

Writing in Plain Language

Washington State Guidelines

PLAIN TALK

Understand your customers' needs.

Find out who will be reading your material, their circumstances, and the information they need.

Include only relevant information.

Your customers are looking for specific information. If you try to cover too many topics, you will frustrate them and dilute your message. Stick to the basics and don't describe every detail.

Use words your customers use.

Choose words your customers normally use, not words subject matter experts or your co-workers use. If you must use a specialized term, define it.

Use active voice.

Active voice shows who is responsible for doing what, which tends to eliminate confusion.

Use personal pronouns.

The personal pronouns "you" and "we" can take the place of nouns, such as "all residents" and "the department." When the writer is an "I" or a "we" and the reader is a "you," the reader understands who the message is for, and who is delivering it.

Keep sentences and paragraphs short.

Your document will be easier to read if you keep your sentences short. Try limiting sentences to fewer than 20 words and paragraphs to fewer than six sentences.

Design clear pages.

Your page design is as important to readability as the words you use. The right design will highlight your messages so your customers can scan the document quickly.

For more information on how and why to use these guidelines, read [Washington state's guidelines for writing to customers in plain language.](#)