



**Plain Language Workbook:**

**Five Steps to Clear, Effective  
Communications**

**for the**

**Federal Communications Commission**

**Presented by the Office of the Managing Director  
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# Why Plain Language?

Why plain language? Perhaps a better starting question is this one: “Why write at work?” If you’re like most people, your answer is: “To communicate.” Or: “To send information.” At the FCC, you also want get a response, whether for telecommunications professionals to adhere to a policy or for consumers to know what the FCC does on their behalf. Or, you may simply want a co-worker to send you information the first time you ask.

Other responses may be hidden: for example, you may want others in the FCC to understand your message, even if you wrote it for an external audience. You may want to create a paper trail that could prove critical later. Most certainly, you want to create a comfortable reading experience for the audience: this will help them grasp the meaning faster and more effectively.

By using Plain Language you will send clear, well-positioned messages that help you get all these responses and more. In fact, studies from the Federal Government, among others, indicate that Plain Language can also help ease the review processes, sometimes cutting it down by hours, even days; improve consumer relations; lessen the likelihood of prolonged disputes; and expedite routine processes, among others!

It’s important to remember that you naturally speak and write in Plain Language - the most natural and effective approach to communications. By using Plain Language you will ultimately be communicating in your own voice.

# What Is Plain Language?

Plain Language is nothing more than the using clear, familiar language that a range of people can understand. In some situations, such as when you’re writing a Congressional letter or summarizing a regulation, you’ll sound more formal. In others, such as when you’re writing a blog, you’ll sound more relaxed. Still, your language will consistently have the following attributes:

- 1. Concise word use.** You will only use necessary words— nothing extra. As a result, the message will be easier for your audience to read and faster for you to write. Important: concise word use refers to the *style* of your message *not* the amount of content.
- 2. Active voice.** The term “active voice” refers to sentence structure, where you include who *did* the action, what that action was, and who received the action...usually in that order. You normally use the active voice when writing informal documents or speaking in a social context.
- 3. Cohesive structure.** Your writing should flow in a smooth, logical sequence, whether you’re writing a complex analysis or a one-paragraph memorandum. The order should go from the most to the least important information.
- 4. Reader-Focus.** The concept of reader-focus requires that you use words that are understandable to the audience; the second person “you” when possible; and an orientation that is from the audience’s perspective. Newspapers, marketing documents, text books, among other professional documents, use the reader-focus.
- 5. Tone.** Writing, like speaking, contains an emotional quality whether you intend it or not. With plain language, you create the most accessible tone possible whether by managing your jargon or avoiding unduly negative or hostile overtones.

## Seven Steps to Plain Language

When creating any kind of marketing document, try to follow these steps:

### 1. Determine What You Want the Reader to Do

What do you want the reader to do as a result of your copy? Try to be as realistic and precise as possible. For example, if you’re sending an e-mail, the first response you want is probably for them to open it. The next response: to take a specific action whether calling you or sending something along. If you’re writing a report, you want your boss to know the most important information. When writing for the Web, you want the

audience to understand issues that affect them personally and actions they can take.

## **2. Make a List**

Create a simple list of the information you need to include in your message. Don't bother with the outline form you probably used in high school or college: it's simply too elaborate and time-consuming. Instead, write a few words for each new idea. Then, reorder your list so it flows in a logical order. Always place the most important information – *to the reader* – first.

## **3. Write**

The best approach depends on your personal style. Some like to write without stopping, ignoring word problems, and leaving spaces for figures and facts. Others like to shape their text as they go, regardless, be sure to write in relative silence, avoiding nearby conversations or undo noise. Also - take breaks. Fatigue will jeopardize your style, and sometimes, in the course of a break, a useful phrase, connection, or concept, will occur to you. Finally, don't plan to send your message immediately – even if you're sending it to a co-worker for a review. Instead, wait a few minutes, longer if you can. Then check – you'll be more objective. Even when sending e-mails, wait a few moments, then rewrite so you're sure to send the message that you mean.

