INTRODUCTION

Circuit Media has prepared a Plain Language Style Guide to assist anyone who needs to convey their message as clearly and plainly as possible. When you write plainly, you communicate your ideas in the simplest, clearest, and most direct way possible. Plain language is all about communicating clearly to your intended reader, organizing your document so readers can find the information they want as fast as possible, and choosing words that create a transparent message. This style guide is broken down into three main sections: Audience, Organization, and Word Choice.

AUDIENCE

An important rule of plain language is writing for your audience. Sometimes, you will have a specific audience, but most of the time, your readers will be part of a wider audience with a range of backgrounds. Before starting to write, you must identify your audience and write for them. This will help identify what information needs to be explained in depth and what could be taken out.

How to pinpoint your audience

- When you begin writing, it is important to **identify your audience.** Questions to consider can include: Who are we talking to? What kind of document would work best for our target audience? What does the audience want or need to know?

- Think about the background knowledge that your audience may already know, this way you won't be repetitive or waste time reviewing material. Also think about what **background knowledge** might need to be corrected or introduced.

- **Anticipate** what kinds of **questions** the audience will have to help incorporate answers within the text and headings.

Speak to the audience, not at them

- Even though your audience could be a large number of people, there's only one person reading it, therefore you should **address them directly.**

- **Pronouns** such as you, yours, we, our, or they can take the place of objective or indirect pronouns and help you avoid using the same pronoun over and over again. Using "you" addresses the readers directly and helps them understand what their responsibility is as a reader and what to take away from the page. For example, addressing the reader as "his or her" does not directly call the reader to action.

- It is important to define who "you" is early on. For example, "this document tells you, the first time home buyer, how to apply for a mortgage."

Write for the intended reader

- Plain language is all about **communicating clearly to your intended reader.** If a document looks too long or complex, a reader might be likely to disregard it. Do not overestimate the reading level or time someone has to read.

- Writing for an individual reader.

  - You might be tempted to address multiple readers at once. If you do this, you risk your message losing focus, clarity, and intent. Different audiences require different messages. If you find yourself needing to address multiple audiences in a single document, use sections to address them separately.

- Don't think about plain language as dumbing down material, but rather making it clear to the **intended audience.** For example, if we are writing for P.h.D. candidates, we will follow the same background information step and meet them at their plain language level. The same is true for a middle schooler - we will follow the background information step and meet those students at their plain language level.

- When writing for a wide audience **limit jargon** and acronyms as much as possible. Unfamiliar jargon and acronyms can distract the reader from the message. If someone doesn't know the industry lingo they would be less concerned about the message you are sending but rather what that single word or phrase might mean. On the other hand, if you know you are writing to members of a specific industry, like healthcare or law, it would detract from your message to explain jargon that they already know.

Voice

- Use words readers are likely to understand. Keep in mind that a term you may naturally use might not be natural to someone who speaks English as their second language, who is not in the same profession, or is confused by distracting wording.

  - For example, while the phrase "familiarize yourself with the documents," might be clear to some audiences, a more direct and understandable way to phrase this request would simply be "read the documents."

- Plain language should eliminate any confusion or unanswered questions. Statements should clearly address the intended audience, necessary information, and any actions that must be taken.

- Tell people what to do, rather than what has been done. In other words, use **active voice.** See the table below for example sentences using active voice to assign a person an action and save time and space.

Passive	Active
The bid has been proposed by the contracting agency.	The contracting agency proposed a bid.
The budget estimate must be included for the bid to be considered finished.	You must include the budget estimate in your bid.

- If you write with a professional voice rather than a conversational one, the actual message could get lost in translation. While some professional wording and jargon is effective in the workplace, it doesn't convey a clear point of action or assign responsibility.

  – For example, the word "shall" should not be used in plain language. This word could be confusing to someone since it is not used in a natural tone or voice. The word "shall" does not give a clear direction to an action and should be avoided.

