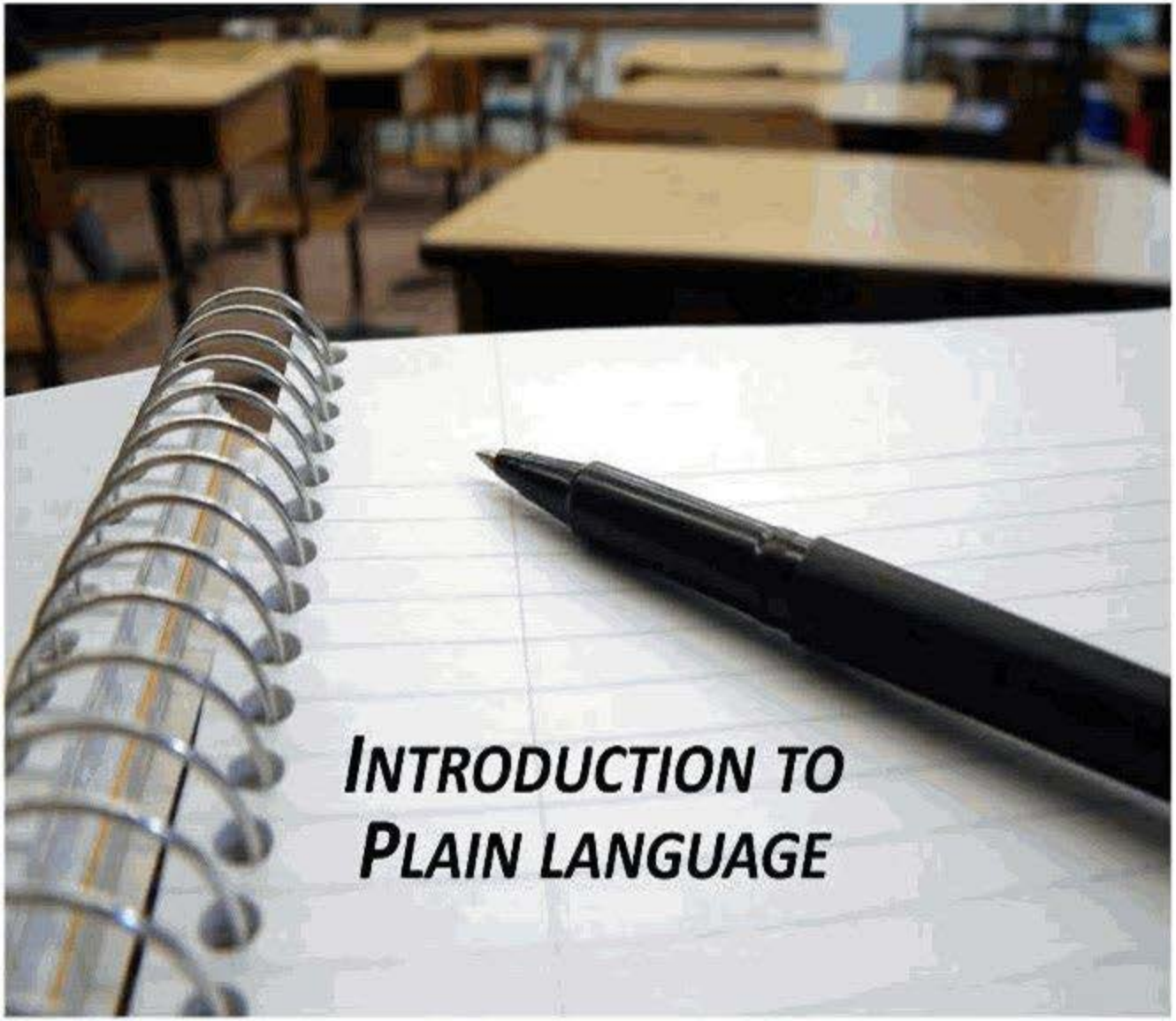
INTRODUCTION TO
PLAIN LANGUAGE

The Introduction to Plain Language course will address these topics:

What Is Plain Language?

