

Writing Documents
in
PLAIN TALK

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EXECUTIVE ORDER 05-03

PLAIN TALK

WHEREAS, Washington State government strives to provide exceptional customer service, and we recognize that clear easy-to-understand communications are essential to good service. We communicate with businesses and individuals through letters, forms, instructions, announcements, publications and other documents, which are the tools we use to do business with the public. They must be written and designed so that they can be easily understood.

User-friendly documents show our respect for people and their time. They are also good customer service. Clearly written documents make it easier for citizens to understand how to access service and the roles of all parties involved.

The Departments of Revenue, Labor and Industries and Ecology have programs to improve the readability of their letters, instructions, forms and applications. These "Plain Talk" programs have resulted in measurable improvements in customer service and agency performance, including:

- Reduced phone calls and questions from customers;
- Fewer complaints about difficulties doing business with the state; and
- Improved compliance with regulations.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, Christine O. Gregoire, Governor of the state of Washington, hereby order that all agencies adopt the principles and practices of Plain Talk currently used in the Departments of Revenue, Labor and Industries and Ecology.

Using Plain Talk principles, the announcements, publications and other documents agencies send to the public will contain clear and concise instructions and information. Documents written in Plain Talk will include:

- Clear language that is commonly used by the intended audience;
- Only the information needed by the recipient, presented in a logical sequence;
- Short sentences;
- Sentences, written in active voice, that make it clear who is responsible for what; and
- Layout and design that help the reader understand the meaning on the first try. This includes adequate white space, bulleted lists, helpful headings and other proven techniques.

Guidance for implementation will be provided by the Governor's Office of Management, Accountability and Performance.

This executive order takes effect immediately.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the State of Washington to be affixed at Olympia this 24th day of March A.D., Two thousand five.

CHRISTINE O. GREGOIRE
Governor of Washington

Figure 1A - Governor Gregoire's Plain Talk Executive Order.

What is Plain Talk?

Plain Talk is an approach to writing that makes it easy for people to understand how to do business or interact with Washington State agencies. According to the Governor's Executive Order (Figure 1A), Plain Talk means writers should:

- Use shorter sentences.
- Use the same words their readers use.
- Present key ideas in a logical sequence.
- Create active voice sentences that clearly identify who does what.
- Design a layout that helps readers find key information quickly.

Why Should I Write in Plain Talk?

If you write on the job, there are many good reasons to use the "Plain Talk" approach in everything from emails to reports. Let's look at three of those reasons.

REASON #1. The State requires it. The Governor's Executive Order requires all Washington State agencies to use Plain Talk in their distributed written materials. For most agencies, that means a major change in the way their staff writes. But the change will mean greater efficiency and success for everyone. Whether your agency is ready for the change, you now need to use the Plain Talk approach in your writing.

REASON #2. Ideas should remain easy to understand. Several readability and usability studies have proven within the last half century that nearly everyone prefers to read business-related information in a simple, straightforward style. So save your fancy prose and hundred-dollar vocabulary for the stuff you write outside of work.

REASON #3. People need it. Research into readability also found that 3 out of every 10 people suffer from some type of reading "challenge." While Plain Talk may not solve every one of those challenges, it doesn't create any new ones either. Remember that you're writing to solve problems, not create them.

With the remainder of this packet, we will explore the 5 required elements of Plain Talk, and make sure you know how to use them as you write for your workplace.

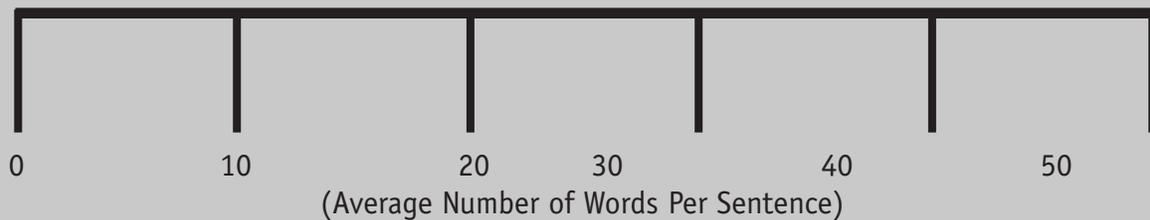
Use Shorter Sentences

Remember those elementary school warnings about “run-on” sentences? Most of us can easily spot sentences that have run out of control in someone else’s work. Why is it so hard to keep our own sentences short?

