Destination:

Plain Language

Elizabeth LaPlante
Helen O’Guinn
A Little Engine That Could
Plain Language Defined

Using plain language in your writing helps explain complex information in a simple, easy-to-understand way. Plain language helps readers understand your message the first time they read it.

When you use plain language, your readers can:

- **Find** what they need.
- **Understand** what they find.
- **Use** what they find to meet their needs.
It’s the Law

In 2010, President Obama signed the Plain Writing Act into law. As laws go, it is short and direct. It says that federal agencies should promote “clear Government communication that the public can understand and use.”

The act goes on to define “plain writing” as “clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject.”
12 Areas of Plain Language

- Audience
- Clarity
- Consistency
- Length
- Organization
- Readability
- Sentence Structure
- Separated Topics
- Simplicity
- Tone
- Voice
- Word Choice
12 Areas of Plain Language

- Audience
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- Consistency
- Length
- Organization
- Readability

- Sentence Structure
- Separated Topics
- Simplicity
- Tone
- Voice
- Word Choice
Word Choice

Use common, everyday words to help readers understand your intended meaning. Avoid foreign terms, Latin terms, and legal terms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avoid</th>
<th>Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>facilitate</td>
<td>help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in order to</td>
<td>to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>due to the fact that</td>
<td>because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>utilize</td>
<td>use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g.</td>
<td>for example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with regard to</td>
<td>about</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Word Choice

Abbreviations can create alphabet soup.

When you are 64, you should consider moving from the ACA to Medicare ASAP, unless you have COBRA. Just as you chose from HMOs and PPOs, you can now look at MA plans, MAPDPs, and a wide range of other options. If you have an elderly relative that needs help, you may look beyond Medicare to PACE. If you think you need OOP help, contact your SHIP or SPAP or ask about a QDWI.
Word Choice

Be consistent with your word choices. Synonyms may confuse your reader.

For example, don’t interchange “doctor,” “physician,” and “health care practitioner.”

Choose one and stick to it.
Sentence Structure

Generally, our spoken language flows in logical order:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Direct Object</th>
<th>Indirect Object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passport applicants</td>
<td>must submit</td>
<td>valid ID</td>
<td>to the government.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Trouble can begin when writers reorganize for emphasis.
To receive a passport, a valid ID must be presented to the government.

The government requires a valid ID to issue a passport to individuals wishing to travel abroad.

To apply for a passport, applicants must submit to the government a valid ID.

Valid IDs are required by the government for individuals wishing to obtain a passport to travel abroad.

Individuals must submit to the government for traveling abroad a valid ID.
Readability

Readable documents have:

- **Short sentences** and **paragraphs** to help readers get through important information
- **Sections** with useful **headings** to break text into digestible chunks
- **White space** to add visual appeal
- **Lists** and **tables** to clarify complex material
4/1/2015

Jane Doe
123 Main Street
Anytown, ST 00000

DCN: 000000000000000

Dear Ms. Doe,

It was a pleasure to receive your letter regarding claim number 0000000000000000 at Medicare. We performed research on the claim you are inquiring about. Our research found the following about the claim. The services were received on 2/10/2015 and the total billed amount on the claim was $125.90. Medicare processed the claim on 3/4/2015, considered $66.86 and mailed a check in the amount of $53.26 to you. If you did not receive a check for the amount of $53.26, you should correspond with us so that we can investigate and take all the actions that are required to remit the payment to you again.

Medicare

4/1/2015

Jane Doe
123 Main Street
Anytown, ST 00000

DCN: 000000000000000

Dear Ms. Doe,

Thank you for contacting Medicare.

We received your letter regarding claim number 0000000000000000 for $125.90 for services you received on 2/10/2015.

We processed the claim on 3/4/2015 and sent you a check for $53.26. If you did not receive the check, please call us at the number below, and we will reissue the check.
Dear [Name]:

Please furnish medical evidence in support of your pension claim. The best evidence to submit would be a report of a recent examination by your personal physician, or a report from a hospital or clinic that has treated you recently. The report should include complete findings and diagnoses of the condition which renders you permanently and totally disabled. It is not necessary for you to receive an examination at this time. We only need a report from a doctor, hospital, or clinic that has treated you recently.

This evidence should be submitted as soon as possible, preferably within 60 days. If we do not receive this information within 60 days from the date of this letter, your claim will be denied. Evidence must be received in the Department of Veterans Affairs within one year from the date of this letter; otherwise, benefits, if entitlement is established, may not be paid prior to the date of its receipt. SHOW VETERAN’S FULL NAME AND VA FILE NUMBER ON ALL EVIDENCE SUBMITTED.

Privacy Act Information: The information requested by this letter is authorized by existing law (38 U.S.C. 210 (c)(1)) and is considered necessary and relevant to determine entitlement to maximum benefits applied for under the law. The information submitted may be disclosed outside the Department of Veterans Affairs only as permitted by law.

The body (without letterhead) of the "before" letter from a study by Reva Daniel for the VA Regional Office, Jackson, Mississippi

Dear [Name]:

We have your claim for a pension. Our laws require us to ask you for more information. The information you give us will help us decide whether we can pay you a pension.

What We Need

Send us a medical report from a doctor or clinic that you visited in the past six months. The report should show why you can’t work. Please take this letter and the enclosed Guide to your doctor.

