Plain Language Principles
(Adopted from plainlanguage.gov)

Definition of Plain Language
Plain language is defined as an approach to writing that ensures that the users of information can
- "find what they need,
- understand what they find, and
- use what they find to meet their needs" (*Federal Plain Language Guidelines*, 2011, p. i).

Basic Guidelines
Identify your audience
Think about why the reader needs to read the document. Also, identify people who will be interested in the document, even if they are not directly affected. Write to everyone who is interested, not just to technical or legal experts. Keep in mind the average reader's level of technical expertise.

Write in active voice
Voice is the form a verb takes to indicate whether its subject acts or is acted upon. When the subject of a verb does something (acts), the verb is in the **active** voice. When the subject of a verb receives the action (is acted upon), the verb is in the **passive voice**.
> **Active voice:** Conor hit the ball.
> **Passive voice:** The ball was hit by Conor.

To know whether you are writing in the active or passive voice, identify the subject of the sentence and decide whether the subject is doing the action or being acted upon.
> **Passive Voice**: the subject is the receiver of the action.
> The tax return (subject) was completed (action) before the April 15 deadline by Mr. Doe.
> **Active Voice:** the subject does an action to an object.
> Mr. Doe (subject) completed (action) the tax return (object) before the April 15 deadline.

When we write in the passive voice, we add some form of the helping verb "to be" (am, is, are, was, were, being, or been) to an otherwise strong verb that really did not need help.
> **Passive:** Additional information (subject) can be obtained (action) by employees from our website.
> **Active:** Employees (subject) can obtain (action) additional information (object) from our website.

Active voice makes documents stronger by showing responsibility or giving credit for an action. When we avoid showing responsibility, we often don't give enough information to explain the problem and how to fix it. Often, we use a form of the passive called the "cut passive" and never identify the doer of the action. This form sounds vague and abstract.
> **Cut Passive:** New requirements (subject) were introduced (action) to strengthen the banking system.

Active: The Banks Act of 1985 (subject) introduced (action) new requirements (object) to strengthen the banking system.

By eliminating the helping verb, the active voice sentence generally uses fewer words to communicate the same information.

Passive: Mr. Doe (subject) was told (action) by the bank official that he would need to provide additional information. (16 words)

Active: The bank official (subject) told (action) Mr. Doe (object) he would need to provide additional information. (13 words)

Active voice more closely resembles spoken language, hopefully ideal spoken language. When we speak, we generally use the active voice without thinking. Our writing should become that automatic.

You would never say:

Passive: My car (subject) was driven (action) to work by me.

Or:

Passive: Breakfast (subject) was eaten (action) by me this morning.

Instead, you would say:

Active: I (subject) drove (action) my car (object) to work.

And:

Active: I (subject) ate (action) breakfast (object) this morning.

NOTE: Using the cut passive form is appropriate in two situations:

- When we do not know who performed the action.
- When the doer of the action is unimportant.

However, one caution: If adding the name of the person or organization performing the action would make the document stronger and help our readers, we should try to identify the doer of the action.

How can you start writing in the active voice? Turn the clause or sentence around, putting the subject first:

Passive: This proposed rule (subject) was published (action) by General Counsel in the Federal Register.

Active: General Counsel (subject) published (action) this proposed rule (object) in the Federal Register.

Change the verb to eliminate the helping verb "to be":

Passive: We must consider how our resources (subject) will be used (action) to deliver quality services.

Active: We (subject) must consider how to use (action) our resources (object) to deliver quality services.

Rethink the sentence:

> **Passive:** Although Mr. Doe (subject) was found (action) to be eligible for this position; all of the positions (subject) in Boston had already been filled (action) by our personnel office prior to receiving his application.
> **Active:** Though we (subject) found (action) Mr. Doe (object) eligible for the position, our personnel office (subject) had filled (action) all positions (object) in Boston before we (subject) received (action) his application (object).

Writing in the active voice isn't difficult if you follow who-does-what sequence. Your readers can visualize the action and follow the action to the conclusion.

Keep it short!

You will communicate more clearly if you keep sentences and sections short. Aim for an average sentence length of 20 words. Cover only one subject in each paragraph, and keep paragraphs under 10 or 12 lines.

Use personal pronouns

Help users picture themselves in the text. Pronouns help readers relate better to documents. When you address the reader as "you," he or she feels directly addressed and is more likely to understand what his or her responsibility is. When your writing reflects this, it is more economical and has a greater impact on the reader. Also, remember to define in the beginning of the text who the audience or "you" is.

Additional benefit*:* By writing your documents to be clear to an individual, you will find it easier to

- Put information in a logical order
- Answer questions and provide the information that your reader wants to know
- Assign responsibilities and requirements clearly

Write in a visually appealing style

With visual layout, you draw your readers' attention to information they need to know. Steps to make your documents visually appealing include the following:

> **Use lots of informative headings**: Make sure each heading has enough information to help your reader understand the content of the paragraph or section.
> **Write short sections**: Short sections break up the material into easily understood segments. They also look easier to read and understand.
> **Use vertical lists**: Vertical lists highlight a series of items in a visually clear way. Use vertical lists to help your reader focus on important material.

Don't be wordy

Omit needless words. Excess or elaborate words make your writing weaker. Here are some examples of excess words in our writing and plain alternatives:

> **Original**: At the present time, the FAA in accordance with new regulations will on a monthly basis conduct random security checks in the event that there is a terrorist alert.
> **Revised:** The FAA under new regulations will conduct monthly random security checks if there is a terrorist alert.

Use specific, concrete words.

Structure your writing

How you organize the document and what headings you include are extremely important in determining what effect your document will have on its readers. To achieve the highest rate of comprehension from your readers, follow the suggestions below:

- Put the main message first.
- Divide your material into short sections and group related ideas together.
- Put material in an order that makes the best sense to the reader and use lots of headings.

Use graphics and tables

Use figures such as charts, tables, and other illustrative material as examples to explain complex material. Mention or introduce every figure in the text before it occurs and place the figure close to the text that explains it. Try to limit figures to one page. For figures that extend to more than one page, repeat the name and figure number on each page. Make sure all figures have informative headings.

> **Original:** Students should submit an official copy of their transcripts, two recommendation letters, and a statement of financial need to our office by May 15.
>
> **Revised:** To apply, submit the following items to our office by May 15:
> - An official copy of your transcript,
> - Two recommendation letters, and
> - A statement of financial need.

Avoid unnecessary qualifiers

They add no additional meaning to a sentence. The classic example from everyday language is "very dead." Here's some examples we see in FAA writing:

> Their claim was **totally** unrealistic. We are **completely** convinced …. It is **definitely** worth experiencing. Work in **partnership** with … Additional requirements **needed** to provide a level of safety. Maintain **successful** bilateral agreements …

Don't use multiple negatives

When you can put a negative statement as a positive one without changing the meaning of it, do it. You'll save readers from unnecessary mental work. Using more than one multiple negative muddles the meaning of a document. Accentuate the positive when you can.

> **Original:** No changes will be made to the Department of Transportation's regulations unless the administrator reviews them and concludes that they are not lacking any important information.
>
> **Revised:** Changes will be made to the Department of Transportation's regulations only if the administrator reviews them and concludes they are lacking important information.

Avoid redundancies

To make an idea clear, you don't need to state it in as many ways as possible. Using different words that mean the same thing can actually make your document harder to understand. To avoid repetition, if you are thinking of describing something with two words that have the same meaning, use the word that sounds more powerful.

Original: Because you are alumni, you should help aid the new incoming freshman.
Revised: Because you are alumni, you should help the incoming freshman.