

Governor's Plain Language Initiative

A Two-Way Conversation With the People of Florida

*Turning the needlessly complex into understandable communication:
a handbook for state agencies*

Charlie Crist
Governor

Introduction

The way that we as public servants communicate with the people we serve goes a long way toward fulfilling our responsibility to them. That responsibility ranges from routine procedures to issuing instructions that can save lives.

Since it is impossible to speak personally with every citizen, it is vitally important that our methods of written communication be clear, concise, and free of needless verbiage. This includes presentations on agency websites, letters, notices, applications, reports, pamphlets and any other communication meant for public consumption.

We should, of course, be clear and concise in our verbal communications, but since we reach more citizens through the written word, the goal should be to answer the basic questions from the intended audience without those questions being asked. Meeting that goal will allow both human and operational resources to focus on other areas.

Each executive agency – or any agency or business that hears the call to assess their external communication with their customers – should do a thorough review of products and procedures. While the lawyers are often labeled as culprits for producing unclear documents, sometimes unfairly, they must play an important role in the review process.

It makes perfect sense for non-lawyers to be heavily involved in re-writes or “translations” of written communication, but great care must be taken to prevent the elimination of any language that is required. This document will provide guidance for proceeding while keeping that thought in mind.

Executive Order 07-01 calls upon each agency to “adopt a plan to implement Plain Language guidelines and standards” by April 2. Each agency is different, but the review process will enable agency secretaries, directors and their designates to obtain necessary knowledge to formulate those guidelines and standards.

The Executive Order was specific by requiring clear language containing only necessary information presented in a logical sequence. It further called for short sentences written in the active voice that make it clear who is responsible for what. Equally important was the attention to layout and design of a publication. This handbook is designed to assist all agencies in meeting the requirements of the directive.

Any questions may be directed to Bob Sparks, Assistant Chief of Staff for Citizen Services at 850-488-5603.

Organizing the Review

In almost anything that we do, the amount of preparation that goes into a project can have a direct relationship with the project's success. That is certainly true of the effort to write documents in plain English. Each agency probably has a "go-to" person, or small group of people, for writing important letters or documents.

For this project, a group of people with varied skills would be appropriate participants. With the understanding that each agency is different, it should be understood that some from the list below will not apply to your agency or situation. They are merely suggestions.

Those you select, and the point at which you involve them in the project, will depend upon your document, schedule, and budget. Once the standards and guidelines are developed and documents are being "translated", team members can be consulted on a case-by-case basis. Some agencies have detailed guidelines for correspondence, but not for other publications. Others may not be as far along. This information is designed to assist in fulfilling any remaining need in the area of public communication.

A team should comprise at least some of these professionals:

- **Team Leader.** This person should have the authority to make decisions that keep the project moving forward.
- **Lead Writer.** The lead writer ensures the document has a logical structure and simple, clear language. If more than one person is drafting sections of the document, the lead writer ensures the final draft has a consistent tone and the individual parts form a coherent whole.
- **Attorney.** In order to ensure that required language is included and that unnecessary "legalese" can be excluded, a senior attorney – perhaps the General Counsel – should be an important part of the team.
- **Compliance/regulatory officer.** This person can lend guidance to the writers and who understand what information must be included.
- **Production/operations professional.** This person understands the mechanics and costs of printing and mailing documents and pamphlets. This will prevent the improved document from getting ahead of in-house capabilities or budget.
- **Agency-specific expert.** This person can lend advice on the target audience of the publication and the specific information to be conveyed.

Writing in Plain English

There have been numerous articles written and seminars conducted on writing in plain English. Some of you may wish to send a few employees to one of these seminars. With an assist from the federal Securities and Exchange Commission, here are some problems, examples and suggestions for better writing. Some of the common problems are:

- Long sentences
- Passive voice
- Weak verbs
- Needless words
- Legal jargon
- Numerous defined terms
- Abstract words
- Unnecessary details
- Unreadable design and layout

While there can be no boilerplate model for communication, here are some tips that can lead to effective, well-written documents.