When We Need It

We need the doctor’s report by [date]. We’ll have to turn down your claim if we don’t get the report by that date.

Your Right to Privacy

The information you give us is private. We might have to give out this information in a few special cases. But we will not give it out to the general public without your permission. We’ve attached a form which explains your privacy rights.

If you have any questions about this letter, you may call us at 1-800-227-1000. The call is free.

The body (without letterhead) of the "after" letter from a study by Reva Daniel for the VA Regional Office, Jackson, Mississippi
Voice

Use active voice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active Voice</th>
<th>Passive Voice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clarifies who is doing what</td>
<td>Obscures who is doing what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is generally short and clear</td>
<td>Tends to be long and less direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is structured with the actor first (as the subject), then the verb, then the object of the action</td>
<td>Occurs when the person doing the action follows the verb.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Active Example:** We mailed your form on May 1.

**Passive Example:** Your form was mailed by us on May 1.
Using active voice is the most powerful change you can make in your writing.
Questions?
Activity:

Sharpen Your Pencils
Sharpen Your Pencils!

Apply your best plain language skills to these sentences.

A legal permanent resident is any noncitizen residing in the United States under legally recognized and lawfully recorded permanent residence as an immigrant.

Possible answer: A legal permanent resident is any immigrant legally and permanently residing in the United States.

Building maintenance has reported that they are aware of the faint odor in the Allison Pointe office. The smoke-like odor is the result of burning that occurred external to the building. The office has been cleared by Building Maintenance; however, it may take some time for the odor to dissipate.

Possible answer: You may smell smoke in the building. There was a small fire on the outside of the building and it may take some time for the odor to dissipate.

Ask the participants to use their markers to write 3 to 5 items on their whiteboards for each main topic on the flip chart that identifies what constitutes a passing grade in the assigned topic.

Possible answer: Ask participants to use their whiteboards to write 3 to 5 criteria for a passing grade on the assigned topic.
Sharpen Your Pencils!

If you have had any piece of equipment from the same durable medical equipment prosthetics, orthotics, and supplies (DMEPOS) item category within the previous five years, a same or similar equipment denial of payment can be expected from Medicare.

**Possible answer:** If you are submitting a claim for any piece of equipment that is the same or similar to one that you bought or rented within the past five years, Medicare will deny payment for that claim.

The use of polymers to produce prosthetic heart valves that have the positive attributes of current commercial and mechanical valves without any of their drawbacks, has been a focus of research by scientists since the 1950s.

**Possible answer:** Since the 1950s, scientists have been trying to use polymers to produce prosthetic heart valves that have the positive attributes of current commercial and mechanical valves, but without any of their drawbacks.
Destination:

Process Improvements
Create a style sheet or mini-style guide.

Make an editing request form using Outlook.

Your checklist should be detailed and specific.

Track your work carefully.

Create a spreadsheet to track your work.
Make an editing request form using Outlook.

Your checklist should be detailed and specific.

Track your work carefully.

Create a spreadsheet to track your work.

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Wed 3/15/2017 1:13 PM

Quick Turnaround [Insert script name]

To: Medicare Editors

Cc: [Redacted]

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Script Name: Referrals and Prior Determinations of Original Medicare Coverage
Number of Panels/Pages: 3
Expected time to deliver to Editing (via SharePoint request): 3/15/17 2pm
Requested return time from Editing: 3/16/17 Noon

Thank you,

[Redacted]
Content Specialist
HighPoint
Baltimore, Maryland
Questions?
Your checklist should be detailed and specific.

Create a style sheet or mini-style guide.

Make an editing request form using Outlook.

Track your work carefully.

Create a spreadsheet to track your work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Editing Request</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First Read</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read everything closely to ensure quality and consistency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title of document correct and matches filename. If not, query ID.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second Read</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read everything closely to ensure quality and consistency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alt Text:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edit and spell check alt text for figures and tables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If alt text is missing, add a comment for ID to add</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alt text should match what figure/table shows</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Final Read</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read everything closely to ensure quality and consistency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delete Extra Spaces: #, ##, #, ; #, #</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spell Check with no markup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Scan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulleted Lists in Materials, Supplies, and Equipment Checklist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No lead-in sentence saying “these supplies are used” — just the header</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Create a style sheet or mini-style guide.
2. Make an editing request form using Outlook.
3. Your checklist should be detailed and specific.
4. Track your work carefully.
5. Create a spreadsheet to track your work.
Create a style sheet or mini-style guide.

Make an editing request form using Outlook.

Your checklist should be detailed and specific.

Track your work carefully.

Create a spreadsheet to track your work.
Other Tools in the Toolkit
Destination:

Danger Zone
Client Relations
Plain Language Gone Bad
Edited Text:

RMEs should be addressed on a first-in, first-out basis unless the ARC might not meet the 45-calendar-day written correspondence requirement. When possible, work the older activities (based on return dates for phone activities and scan dates for written correspondence) before newer items.

Final Edited Text:

RMEs should be addressed on a first-in, first-out basis. An exception can be made only if the ARC is in danger of failing to meet the 45-calendar-day written correspondence requirement. When possible, work the older activities (based on return dates for phone activities and scan dates for written correspondence activities) before newer items.
Plain Language