by termination of illumination. This will, of course, require that in building areas in which production must continue during the blackout, construction must be provided that internal illumination may continue. Other areas may be obscured by terminating the illumination.

Mr. Roosevelt's revision:

In buildings where you have to keep working, put something across the windows.

In buildings where you can let the work stop, turn off the lights.

Which of the following would you rather read?

An engineer's language at work:

This is to inform you that a date coding system for identification of all sterilization lots has been implemented. The placement of the code has not been determined. However, it has been ascertained that the most advantageous placement position would be on the top of the container itself.

An engineer's language at home:

The Date coding team decided yesterday to put the date labels on top of the sterilized bottle containers.

Before You Hit the Send Button

After clarifying your thoughts and framing your draft for the reader--but before hitting the print or send button--revise your draft using the elements of plain language. While the writer's ego within you might cringe, your readers will have their cake and be able to eat it too. This is a good thing, right?



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