- Other examples of words that don't convey a conversational voice include:

  – Inquire, Accordingly, Reserve, Ensure, Provide, Utilize

ORGANIZATION

The organization of your page is an important part of the delivery of your message. Strategic organization helps readers find exactly what they are looking for quickly. Many readers do not actually take the time to read but often scan. Organize your document to help readers find what they want, how they want. This section discusses organization strategies such as the inverted pyramid, headings, blank space, and transitions.

The Inverted Pyramid

The Inverted Pyramid **structures information efficiently** for your readers while keeping readers on the page. Every second counts when you're trying to get key points across. Viewers decide within 5 seconds whether they want to continue on reading the page. This means that in those 5 seconds, the viewer needs to be presented the most important information. Think of your page as a pyramid.

Information in the inverted pyramid is ordered according to "weight." The most important information should be at the top with details and examples at the bottom. You can think of this as "what you need to know" at the top and "what is nice to know" at the bottom. Another way to think of the top of the pyramid is to start with your conclusion.

Top of the Pyramid

Instead of grouping information into paragraphs and sections, organize your information with headings and keywords so readers can easily navigate the document.

Middle of the Pyramid

In the middle of the inverted pyramid are the details. This is the section where you will put supporting or explanatory information. It should appeal to a broad audience. You don't want to put specific details in this section that wouldn't be useful to the majority of the readers. Don't forget to keep sentences and paragraphs concise.

Bottom of the Pyramid

At the bottom of the page or pyramid are the explanations. Rather than need-to-know information, this is the nice-to-know information. It is not necessarily the least important information but is least relevant to the main focus at the top of the pyramid.
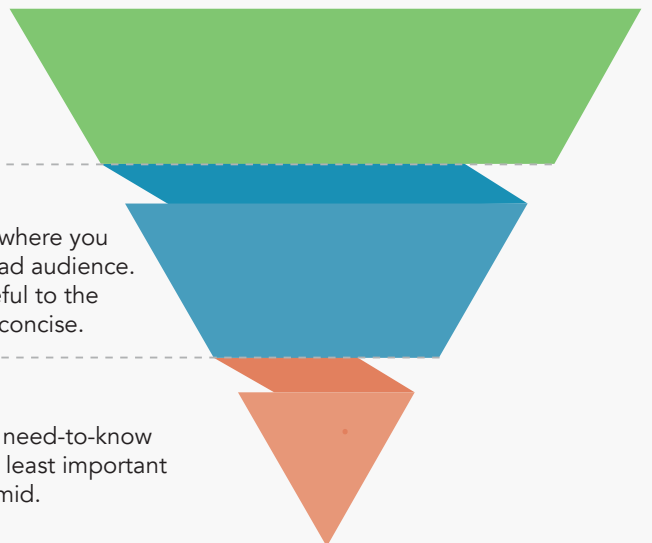
Headings

- Informative headings help the audience navigate the document and quickly find relevant information. Organize your headings to meet your reader's questions and concerns. This can be in several formats: questions, statements, or topics.

    - **Question: "Why do we use headings?"** – Use anticipated questions as headings where possible. This makes it easy for readers to find answers or results. Question-and-Answer organization can be helpful when readers are scanning the page for specific answers.

    - **Statement: "Add useful headings."** – Statement headings are useful when identifying specific information. Using this type of heading breaks up the page and tells the reader what will be talked about and what actions they may need to take.

    - **Topic: "Headings"** – Topic headings are useful when talking about broader subjects. You can also take advantage of these headings when breaking up instructions or processes.

Blank Space

- Ample blank or white space on the page in presenting only essential information instead of filling up a page. Documents without a lot of blank space often dissuade readers from reading. Long **walls of text** are intimidating and hide important information.

- To begin, justify what space you are working with and **identify margins.** If you are creating a poster, website, document, or presentation, there are different appropriate margins. You don't want to waste too much space on borders.

- An ideal page has **layering** or **levels.** We can create this look by using blank space between lines as well as to the left or right of them. For example, bullets that are indented create an organized structure because of the offset spacing.