Believe it or not, you can probably trace the problem back to English class. Throughout our schooling, we are taught to write with a focus on length. The more advanced our writing assignments, the longer they need to be to get the good grade.

Unfortunately, when we enter the work world, that compositional-style approach doesn’t work.

THE IMPACT OF SENTENCE LENGTH ON READING EASE



- Ideally, your **average** sentence should be _____ words per sentence.
- Conveying key points in 10 words or less results in _____% readability.
- The longer your sentences, the less readers _____ or _____.

Shorter Works Better – Especially on the Web

Even Web experts agree that shorter sentences make writers more efficient and clear, while making key information easily accessible to busy readers.



I find I have no trouble getting rid of half the words on most Web pages without losing anything of value.

Getting rid of all those words that no one is going to read has several beneficial effects:

- It reduces the noise level of the page.
- It makes the useful content more prominent.
- It makes the pages shorter, allowing users to see more of each page at a glance without scrolling.

From Web usability expert Steve Krug’s book, **Don’t Make Me Think**.

Aim for the “Ideal” Average Sentence Length

Using what you’ve learned about keeping sentences short, rewrite these examples. Make your rewritten sentences average 17 words or less.

- A. If an independent investigation is undertaken and a formal review of the findings during any phase of your independent investigation is desired, you may request assistance from the Department under the Voluntary Program. (33 words)

- B. Those persons without a State-issued license or identification card or other documents verifying both citizenship and identity, such as a passport, will need to present two pieces of evidence—one for citizenship and one for identity. (37 words)

- C. Student-level data and program-specific financial aid awarding information are needed by the agency to conduct research, design state financial aid programs that complement other existing federal, state, and institutional programs, describe recipient populations; and administer and evaluate state financial aid programs, as required by state law. (48 words)

- D. Our objective is to provide a technology and economic framework in which public proposals and private business plans can result in successful build-out and operation of renewable energy facilities. (31 words)

Watch Your Vocabulary: Choose Words Your Readers Use

For some professionals, using a big vocabulary is a way to show off our level of competence, intelligence, or, at the very least, our extra years of education. But readers prefer an “everyday,” or conversational, vocabulary over the complex language often used in business documents.

Things to keep in mind:

- **Today’s English dictionary has roughly _____ words in it.**
- **Most of us recognize between _____ and _____ words.**
- **The average American only uses _____ to _____ words regularly at work.**
- **“Good” business writers choose words to _____ rather than to _____.**

Tapping into one’s expanded vocabulary doesn’t make the writing better. Instead, “big” words make our documents harder to understand. With big words, you often waste everyone’s valuable time.

Use “Big” Words ... When You Have No Other Choice

If you choose the words that communicate your ideas in the clearest, simplest way possible, you’ll find that nearly 90 percent of the time simple words work best.

But sometimes there’s no way around using “big” words – such as “terms of art.” Terms of art are those words unique to your field of study that best convey complex ideas. Because they are terms known only by a select audience, you still must choose when and how to use these “big” words. For some audiences, terms of art offer the quickest understanding. For others, you may need to use additional simple words to best convey an idea or clarify a term.

Consider any word that has _____ or more syllables a “big” word.

Some “Big” Words Give You a Choice, So Choose Wisely

Understand that some words may ride the fence of being considered “big.” Words like *employee*, *procedure*, *application*, and *vehicle*. Most people know and use these words regularly. They’re not “complex,” but they contain three or more syllables. In those cases, use your best judgment based on knowledge of your reader. If you know your reader can handle those words easily, use them. If you’re uncertain and you’re using many other “big” words, exchange them for words like *worker*, *process*, *program*, and *car*.

Ideally, you should try to use less than _____ “big” words in a document.

Writer's Tip: Compare the length of the "big" word you want to use with the length of the meaning you need to express. Choose the option that offers the quickest access to your idea.

Look at these two common word choice examples:

FACILITATE (10 letters, 4 syllables)

What's does the word mean? _____

Is there a shorter word that means the same thing? _____

You're better off with the shorter word here.

COMPUTER (8 letters, 3 syllables)

What's the meaning behind the word? _____

Is there a shorter word that means the same thing? _____

In this case the big word is the shortest route to your meaning.

