

CM Plain Language Style Guide/Cheat Sheet



Format

ARE YOU EFFECTIVELY USING HEADINGS, LISTS, AND BLANK SPACE?

- **USE HEADINGS**
Writing headings as questions can be helpful for presentations
- **LISTS**
No more than 7 items in a list
- **BREAK UP WRITING BY LEAVING BLANK SPACES**
Helps the reader see the structure of the document



DO: Create a list with less than 7 bullets

DO: Leave appropriate blank space to have a linear format



DON'T: Have a wall of text on screen

DON'T: Present information in complex or fancy formats



Audience

ARE YOU WRITING EFFECTIVELY FOR YOUR AUDIENCE IN TERMS OF ACRONYMS, ABBREVIATIONS, READING LEVEL, AND JARGON?

- **LIMIT ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS TO HELP AUDIENCE**
Make abbreviations pronounceable
- The average reading level is equivalent to a 6th grader
- **DON'T USE JARGON**
If the jargon is necessary, quickly follow it with a definition



DO: Write as simple as possible, equivalent to a 6th grade reading level



DON'T: Include unknown words and complex sentences that distract from the main point



Grammar

IS YOUR GRAMMAR AS SHORT AND SIMPLE AS POSSIBLE?

- **REDUNDANCIES**
 - At a later time » later
 - During that time period » During that time or then
 - Will plan in the future » will plan
 - At least 12 years of age or older » at least 12
- **WORDS TO ELIMINATE**
 - Very
 - Closely
 - Easily
 - Extremely
 - Super



DO: Make sentences as simple as possible



DON'T: Use excessive adjectives to fluff up a sentence



Voice

ARE YOU WRITING IN AN ACTIVE VOICE?

- **USE ACTIVE, NOT PASSIVE VOICE**
 - **Passive:** "The application must be completed by the applicant and received by the financial office at the time designated by that office."
 - **Active:** "We must receive your completed application by the deadline that we establish."
- **AVOID SHALL BECAUSE IT IS NOT USED IN EVERYDAY SPEECH**
 - Use "must" or "must not"
 - Use "may" or "should"



DO: Present information directly using everyday speech



DON'T: Use a passive voice or words you wouldn't say during an interpersonal conversation such as "shall"