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.

- Interview staff members.
- Ask your customers/clients.
- Do a usability test.
- Do informal "try-outs" asking for feedback.

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.

- Identify your main point.
- Include only key information.
- Use attachments or links.

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.

- Select the plain, rather than the "formal" word.
- Ask your customer service staff what words they use.
- Listen carefully during usability tests for words customers tend to use.

Use the active voice.

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

- Use personal pronouns, such as "I" or "we," or name the person doing the action.
- Place the subject (the "doer") at the beginning of the sentence.
- Look for the "deadly 7" verbs that signal you might be using passive voice: am, is, are, was, were, be, and been.

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.

- Establish the agency or person sending the letter, in the opening or on the letterhead. Then use "I" or "we."
- Assume the reader is the intended recipient and refer to him or her as "you."

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.

- Cut out unnecessary words.
- Make one point per paragraph.
- Remove information that applies to only a few readers. Put the more specialized information in an attachment or link.

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.

- Pick one or two simple fonts.
- Use bold headlines to break up the text.
- Emphasize important information with bold or italics - but sparingly.
- Choose bullets for lists when the order isn't important.
- Use numbers to show your reader the order or importance of directions and topics in outlines.
- Create white space.
- Align your text. Use a left-justified, ragged-right text alignment for letters.

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