Why Use Plain Language?

Our readers are busy. They want to scan, not read. About 79% of users scan new pages they come across; only 16% read word-by-word.

Plain Language saves money, increases efficiency, and reduces the need for clarification.

10 Steps to Plain Writing

1. Know your audience
   - Think of why your audience needs to read the document.
   - What does my audience already know?
   - Write to everyone who is interested, not just technical experts.

2. Organize your thoughts
   - Even experts prefer clearly written documents.
   - What questions will your audience ask?
   - Make sure your audience can find what they need.

3. Summarize main points
   - Highlight main points with headers and lists.
   - Provide links to more information when necessary.
   - Writing a e-mail? Put conclusions in the first paragraph so readers are sure to notice them.

4. Write short sentences and paragraphs
   - Do not use unnecessary words just because they make you sound authoritative.
   - Each paragraph should have one topic sentence and develop one idea.
   - In documents, the average sentence length should be 20 words; 15 on the Web.

5. Use everyday phrases and words
   - People relate better to information that talks directly to them.
   - Meaningless words and phrases waste space and your reader's time.
   - Eliminate unnecessary words - An absolute success, completely finished, tentatively suggest.

6. Minimize "Census-speak"
   - Acronyms are not unique. Don't assume your reader knows them all.
   - Don't use more than two or three abbreviations in each written document.
   - Avoid bureaucratic and legal language—promoting an informed and inclusive multicultural society.

7. Use strong subjects and verbs
   - Write the action(s) you want the reader to take.
   - Use active voice to make clear who is responsible.
   - Passive voice confuses the reader.
   - Keep the subject and verb close together to avoid confusion.

8. Define uncommon terms
   - Acronyms and abbreviations distract the attention of your reader.
   - Define uncommon terms and use them consistently.
   - Define acronyms more than once. If necessary, provide a glossary.

9. Use headings, lists, and tables
   - Headings and lists help your audience find the material they want quickly.
   - Use tables and illustrations that visually engage your audience.
   - Make sure that all the items in a list start with the same part of speech.

10. Proofread
    - Review with a pair of fresh eyes—wait two or more days to review or ask a peer to edit.

Use this

- must
- try
- start
- show, prove
- rank
- end, cancel
- use
- in
- ask for

Not that

- shall
- attempt
- commence
- demonstrate
- prioritize
- terminate
- utilize
- set forth in
- solicit

Plain Language at Census:
http://www.census.gov/aboutus/plain-writing.html

“If you can’t explain something simply, you don’t understand it well.”
- Albert Einstein

Plain Language...

is NOT imprecise.

is NOT an attempt to dumb-down information.

does NOT strip out necessary technical and legal information.

is NOT only editorial “polishing” after you finish writing.

It’s a whole process.

is NOT just using pronouns in a “question and answer” format.

For more examples, go to:
http://go.usa.gov/62p