WRITE CLEARLY

TWB's guide to writing in plain language
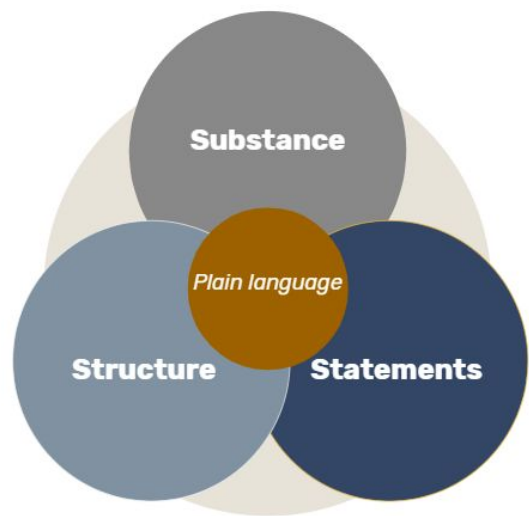
TRANSLATORS
WITHOUT BORDERS

Plain language helps all readers

When you write in plain language, you help your readers to find, understand and use your content. Plain language reduces the reading effort, so it helps everyone, regardless of their education, literacy level, or professional status.

TWB recognizes three overlapping aspects of plain-language writing:

- **Substance:** present a consistent core message that reflects your readers' needs.

- **Structure:** present content so it promotes comprehension, retention, and usability.

- **Statements:** use familiar terms and grammatical structures to minimize reading effort.

Key aspect	Tips
Substance	• Put the most important information first • Prefer rhythm and clarity over so-called "rules"
Structure	• Use informative subheadings • Use vertical lists • Delete expletives • Vary sentence length
Statements	• Prefer simple sentence structures • Prefer familiar words • Prefer the active voice • Watch for extra additional words • Use the clearest verb form • Avoid noun strings

The following pages give more detail on how to apply these tips.

Substance

Present a consistent core message that reflects your readers' needs.

Put the most important information first

Get to the point quickly. Readers typically decide within seconds if they will continue to read something. Long introductions and lots of background information seldom engage readers. Present the information that readers want to know, rather than what you want to tell them.

Each paragraph should address a single point. State your point of each paragraph as clearly as possible in its first sentence. Explain that point in more detail in subsequent sentences, arranged in order of importance to your readers. This model is called the "inverted pyramid style, " and is illustrated in Figure 1.
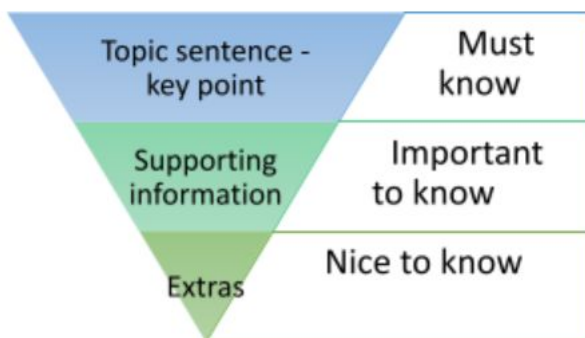

Figure 1: The "inverted pyramid" writing style is a useful model for structuring your text.

Prefer rhythm and clarity over so-called "rules"

Language conventions emerge and evolve. Plain language values clarity over compliance so you don't need to slavishly apply the grammar rules your English teacher insisted on. An occasional split infinitive might help your reader to better understand your point. Similarly, while it was once considered poor grammar to end a sentence with a preposition, it generally is no longer frowned on.

And it's acceptable to start a sentence with a conjunction occasionally. This is especially true if it helps you to avoid cumbersome words such as "furthermore," or "additionally." Or if it allows you to subdivide a long sentence. But don't do it too frequently, or it becomes distracting.

Structure

Present the content so it promotes comprehension, retention, and usability.

Use informative subheadings

Use informative subheadings every four to six paragraphs to break up large blocks of text. An informative subheading summarizes the message to follow and is similar to a newspaper headline. Informative subheadings give readers a clue about the content to follow. This helps readers who might not read your content in detail because of time or language constraints.

Most readers scan content before deciding whether to read it in detail. Subheadings stand out visually from normal text, so most readers subconsciously rely on them to evaluate how relevant your content is to them. Informative subheadings are therefore an efficient way to convey your intended messages quickly. They convey key information, even to people who choose not to read the document in detail.

By contrast, traditional topic subheadings like "Methodology" or "Examples" only tell readers about the content to follow. Question headings such as "Where can I get more information?" serve a similar purpose. Readers must read the rest of the content to receive any information.

Use vertical lists

A list of items is usually easier to read, understand, and remember when presented as bullet points.

A bullet-point list makes ideas easier to:

- read
- understand and
- remember.

Use numbered lists when you want to prioritize list items or show a sequence of steps.

