DRAGONFLY FIELD GUIDES

Tips and tools
FOR CONTENT & DESIGN

10 Steps to Boost Plain Language in Your Writing

Smart business writing doesn't require overly complex jargon or convoluted sentences. In fact, it shuns them. Learn how using plain language techniques can help you build messaging that is clear, informative, and engaging.

1 KNOW YOUR READER.

Write so your readers can access the information they need quickly and easily. Before you put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard, identify your target audience.

Consider who will be reading your words and why. Then, approach your writing task with a clear mission — to inform, to caution, to challenge, to entertain — and focus on delivering only details that are directly relevant to that goal.

2 MAKE IT EASY TO FIND YOUR POINT.

Readers don't want to read your text multiple times to get your meaning. Even if you're discussing a complex idea, write so that your audience can understand your key takeaways following just a quick read of your document.

You can do this by:

- Organizing text so that primary takeaways come first, followed by supplemental messaging
- Dividing text into easily digestible chunks using headlines, subheads, bold font, or bullets
- Avoiding industry-specific jargon — terms like *J-curve* (economics), *contusion* (medicine), or *riprap* (civil engineering), which everyday readers may not readily know
- Preserving white space so readers can scan and navigate your text easily

3 FAVOR SIMPLE SENTENCE STRUCTURES.

Perhaps you learned to diagram sentences in elementary school and relished all those tangential modifying clauses filling the blackboard. Clear business writing, though, should work more like an arrow — think subject → verb → object — than a sprawling spiderweb of supplementary information.

Working toward active, rather than passive, voice is one simple way to integrate straightforward, subject-verb-object syntax into your writing.

4 CHOOSE SHORTER, FAMILIAR WORDS.

There are no gold stars for having the biggest vocabulary in effective business writing. Overly long words only cloud your meaning. Favor clear, simple language whenever possible. Rather than *acceded to*, write *agreed to*. Rather than *arterial hypertension*, write *high blood pressure*.

Even simple words can often be simplified further: why write *utilize*, *facilitate*, or *functionality* when *use*, *help*, or *function* work just as well?

5 REMOVE REDUNDANCY.

Do a spot check for phrases that are inherently redundant, and pare out the unnecessary part. Change *new innovations* to *innovations*, *close proximity* to *proximity*, and *regular routine* to *routine*, for example.

EMPLOY ONE STRONG WORD.

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Resist the temptation to fluff up your writing with wordy phrases, when a [single, concise term](#) will do. After all, you're a professional, not a student stretching to make a 1,000-word essay minimum. Rather than *in order to*, simply write *to*.

Other examples include:

- In conjunction with → with
- In the event that → if
- Until such time as → until
- In a timely manner → promptly
- It should be noted that → note
- On a monthly basis → monthly

BE PRECISE.

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Whenever possible, be specific and concrete. Instead of suggesting readers use "a tool" for repairs, tell them they'll need a screwdriver, for instance. Similarly, in memos to staff, rather than noting your meeting "starts after lunch," use the less ambiguous wording "begins at 1 p.m."

USE ACRONYMS SPARINGLY.

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Too many acronyms can create acronym soup in your document — and glazed-over eyes on your reader's part. Replace repetitive acronyms with other meaningful words to describe organizational bodies instead, such as "the council" or "the agency."

PRIORITIZE READABILITY.

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Business writing is not novel writing — and their best practices widely differ. While Faulkner may be known for page-long paragraphs, your corporate communications shouldn't be. Create "readable" text by:

- Addressing just one key idea per paragraph
- Breaking up any paragraph with more than seven lines of visual text
- Striving for an average sentence length of just 14 words

To dive even deeper, use [embedded tools](#) in either Word or Google Docs to learn your document's readability score.

Hint: you want your text to fall between a fifth- and ninth-grade level on the Flesch-Kincaid readability scale or have reading ease equal to or greater than 60 on the Flesch Reading Ease scale.

EXPLORE PLAIN WRITING RESOURCES.

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At its core, plain language is writing that lets readers **get** what they need, **find** what they need, **understand** what they find, and **use** that information. For more tips on plain writing best practices, check out available resources such as:

- [ISO Plain Language Guidelines](#)
- [International Plain Language Federation](#)
- [Plain Language Association International](#)
- [PlainLanguage.gov](#)
- [Dragonfly Field Guide: 7 Steps to Writing for Readability](#)
- [Dragonfly Field Guide: 12 Steps for Crafting Readable Writing](#)
- [Dragonfly Field Guide to Concise Language](#)