Plain talk basics
How to get your message across to your readers

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Why plain talk?

If there is a misalignment between your DMR and the ACOP, you will need to complete the first section of the 16-889 form, but only if you state that you are eligible for a 109S exemption, in which case you’ll need to call our offices for your X14 number, otherwise you’ll need to work with your TMG.
Know your audience
Create a conversation

• It’s not about us.
• Write to one person.
• Picture that person reading what you wrote.
Content is the conversation

“Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah!”

“How do I get paid?”

“Use this new code.”
Ask yourself these questions

1. Who is my audience?
2. What do they want/need? What do they value? What’s important to them?
3. Why will they read it?
4. What do they NOT need?
Know your purpose

- What is your business need?
- If you don’t know, find out.
- Try to reach internal agreement before you write or edit content.
A clear purpose means...

• You’ve identified what you want your audience to know, think, or do as a result of your communication.
• Your purpose connects with the audience.
Examples: Unclear purposes

• Questions on a form that aren’t used.
• Too many messages in the same communication.
• Background information readers don’t need.
What is plain talk?

Communication that your audience or readers can understand the first time they hear or read it.
Why use plain talk?

• Makes content audience-focused
• Communicates clearly and concisely
• Eliminates barriers
• Lowers costs
• Improves compliance

But mostly ...
Everyone is busy!

• Plain talk lets our readers get what they need and ...
• Move on!
• And you’ll get a better outcome.
Plain talk done right...

- Helps the reader **find** the information
- Helps the reader **understand** the information

**Remember:** If your content doesn’t do both, it’s not plain talk.
30-3-30 rule (20th Century)

• 30 minutes—people who like to read

• 3 minutes—people who flip, skim, and scan for key ideas (not really reading the text)

• 30 seconds—lookers with a short attention span

Adapted from Public Relations Tactics, January 2016 issue
10-30-2 rule (today’s rule)

- 10 seconds deciding whether to stay on a page
- 30 seconds if they don’t bail at 10 seconds
- 2 minutes if the content really resonates for them
Logical order

• Put the main message first.
• Organize information into manageable chunks.
• Anticipate your audience’s questions, and answer them in the order they’re likely to be asked.
• Give your audience a roadmap.
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Executive Order 12988

With respect to the review of existing regulations and the promulgation of new regulations, section 3(a) of Executive Order 12988, “Civil Justice Reform,” 61 FR 4729 (February 7, 1996), imposes on Executive agencies the general duty to adhere to the following requirements: (1) Eliminate drafting errors and ambiguity; (2) write regulations to minimize litigation; and (3) provide a clear legal standard for affected conduct rather than a general standard and promote simplification and burden reduction. With regard to the review required by section 3(a), section 3(b) of Executive Order 12988 specifically requires that Executive agencies make every reasonable effort to ensure that the regulation: (1) Clearly specifies the preemptive effect, if any; (2) clearly specifies any effect on existing Federal law or regulation; (3) provides a clear legal standard for affected conduct while promoting simplification and burden reduction; (4) specifies the retroactive effect, if any; (5) adequately defines key terms; and (6) addresses other important issues affecting clarity and general draftsmanship under any guidelines issued by the Attorney General. Section 3(c) of Executive Order 12988 requires Executive agencies to review regulations in light of applicable standards in section 3(a) and section 3(b) to determine whether they are met or it is unreasonable to meet one or more of them. DHS has completed the required review and determined that, to the extent permitted by law, this final rule meets the relevant standards of Executive Order 12988.

Executive Order 12988

This rule meets the applicable standards in sections 3(a) and 3(b)(2) of Executive Order 12988.
Use everyday words

Instead of these ...
• Anticipate
• Attempt
• Commence
• Demonstrate
• Implement
• In the event that
• Submit
• Terminate

Use these ...
• Expect
• Try
• Begin, start
• Show, prove
• Start
• If
• Send, give
• End, cancel
Use short sentences

- 1 subject in each sentence
- Aim for 20 or fewer words
- Avoid complex sentences
• **Before:** First of all, in a general sense, what is interesting is that in addition to the initial objective which was to restart the learning process, it was found that this literacy training would enable individuals, who are totally inhibited, to once again discover at least a minimum of self-confidence.

• **After:** The literacy training met the initial objective of restarting the learning process. It also helped participants, who were very inhibited, to begin acquiring self-confidence.
Use short paragraphs

• Limit a paragraph to 1 subject or step

• It’s OK to have a 1 sentence paragraph!

• Use “bites” that are easier to digest

• Aim for no more than 7 lines
Common sources of wordiness

- Redundancies
- Hidden verbs
- Prepositional phrases
- Unnecessary modifiers
- Passive voice
- Not using pronouns
Avoid hidden verbs

Wordy
- Conduct an analysis
- Present a report
- Do an assessment
- Provide assistance
- Came to the conclusion of

Concise
- Analyze
- Report
- Assess
- Help
- Concluded
Avoid prepositional phrases

• Instead of:
  – It is a matter of the gravest possible importance to the health of anyone with a history of a problem with disease of the heart that he or she should avoid the sort of foods with a high percentage of saturated fats.

• Use:
  – Anyone with a history of heart disease should avoid saturated fats.

(Heffernan and Lincoln, 1996, p. 55)
Avoid unnecessary modifiers

“Substitute 'damn' every time you're inclined to write 'very;' your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be.”

– Mark Twain
Use active, not passive voice

Passive voice

• Can disguise who does what
  – The memo was written yesterday.

• Wordy
  – The application must be received by the financial office by the time designated below.

• Awkward
  – Consultation from respondents was obtained.

Active voice

• Clear about who does what
  – The director wrote the memo yesterday.

• Concise
  – We must receive your application by December 15.

• Natural
  – We consulted with the respondents.
Use pronouns

• Use “we” or “our” to refer to your agency
• Use “you” for the reader
• If you are using Q&A format, use “I” in the questions and “you” in the text
Using pronouns = less words

Once the candidate’s goals are established, one or more potential employers are identified. A preliminary proposal for presentation to the employer is developed. The proposal is presented to an employer who agrees to negotiate an individualized job that meets the employment needs of the applicant and real business needs of the employer.

52 words

Once we establish your goals, we identify one or more potential employers. We prepare a preliminary proposal to present to an employer who agrees to negotiate a job that meets both their and your employment needs.

37 words
Reduce confusion

Avoid using:

- Acronyms
- Jargon
- Buzzwords
- Internal language
- Legalize
- Bureaucratize
Break up your content

• Headings
• Bullets or numbered lists
• Tables
Use headings

Why?
• Makes content easy for readers to scan
• Gives a clue about what’s coming next

How?
• Keep them short
• Put your audience’s words in the headings
• Use verb or verb phrase or question
• Statement v. question v. call to action?
Use lists

- Strong visual cue
- Easy to identify items or steps
- Helps to see structure
- No more than 7 items
Go forth and plain talk!