## **4. Check Structure**

Check your structure to ensure the points connect in the fastest and most expedient way. If you're writing a project plan or report, the segments may be predetermined. Still, make sure your paragraphs are in a clear order and the points within them cohesive.

## **5. Rewrite Word Use**

You may have one or two problems that interfere with strong writing. So, identify those specific issues then correct them. Be conscious of the changes – make sure you're correcting a problem not simply “making the writing better” in an abstract and subjective way. You'll only be

shuffling words around and wasting time. In the process, you'll improve your document *and* break your bad habits.

## **6. Show for Comments**

Everyone needs feedback about their writing to improve – even professional writers. So, be sure to show your work to someone every few weeks, depending on how often you write. Make sure that person really understands the requirements of strong writing and knows which problems you are trying to fix. Make sure you take notes or that the person writes his or her comments down so you can refer to them the next time you write.

## **7. Proof**

It's always a good idea to have someone else proof your copy since most people have trouble identifying the usage and punctuation problems in their writing. This is *not* because they're lazy, uneducated, or sloppy – they're simply big picture thinkers. If you don't have anyone who can proof your work, then print out the copy and reread it, looking for errors. It's also helpful to have someone review your copy once or twice and point out the mistakes. Then, when you proof, make sure you avoided those particular errors.

# **Three Types of Responses**

## **Emotional Response**

- Feel excited, concerned, interested
- Create a sense of urgency or necessity

## **Cognitive Response**

- Understand what you mean
- Know the information

## Physical Response

- Take some sort of action
- Avoid taking an action
- Respond within a specific timeframe

## Response Factors to Remember!

- The audience initially responds to messages in 1/50<sup>th</sup> of a second.
- Due to the so-called “halo effect,” that initial, preconscious response will shape how the audience perceives your message – sometimes regardless of content!
- The audience focuses on the first few words of your message the most.
- Most audiences skim, rather than read, so positioning and visual effects, such as white space, are of paramount importance.

## Case Study

After the Challenger shuttle tragedy in 1986, Professor Dorothy Winsor analyzed a memo that discussed the Challenger's faulty O-rings *before* the disaster occurred. Clearly, as Winsor points out, if the memo had positioned the problem the right way, the accident may never have occurred. Here's what the memo said:

Per your request, this letter contains the answers to the ...questions you asked at the July Problem Review Board telecom.

**1. Question: If the field joint secondary seal lifts off the metal mating surfaces during motor pressurization, how soon will it return to a position where contact is re-established?**

Answer: Bench test data indicate that the O-ring resiliency (its capability to follow the metal) is a function of temperature and rate of case expansion. MTI measured the force of the O-ring against Instron patters [sic], which simulated the nominal squeeze on the O-ring and approximated the case expansion distance and rate.

At 100 degrees F., the O-ring maintained contact. At 75 degrees F., the O-ring lost contact for 2.4 seconds. At 50 degrees F., the O-ring did not re-establish contact in ten minutes at which time the test was terminated.

The conclusion is that secondary sealing capability in the SRM field joint cannot be guaranteed.

(Presidential Commission 5:1568)

Source: Dorothy A. Winsor, "Asking the Right Questions about the Challenger Disaster," 1989

## **Plain Language Attribute 1: Concise Word Use**

Concise word use refers to the number of words you use to reflect meaning, not how much content you include. To achieve this, focus on eliminating the following from your writing:

### **General-specific combination**

Extra words result when you say something in general terms then repeat it with specifics:

**Do:** The justification that you provided is not sufficient for the FCC to grant a waiver.

**Not:** We have made a determination about your request for a waiver. We found that the justification you provided is not sufficient for the FCC grant a waiver.

### **Negative structures**

“Negative” refers to the structure of your sentence, not the attitude of your message. It tends to be indirect, vague, and wordy. So, try for a direct approach, instead:

**Do:** The content is clear but you need to provide details before we can determine if you are eligible for a license.

**Not:** The issue was not that the content was unclear, but that the details are lacking. So, we are unable to determine if you are eligible for a license.