Some Words Will Never Count as "Big"

To help keep you to a minimum "big" word count, certain kinds of words should be considered the exception, not the rule. When you calculate the number of "big" words you've used, you can ignore:

- **Proper nouns.** (Such as Washington, Department of Licensing, and Governor.)
- **Short word combos.** (Such as ongoing, paperwork, and fingerprint.)
- **3-syllable words ending in "es" or "ed."** (Like services, reduces, or committed.)



I never write 'metropolis' when I can get the same price for 'city.'

– Mark Twain

Some More “Big” Words to Watch

The *misutilization* of minors has decreased 12 percent in the last decade.

The legal department hopes to *finalize* our online policy manual soon.

The Senator, shown here *accompanied by* his wife, toured the plant last Tuesday.

Plans to *execute* the new employee policy have been changed.

The *deobligated* funds were later used by an agency across town.

We expect to have the plan fully *implemented* by next fall.

Pursuant to changes in Washington State law, our office should now avoid the use of . . .

Also Avoid Wordy Phrases

Sometimes these phrases (we called them “prepositional phrases” in school) stand for a simple word, a missing verb, or no longer exist. Using them lengthens your sentences, and lowers readability.

This letter was written *for the purpose of* answering your questions regarding . . .

The Attorney General’s Office *has the ability to* remove a lot of legalese from state law.

We have updated our policy *in accordance with* the new city ordinance.

We cleaned out the basement *in order that* we could move Milton’s desk down there.

In the event that something should happen while I’m away, please contact . . .

In view of the fact that Governor Gregoire prefers Plain Talk, we need to make sure . . .

I need the Johnson proposal back from you *at a later date*.

If you have any questions, please *do not hesitate to* call me at (360) 123-4567.

We monitor our Web site usage statistics *on a monthly basis*.

“Government-ese” Has Got to Go

Never rely on the old adage that “this is the way we’ve always said it.” Just because you’ve used a certain word or expression for years, doesn’t make it right. How can we update these?

Heretofore, every citizen of Washington State can . . .

As you know, Revised Code of Washington (RCW) regulates . . .

As per your letter dated June 21, 2005 . . .

In accordance with your request, the Department has made available . . .

We acknowledge receipt of your January 2007 letter of complaint.

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that we will . . .

At your earliest convenience, please feel free to contact our office . . .

There were six divisions that failed to . . .

The department would like to apprise your office of the fact that . . .

Thanking you in advance.

Give Your Documents Some Personality

Government writers often write in the third person. Though considered “professional” for many decades in business, the tone of third person workplace material is cold and detached. Most readers don’t like it.

With Plain Talk, writers may use personal pronouns freely. Personal pronouns tend to warm up the tone of emails and letters. They also hold the reader’s interest, where the detached third-person style often loses reader interest quickly.

Plain Talk: Contractors, please submit your bids to us by May 1, 2008.

Third Person: The department requests that contractors submit bids by May 1, 2008.

Rip Out Redundancy

Redundancies happen when writers add words without adding any new meaning to a sentence. Redundancies only produce long sentences.

The meeting facility is a distance of 30 miles from our headquarters building.

Please answer the following five (5) questions within the next twelve (12) minutes.

Experts recently concluded “third-hand” smoke is potentially hazardous.

We need to meet together to solve this issue.

Join us tomorrow in conference room 8A at 8 a.m. in the morning.

WARNING! All pregnant female employees should avoid Sector M until further notice.

Please provide supporting evidence for your claim.

The end result should provide us with a better understanding of cell phone design.

We can't decide whether or not we should close our Shelton branch.

Apply what you've learned to make these instructions easier on the reader:

If in addition to the street address there is also a unit designation (such as apartment number, lot number, space number, suite number, etc.), enter two (2) spaces and then enter the number (or letter). For example, 1234 Your Street, Apartment 3G would therefore be entered as: 1234 YOUR ST 3G. As you should know by now, we do not include the type of unit as part of the designator nor do we use the “#” sign.

While We're on the Subject . . .

And/Or. When you use these words together, do you mean you want the reader to do both or do either as alternatives. Using the device “and/or,” makes the meaning of a document unclear. Why use two words where one would do? Most of the time you mean either “or” or “and,” but not both. Before writing your document, decide what you want to say and whether “and” or “or” will fit your meaning best. Then choose one.

Sometimes you do need both. If so, write it this way:

The facility has a strict security policy. The more identification you have the better. Bring your driver's license, your birth certificate, or both.