The Plain Writing Act

The Plain Writing Act of 2010 requires Federal agencies to use "clear government communication that the public can understand and use."

The Plain Writing Act requires agencies to use plain writing in every paper or electronic letter, publication, form, notice, or instruction, except regulations. Regulations are addressed in Executive Orders.

Federal Plain Language Guidelines

Federal Plain Language Guidelines address how we should implement the Act.

Guidelines – and other materials – are available at the U.S. Government Plain Language website.

DoD's Plain Language Pledge

We are committed to writing all documents using plain language principles as appropriate. This includes not only those public documents required by the Plain Writing Act of 2010, but our internal documents. By using plain language, we will achieve two objectives:

1. Become a more efficient and cost-effective agency by providing clear guidance to our personnel; and

2. Help to make government more accessible to the public.

What is Plain Language?

Plain language is communication that your readers can understand the first time they read it.

In a plain language document, readers can achieve three objectives:

A. Find what they need;
B. Understand what they find; and
C. Use what they find to meet their needs.

The examples on the following slides show how using plain language helps readers understand your meaning.

At the end of the course, you will find a list of resources on plain language. These include links to the U.S. Government Plain Language Website and the DoD Plain Language Website.

Plain Language Matters

Before:

The OST meeting was attended by 6 FMD officials and major decisions were made on TRP processes.

After:

On June 4, the Oversight and Statistical Team made the following changes to travel-related payments …

Before:

In the case where the applicant's age meets or exceeds 65 years, failure to complete blanks 7 and 8 in addition to blank 5 may result in substantial delays in processing.

After:

If you are 65 or older, complete blanks 7 and 8 in addition to blank 5.

Before:

Due to excessive pushing of random buttons by impatient users – which has led to loss of data, compromising of internal integrity, and steep increase in requests for technological fixes – the Western Region DF-492 database that serves customers in most states in the West (with the exception of Minnesota and North Dakota) has experienced a temporary shutdown.

After:

The Western Region DF-492 database is temporarily shut down. The database will be available …

Plain Language is ...

1. Writing for your audience;
2. Organizing your writing;
3. Shortening paragraphs and sentences;
4. Simplifying word choices;
5. Using lists; and
6. Developing reader-friendly websites.

Plain Language Is Not ...

1. Writing less precisely;
2. “Dumbing down” or using playful language or baby talk;
3. Attempting to be folksy or too informal; or
4. Leaving out necessary technical or legal terms.

Why Use Plain Language?

Plain language accomplishes six items:

A. Shows customer focus;
B. Communicates effectively;
C. Increases reader comprehension;
D. Reduces questions from readers;
E. Makes government services accessible; and
F. Increases readers' trust in government.

Writing for Your Audience

Writing for Your Audience

This section addresses three items:

1. Understanding the needs of your audience;

2. Accessing information if you don't know the needs of your audience; and

3. Using "we" and "you" when writing for the individual and when addressing the needs of multiple audiences.

Consider Your Audience

Before you begin writing, answer these four questions:

1. Who is my audience?
2. What does my audience already know about the subject?
3. What does my audience need to know?
4. What questions will my audience have?

If you do not know the answers to any of those questions, here are 3 suggestions:

A. Ask colleagues who work closely with your stakeholders;
B. Find out if stakeholders have written letters to your organization; and
C. Research your audience on the internet.

Remember: It's About the Audience, Not the Writer

Instead of thinking: "What do I want to say?"

Consider asking:
"What does my audience need to know?"

Instead of thinking: "How can I protect my interests?"

Consider asking:
"How can I serve my readers' interests?"

Instead of thinking: "How can I impress my readers?"

Consider asking:
"How can I communicate what my readers need to know?"

Using “We” and “You”

Use “we” and “you” instead of nouns (such as “the applicant” and “the processing agency”).