If you want a more positive way to discuss a negative situation, try focusing on the solution, rather than the problem.

**Do:** You still need to send pages six and seven of the application.

**Not:** You did not send the entire application. You did not send pages six and seven.

### **Little extra words**

Wordiness frequently occurs when you have clusters of small, insignificant words, including prepositional phrases such as: “In the event that...,” “In light of the fact that...,” and “At the present time.” You can repair this problem simply by cutting the words.

**Do:** CGB notes that consumers have different needs for broadband service. For example, someone who uses the Web primarily for email may need a smaller and less expensive service than an avid video viewer.

**Not:** CGB notes that at the present time consumers have very different needs for broadband service depending on what they use it for. Someone who uses the Web primarily for email, for example,



may be well served by a smaller and less expensive service than an avid video viewer would need.

### **Repeated words**

Repeated words are easy to spot and correct: cut the repeated words and reconstruct the sentence or paragraph. Another solution is to substitute one of the repeated words for another, but this will be a band aid solution, masking but not correcting the problem.

**Do:** Panel discussions in the morning will focus on how current and projected capabilities and deployment costs for different broadband technologies may impact the Broadband Initiative.

**Not:** Panel discussions in the morning will focus on current and projected capabilities and deployment costs for different broadband technologies and how such capabilities and costs may impact the Broadband Initiative.

### **Twin words**

Beware of using two words which hold the same meaning, such as “complete stop,” “dollar amount” and “completely honest.” This problem is relatively easy to identify and correct: simply cut one of the words.

**Do:** I think we should destroy the old software tools as they are incompatible with our current software.

**Not:** It is my personal belief that we should completely destroy each and every one of the software tools that were an integral part of our previous processes as that are completely incompatible with our current software.

### **Obvious Information**

Cutting obvious information can be a bigger task than simply pulling out words. You need to analyze the content, albeit briefly, to ensure the content remains intact.

**Do:** General Inquiries referred you to the Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau (CGB) where a representative contacted you within a few hours. She agreed to contact you later that day with a more detailed answer.

**Not:** You contacted General Inquiries because you had questions that you needed answered. You were referred to the Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau (CGB) where a representative contacted you within a few hours. You asked the FCC representative your question at that time, and she agreed to contact you later that day with a more detailed answer.

## **Concise Word Use Exercise**

Rewrite the following to make them more concise:

1. We initiate this proceeding because it is our belief that we need to facilitate the development and deployment of well-designed signal boosters, which hold great potential to empower consumers in rural and underserved areas to improve their wireless coverage in their homes, at their jobs, and when they travel by any means, such as car, recreational vehicle, or boat.
  
2. The customer is doing a license search on Call Sign "WEE585." When she goes to the "Path Tab" she should be clicking on Path 3, Call Sign "KHW70", but when she clicks on that call sign it takes her to call sign "WEE582'. The call sign status shows that is cancelled. She called the Help Desk to get help with this matter. Please advise.

## Plain Language Attribute 2: The Active Voice

Grammar requires that you have an actor and action in your sentence – in that order. When you break that order, you can eliminate information, obstruct clarity, and confuse the reader. That trouble is called the “passive voice” and the solution is the “active voice.” You may lapse into the passive voice in the following ways:

### **The Active Voice**

The active voice describes the relationship between the actor and the action in the sentence. Whether a person, place, thing, or concept, the actor generally comes first in the sentence; the action second; and the recipient, or object of the action, third.

The passive voice separates the actor and the action in three distinct ways.

- **Separates the actor and action within the sentence**

The actor rests at the end of the sentence: technically it becomes the object rather than the subject.

**Do:** The management team reviewed the report.

**Not:** The report was reviewed by the management team.

You can identify this form of passive by looking for the helping verb/by combination, as in: “The report *was* reviewed *by*...”