WRONG: *The contractor and/or supervisor must monitor weekly staff assignments.*

RIGHT: *The contractor, supervisor, or both must monitor weekly staff assignments.*

Shall. Depending upon the document, the helper verb “shall” can mean must, ought, or will. Sometimes the courts get just as confused when you use the word incorrectly. You should only use “shall” when its use is directly connected with a law, code, rule, or policy. The safe substitute is **must**. The word “must” clearly conveys to your readers that they have to do something.

Unnecessary Qualifiers. You have unnecessary qualifiers working against Plain Talk when you try to add meaning to your sentence with extra adverbs, nouns, verbs, or adjectives.

*I must **respectfully** request you to provide . . . (adverb)*

*Work **in partnership** with . . . (noun)*

*Additional requirements **needed** to provide a level of safety include . . . (verb)*

*Maintain **successful** bilateral agreements . . . (adjective)*

Multiple Negatives. If you can write a negative statement as a positive without changing the meaning, do so. Otherwise, only use one negative in a sentence. Using more than one muddles the meaning. Accentuate the positive whenever you can.

WRONG: No changes will be made to the Department of Transportation's regulations unless the administrator reviews them and concludes they are not lacking any important information.

RIGHT: Changes will be made to the Department of Transportation's regulations only if the administrator reviews them and concludes they are lacking important information.

Present Your Details in a Logical Sequence

Remember Your Reader Doesn't Live Inside Your Brain. Just because you may know the material you're writing inside and out doesn't mean your reader does too. The time you save writing shorter sentences and words must be spent on developing the best order for your ideas.

Descending Order Gets You to Your Point. Put your main point or points out front for your readers and no one will miss them. Savvy writers have known for years that many readers merely scan your materials for its "key" elements.

When Giving Instructions, Follow the Clock. Employees work in a chronological sequence. When they read about how to do something, they need the same logic built into the instructions. If step 2 doesn't really follow step 1 in your instructions, then someone's going to do their work wrong.

Try to Give "Bad News" Away in Acceptable Order. Nobody likes to get negative news. If you write it into the front of your material, readers may stop reading altogether. If you close with your bad news, readers end on a sour note. So put the bad news somewhere in the middle. This approach allows you to soften the blow (without sugarcoating) and keep a friendly tone.

Before beginning to compose something, gauge the nature and extent of the enterprise and work from a suitable design. You cannot plunge in blindly and start ticking off fact after fact about your subject, lest you miss the forest for the trees and there be no end to your labors.

- E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*



Write in the Active Voice

Why write actively?

Active-voice sentences:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

What does “Active Voice” writing mean?

Active voice writing simply means that you put your “doer” subject clearly on display for your reader. Let’s look at an example:

John drove the bus today.

So what does “Passive Voice” writing look like?

Passive voice writing tries to convey the same idea. But passive writing usually requires more words and more mental effort to clarify what’s going on. Let’s look at the same idea written in the passive voice:

The bus was driven by John today.

Passive writing creates “done to” subjects instead of “doer” subjects. And sometimes passive writing creates sentences with missing doers altogether. Consider a third way to write the sentence:

The bus was driven today.

All three versions of the sentence convey the same basic message. That doesn’t make all three sentences well written. The second example took more words to say the same thing as the first. The third example was nice and short, but it left my “doer” subject out.

Passive Writing Relies on the “Passive Family”

You can always spot your passive sentences because they count on at least one of these 7 forms of the verb “to be” to function as the verb of the sentence.

Beware of the Passive Family of Verbs:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____

How do I rewrite my sentences in active voice?

First, identify the passive verb or verbs in your sentence and remove them. Then ask yourself these two questions about the sentence:

1. What’s really happening here? (Answer with a verb that ends in “-ing.” Then drop the “-ing.”)
(The answer gives you the real _____ of the sentence.)

2. Who or what makes it happen?
(The answer gives you the _____ of the sentence.)

These questions seem simple. Almost grade-schoolish, I know. But they’ll solve the active voice problem for you every time.

It is Carl’s responsibility to lead next week’s meeting.

Let’s use our new-found technique to fix this passive sentence.

Step 1: Identify any passive verbs and cross them out.

