ABCs of Plain Language

Active Voice	• Avoid writing in past tense • Subject comes first to keep emphasis on the subject • Makes it easier to understand who the subject is
Bulleted Lists	• Avoid long lists separated by commas • Bullets emphasize ideas • Lists are easier to read
Consistent	• Avoid using different terms to describe something • Use consistent terms throughout • Build a thesaurus for your organization
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.
Explain	• Use definitions to explain complex terms. • Only define terms not commonly used. • Make instructions clear and easy to your user. • Assess what your users already know about the subject.
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
Guide User	• Who is you audience? What does my audience already know about the subject? • What does my audience need to know? What questions will my audience have? • What is the best outcome for my agency? What do I need to say to get this outcome? • What is the best outcome for our audience? What do I need to say to get this outcome?

Highlight	• Use headings help to 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
	• Only highlight the important concepts, otherwise you will dilute their impact

Jargon	• Avoid using complicated language to impress • Make technical language as clear as possible • Substitute everyday language
aKronyms	• Avoid acronyms and abbreviations • Common abbreviations are okay: PhD, ATM, BMW, FBI • Consider a nickname rather than anan acronym: The Developmental Disabilities Council can be shorted to the Council • Don't provide acronyms for terms you don't use
Positive Language	• Avoid double negatives

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. Example include absolutely, actually, completely, really, quite, totally, very
pro**N**ouns	• Address the user by using "you" • Define who "you" is, i.e. 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
Omit Extra 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 like of, to, on
Questions	• Avoid FAQs • Well-written documents do not need FAQ's to answer user questions
Redundancy	• Omit redundant words
Short **S**entences	• 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
Universal **D**esign	• 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 • The end with -ment, -tion, -sion, and -ance
Whitelist	• For common phrases that cannot be shortened, these phrases can be whitelisted.
e**X**cess Words	• Omit excess words
Your Audience	• Understand your audience • Writing for everyone vs. for academics • Focus on what users want to know, state it out loud
Zzzz	• Design content to be engaging to your reader • Users will be less likely to add clear, concise material to the "Read Later" pile