- **Eliminates the actor**

The actor vanishes from the sentence, which can destroy the sentence structure and withhold information from the reader.

**Do:** Consistent with Section 0.459(c), the Bureau will not consider requests that do not comply with the requirements of Section 0.459.

**Not:** Consistent with Section 0.459(c), requests that do not comply with the requirements of Section 0.459 will not be considered.

The helping verb may be a tip-off that you are using the passive voice, although they may be indicating tense, instead.

- **Hidden verbs**

The action appears to be the actor, although it is not.

**Do:** We developed the program in four days

**Not:** The development of the program took *four days*.

Frequently, hidden verbs have “ment” and “tion” endings. In some cases, though, words in active sentences contain these endings:

“We gave the matter deep consideration but decided against it.”

Although you should use the active voice about 95% of the time, the passive voice can make the message sound clearer or more natural. For example, this sentence:

“The FCC is directed by five commissioners who are appointed by the President of the United States and confirmed by the U.S. Senate.”

sounds better than this one:

“The President of the United States appoints five commissioners who direct the FCC and who the U.S. Senate appoints and confirms.”

Do not use the passive voice to hide the actor, however.

## **Active Voice Exercise**

See if you can identify the passive voice in the following examples, and then correct it.

1. By the year 2019, it is envisioned that 10,000 x-band radars for the networks will be deployed throughout the United States. It has been

suggested to the Lead University on this project that establishing this effort as a service would require a rulemaking.

2. The frequencies on your license 154.470 and 154.600 are no longer licensed under Rule Part 90. Therefore, your application is dismissed. These frequencies have been reallocated from part 90 Land Mobile Radio Service, to one of the Citizen Band Radio Services in Rule Part 95, called the Multi Use Radio Service (MURS). There is no licensing requirement for these frequencies.

### **Active Voice and Concise Word Use Review Exercise**

Write a fresh piece that you need to compose for work that is 100% active and concise. If you can't think of any, or don't have sufficient content on hand, write one of the following:

- An e-mail to a new co-worker discussing the three most important aspects of the job he or she needs to know to contribute fully.
- A message to a citizen who called demanding that you lower his or her cell phone payments. You need to explain that the FCC is not responsible for sending or determining bills at that level.

## Plain Language Attribute 3: Cohesion

How you position information is a critical component of plain language. The points must flow in logical order within paragraphs, between sections, and throughout the entire document. This will enable the reader to find information easily; help you have greater control of your support points; and help you be more concise.

### Subject Lines, Headers and Titles

**Length:** 70 characters maximum, including spaces

Subject lines and headers will either encourage the audience to read carefully or alienate them. So, you must make them energetic and informative. One way to achieve this is to avoid using noun-only headers: they tend to be flat and don't project the energy that will engage the reader. Instead, use a verb when possible. Notice the difference in this subject line:

**Do:** Form 92 B Due Immediately

**Not:** Form 92B

Also, be sure that your openings:

- Contain information

**Do:** Review Meeting Rescheduled

**Not:** Meeting

- Use familiar words

**Do:** New licensing changes

**Not:** MURS adjustment

- Support the flow of information

**Do:** Five Steps for Applying

## **Not: Application Requirements**

Some openings will naturally contain flat openings, such as “Background” for historic reasons. When possible, though, avoid them.

## **Subject Line and Headers Exercise**

Write the subject line or header for a message you need to send shortly, or any of the following:

- An e-mail to an external or internal audience reminding them that they must send you a required fee (for travel or a renewed license, for example) or miss their deadline.
- An e-mail to a colleague reminding them (again) to send information.
- A header for a section telling the audience requirements they must address in an FCC process (not “Requirements”)

## **Titles**

Titles have the same qualities as headers and subject lines. Make sure that you use consistent upper and lower case and get right to the point - in 70 characters or less, including spaces. So, a title might look like this:

Technical Advisory Council Issues Technology Policy Recommendations  
to Spur Jobs, Innovation

## **Titles Exercise**

Rewrite the following titles so they’re 70 characters or less, including spaces. Also correct upper and lower case.