Step 2: Ask: **What’s really happening here?** (_____ -ing)

Step 3: Ask: **Who or what makes it happen?** (_____)

Step 4: Once we know the active verb and “doer” subject of the sentence, we can now rewrite the sentence in the active voice:

New Sentence: _____

Notes: _____

If You “Noun” a Verb, You Wind up Adding a “Dull” Verb.

Sometimes we hide the verbs in our sentences by “latinizing” them. Latinized verbs have endings like *-ion, -tion, -ation, -sion, -ent, -ment, -ance, -ency, -tive, -able, and -ier*. Any time you add those endings to your verb, you turn the verb into a noun – a process I call “nouncing the verb.”

Because your original verb has become a noun, you’ll have to add another verb to make a full sentence. Unfortunately, this new verb is not the primary action word for your message. The new verb just adds unnecessary length and dullness to the writing.

Five common “dull” verbs to watch out for are:

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____ 4. _____ 5. _____

“Latinized” Words and “Dull” Verbs at Work

Tom **got** into an **argument** with Wendy at work last Thursday.

It **is** my **understanding** that you **had made** a **decision** to . . .

Top level management **has** a **tendency** to ignore new ideas.

Anna **goes** to **meet** with legal staff every month.

Margaret **came** as the **presenter** of the new software rollout plan.

Allen **made** the **statement** that Plain Talk was just a new name for clear writing.

The court **made** an **allowance** of the newly found crime scene evidence.

Management has **come** to the **conclusion** that we need a new plan.

The I.T. department **has** taken **action** following last month’s decision.

There's Just One More Thing . . .

When you need to show action in the process of happening, add *-ing* to the active verb and use it with a "to be" verb. The sentence will still qualify as active. For example, . . .

John was driving the bus today.

Because John is (**in the process of**) driving, the sentence remains in the active voice. We still have a "doer" doing something. He's simply in the process of doing it. So when a "to be" verb teams up with another verb ending in *-ing*, the two verbs create a single active verb.

NOTE: Plain Talk is really a blend of active and passive voice.

There are times when, used carefully and sparingly, passive writing is appropriate and even called for. Here are a few "good" reasons to use some passive voice in your writing:

1. To soften the tone.

Active voice tends to be very direct and almost curt.

Sharp Tone: You did not submit your final recommendations before the stated deadline.

Softer Tone: Your final recommendations **were** received after the stated deadline.

2. To avoid blame. (Be careful with this one.)

Specific Blame: Henry made several accounting errors in the report.

No blame: Accounting errors **were** made in the report.

3. When the "doer" is unknown or unimportant.

Fire **was** discovered thousands of years ago.

Joan **was** hospitalized due to an unexplained illness.

TIP: Whenever your reader needs to know Who-Does-What, write in the active voice.

Active or Passive?

1. Dean delivered the Danishes to Dharma.
2. Dharma is out of the office today because of food poisoning.
3. Dean was explaining to Dharma that the Danishes "went bad."
4. Dharma is still mad at Dean and his Danishes.

Let's Get Active!

- 1) Find the passive verbs in these sentences – **IS AM ARE WAS WERE BE BEEN**
- 2) Ask: **What's really happening here?** and **Who or what makes it happen?**
- 3) Rewrite each sentence in the active voice.

1. The desk manager is responsible for the initiation of all A19 payments.
2. When the affidavit form is mailed back to the department, it will be routed to the desk manager.
3. Lacey's proposal for more roundabouts was not accepted by the Department of Transportation.
4. Data improvements are imperative if we are to lead the market or even stay competitive.
5. Currently, the frequency of our vehicle inspections is every two years.
6. The 25th and 26th lines are used for displaying the function key labels.
7. This form can be downloaded by any user on the Agency's Web site at [http://www . . .](http://www...)
8. Another thing that is going to help us save paper this year is email.
9. The decision was made by Dr. Gregory House to perform the brain surgery.
10. Changes to our internet use policy were made by the legislature last year.

Follow Plain Talk Design Guidelines

Always design your documents with readability in mind. With the right visual devices, you can grab your reader's attention and hold it. Here are a few hints on visuals:

Use More Lists in Your Writing

True – lists are not a new writing convention. The problem with lists is that most writers don't use enough. Most business writers are caught in the rut of writing only in the "narrative" style. Paragraphs are all they write.

Bring balance to your workplace writing by using more lists. Lists allow readers to easily re-enter material when interrupted. Some lists work great with numbers, while others work just as well with bullets. For example, if order of importance plays a role in your writing, numbered lists work best. Bullet lists emphasize brief points you need to make.

