

# Plain Talk Guidelines

## Guideline 1: Understand your customers' needs

Find out who will be reading your material, what information they are looking for, and what the circumstances are.

### How do I do this?

- **Interview staff members.** Ask employees who work directly with your customers. They know what questions people ask and the problems they encounter.
- **Ask your customers.** Survey your customers or their associations. Try questionnaires or short interviews.
- **Do a usability test.** Test your revised document or web pages with four to six typical customers to see if they can “use” it. [Learn about usability testing.](#)
- **Do informal try-outs.** Try your document out with a group of people who know nothing about the subject. They may be friends, family, or work colleagues.

### Why do this?

- Your writing will be more effective and direct when you understand who you are trying to reach.
- When you listen to people read what you've written, it helps you understand what is confusing and which words don't work.

### Do

#### Can DCS garnish my public assistance money?

No. DCS cannot take public assistance money.

We received your public records request and are now searching for the materials. We will respond within 30 days to let you know:

- If the records are available.
- If any of the records will be withheld for legal reasons.
- If we must charge you for copying.

### Don't

#### Can DCS collect child support from me while I'm on public assistance?

If you owe child support, DCS will continue to try to collect from you even when you receive public assistance, such as a TANF or a General Assistance – Unemployment (GA-U) Grant. DCS cannot take and keep your public assistance money, but we can keep your wages, earnings or assets.

Thank you for your public records request. Pursuant to RCW 42.1.320, we are informing you it has been received and we estimate a further response to you by mail within 30 days. Although we hope to complete your request as soon as possible, we are making allowances for such variables as file availability, increased request demands, computer system downtime and unforeseen staff changes.

## Guideline 2: Include only relevant information

Your customers are looking for specific information. If you try to cover too many topics, you will frustrate them and dilute your message. Stick to the basics and don't describe every policy change or service you provide.

### How do I do this?

- **Identify your main point.** Decide what your document's most important topic is before you start writing.
- **Include only key information.** Explain specifically what you want the customer to do, how to do it, and, if you have one, what the deadline is.
- **Use attachments or links.** Direct your customer to online information, or include an attachment. This way, you can keep your message short, but still include descriptions of other services, laws, and policies they may want more information about, or that you are required to give them.

### Why do this?

- Customers will pay more attention if you only include the messages you **really** need them to understand.
- Your customers are more likely to comply with rules or instructions if they are short and to-the-point.

#### Do

You must apply for at least three jobs each week that you collect benefits.

If you do not pay your unemployment taxes, you will have to pay a penalty and you could go to jail. Read the law [here](#).

#### Don't

We have recently changed our policy regarding the requirements for people who collect unemployment benefits. Recipients are now required to make at least three job search contacts each week that they collect benefits.

According to RCW 50.36.020, any person who willfully fails to collect or truthfully account for and pay over such contributions, and any person who willfully attempts in any manner to evade or defeat any contributions imposed by this title or the payment thereof, is guilty of a gross misdemeanor and shall, in addition to other penalties provided by law, upon conviction thereof, be fined not more than five thousand dollars, or imprisoned for not more than one year, or both, together with the costs of prosecution.

### Guideline 3: Use words your customers use

Choose words your customers normally use, not what attorneys or your coworkers use. If you must use a specialized term, define it for your readers.

#### How do I do this?

- **Select the plain, rather than the “formal” word.** Imagine you are writing to an intelligent friend who knows nothing about your work. This isn’t “dumbing-down” the language. It is showing respect for busy people who aren’t familiar with your specialized terms.
- **Ask your customer service staff.** They explain your agency’s policies and instructions all day long. Listen to the words they use.
- **Listen carefully during [usability tests](#).** This is a great opportunity to listen for words customers tend to use.

#### Why do this?

- Your customers are more likely to pay attention to your message.
- People read plain, conversational language quickly and more patiently.
- Studies show people are more likely to follow simple instructions than complex ones.
- People have a right to readable language when it involves their legal rights.

<b>Do</b> Your completed <b>Employer’s Quarterly Report for Industrial Insurance</b> and payment is now past due.	<b>Don’t</b> OUR RECORDS INDICATE YOU HAVE NOT SUBMITTED YOUR EMPLOYERS PREMIUM REPORT OF HOURS AND PAYMENT FOR THE PREMIUM STATED ABOVE. RCW 51.16.155 AUTHORIZES LABOR AND INDUSTRIES TO ESTIMATE AND COLLECT PREMIUM.
<b>Do</b> Stop	<b>Don’t</b> Cease
Use	Employ
Give	Furnish
Ask	Inquire
Before	Prior to
Stop	Cease
Use	Employ
Ask	Inquire
Get	Procure
Ask	Request
Send/Pay	Remit
Keep	Retain
End	Terminate
Use	Utilize

#### More Examples

**Before:** In general, full accreditation is awarded for those parameters for which the two most recent PT results, if applicable, were rated “acceptable.”

**After:** Ecology will award you full accreditation if your two most recent, applicable PT results were rated “Acceptable.”

## Guideline 4: Use the active voice

The active voice shows who is responsible for doing what, which tends to eliminate confusion.

**Passive voice:** The bill was sent to you on Sept. 1. **Active voice:** *We* sent you the bill on Sept. 1.

### How do I do this?

- Use personal pronouns, such as “I” or “we,” or name the person doing the action.
- Place the subject (the “doer”) at the beginning of the sentence.
- Look for “deadly 7” verbs: **am, is, are, was, were, be, and been.** This signals you might be using passive voice in your sentences and may need to rework your sentences to be more direct.

