ABCs of Plain Language

presented for the Association of University Centers on Disabilities

Active Voice

- Avoid writing in past tense
- Subject comes first to keep the emphasis on the subject
- Makes it easier to understand who the subject is

Example

The ballots were counted by the volunteers.	**The volunteers count the ballots.**
States the provided insurance	**States providing insurance**

Your Turn! Rewrite the sentences to make the text clear.

Senators were asked to indicate if they agreed with the proposed change.
Participants indicated if they agreed or disagreed with the statement.

Bulleted Lists

- Avoid long lists separated by commas
- Bullets emphasize ideas
- Lists are easier to read
- Encourage future reading by adding Continue Reading with a link for more information

Example

Symptoms include fever, chills, cough, shortness of breath, and fatigue.	**Symptoms include:** • **Fever** • **Shortness of breath** • **Chills** • **Fatigue** • **Cough**

Your Turn! Rewrite the sentences to make the text clear.

To make decisions that reflect best practices, educators take into consideration what they know about child development and learning, each child as an individual, and each child's social and cultural context (from naeyc.org)

Consistent

- Avoid using different terms to describe something
- Use consistent terms throughout
- Build a thesaurus for your organization

Examples of Words that Should be Consistent

Student	vs.	**Child**	vs.	**3rd Grader**

People with disabilities	vs.	**Individuals with disabilities**

Senior citizens	vs.	**The elderly**

U.S.	vs.	**US**	vs.	**America**

> **Your Turn!** Consider inconsistent terms in your organization.
>
> Assign a point person to take the lead on having a consistent list of terms. Write some of the terms below.

Doublets

- Avoid using two different consecutive words to describe the same thing
- These are words with similar meanings used, where both words are not required.

Example

Knowledge and information	Choose one
Cease and desist	Stop
Begin and commence	Start

> **Your Turn!** Rewrite the sentences to make the text clear.
>
> The car came with a warranty providing a guarantee the car will operate.
> The abbreviated and abridged version was available online.

Explain

- Use definitions to explain complex terms.
- Only define terms not commonly used.
- Make instructions clear and easy for your user to understand.
- Assess what your users already know about the subject.

Example

Please take a number to secure your place in line. Ring the bell if you need assistance.	**If the counter is unattended, please ring bell for attention. To continue shopping while your order is being fulfilled, please take a number.**
Federal statutes prohibit discrimination in the workplace.	**These laws protect people against discrimination. Discrimination is when a person is treated unfairly or badly because a person is part of a particular group.**

Your Turn! Rewrite the sentence to make the text clear.

Fill out the absentee ballot and return in the mail.

Avoid Filler Phrases

- Avoid using filler phrases, which are needless words and phrases that do not add meaning to the text.
- Choose concise words and phrases

Example

AUCD likes to think outside of the box when it comes to accessibility.	**AUCD serves people with disabilities in creative ways.**
Having a diverse group of people is value added to the process.	**Having a diverse group of people is important. They may have more to add to the conversation.**

Your Turn! Rewrite the sentence to make the text clear.

Let's put a pin in this conversation for now.

Guide User

- Who is your audience?
- What does your audience already know about the subject?
- What does your audience need to know?
- What questions will your audience have?
- What is the best outcome for your agency? What do you need to say to get this outcome?
- What is the best outcome for your audience? What do you need to say to get this outcome?

Your Turn!

Think about a brochure you regularly give to people. Who is your audience? What is the best outcome for your audience? What do you need to say to get this outcome? Write your answers below.

Heading

- Use headings to help organize ideas.
  - Question headings: "Why do we use headings?"
  - Statement Headings: "This is the heading."
  - Topic Headings: "Application"
- Add bold and italics to highlight concepts

Example

To vote via mail-in ballot, request a ballot online. Once you receive your ballot, fill it out and return to cast your vote.	**How can I vote with a *mail-in ballot?*** Visit www.vote.gov to request a mail-in ballot. You will receive the ballot in your mailbox. Open the envelope and follow the instructions carefully. Use a blue or black ink pen to mark your choice. Be sure to sign both envelopes. To cast your vote, put the ballot back in the large envelope and seal it. You do not need to address the envelope or add a stamp. That has already been done for you. Place it in the mailbox for a mail carrier to pick up.

Information Organized

- Avoid starting text with information important to you
- Start your text by stating what your purpose and goal for sharing the information is
- The most essential information should be at the beginning. Include background information at the end. Background information includes things like your organization's name and mission statement.

Example

The State University and Developmental Disabilities Council are collaborating on a survey of the needs of people with disabilities in our community. This survey is an annual assessment of needs. This survey will help to determine needs in this upcoming year.	This survey will assess community needs in the upcoming year. [Survey] Thank you for taking the time to complete. This annual survey is a collaboration of State University and the Developmental Disabilities Council.