- FCC Takes Action to Extend Deadline for Broadcasters and Other EMERGENCY ALERT SYSTEM PARTICIPANTS to Comply with

## TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS FOR Next-Generation Emergency AlertS

- PREPARED REMARKS OF CHAIRMAN JULIUS GENACHOWSKI, FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION, RAINBOW PUSH COALITION TELECOMMUNICATIONS SYMPOSIUM, CAPITAL HILTON

### **Opening Paragraphs**

**Lines:** Maximum of eight, five line optimal in most documents.

Whether called an “abstract,” “lead,” or “overview,” the opening paragraph should present the most important information to the reader immediately in clear, plain language:

**Do:** As the enclosed document indicates, the Foothills Community neglected to file for a renewed license. So, they must pay the penalty fee of \$3,000 as stated in Section 73.3539.

**Not:** The Foothills Community have petitioned to be allowed to continue broadcasting under its current license without paying the penalty of \$3,000 for neglecting to register as required by Section 73.3539 of the Rules.

The decision in the “Not” example typically does not enter the text until the last or second-to-last paragraph of the message. If you have too many points to address in one paragraph, present the reader with a range indicating the content that lies ahead.

- The following will address the five main points.
- We found three problems which they need to address before we can approve their plan.
- We will focus on the physical environment, the process changes, and the software systems currently in use in this document.

Do not waste space in the introduction by stating obvious or unnecessary points.



**Do:** As you requested, we are providing details about the rationale for our July 14 memo which entails...

**Not:** This letter is a follow-up to your inquiry about the memo we sent on July 14 in which we stated that their recommendations were consistent with our observations the previous month. We will provide details about our response, as you requested.

Finally make sure that your introduction functions as a self-contained unit enabling the reader to prioritize the document and learn the most critical points he or she needs to know.

### **Paragraphs**

**Minimum:** Five lines

**Maximum:** 15 lines. Use long paragraphs only when the content does not allow for a logical break.

The paragraphs should have a clear internal structure, whether they are independent units of thought or follow from previous paragraphs. This does not mean that all paragraphs should have the same structure: decide which one works best for the content.

### **Most to Least Important Information**

Provide information in the most-to-least important order, depending on how the reader will use it. The order may differ for different audiences in certain messages.

To: Employees entering the building

The security procedures have changed as of May 15. Now you must show your identification at the security desk just beyond the gate. Be sure to carry your driver's license or one other form of identification, as you may need to present that, too. Your visitors should present their identification before entering the gate and should wait in the outer lobby area for an escort. You must take these procedures seriously—any violations are punishable by law.

To: Visitors

When arriving at the gate, present your identification to the guard who will allow you in—then wait for your escort in the outer lobby. Escorts must be employees and have valid identification, which they will need to show to sign you in. You must take these procedures seriously—any violations are punishable by law.

### **Analysis and Support**

This is a common structure for FCC reports.

(Point) This project must be a first priority if we are to maximize our efficiency over the next few months. (Support) It will provide valuable information we can use on other projects. (Support) Also, we have devoted a considerable amount of time and energy to doing it— if we put it on hold, we will lose our momentum.

### **Equal Facts**

The most common structure, equal facts present matters that have equal value. Bullets are reserved for equal facts.

If you wish to prevent spam, you can take the following steps:

- Put your wireless phone number on the national Do-Not-Call list, and distribute it sparingly.
- Don't display your wireless phone number or e-mail address in public.
- If you open an unwanted message, send a stop or opt out message in response.
- Check the privacy policy when submitting your wireless phone number or e-mail address to any Web site.
- Contact your wireless or Internet service provider about unwanted messages.

## **Compare and Contrast**

You can use a number of structures when comparing and/or contrasting points.

