Why Use Plain Language?

Our readers are busy. They want to scan, not read. About 79% of users scan new pages they come across; only 16% read word-by-word.

Plain Language saves money, increases efficiency, and reduces the need for clarification.

(Morkes, J., and Nielsen, J. (1997). Concise, SCANNABLE, and Objective: How to Write for the Web. http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/writing.html)

10 Steps to Plain Writing

1 Know your audience

- Think of why your audience needs to read the document.
- What does my audience already know?
- Write to everyone who is interested, not just technical experts.

2 Organize your thoughts

- Even experts prefer clearly written documents.
- What questions will your audience ask?
- Make sure your audience can find what they need.

3 Summarize main points

- Highlight main points with headers and lists.
- Provide links to more information when necessary.
- Writing an e-mail? Put conclusions in the first paragraph so readers are sure to notice them.

4 Write short sentences and paragraphs

PLEASE COME TO A CESSATION OF MOVEMENT

- Do not use unnecessary words just because they make you sound authoritative.
- Each paragraph should have *one* topic sentence and develop *one* idea.
- In documents, the average sentence length should be **20 words**; 15 on the Web.

5 Use everyday phrases and words

- People relate better to information that talks directly to them.
- Meaningless words and phrases waste space and your reader's time.
- Eliminate unnecessary words - *An absolute success, completely finished, tentatively suggest.*

6 Minimize "Census-speak"

- Acronyms are not unique. Don't assume your reader knows them all.
- Don't use more than two or three abbreviations in each written document.
- Avoid bureaucratic and legal language— "*promoting an informed and inclusive multicultural society.*"

7 Use strong subjects and verbs

Verbs

- Write the action(s) you want the reader to take.
- Use active voice to make clear who is responsible. Passive voice confuses the reader.
- Keep the subject and verb close together to avoid confusion.

8 Define uncommon terms

dic·tion·ar·y
/ˈdikɟ,nɛri / [dik-shuh-ner-ee] n.

- Acronyms and abbreviations distract the attention of your reader.
- Define uncommon terms and use them consistently.
- Define acronyms more than once. If necessary, provide a glossary.

9 Use headings, lists, and tables

- Headings and lists help your audience find the material they want quickly.
- Use tables and illustrations that visually engage your audience.
- Make sure that all the items in a list start with the same part of speech.

10 Proofread

- Review with a pair of fresh eyes—wait two or more days to review or ask a peer to edit.

Use this | Not that

Use this	Not that
must	shall
try	attempt
start	commence
show, prove	demonstrate
rank	prioritize
end, cancel	terminate
use	utilize
in	set forth in
ask for	solicit

Plain Language at Census: http://www.census.gov/aboutus/plain_writing.html

"*If you can't explain something simply, you don't understand it well.*" -Albert Einstein

Plain Language...

is NOT imprecise.

is NOT an attempt to dumb-down information.

does NOT strip out necessary technical and legal information.

is NOT only editorial "polishing" after you finish writing. It's a whole process.

is NOT just using pronouns in a "question and answer" format.

For more examples, go to: http://go.usa.gov/G2o

United States Census Bureau