Jargon

- Avoid using complicated language to impress the reader
- Make technical language as clear as possible
- Substitute with everyday language

Example

As an organization, the information disseminated in communication must remain bipartisan.	The information our organization gives people should support everyone and their ideas.
Pass me the sodium chloride.	Pass me the salt.

Your Turn! Rewrite the sentence to make the text clear.

During our afternoon assembly, we will discuss federal legislature relating to accommodations.

a<u>K</u>ronyms

- Avoid acronyms and abbreviations
- Common abbreviations are okay (PhD, ATM, BMW, FBI)
- Consider a nickname rather than an acronym
  - The Developmental Disabilities Council can be shorted to "the Council"
- Don't provide acronyms for terms you don't use

Example

TAALC	Teaching Age Appropriate Learning through Communication

Your Turn! Rewrite the sentences to make the text clear.

The Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities National Training Center provides mental health services for people with developmental disabilities. The Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities National Training Center is a collaboration between the University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities.

Positive <u>L</u>anguage

- Avoid double negatives

Examples

If the application is not signed, it cannot be approved.	The application must be signed to be approved.
Now fewer than five people	Five people at a minimum

Your Turn! Rewrite the sentence to make the text clear.

An application for a grant does not become void if it does not include a budget.

Modifiers

- A modifier is a word or phrase that describes another word or group of words. That word or phrase could be a noun, verb or an adjective.
- Avoid using common modifiers, as they don't add anything to the sentence
- Examples of modifiers include: absolutely, actually, completely, really, quite, totally, very

Examples

This is quite literally one of the very best resources I have actually seen.	**This is one of the best resources I have ever seen.**

Your Turn! Rewrite the sentences to make the text clear.

We are completely sure the data is correct. There is absolutely no reason for the application to verified without proof.

proNouns

- Address the user by using "you"
- Define who "you" is. For example, "This regulation tells you, the loan applicant, how to apply."
- Speak to the person reading your document
- Convey responsibility to the user
- Avoid using she/her or he/his

Examples

Individuals and organizations wishing to apply should submit the application by Tuesday.	**If you wish to apply, submit your application by Tuesday.**

Your Turn! Rewrite the sentence to make the text clear.

The applicant should submit his or her request no later than Tuesday if he or she wishes to apply.

Omit Detail

- Organizational information is more important to you and less important to the user.
- Move organization information to the end or footer

Prepositions

- Avoid using prepositions (of, to, on)

Examples

At this point in time	Now
On a monthly basis	Monthly

Your Turn! Rewrite the sentence to make the text clear.

At this point in time, our organization meets with the state government on a monthly basis.

Questions

- Avoid FAQs
- Well-written documents do not need FAQs to answer user questions.

Redundancy

- Omit redundant words

We worked together on a joint project to improve accessibility of health resources.	We worked together to improve health accessibility.

Your Turn! Rewrite the sentence to make the text clear.

She independently created a program by herself without the help of others.

Short Sentences

- Limit each sentence to one idea
- Break up complex sentences into two or more sentences.

Tables

- Tables make complex material easier to understand
- Utilize 'if then' tables to break up information

If:	and:	then the percentage of the deduction is:
a tribe requests an increase in the deduction through a tribal resolution	they send us a written request	the percentage requested by the tribe
an authorized tribal representative requests a decrease in the deduction	we approve the decrease	the percentage requested, with a one percent minimum

Universal Design

- Things designed should be available to as many people as possible.
- Create things with a wide range of audiences in mind.

Verbs

- Avoid hidden verbs. These are verbs converted into nouns.
- These include words that end with -ment, -tion, -sion, and -ance

Undertake a calculation	**calculate**
The production of accurate statistics	**Accurate statistics were produced.**

Your Turn! Rewrite the sentence to make the text clear.

A thorough investigation of the application was sent for an analysis.

Whitelist

- For common words and phrases that cannot be shortened, these phrases can be whitelisted.
- For example, intellectual and developmental disabilities is a long phrase, however there is not a plain language alternative. In a readability test, use IDD.

eXcess Words

- Omit excess words

If the State Secretary finds that an individual has received a payment to which the individual was not entitled, whether or not the payment was due to the individual's fault or misrepresentation, the individual shall be liable to repay to State the total sum of the payment to which the individual was not entitled.	**If the State agency finds that you received a payment that you weren't entitled to, you must pay the entire sum back.**

Your Audience

- Understand your audience
- Writing for everyone vs. writing for PhD candidates
- Focus on what users want to know

Zzzz

- Design content to be engaging to your reader
- Users will be less likely to add clear, concise material to the "Read Later" pile