### **Line by line**

When considering the viability of the new system, carefully weigh the pros and the cons. On the one hand, the system would require that we retrain our employees, which would cost us at least three days of training time per employee. On the other hand, they will become far more efficient once they know how to use the tool and shave weeks off their work time each year. The dollar cost is another consideration. The system costs almost \$250,000. Is our department ready for such an investment? Still, it will lower the risk of errors, which will save us money in the long run.

### **One set of points all at once, then another**

When considering the viability of the new system, carefully weigh the pros and the cons. With the system, we'd need to retrain all our employees, which would cost us at least three days of training time per employee. Then there's the dollar cost of almost \$250,000. Is our department ready for such an investment? Still, employees will become far more efficient once they know how to use the tool, and shave weeks off their work time each year. Also, the tool will lower the risk of errors, which will save us money in the long run.

### **One set of points in one paragraph and one set of points in the following paragraph**

With writing documents for the FCC, you must determine what response you want from your message first. Then, you should write the document. Don't worry about making every word perfect—just get the content down. Next, revise for mistakes you've made in the past as well as general problems.

Editing is quite different. The message is already written: the editor must ensure the word use and punctuation are accurate. First, read a few paragraphs and get a sense of the author's strengths and weaknesses. Then, correct the mistakes. Once you're done, double-

check your changes. Also, let the authors know their weakness. This will help them become better writers.

## **Closings**

**Length:** Eight to ten lines maximum

Closings can serve numerous functions. When you have a long document, or numerous complex points, the closing can summarize them for the reader. You can also put final points, typically of minimal importance, at the end. If you want to end with the most salient point of your entire communication, place that point in the opening also to ensure the reader sees it.

Closings generally break down into these categories:

## **Summaries**

Use a summary at the end of a document in these situations:

- You are writing in a genre that requires one, such as a report.
- You have a long piece—over five pages—where the reader won't be able to remember all the information or is unlikely to read all the way through. This is when you remind them.
- You have connecting points too complex or numerous for the reader to absorb. In lengthy papers, you can place summaries after every section. Usually, though, place your summary at the front of the document, if you need one at all.

## **Conclusions**

Keep the conclusion at the beginning of your document except when you have:

- A short document with interesting points that the reader will definitely read, leading to an even more interesting conclusion.
- A persuasive introduction with a “gun” that will sustain the reader until the end.

- Short sections in your documents, each requiring an analysis and conclusion.

### **Numbers and bullets**

In short pieces, when the numbers or bullets end, so does the document.

### **Letter closings**

Make follow-up plans or tell the reader how they can find you.

## **Cohesion Exercise**

Rewrite the following message:

Dear Ms. Jones,

This is in reply to your email dated March 5, 2010, in which you invoke the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) (5 U.S.C. 552), seeking to obtain “the precise specification issued pursuant to the program for manufacture and testing of the digital converter boxes.”

The Department of Commerce, National Telecommunications Information Administration (NTIA) administered the coupon program for digital-to-analog converter boxes. However, the information you seek is also publicly available from their website that I have provided for your convenience: [http://www.ntia.doc.gov/frnotices/2007/DTVCouponFinalRule\\_031207.pdf](http://www.ntia.doc.gov/frnotices/2007/DTVCouponFinalRule_031207.pdf) For any other information or documents regarding the digital converter box program, please contact NTIA.

You may seek review of this disposition of your request by the Commission by filing an application for review with the Office of General Counsel within 30 days of the date of this letter. See 47 C.F.R. § 0.461(j).

## Plain Language Attribute 4: Reader-Focus

When you take a reader-focused approach, you communicate information from the reader's perspective. This affects all aspects of your style, from the word use, which must be clear and accessible, to how you position information on the page.

### Point of View

Your ability to position information from the reader's perspective is critical to your voice, in everything from e-mails to notices to responses to complaints.