When creating lists, make sure to :

1. Use bullet and number types consistently; pick one style and stick with it.
2. "Parallel" your lists – start each listed item with the same kind of word.
3. Avoid asterisks (*) or hyphens (-) when creating bulleted lists.
4. Choose Arabic Numerals (1, 2, 3, ...), not Roman Numerals (I, II, III, ...).
5. Follow the Gregg Reference Manual's style when listing (see below).

The Gregg Reference Manual offers a new approach to listing . . .

107 a. Use periods after independent clauses, dependent clauses, or long phrases that are displayed on separate lines in a list. Also use periods after short phrases that are essential to the grammatical completeness of the statement introducing the list. (In each of the following examples, the three listed items are all objects of the preposition *on* in the introductory statement.)

<p>Please get me year-end figures <i>on</i>:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Domestic sales revenues. b. Total operating costs. c. Net operating income. 	<p>OR: Please get me year-end figures <i>on</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domestic sales revenues. • Total operating costs. • Net operating income.
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NOTE: Avoid the use of semicolons and a conjunction when displaying items in a list.

<p>You'll profit from inquiries through:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Your toll-free number. 2. A reader service card. 3. A fax-on-demand service. 	<p>NOT: You'll profit from inquiries through:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Your toll-free number; 2. A reader service card; and 3. A fax-on-demand service.
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Use More Descriptive Headings

- **Run-in Heading** – Begins a paragraph and is immediately followed by text matter on the same line. Run-in headings end with a period or a question mark.

Insuring Your Car. Our automobile insurance provides six different types of coverage . . .

How Much Will It Cost? How much our automobile insurance will cost you depends on your driving record and your age.

- **Freestanding Heading** – Displayed on a line by itself. It doesn't require a punctuation mark unless it asks a question.

Create Nontaxable Income

You can reduce your tax bill by investing in municipal bonds. Since the interest payable on these bonds is nontaxable, investing in municipals has become one of the most popular ways to avoid . . .

Is It Legal?

Yes, investing your money so as to avoid taxes is perfectly legal.

- **Headlines as Headings** – A complete sentence on a line by itself. It doesn't need a punctuation mark unless it asks a question. Keep it to ten words or less and use an active verb.

OLD LOOK: Label Headings

Description of Proposal

The Department of Ecology (Ecology) funded the Washington State University (WSU) Department of Biological Systems Engineering to complete a biomass and bioenergy assessment for Washington State. The goal of this work was to support Ecology's Beyond Waste Plan to reduce wastes and recover useful organic materials. Forty two biomass sources from the following categories were inventoried: forestry residue, agricultural field residue, municipal solid waste, animal manures, and food packing/processing. The inventory was completed at a county level, resulting in per county and state biomass totals.

NEW LOOK: Headline as a Heading

WSU Engineers Inventory Biomass and Bioenergy in Washington State

The Department of Ecology (Ecology) funded the Washington State University (WSU) Department of Biological Systems Engineering to complete a biomass and bioenergy assessment for Washington State. The goal of this work was to support Ecology's Beyond Waste Plan to reduce wastes and recover useful organic materials. Forty two biomass sources from the following categories were inventoried: forestry residue, agricultural field residue, municipal solid waste, animal manures, and food packing/processing. The inventory was completed at a county level, resulting in per county and state biomass totals.

Why Are Headlines So Great?

There are three advantages to headlines:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

How to Create an Attention-Grabbing Headline

Here's a few writing and design tips for your eye-catching headline statements:

1. Make it express the _____ of your paragraph(s).
2. Use no more than _____ words.
3. Include a _____.
4. Format the line so it's _____.
5. Use no _____.

Create a Headline For This Information

Due to the presence of coliform bacteria in three of our local wells, we have treated all of our wells with a chlorine-based purifying agent. To avoid illness from either the bacteria or the treatment, we recommend that you take the following steps for the next 7 days:

- Avoid drinking your tap water. If possible, purchase bottled water for drinking.
- Boil any tap water that will come into contact with the skin **before** using it.
- Stop watering your lawn and landscaping, if possible.

If you have any questions regarding the bacteria treatment, please call our office. . .