“We” and “you” can make your sentences more straightforward and help your readers feel you are speaking directly to them. This makes your message seem more relevant.

Five Guidelines:

1. Use “we” or “our” to refer to your agency;
2. Use “you” for the reader;
3. In a Q&A format, use “I” in the questions and “you” in the responses;
4. If using “you” to address more than one audience, write separate messages to each audience; and
5. Don't use “we” if you are referring readers to more than one office within your organization.

Examples of Using “We” and “You” to Write to One Person

Even though your document may affect millions, speak to the person who is reading it. Readers are more apt to pay attention if they feel you are speaking directly to them.

Use “you” instead of “he or she” to reduce awkwardness and write to the individual.

Before (stilted and awkward):

“The applicant must provide his or her mailing address and his or her identification number.”

After (directly addresses the individual reader):

“You must provide your mailing address and identification number.”

Examples of Using “We” and “You” to Write to Many People

To reduce confusion when you are trying to address more than one group, use “you” and write a separate message to each group.

Before (confusing and vague):

“Individuals and organizations wishing to apply must file applications with the appropriate offices in a timely manner.”

After (clearer):

“You must apply at least 30 days before you need the certification at either of the following two locations.

1.If you are an individual, apply at the office in the State where you reside.

2.If you represent an organization, apply at the office in the State where your headquarters is located.”

Organizing Your Writing

Organizing Your Writing

This section addresses three guidelines:

1.Use one of two basic organizational structures for most of your writing:

A. Chronological order; or
B. Reverse pyramid.

2. Break your writing into short sections.

3. Use headings to guide the reader.

Organizational Structure #1: Chronological Order

Here are two scenarios to use chronological order.

1. Use chronological order for process descriptions or instructions.

2. Present the steps in the order they need to happen.

Examples:

Paragraph 1: The first step in the application process is to determine if you are eligible for the grant. The grant is open to those who ... If you have questions on eligibility, contact ...

Paragraph 2: The second step is completing the application form. The form is available at http ... Below are instructions for completing that form ... If you need assistance with the form, contact ...

Paragraph 3: The dates for processing the forms are as follows:... You can check on the status of your application on this website...

Organizational Structure #2: Reverse Pyramid

Here are two scenarios to use reverse pyramid order.

1.Use this style when explaining a regulation or writing a report.

2.Provide overview or summary information first, followed by the exceptions, details, or examples.

NOTE: Most newspaper articles are written in this style.

Examples:

Paragraph 1 of a regulation explanation: Explain how to ship service dogs to other countries.

Paragraph 2: Explain how to ship service dogs to countries that are currently in war or conflict status.

Paragraph 3: Describe where to check on changing status of countries.

Section 1 of a report: Give a summary or overview stating the monetary cost and personnel commitment involved.

Section 2: Give more explanation of the monetary costs.

Section 3: Give more explanation of the personnel costs.

Make Short Sections

Why should you break your document into short sections?

Readers have three tendencies:

1. Tend to skip over large passages of text;
2. Get lost in long paragraphs; and
3. May be intimidated by dense blocks of text.

Break up large blocks of text into smaller sections and use a heading to indicate a new section.

Each new section should consist of three items:

1. Address one idea;
2. Have 1-3 short paragraphs; and
3. Have a separate heading.

Why Headings Are Useful

1. Your reader might come to your document looking for an answer to a specific question or concern.

2. Your reader may want to browse a document for an overview of the content before reading the document more carefully.

Instead of thinking:
"Headings are a waste of space."

Focus on the audience and think:
"Clear and frequent headings allow the reader to move through a document and find needed information quickly."

Types of Headings

Headings help organize the information and guide the reader.

They can be topics, statements, or questions.

A topic heading is typically a word or short phrase that conveys minimal meaning. It could be used at the beginning of a major section in a document.
Example: Headings

A statement heading can be a phrase or short sentence and conveys more information than a topic heading.
Example: Headings Help Guide a Reader

A question heading is the most reader-friendly type of heading and is best to use if you know the questions your readers have.
Example: Why Do We Use Headings?

