



ExecuWrite

It's about *style.*

BETTER BUSINESS WRITING

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PLAIN ENGLISH PLEASE

BOTTOM LINE

Plain English is easier to read - and easier to write.
It can express the range of ideas, from simple to complex.

Plain English, put simply, is a way of expressing your ideas clearly. There are three parts to plain English:

- **Style:** By style, we mean how to write clear, readable sentences. In essence, write more the way you talk. This may sound simple, but it's a powerful idea that can revolutionize your writing.
- **Organization:** Start with your main points almost all of the time. This doesn't mean it has to be your first sentence (though it can be) - just that it should come early and be extremely easy to find.

Layout: This is the appearance of your page and the words on it. Headings, bullets, and other techniques of white space help your reader see - visually - your structure in your writing. The value is immense. Layout is fun and easy to do with today's computers.

Here is an example of a regulation which is not Plain English - an example of what is produced by the true Masters of Gobbledygook

Each application shall be supported by a comprehensive letter of explanation in duplicate. This letter shall set forth all the facts required to present to this office a complete disclosure of the transaction.

Here is a better version. Notice that it loses no preciseness:

You must send us the following:

- One copy of your application.
- Two copies of a letter explaining the complete details of your application.

It is a fact that we take longer to read less familiar words (like *commence*) than familiar ones (like *begin*). As writers, we can help our readers by preferring ordinary words.

Tip

"Write the way you talk"

Imagine you are actually standing in front of your reader. Or talking on the telephone. What would you say - in an organized and polite way? Then write those words. Sounds too simplistic? Some people are afraid that "writing the way you talk," means being simple-minded, writing like a child.

The advice is to write the way *you* talk. Look in magazines, newspapers and successful books. Listen to the most moving speeches, the best newscasts.

TIP
The next thing you write, try putting down the words as you would actually say them.
Sit in front of your computer talking through the keyboard to your imaginary reader.

What you will find is that the best of writing and the best of speaking have much in common. And what they have in common produces plain English.

Specifically:

- Use ordinary words.
- Use a variety of punctuation.
- Use more personal pronouns.
- Use contractions.

USE ORDINARY WORDS

From which column do you normally choose your words when you're writing?

| | |
|----------|--------|
| Advise | tell |
| assist | help |
| commence | begin |
| furnish | give |
| prior to | before |

Do as the good professionals do:

- Good professionals use *ordinary* words unless they need something more precise - which happens fairly often.
- Bad amateurs use *impressive* words all the time - unless they can't think of them.

The following passage is from Russell Baker's book, *Growing Up* (which won a Pulitzer Prize). It says extraordinary things with ordinary words:

At the age of eighty my mother had her last bad fall, and after that her mind wandered free through time. Some days she went to weddings and funerals that had taken place half a century earlier. On others she presided over family dinners cooked on Sunday afternoons for children who were now gray with age. Through all this, she lay in bed but moved across time, traveling among the dead decades with a speed and an ease beyond the gift of physical science.

Compare this to a sentence with mainly impressive words:

Subsequent to the passage of subject legislation, it is incumbent upon you to advise your organization to comply with it.

And if we rewrite that sentence with ordinary words:

After the law passes, you must tell your people to comply with it.

Would you rather read pages of the first version or the second?

USE A VARIETY OF PUNCTUATION

Punctuation has intimidated brave men and women for years. There is a misconception that someone who is good at punctuation simply knows what punctuation mark should go where - a comma here, a semicolon there, and a full stop at the end.

Too often, business writers use only commas and full stops. Have you ever heard anybody speak in a monotone? Well, people who write with only commas and full stops are like speakers who speak in monotone, forcing you - the target audience - to do too much work.

Don't think of punctuation as a way to go *wrong* (as a way to make mistakes). Instead, think of punctuation as a way to go *right* - as a way to say just what you mean, in the best possible way.

Writing in plain English means becoming more comfortable with using:

- comma
- period (full stop)
- questions
- the colon
- the dash
- the semicolon
- the apostrophe

Comma (,)

The comma is used to insert a pause in your writing and to separate an item or group of items from another item or group of items. In reading, the comma signifies a 2-second pause.

In reply to your letter, received on December 9, I wish to confirm my acceptance of your proposal.

The “and,” dilemma.

There is much debate over the rule about not using a comma after the word “*and*”. Traditionalists say ‘never’ – the word *and* already signifies a pause and replaces the comma.

However, in the pursuit of clarity of writing and ease of understanding, the comma may be used after the word *and* if it’s purpose is to separate multiple groupings of information.