Use the active voice with strong verbs

The length of many government documents makes readers yearn for clear words and short sentences. The quickest fix lies in using the active voice with strong verbs. Strong verbs are guaranteed to liven up and tighten any sentence, virtually causing information to spring from the page.

When you start to rewrite or edit your work, highlighting all the verbs can help. You may be surprised by the number of weak verbs, especially forms of 'to be' or 'to have' that you will find. The time spent searching for a precise and strong verb is time well spent. When a verb carries more meaning, you can dispense with many of the words used to bolster weak verbs.

Weak verbs keep frequent company with two more grammatical undesirables: passive voice and hidden verbs. In tandem, they add unnecessary length and confusion to a sentence.

The active and passive voices

Here is a quick refresher on the active and passive voice.

active

The investor buys the stock.

In the active voice, the subject of the sentence, the investor, performs the action, buying stock.

passive

The stock is bought by the investor.

In the passive voice the subject, the stock, is acted upon. The person or the thing doing the action is introduced with 'by.' Sometimes, the person or thing doing the action is deleted, leading to...

passive with agent deleted

The stock is bought.

You do not know who bought the stock.

Readers understand sentences in the active voice more quickly and easily because it follows how we think and process information. Many times the passive voice forces readers to take extra mental steps as they convert the passive into the active.

To recognize the passive voice, ask yourself:

Does the sentence use a form of the verb 'to be' with:

- another verb in the past tense; and
- a prepositional phrase beginning with 'by'?

Remember that it's harder to recognize the passive voice when the object (the phrase introduced with 'by') is left out. When you rewrite the sentence in the active voice, use a strong verb. These examples show how strong verbs and the active voice transform sentences, making them shorter and easier to understand.

before

The foregoing Fee Table **is intended** to assist applicants in understanding the costs and expenses that a permit holder will bear directly or indirectly. The before example uses the passive with agent deleted. We don't know who "intended" to assist applicants. Note how long it took to get to the meat of the sentence: the costs and expenses. Dispensing with the filler words "...to assist applicants in understanding..." moves the reader more quickly to the important points.

after

This table describes the fees and expenses that you may pay if you are granted a permit.

Here's another example:

before

The proxies solicited hereby for the Heartland Meeting **may be revoked**, subject to the procedures described herein, at any time up to and including the date of the Heartland Meeting.

after

You may revoke your proxy and reclaim your right to vote up to and including the day of the meeting by following the directions on page 10.

The plain English version tells you who may revoke a proxy and where to find the information on how to do it. It replaces the abstract "subject to the procedures described herein" with concrete, everyday words, "by following the directions on page 10." It's not enough merely to translate existing texts – the key is to add useful information.

Don't ban the passive voice, use it sparingly

These suggestions are presented as guidelines, not hard and fast rules. The passive voice may make sense when the person or thing performing the action is of secondary importance to another subject that should play the starring role in sentence. Use the passive voice only when you have a very good reason for doing so. When in doubt, choose the active voice.

Find hidden verbs

Does the sentence use any form of the verbs "to be," "to have," or another weak verb, with a noun that could be turned into a strong verb? In these sentences, the strong verb lies hidden in a nominalization, a noun derived from a verb that usually ends in *-tion*.

Find the noun and try to make it the main verb of the sentence. As you change nouns to verbs, your writing becomes more vigorous and less abstract.

before

We made an **application**

We made a **determination**

We will make a **distribution**

after

We **applied**

We **determined**

We will **distribute**

before

We will provide appropriate **information** to teachers concerning

after

We will **inform** teachers about

before

We will have no stock **ownership** of the company.

after

We will not **own** the company's stock.

before

There is the possibility of prior Cabinet **approval** of these appointments.

after

The Cabinet might **approve** these appointments in advance.

Try personal pronouns

No matter how sophisticated your audience is, if you use personal pronouns the clarity of your writing will dramatically improve. Here's why.

First, personal pronouns aid your reader's comprehension because they clarify what applies to your reader and what applies to you.

Second, they allow you to "speak" directly to your reader, creating an appealing tone that will keep your reader reading.

Third, they help you to avoid abstractions and to use more concrete and everyday language.

Fourth, they keep your sentences short.

