

If you can't understand it, you can't use it

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Plain language

Material is in plain language if your readers can

- find what they need
- understand it
- use it to fulfill their needs

the first time they read it!

Benefits of plain language

Plain language

- saves your organization and your customers time and money
- reduces complaints and errors
- serves your customers better

Examples of benefits

The Arizona Department of Revenue saved \$50,000 in one year in avoided phone calls by clarifying the instructions on a form.

One Veterans Administration office avoided 1,000 calls a year by rewriting one letter in plain language – and more veterans applied for benefits because they understood the instructions.

The Federal Communications Commission halved the time it took users to find answers to their questions in pleasure boat radio regulations by rewriting the regulation in plain language.

Top 10 plain language tips

- Write to your audience.
- Organize logically.
- Keep sentences reasonably short.
- Prefer active voice.
- Prefer verbs over nouns, and use strong verbs.
- Eliminate excess words.
- Avoid abbreviations, jargon, foreign words, and legalisms.
- Use common words.
- Use pronouns.
- Use lists and tables.

Which is more usable?



Australians mailing food to the United States may have to fill out a prior notice form

Starting date: August 12, 2004

Must I do this?

There is one exception: If you made the food yourself in your home and are sending it as a personal gift (not for business reasons) to an individual in the United States, you do not have to fill out the prior notice form.

In all other situations, Australians must fill out the prior notice form.

What must I do?

1. Go to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's [prior notice web page](#).
 2. Fill out the form there about the food you are sending to the U.S.
- The system verifies that your information is complete and then shows you a confirmation page with a confirmation number and the information you submitted.
3. Print the confirmation page.
 4. Take the confirmation with you when you go to Australia Post to mail your package.

Why must I do this?

The U.S. [Bioterrorism Act](#) requires this.

The "before," from the Australia Post's web site, was removed only a few months ago. Suggested revision by Ginny Redish, *Letting Go of the Words*, pgs 201-202.

Which is more usable?

If you disagree with this disallowance and believe the evidence now of record is sufficient for us to award you benefits, please refer to the enclosed VA Form 1-4107, Notice of Procedural and Appellate Rights, which explains your rights to appeal.

The "before" is from an original Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) letter; "after" is the VBA's own rewrite.

If you think we shouldn't have turned down your claim, you should write and tell us. We've attached a form, which explains your rights.

What's happening?

The US House of Representatives passed HR 3548, the Plain Language in Government Communications Act of 2008, 376 to 1.

The Senate is considering the companion bill, S. 2291.

10 states have laws requiring plain language in consumer contracts.

Washington, Oregon, and Florida have broader plain language requirements.

Los Angeles County has a plain language initiative.

Sweden, Mexico, England, Australia, and New Zealand all have strong plain language programs.

Find out more

Visit: www.plainlanguage.gov

www.centerforplainlanguage.org

Read:

Redish, Janice (Ginny), *Letting Go of the Words – Writing Web Content that Works*

Wydick, Richard, *Plain English for Lawyers* (a little book for everyone)

Schriver, Karen, *Dynamics in Document Design*

Security and Exchange Commission, *Plain English Handbook*

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