In general, use vertical lists to break up sentences that list between three and six items. The advantages typically decline with more than six items.

Delete expletives

An expletive is a word or phrase that doesn't add anything to the meaning or structure of a sentence.

The first five words in the sentence "There is a chance that some members of the affected population may not receive the information" are unnecessary. Compare it with "Some members of the affected population may not receive the information".

Avoid meaningless fillers like, "in my opinion," "it is important that," and "it is necessary." "

Vary sentence length

Most sentences should have fewer than 20 words. Short sentences contain fewer clauses and less punctuation, so they are easier for readers to process. Figure 2 shows how comprehension rates decrease as sentence length increases. It applies to native speakers too.

Use different sentence lengths to give rhythm to your writing and to keep your readers engaged. Short sentences can be powerful.
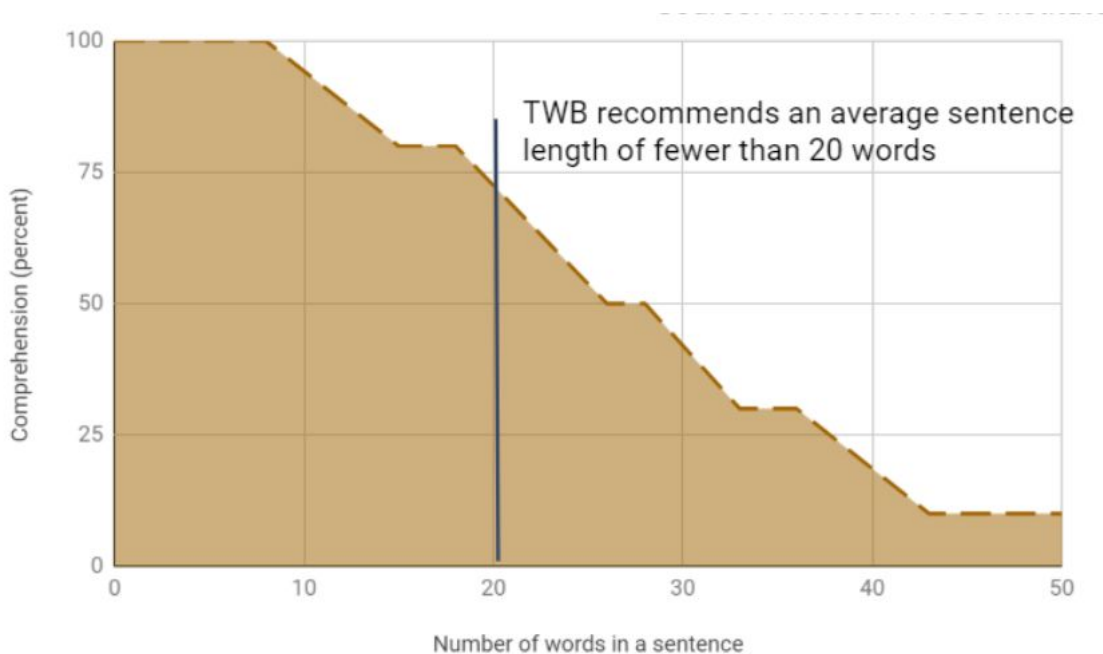

Figure 2: Comprehension rates decrease as sentence length increases

Statements

Use familiar terms and grammatical structures to minimize reading effort.

Prefer simple sentence structures

Complex sentences usually have lots of punctuation to separate distinct clauses. Avoid using colons, semicolons, parentheses, and dashes. These indicate complex sentence structures.

For example, "In general, and regardless of their education level, readers will rarely understand writers (particularly those trying to appear intelligent, sophisticated, or articulate) if those writers use complex sentence structures; on the contrary, most readers will find such structures tedious, disengaging, and difficult — if not impossible — to understand."

Compare that single sentence with the following version of the same idea. It removes a lot of punctuation by creating several simple sentences.

"Readers generally understand simple sentence structures more easily than complex sentence structures. This applies regardless of readers' education. Some writers try to appear intelligent, sophisticated, or articulate by using complex sentence structures. Yet on the contrary, most readers find such structures tedious, disengaging, and difficult to understand."

Prefer familiar words

Maximize reader comprehension by using words that are familiar to most readers. Resources such as Martin Cutts' Plain English Lexicon or online word frequency lists let you check your assumptions about how familiar a word might be.

Using familiar words makes your content accessible to a wider range of readers. It will also make it quicker to read, even for people who could potentially understand less common words.

The following example uses many uncommon words.

"There is a large-scale conviction among some authors that the application of atypical lexes and syntax will assist them to appear more erudite and scholarly. However, investigations demonstrate that commonly used words facilitate swifter comprehension, which warrants that the author is perceived as both cerebral and compassionate. A thesaurus can be beneficial in that regard."