**Do:** So you can have your plane tickets in time for the trip, please complete and send me the travel form by May 15.

**Not:** I need to receive your travel form by May 15 so I can make arrangement for your airplane tickets.

### Position of Information

You must approach circumstances from the audience's vantage point. So, answer these questions before creating your message:

- What matters most to the reader?
- How will they benefit or otherwise be affected by the message?
- What is the greatest fear, concern, or reservation you must address?
- What response do they want from you?
- What response do you want from them?

Once you have answered these questions, place the most important information (from the readers' perspective) first.

- A report: in the first few lines of the introduction, the sub-headings, and paragraph of each new section
- An e-mail: in the subject line
- A letter: in the opening paragraph
- A decision: in the first paragraph
- A memo: in the "RE" line and the first few lines of the first paragraph

## **Second Person “You”**

When speaking to another person or sending an E-mail, you naturally use the second person “you.” For example, in a meeting, you may ask a colleague: “What information do you need for the project?” You probably would not say: “What information is needed for the project?” You should apply this concept to as many communications as seems reasonable.

**Do:** You have rights, under the FCC, that protect you from fraud.

**Do:** The FCC has regulations that protect you from fraud.

**Not:** The FCC has regulations that protect consumers from fraud.

## **Showing (Not Telling)**

The “show-not-tell” strategy helps the reader see the message for his or herself which creates true transparency. With “showing” you give the reader details that create an objective message. With “telling” you explain from your point of view, usually in more general terms. If the information is too general for you to be specific, you can also show a range:

**Do:** This option will take between two and three months to implement.

**Not:** This option will require considerable time to implement.

Also avoid adding too much support which provides no true value and can exhaust the reader. Apply the concept called “degree of separation” where your support links *directly* to your main point and avoid:

- Unnecessary background
- Long explanations that do not address the reader’s immediate concerns
- Examples that are only slightly related to the subject of your discussion

## Reader-Focus Exercise

Create a reader-focus from one of the following messages:

- You are applying for a new position within the FCC. You have all the experience necessary for the job, but don't want to brag or focus heavily on yourself.
- A consumer contacts the FCC with a complaint about their internet service provider. You need to explain where to go for information about actions they can take, without feeling like you're putting them off.
- You need information from a co-worker that you expected to receive days before. Unless you get this material, you won't be able to complete a report and your entire team will miss a deadline.
- Any other message that you need to write for work.

### Jargon-Free Language

To create a true reader-focus, you must control how you use industry language and jargon. Use the following definitions to distinguish between the two and manage both:

#### Jargon

- **Specific to your industry or one or two others.** You won't find jargon in your average newspaper and you don't use jargon at home. In fact, people in your industry, possibly in your office, are the only ones who use it.
- **Grammatically incorrect or doesn't use common grammar.** Jargon is usually loaded with hidden verbs or other grammar frailties.
- **Other words can replace it.** You can replace the jargon and still have precise meaning.

**Solution:** Replace with other words.



### **Industry terminology**

- **Specific to your industry—or one or two others.** Same as jargon.
- **Grammatically correct.**
- **No other words can replace it.** You need these words. They are formal nouns, for example, or words with deep legal implication.

#### **Solution:**

*If....*your readers have mixed backgrounds, define after the word and repeat the definition later.

*If....*your readers are clearly insiders, leave it alone.

*If....*your readers are mixed or outside the industry *and* you use the word only once, use the definition, instead.

## **Managing Jargon Exercise**

Write five to 10 words that you feel are problematic. Then, test them against the industry/jargon definitions to determine the best approach for addressing them.

# Plain Language Attribute 5: Tone

Written tone is much like the tone of your spoken voice. It can be informal, “Go ahead and sit down...” or formal, “Won’t you please take a seat.” In writing, you create a tone that the reader hears in his or her inner ear through your words, the context of your message, and even the sentence length. Generally, you have three options when writing a message:

## 1. Hyper-formal

This tone contains highly technical language with dense industry language, jargon, long, convoluted sentences, and the passive voice. Many professionals believe that this tone sounds more convincing yet it tends to be impenetrable and distracting for the reader.