Fifth, first- and second-person pronouns aren't gender-specific, allowing you to avoid the "he or she" dilemma. The pronouns to use are first person plural (we, us, our/ours) and second-person singular (you, your/yours).

Observe the difference between these two examples:

before

This Summary does not purport to be complete and is qualified in its entirety by the more detailed information contained in the Proxy Statement and the Appendices hereto, all of which should be carefully reviewed.

after

Because this is a summary, it does not contain all the information that may be important to you. You should read the entire proxy statement and its appendices carefully before you decide how to vote.

Omit superfluous words

Words are superfluous when they can be replaced with fewer words that mean the same thing. Sometimes you can use a simpler word for these phrases:

superfluous

in order to
in the event that
subsequent to
prior to
despite the fact that
because of the fact that
in light of
owing to the fact that

simpler

to
if
after
before
although
because, since
because, since
because, since

Another source of superfluous words is "shotgunning": letting loose a blast of words hoping at least one conveys your intended meaning. The simplest solution here is to replace your laundry list of adjectives with a single word or phrase that adequately expresses your intended meaning.

Omitting superfluous words is one of the easiest ways to improve your document because it does not require you to revise sentence structure.

before

The following summary **is intended only** to highlight certain information **contained elsewhere** in this report.

after

This summary highlights information contained in the report.

Positive writing

Positive sentences are shorter and easier to understand than their negative counterparts.

For example:

before

Persons other than the graduates may not sit in the auditorium.

after

Only the graduates may sit in the auditorium.

Also, your sentences will be shorter and easier to understand if you replace a negative phrase with a single word that means the same thing.

For example:

negative compound

not able
not accept
not certain
not unlike
does not have
does not include
not many
not often
not the same
not...unless
not...except
not...until

single word

unable
reject
uncertain
similar, alike
lacks
excludes, omits
few
rarely
different
only if
only if
only when

Use short sentences

No one likes to read a sentence that is two pages long. And yet, lengthy, information-packed sentences choke many documents today. To further complicate matters, these sentences are filled with jargon and legalese. When a sentence is longer and more complex, it is harder to understand any portion of it. Shorter sentences allow writers to move from the general to specific and make it likely that the reader can read the paragraph once to understand it.

Replace jargon and legalese with short, common words

Ruthlessly eliminate jargon and legalese. Instead, use short, common words to get your points across. In those instances where there is no plain English alternative, explain what the term means when you first use it.

If you have been in the financial or legal industry for awhile, it may be hard to spot jargon and legalese in your writing. Consider asking someone outside those circles to check your work for incomprehensible words.

Last, don't create new jargon that is unique to your document in the form of acronyms or other words. It is asking too much of your readers to memorize a new vocabulary while they are trying to understand complicated concepts. Note the following, which is taken from a letter provided by a federal agency:

The standards under CWA and MPRSA for determining the need for testing differ. The requirement for testing of dredged material under the CWA is based on a reason to believe that contaminants are present in the material proposed for discharge and have the potential to cause an unacceptable adverse impact (40 CFR 230.60). Testing under the MPRSA is required when the dredged material does not meet the exclusionary criteria in 40 CFR 227.13(b)3. Once it is determined that testing is needed, however, the physical, biological and chemical (bioassay) tests relied upon for evaluating dredged material are similar (variations may reflect geographic and ecosystem type differences).

This passage talks of "material proposed for discharge" and "unacceptable adverse impact", "exclusionary criteria" and "bioassay."

Would it not be simpler to say that two areas of federal law cover testing of dredged material? The Clean Water Act requires testing if there is reason to believe the local environment will be harmed. The Marine Protection, Research and Sanctuaries Act also prescribes testing, but provides exceptions.

Choose the simpler synonym

Surround complex ideas with short, common words. For example, use *end* instead of *terminate*, *explain* rather than *elucidate*, and *use* instead of *utilize*. When a shorter, simpler synonym exists, use it.

Conclusion

Hopefully, this guide will be of use in evaluating current agency communications and establishing guidelines and criteria for such interaction in the future. Again, it should be remembered that oral communication is equally important and these guidelines should apply to interactions with the citizens whether in the field, in our agencies, or at public gatherings.