Use a Familiar Look

The overall look of your document takes planning and careful layout. It doesn't just happen on its own. You will need to come up with a layout that works best for the reader. Taking everything we've already covered into consideration, remember these two simple points.

1. Use a familiar look; don't go too far over the edge.

- a. Keep your familiar letterhead. Your reader will expect to see it.
- b. Use basic agency format by retaining these lines—as needed: Date, Inside Address, To, From, Subject, RE, Enclosure, Attachment, Approval or Reference.
- c. Keep your intended goal for the document, which may become your first key point: To reduce . . . To comply with. . . To complete . . .
- d. Stress your key message(s).
- e. Assign responsibilities and requirements clearly as you would normally do.

2. Stay away from the circus flyer look.

- a. Retain logical order with few graphics, colors, and fonts.

Keep Readability in Mind

As you design the final copy of your document, keep in mind those key things that help to make reading easy for your customer.

1. Use lots of white space—white space is your friend!
2. Take another look at the order of your ideas—will it make sense to your reader?
3. Anticipate reader questions—ask: who, what, where, when, why, and how.
4. Keep related info close together in short sections—don't let your paragraphs get too big.

How to Test Your Writing for Readability

Measure the readability of these paragraphs using the Fog Index.

The institution should determine which year's application it will use and apply this standard consistently to its entire SWS summer school population. The financial aid administrator may make reasonable adjustments on an individual basis, to the computed total applicant resources if individual circumstances affect the family's ability to contribute. Such adjustments include, but are not limited to, a parent contribution which is not forthcoming due to the job loss of the primary wage earner, death of a parent, a business reversal or emergency expenses, and use of current year rather than base year information. Institutional SWS earnings are excused from income control for welfare benefits.

1. Number of words: _____
2. Number of sentences: _____
3. Average sentence length: _____
4. Number of "big" words: _____
5. Percentage of "big" words: _____
6. Average sentence length + percentage of "big" words: _____
x 0.4: _____
7. FINAL FOG INDEX: _____

Each school should decide which year's need standard they will apply to the State Work Study (SWS) summer program. Administrators may adjust the computed total for student resources on a case-by-case basis, if problems arise that decrease a student's total family contributions. Problems might include (but are not limited to) loss of a job, death of the main income parent, health emergencies, or other unplanned expenses. Schools may also adjust the use of the base year's standard for a needy student, if it exceeds the current year's standard. State Work Study earnings are excused from income control for welfare benefits.

1. Number of words: _____
2. Number of sentences: _____
3. Average sentence length: _____
4. Number of "big" words: _____
5. Percentage of "big" words: _____
6. Average sentence length + percentage of "big" words: _____
x 0.4: _____
7. FINAL FOG INDEX: _____

Your Very Own Fog Index

With this blank version of the Fog Index, you can measure the readability of your own work. For documents that go to co-workers, your readability should measure between grade 9 and 11. For public documents, readability should be around grade 6.

Select a writing sample of complete sentences that is at least 100 words.

Step 1. Number of words: _____

Step 2. Count the number of sentences: _____

Step 3. Average sentence length: _____

Step 4. Count the number of "big" words: _____

(For exceptions See page 7.)

Step 5. Percentage of "big" words: _____

Step 6. Add Step 3 + Step 5 _____

Step 7. _____ x 0.4: _____

Step 8. FINAL FOG INDEX: _____

DATE
ORDER OF SUSPENSION

NAME
ADDRESS
CITY, STATE, ZIP

LICENSE NO:

BIRTHDATE:

ON _____ 2:01 AM YOUR DRIVING PRIVILEGE WILL BE SUSPENDED FOR FAILURE TO APPEAR/PAY/COMPLY ON CITATION # _____. * RCW 46.20.289. THE SUSPENSION WILL REMAIN IN EFFECT UNTIL YOU ARE NOTIFIED OF REINSTATEMENT BY THIS DEPARTMENT.

TO AVOID SUSPENSION, YOU MUST RESOLVE ALL CHARGES ON THIS CITATION WITH THE COURT INDICATED BELOW AND THE DEPARTMENT MUST RECEIVE PROOF FROM THE COURT BEFORE _____ THE CHARGE (S) HAVE BEEN RESOLVED. QUESTIONS REGARDING THE CITATION AND/OR FINE SHOULD BE DIRECTED TO THE COURT LISTED BELOW.