Can a Heading be Too Long?

Headings should not overwhelm the content. Make your heading shorter than the content following it.

Example (heading overwhelms content):

"Do I have to file a newspaper notice of my activities before I begin operations?"

"Yes."

Example (heading is shorter than content):

"Must I publish a public notice?"

"Yes. You must publish a notice of your operations in a local newspaper before you begin."

Writing Your Document

Writing Your Document

In this section of the course, we will look at six tools you can use to make your document easy to understand.

A. Guidelines for writing paragraphs in a plain language style;

B. Methods for improving your sentences;

C. Techniques you can use at the word and phrase level;

D. Aids to make your final product easier to read and navigate (e.g., lists and white space);

E. Basic guidelines for web writing; and

F. Tips for final review.

Paragraphs: General Guidelines

To make your paragraphs easy to read and navigate, here are four guidelines:

1. Make each paragraph short, typically fewer than 7 lines of text.

2. Have only one topic in each paragraph. If you start a new thought or topic, make a new paragraph.

3. Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence that announces the contents of the paragraph.

4. Link your paragraphs with transition words (e.g., first, second, in contrast, however, also).

Paragraphs: Put the Main Idea First

The order for your paragraph should be topic sentence, main idea, and supporting ideas, exceptions, or special conditions.

A reader cannot process details without first knowing the main idea.

Confusing order:

The personnel office can help if you don't have paperwork on your official start date or the official date differs from your records. Since your official starting date is important for calculating your pay, check that. The amount you receive in retirement depends on your years of service.

Clearer when main idea is at the beginning:

The amount you receive for retirement is based on your years of service. So, check that your records and the official records agree on the date you started working. The records office can help you if you find discrepancies.

Sentences: Make Them Short

Write in short sentences, usually fewer than 20 words per sentence. Short sentences convey complex information better because they break information into easier-to-process chunks.

Example (too long and unnecessarily confusing):

Once the candidate's goals are established, one or more potential employers are identified. A preliminary proposal for presentation to the employer is developed and presented to an employer who agrees to negotiate an individualized job that meets the employment needs of the applicant and real business needs of the employer.

Example (shorter and clearer):

Once we establish your goals, we identify one or more potential employers. We prepare a preliminary proposal to present to each employer. Each employer may then negotiate a job that meets the needs of both the employer and you.

Sentences: “If-Then” Issues

Clearly separate each “if-then” provision from another one. To further emphasize the separation, put each of the “if-then” provisions in a separate paragraph or use bullets.

Example (convoluted and confusing):

We must receive your completed application form on or before the 15th day of the second month following the month you are reporting if you do not submit your application electronically or the 25th day of the second month following the month you are reporting if you submit your application electronically.

Two Examples (shorter and clearer):

A.If you submit your form electronically, we must receive it by the 25th of the second month following the month you are reporting.

B. If you submit your form other than electronically, we must receive ...

Using Plain Language Principles in Your Word Choices

Four ways to apply plain language principles when choosing your words:

A. Use active voice;
B. Avoid hidden verbs;
C. Avoid “shall;” and
D. Use common, everyday words.

These actions will be explained in more detail in the next few pages.

Words: Use Active, Not Passive Voice

Active voice is more clear, concise, and direct.

To write in the active voice, tell your reader who does what – in that order.

The below image shows three examples of active voice.

Examples:

Who	Does what
You	must submit your application by November 10.
The hiring official	will decide on your eligibility within 30 days of receiving your application.
We	will not consider any comments that we receive after the deadline.

Words: Why Use Active Voice?

Passive voice can disguise who does what. Active voice, on the other hand, makes it clear who does what.

Passive voice example: The memo was written yesterday.

Active voice improvement: The Director wrote the memo yesterday.

Passive voice can be awkward and wordy, and can sound evasive. Active voice, on the other hand, is concise and direct, and can seem more honest.

Passive voice example: The application must be completed by the applicant and received by the financial office at the time designated.