- Blank space should be used between paragraphs or headings to allow for clear organization. Creating columns instead of one wall of text is another use of blank space that is beneficial to organization and keeping readers attention.

- If you find that there is too much white space, consider making your font bigger.

Lists and Tables

- Using lists and tables throughout your writing will help you eliminate words and avoid walls of text. A great way to diversify your page is to think about writing vertically, using lists and tables. Lists and tables can take the place of paragraphs and help draw the reader's attention. This also helps with efficient usage of blank space.

Transitions

- Transitions are as important to organization as road signs are when you don't know where you're going. Information on or between pages must be linked together by smooth transitions. Depending on the type of organization you use, it is important to transition smoothly.

- When using transitions in plain language you must connect information on your page using transitions such as Also, In Addition, Next, or Finally.

- Transitions can be accomplished when you format your document with Question-and-Answer headings

- Organizing your page in chronological order is another way to create natural transitions throughout your document. When presenting information in chronological order, it is important to use explicit directions such as First, Second, Third or by having dates, times, etc. clearly labeled.

WORD CHOICE

Readers don't want to waste unnecessary time trying to understand difficult, wordy documents. A concise message values your reader's time by providing only what they need or want, and nothing more. There are many times we like to elaborate and add extra words because we think they add clarity, however, they can do just the opposite sometimes. To make your language concise, keep in mind sentence and paragraph length, use lists and tables, and choose your words wisely.

Sentences and Paragraphs

- One way to keep your document concise is to consider sentence and paragraph length. When writing you should aim for **20 or fewer words** per sentence. The more unnecessary words, the less concise you are.

- You don't have to fit all of your information into one sentence. Actually, it's better to use **a few shorter sentences** to get your point across. Each sentence should focus on one subject only. If sentences are broad and touch on multiple points, it is easy for readers to skim over information.

- You don't want your paragraph to come across as a wall of text. Similar to writing sentences, paragraphs should be **short and concise.** Each paragraph should only cover a single topic or step. It is better to have a couple paragraphs with around three sentences each, than one paragraph with 10 sentences. A good rule of thumb is that a paragraph should have at most seven lines.

- The first sentence of every paragraph must **clearly state the topic.** If the information doesn't tie in with that sentence it needs to be in a separate paragraph. It is also easier for the reader to find information easily without having to sort through a long paragraph that covers several topics.

Unnecessary words

- One way to ensure your writing is plain is to consider **word choice.** Some words are unnecessary when writing a sentence. Avoid words that may be repetitive or unfamiliar.

- Often, we want to use several words where one could do the job. For example, instead of saying "at this point in time," the word "now" will suffice.

- Many times we use unnecessary language when trying to make our writing sound formal. Plain language is meant to be quick and easy. Thinking about eliminating excess words helps your sentences be concise. One way to eliminate words is by finding **hidden verbs** disguised as nouns. Below are common examples of excessive phrases that can be shortened for clarity.

Instead of ❌	Use ✅
At a later time	Later
Will plan in the future	Plan
Conduct an analysis	Analyze
Begin and commence	Start
On a monthly basis	Monthly
Come to the conclusion of	Concluded
Provide assistance	Assist

- Avoid abstract or complex words. Complex words can be perceived as a barrier when trying to understand the message clearly. Even if you are talking to professionals, using simpler words doesn't dumb down the writing but simply makes it clearer. Although they may be used in business conversation, below are some examples of words that readers can get caught up on.

Don't Use ❌	Instead Use ✅
Commence	Begin
Monitor	Watch
Profiency	Skill

APPENDIX

To learn more about Plain language guidelines and principles, you can review any of the following resources and materials through our website at www.circuitmedia.com:

- Plain Language Checklist

- Plain Language E-Learning Course

- How to Create an Accessible Document

If you have any questions about plain language or would like assistance on making your content plain, please reach out to us at info@circuitmedia.com.