Or, to put that another way:

"Many writers think that using complex words and sentences makes them seem smarter. But readers understand common words more quickly, which helps writers appear both smart and thoughtful. A thesaurus can help."

Prefer the active voice

Active voice and passive voice are different ways to use verbs. Both are grammatically correct, but the active voice is usually clearer and more concise.

The passive voice uses a form of the verb "to be," such as "was," "were," or "be" with a second verb in a tense called a past participle.

"An assessment of the situation was done" is an example of the passive voice. It combines "was" with "done." The reader must guess who did the assessment, leading to potential uncertainty or an incorrect assumption.

"TWB assessed the situation" is an example of the active voice. It uses the simple past form of "assess" to unambiguously tell the reader who acted.

Notice that the passive voice sentence contains seven words, while the active voice sentence contains four. This difference might seem trivial in a single sentence. But using the active voice consistently in a longer document reduces the total word count and therefore reading time.

One way to test if a verb is in the passive voice is to add "by me" at the end. If the sentence still makes sense, it is probably in the passive voice. "An assessment of the situation was done [by me]" makes sense, even if it's not true. That tells you that the original sentence uses the passive voice so you should probably rewrite it so it's clearer. "TWB assessed the situation [by me]" does not make sense, which tells us that the original sentence used the active voice.

If you need more information on the difference between active voice and passive voice, many explanations are available online, such as [this one](#).

Watch for extra additional words

Avoid using words and phrases that don't add value to a sentence. Many writers emphasise points by repeating them using different words. Consider the subheading above. "Extra" and "additional" mean roughly the same thing, so you can delete one without changing the message.

Don't use adjectives and adverbs unless they add value for the reader. Usually they add to the word count and make sentences more complex. So consider whether they add ~~real~~ value or whether they are just a means of ~~creatively~~ filling out a sentence.

Use the clearest verb form

Plain language relies on well chosen verbs. Some verb forms are more difficult to read and process than others, particularly for non-native speakers.

In general, the clearest verbs:

- use the simple present or simple past tense
- are not hidden in abstract nouns and
- stand on their own.

Use the simple present or simple past tense

The simple present or simple past tenses are clearest. Those verb forms are not always appropriate, but they are a useful starting point. If you're not sure of the different English verb tenses, there are lots of online resources like [this one](#).

Avoid turning verbs into nouns

Verbs lose power when writers hide them in abstract nouns. which typically end in "...ion," "...age," or "..ment." For example, the nouns "provision," "usage," and "development," which hide the verbs "provide," "use," and "develop." In general, sentences that turn verbs into nouns require more words to create them.

Consider the following 14-word sentence. "The construction of shelters is essential for the protection of people from the sun." This sentence disguises the verbs "construct" and "protect" in abstract nouns. The nine-word alternative, "Construct safe shelters to protect people from the sun" makes the message clearer because the relevant verbs are more obvious.

Favour single strong verbs

A single verb is clearer and more concise than two or more verbs. For example, "Perform an evaluation of ..." requires a reader to decode both "perform" and a hidden form of "evaluate." The single verb "Evaluate ..." is shorter and clearer. In isolation, the difference is trivial, but if you consistently use multiple verbs to refer to a single action, your writing will be convoluted and unclear.

Only use modal verbs if they clarify the meaning of a sentence. Modal verbs are "must," "shall," "will," "should," "would," "can," "could," "may," and "might." They only work if combined with another verb, so they dilute the intensity of that other verb.

Avoid noun strings

Using several consecutive nouns and adjectives to describe a single thing makes comprehension more difficult than it needs to be. It also complicates the translation task/

"Critical life-saving medical services" is an example of a noun string.

Usually, you can rewrite the sentence to avoid these strings. "Medical services that save lives" is one alternative. In most cases, "critical" can be omitted because readers will intuitively understand that any action that saves lives is likely to be "critical."

ABOUT TRANSLATORS WITHOUT BORDERS

Translators without Borders (TWB) is a non-profit organization offering language and translation support for humanitarian and development agencies, and other non-profit organizations on a global scale.

Contact us

General enquiries: info@translatorswithoutborders.org

Sponsorship opportunities: info@translatorswithoutborders.org

Press/media inquiries: communications@translatorswithoutborders.org

Translators without Borders - US, Inc.
Suite 500, 30 Main Street
Danbury, CT 06810 USA
+1 (203) 794-6698 (United States)

Kenya office
6th Floor, Senteu Plaza, Galana / Lenana Road Junction
Nairobi Kenya
Postal address: P.O Box 22494 - 00505, Nairobi, Kenya
+254798985410

Ireland office
Marina House, Block V
East Point Business Park
Dublin 3, Ireland
Registered charity number: 474505

translatorswithoutborders.org