It should formally be requested that an Executive Order be issued by the President on broadband infrastructure deployment on land and buildings deemed within the federal domain.

## 2. Formal

Most FCC documents should be in the formal tone, where you use industry terminology as needed, with appropriate definitions; a variety of sentence structures; no contractions; and words that are common to a workplace rather than social setting.

The FCC should formally request that the President issue an Executive Order on broadband infrastructure deployment on federal land and in federal buildings.

## 3. Informal

You usually use the informal tone when speaking with peers, contributing to the FCC blog, or responding to many e-mails. In writing, you may use contractions, unusual punctuation marks such as exclamation points, and colloquial terms.

The FCC should formally ask the President for an Executive Order so broadband can be available on federal land and in federal buildings.

Other style issues will affect your tone, including these:

- **Abbreviations**  
Do not abbreviate words except when the abbreviation is common in everywhere. For example, you frequently see “V.P.” rather than “Vice President.” With FCC-related language, abbreviations may confuse the reader, even industry insiders.
- **Acronyms**  
With acronyms, write the full name followed by the acronym in parenthesis the first time you have used the name, or if you have not used it for several pages. Spell out the name more frequently in documents that primarily go online.
- **Ampersands**  
Do not use “&” unless part of a formal name, such as “Jones & Jones, Attorneys at Law.”
- **Contractions**  
Contractions, such as “you’ll” rather than “you will,” are appropriate for FCC writing, depending on the document. For example, you can use contractions for blogs and many Web-only documents, e-mails, marketing and PR pieces, and many Human Resource documents. Do not use them for Congressional documents or other highly formal pieces.
- **Genderless Language**  
Genderless language does not give preferential treatment to either gender. Use it in all documents. In addition:
  - Use “he or she” when discussing people in general:  
  
 You need to get his or her signature before you can proceed in situations like these.
  - Use the genderless form of a title:  
  
 Mail Carrier
  - Use Ms. for all women, except if they have a title:

Ms. Vine  
President Vine

**Other rules:**

You can find rules for punctuation and other style issues in the “U.S. Government Printing Office Style Manual,” the “AP Style Guide,” and the FCC’s own style guide which should be published soon.

**Closing  
Exercise**

Rewrite the following so it has an appropriate tone, and is reader-focused, cohesive, concise, and active *from beginning to end*.

Under the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC’s) “local number portability” (LNP) rules, so long as you remain in the same geographic area, you can switch telephone service providers, including interconnected Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) providers, and keep your existing phone number. If you are moving from one geographic area to another, however, you may not be able to take your number with you.

Therefore, subscribers remaining in the same geographic area can now switch from a wireless, wireline, or VoIP provider to any other wireless, wireline, or VoIP provider and still keep their existing phone numbers.

**Initiating the Process**

If you want to change companies:

- **Do not** terminate your service with your existing company **before** initiating service with the prospective new company.
- Contact the new company, which will start the process of porting your number by contacting your current company.

- Be prepared to provide the new company with your 10-digit phone number, customer account number, and five-digit zip code. If you had created a passcode to protect your account, you may also need to provide that passcode.

### **Fees and Charges**

Companies may assess fees to recover the costs that they incur in providing number portability. Fees may vary between companies, and some companies may not charge any fees.

Companies may not refuse to port a number because a consumer has not paid for porting.

When considering a switch, consumers should ask the new company whether it charges any number portability fees and whether those fees can be waived.

### **The Porting Period**

The FCC has changed its number porting rules to shorten the porting period for “simple” ports from the current four days to one business day. The new deadline applies to all simple ports, including “intermodal” ports such as wireline to wireless, wireless to wireline, wireline or wireless to VoIP, or any other combination. Simple ports generally do not involve more than one line or more complex adjustments to telephone switching equipment. Wireline, wireless, and interconnected Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) providers are required to meet this new, simple port deadline, which will take effect in late summer 2010 for most carriers. Small, rural carriers have a longer period, until the beginning of 2011, to meet the new porting deadline.