For example:

“It was decided...” is a passive statement.

“We decided...” is an active statement.

### Why do this?

- Your readers will know who is doing what, which will help them quickly grasp your message.
- Your sentences will tend to be more clear and concise.
- Research shows that customers translate passive sentences into active sentences in their heads anyway.

<b>Do</b>	<b>Don't</b>
The Director wrote the memo yesterday. Subject - Action Verb	The memo was written yesterday. Passive Voice
Brad threw the ball.	The ball was thrown by Brad.
We require you to show identification.	Identification is required.

### More Examples

**Before:** The applicant must give an explanation for his or her delay.

**After:** You must explain the delay.

## Guideline 5: Use personal pronouns

The personal pronouns "you" and "we" can take the place of nouns, such as "all citizens" and "the department." When the writer is an "I" or a "we" and the reader is a "you," the reader understands quickly who the message is for, and who is delivering it.

### How do I do this?

- Establish the agency or person sending the letter, in the opening or on the letterhead. Then use "I" or "we."
- Assume the reader is the intended recipient and refer to him or her as "you."

### Why do this?

- The reader will be more committed to reading the message.
- The reader can more quickly understand how they fit into the message.

<b>Do</b>	<b>Don't</b>
We, I	the agency, the department
You	the worker, applicant, employee
We accept applications Monday through Thursday.	Applications are accepted Monday through Thursday.
I will send you the documents by Wednesday.	The department sends documents to applicants every Wednesday.

## Guideline 6: Keep sentences and paragraphs short

Your document will be easier to read if you keep your sentences short. Try limiting them to fewer than 20 words and your paragraphs to fewer than six sentences.

### How do I do this?

- **Cut out unnecessary words.** Revise your draft multiple times. Each revision will produce a more succinct message.
- **Make one point per paragraph.** Ideally, each paragraph should get across one main idea, and each sentence should cover one aspect of that idea.
- **Layer information.** Shorten documents and web pages by removing information that applies to only a few readers. Put the more specialized information in an attachment or link.

### Why do this?

- It is easier for customers to absorb information when they read one idea at a time.
- The reader can more easily choose to read only the information they need.

<b>Do</b>	<b>Don't</b>
Your responsibilities are in the job description we gave you on your first day of work.	The parameters of your responsibility and duties are included in the job description and person specification you received on your initial day of work at the Department.
The regional managers most responsible for carrying out this policy do not seem to understand it well.	This policy does not appear to be well understood by service locations management in the regions, even though this group has primary responsibility for implementing the policy.

### More Examples

**Before:** Department stakeholders who have relevant issues to raise in our regular Wednesday meetings should verbally communicate their interest to us.

**After:** Let us know if you would like to speak at our Wednesday meeting.

## Guideline 7: Design clear pages

The design of your page is as important to its readability as the words you have chosen. The right design will highlight your messages so your customers can scan the document quickly.

### How do I do this?

- **Pick one or two simple fonts.** A 12-point font is easy for most customers to read and is recommended by the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#).
- **Use boldfaced headlines to break up the text**, as shown on this page. It will grab the reader's eye.
- **Emphasize important information with boldface or italics - but sparingly.** Use on important words and phrases, but not entire sentences or paragraphs. Don't underline, unless you are indicating a link.
- **Choose bullets for lists when order isn't important.** Stick to one bullet style. The one we selected for this page works well.
- **Use numbers for directions and outlines.** This will show your reader the order in which instructions must be followed. Or, it may indicate a level of importance.
- **Create white space.** Allow for at least a one-inch border in letters. Place white space between paragraphs to separate large blocks of text.
- **Align your text.** Use a left-justified, ragged-right text alignment for letters. It keeps the spacing between words consistent and is easier to read.

### Why do this?

- Headlines and sub-headlines are the visible outline of your document. They can help the reader scan the document more quickly, by breaking up large chunks of text.
- Too many font styles clutter your page and make it hard to read.
- Numbered lists help the reader understand a logical order.
- Bullets "pull out" the few key points you want to make.
- White space keeps your reader from being overwhelmed by too much information.

### Do

#### If you submit your payment...

- Electronically. **We must receive it by:** the 25th day of the second month after the month you are reporting.
- Other than electronically. **We must receive it by:** the 15th day of the second month after the month you are reporting.

You must complete a certification form if you want to add a:

- Spouse or qualified same-sex domestic partner.
- Student over age 19.
- Dependent over age 19 with a disability.
- Extended (legal) dependent.

### Don't

We must receive your payment on or before the 15th day of the month after the month you are reporting if you do not send your payment electronically, or by the 25th day of the second month after the month you are reporting if you submit your payment electronically.

You must complete a certification form if you want to add any of the following: a spouse or qualified same-sex domestic partner; a student over age 19; a dependent over age 19 with a disability; an extended (legal) dependent.

**More Examples**

**Before:** Before we can process your application, we will need you to forward us a copy of your birth certificate, your Social Security number, a copy of your college transcript, a photocopy of your passport and vaccination records.

**After:** Please enclose with your application:

1. Birth certificate
2. Social Security number
3. College transcripts
4. Passport photography
5. Vaccination records