VIOLATION DATE	VIOLATION REASON	COURT INFORMATION
10-06-1999 *MAY BE MULTIPLE CHARGES	NO VALID LICENSE/C	GRANT CO. DIST CRT 35 C STREET, NW/PO BOX 37 EPHRATA, WA 98823-0037 (509) 754-2011

DO NOT DRIVE AFTER 12:01 AM ON _____ UNLESS WE HAVE NOTIFIED YOU THAT YOU ARE CLEAR TO DO SO.

IF THE SUSPENSION GOES IN EFFECT YOU MUST PAY A REISSUE FEE IN ADDITION TO ANY OTHER LICENSING FEES, BEFORE A NEW LICENSE CAN BE ISSUED. WHEN THE SUSPENSION GOES INTO EFFECT AND YOU HAVE A WASHINGTON STATE DRIVER'S LICENSE IN YOUR POSSESSION, IT MUST BE SURRENDERED TO THIS DEPARTMENT.

AGENT FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF LICENSING
SUSPENSION/REINSTATEMENT SECTION
PHONE: (360) 902-3900

OLD LETTER

NEW LETTER

Date

NAME
ADDRESS
CITY STATE ZIP

DP

License #
Birth Date

On 02-14-2003 at 12:01 a.m. your driving privilege will be suspended.

The Court has notified us that you failed to respond, appear, pay, or comply with the terms of the citation listed below:

<u>Citation Number</u>	<u>Violation Date</u>	<u>Reason for Citation</u>
#00000000	10-06-1999	No Valid License

What do I have to do to avoid suspension of my driving privilege?

1. Contact the court below to find out what you must do to take care of this citation.

GRANT COUNTY DISTRICT COURT
35 C Street, NW/PO Box 37
Ephrata, WA 98823-0037
(509) 754-2011

2. Provide proof that you have satisfied the court's requirements.

After you have satisfied the courts' requirements, they will send us notice showing that this issue has been settled. This may take several days. If you wish, you may take your copy of the Notice of Adjudication form from the court, to any Driver Licensing Office to speed up the process. To find a convenient Driver Licensing Office location look in the government section of your telephone directory or online at www.dol.wa.gov.

What will happen if my driving privilege is suspended?

If you do not make sure the Department of Licensing has received notice that this matter is settled before the date shown above, it will be illegal for you to drive and you must surrender your license to any Driver Licensing Office. You will be required to pay a reissue fee and any other applicable licensing fees before a new license can be issued.

If you have other questions after contacting the court, contact Customer Service at (360) 902-3900 or visit our website, at www.dol.wa.gov.

Document Processing Unit
Driver Responsibility Division

Authority: RCW 46.20.289

What to Do Now?

Use this list of questions as you sit down to “Plain Talk” your next work document:

- 1. What is my document’s goal or purpose?**
- 2. Who is my audience? And do I need to write multiple documents?**
- 3. What will my reader(s) do in response to my document?**
- 4. What key message(s) should my readers find?**

Then use these Plain Talk writing and design reminders:

- 1. Cluster your similar ideas.**
- 2. Use thought triggers: *who, what, where, when, how, why.***
- 3. Attack:** (a) Active vs. Passive voice.
(b) Word choices (shorter).
(c) Sentence length (shorter).
- 4. Work on design structure:** (a) Layout / format
(b) Headings
(c) Lists

Check Out These Plain Language Web sites

- <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/>
“Improving Communication From the Federal Government to the Public”

- <http://www.governor.wa.gov/priorities/plaintalk>
Washington State “Plain Talk” Web site

- <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/government/WArules.cfm>
Manager, Customer Communications, Washington State Department of Labor and Industries, Dana Botka’s article, “‘Plain Talk’ in Washington”

- <http://www.stc.org/confproceed/2002/PDFs/STC49-00022.pdf>
Dana Botka’s article, “From Gobbledygook to Plain English: How a Large State Agency Took on the Bureaucratic Form Letter”

- <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/biblio/0401003.html>
Washington Department of Ecology, “Focus on Plain Talk at Ecology”

- <http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/>
The Plain Language Association International

- <http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/kimble/>
Dr. Joseph Kimble, General and Legal Plain Talk Writing Expert

A Few Other Suggested Resources Related to Words and Writing

Peabody Communications

www.peabodycommunications.com

P.O. Box 1238
Centralia, WA 98531
(360) 280-2317

jordan@peabodycommunications.com