Active voice improvement: We must receive your completed application by the deadline that we establish.

Words: Avoid Hidden Verbs

Hidden verbs are verbs disguised as noun phrases. They are generally longer than their true verb forms. Using hidden verbs distances you from your reader.

Five Examples:

A. Replace “conduct an analysis” with “analyze.”
B. Replace “present a report” with “report.”
C. Replace “do an assessment” with “assess.”
D. Replace “provide assistance” with “help” or “assist.”
E. Replace “come to the conclusion that” with “conclude.”

Words: Avoid “Shall” and “Shall Not”

“Shall” and “shall not” are ambiguous and not part of everyday speech. Use a clearer alternative.

The below image shows six examples of what to use instead of "shall" and "shall not".

To Express:	*Use:*
Is required to – obligation	Must
Is required not to / is not allowed to – prohibition	Must not
Is permitted to – discretionary action	May
Is not permitted to	May not
Ought to – recommendation	Should
Future	Will
From Richard Wydick, Plain English for Lawyers, 5th edition (2005).	

Words: Use Simpler Terms

Get rid of excess words.
Reread what you wrote and see if you can say the same thing with fewer words. Usually, you can find several words you can simplify or eliminate.

Remove pretentious words from your writing.
Your goal when writing for the public is to provide information, give instructions, or relay rules. Common, everyday words will help you reach that goal.

Consider using contractions.
They're often acceptable.

Four Examples:

A. Instead of "date of demise," use "date of death."
B. Instead of "implement" or "commence," use "start."
C. Instead of "attempt," use "try."
D. Instead of "in the event that," use "if."

Words: Acronyms, Jargon, and Technical Terms

Limit acronyms and jargon and define technical terms.

It's your field, so those words make sense to you. To an outside reader, jargon, acronyms, and technical terms interfere with understanding your message.

Acronym: Use an acronym only if you are using that term several times. Spell out the acronym the first time you use it. Your reader can only remember about 2 new acronyms, so limit the number you use.

Jargon: Limit your use of discipline-specific jargon. Your reader is knowledgeable, but may not know your discipline. For example, you may know international travel rules while your reader knows airplane mechanics.

Technical Term: If you must use a scientific or technical term, define it. After you define it, see if you can use the definition instead of the term. Instead of saying "myalgic encephalomyelitis," say "chronic fatigue syndrome."

Navigational Aids: Use Bulleted Lists

Bulleted lists help the reader when there is a series of requirements.

Don't say:

Each well drilling application must contain a detailed statement including the following information: the depth of the well, the casing and cementing program, the circulation media (mud, air, foam, etc.), the expected depth and thickness of fresh water zones, and well site layout and design.

Instead, say:

In your application for a drilling permit, include the following five items:

1. Depth of the well;
2. Casing and cementing program;
3. Circulation media (mud, air, foam, etc.);
4. Expected depth and thickness of fresh water zones; and
5. Well site layout and design.

Navigational Aids: Use Numbered Lists

Numbered lists can help the reader understand the order of events or complete all steps in a process.

Example with four steps:

When a foreign student presents a completed Form I-20:

1. Enter the student's admission number from Form 94;
2. Endorse all copies of the form;
3. Return a copy to the student; and
4. Send a copy to the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Navigational Aids: Final Notes on Lists

Keep lists to 7 items maximum. If you have more items, separate your long list into 2 or more shorter lists, each with its own lead-in sentence.

Use a lead-in sentence to explain your list. The below image shows how adding a leading sentence can be helpful to the reader. In the left column of the table below, it's unclear who must bring the supplies.

Don't say	Say
Classroom supplies: • A tablet; • A pen or pencil; and • The paperwork you sent us when you first applied for class.	Classroom Supplies When you come to class, you should bring the following: • A tablet; • A pen or pencil; and • The paperwork you sent us when you first applied for class.

Writing for the Web

Writing for a website is **similar** in two ways to other kinds of writing you do.

1.Readers come to your website looking for answers to their questions. They want to be able to find answers and understand those answers.

2.Web readers still need you to apply plain language principles, including the use of short paragraphs, headings, and everyday words.

However, there are two **differences** between print and web writing concerning:

1. The way people read websites; and

2. Speed of access.

How People Read Websites

When you are writing for the web, remember that people read websites differently than print material. Here are three things to consider.

A.In a 2008 study, based on analysis of 45,237 page views, Nielsen found that web users only read about 18% of what's on a page.

B.As the number of words on a page goes up, the percentage read goes down.

C.So, to get readers to read half of your words, limit each page to 110 words or fewer.

Web Readers and Speed

Web readers, even more than print readers, focus on speed of access. Here are three items to think about.

1. Web readers dislike PDFs. If you must use a PDF, write a short summary of the content of the PDF so readers can decide whether to open the PDF.

2. Links are only useful if the reader truly needs that information. If you link to another web page, describe the content of the link so readers can decide whether to jump to the new page.

3. Although a media-rich website may be flashier, it may slow down access. Put the most essential information in an easy-to-access format so readers can quickly get needed information.

Final Review: Check for Reader Comprehension

Find a friend.

Get someone outside your discipline to read your work. You and your colleagues understand the subject of your writing. Someone outside your work group can more easily show you where members of the public will be confused. For a website, pre-test the site with a small, public group.

Readability tests.

These are formulas for evaluating the readability of text, usually by counting syllables, words, and sentences. Although rough guides, they can be useful tools. Search for “readability tests” on the internet.

Review your word choices.

Look for inconsistencies, wordiness, jargon, etc. Read your document aloud if that helps you catch errors.

Proofread.

Use the grammar and spell-checking features that are part of many word-processing programs. Then, look for errors the checking features commonly miss (e.g., “plan writing” instead of “plain writing”). Finally, ask someone else to proofread your document.

Final Review: Preview Your Layout

As a final step, examine how the document will appear to your reader using these four questions.

1. **Did you use visual elements** such as bullets, underline, bold, italics, or color to draw the reader's attention to important points?

2. **Did you use white space** to separate ideas or topics?

3. **Were you consistent** in your design and style? For example, if one main heading is 14-point or dark green, all should be that way.

4. **Are your headings informative** enough for the reader to know what will be in the next section?

Additional Resources: Websites

DoD: Plain Writing

This site includes three items:

1.A link to DoD Instruction 5025.13, "DoD Plain Language Program";

2. How to nominate a DoD document for plain language review; and

3.Resources like additional training courses, writing guides, and instructional videos.

Click to access the DoD: Plain Writing Website

U.S. Government: Plain Language

This extensive website is the official Plain Language site. It includes five items:

1. Links to the Plain Writing Act and related Executive Orders;
2. Guidance materials to help agencies comply with the law;
3. Guidelines and examples for writers and editors;
4. Information about free plain language training; and
5. Tips and tools related to plain language.

Click to access the U.S. Government: Plain Language Website

Additional Resources: Websites (continued)

DoD Writing Style Guide and Preferred Usage for DoD Issuances

This style guide may be useful to those writing DoD Issuances

Click to access DoD Writing Style Guide and Preferred Usage for DoD Issuances (PDF)

DoD Manual 5110.04 for Written Material

This two-volume manual provides guidance on correspondence management, written examples, and reference material for DoD writers.

Click to access Volume 1: Correspondence Management (PDF)

Click to access Volume 2: Examples and Reference Material (PDF)

Center for Plain Language: Plain Language Is a Civil Right

This non-profit's site highlights the importance of plain language and includes a toolkit for starting a plain language plan in your organization.

Click to access the Center for Plain Language Website

Federal Register: Plain Language Tools

This website addresses drafting legal documents and rules in plain language.

Click to access the Federal Register Website

Congratulations!

This concludes the Introduction to Plain Language course.

You must continue to the next page to record your training as complete and to view or print your certificate.