Quick Tips to Improve Plain Language Writing Skills

Taken From: http://www.plainlanguage.gov/resources/take_training/actionoff.pdf

Appendix B—Simpler Words and Phrases

Introduction
In spite of campaigns to improve, poor writing still pervades bureaucratic institutions. It persists because people
– don’t know any better
– think it’s expected, or
– feel it’s a way to impress others.

Less is more
Official writing doesn’t demand big words or pompous phrases. Small, one-syllable words
– form the backbone of the English language
– save writing and reading time, and
– increase your power of expression.

Payoff
Simple words and phrases enable readers to
– read what you write
– understand it, and
– remember who wrote it.

Instead of, try . . .
Review the list of big words and pompous phrases in the first column, then consider the simpler alternatives in the second.

Rules
To meet Army writing standards, follow these composition rules from AR 25-50:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Rule</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bottom line up front</td>
<td>State purpose and main point up front. For example, put the recommendation, conclusion, or reason for writing in the first or second paragraph, not at the end.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active voice</td>
<td>Use active voice in most sentences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short words</td>
<td>Choose one or two-syllable words over multi-syllable ones.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short sentences</td>
<td>Write short sentences (average about 15 words).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lean</td>
<td>Write most paragraphs about one inch deep.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No jargon</td>
<td>Avoid jargon, especially when writing to outsiders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error free</td>
<td>Use correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Set a businesslike but informal tone. Use you, we, or I instead of this office or this headquarters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exception: Because it’s patronizing, avoid using possessive pronouns, my or mine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Example: Instead of saying my staff, say our staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One page</td>
<td>Limit length to one page for most correspondence.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Using the Active and Passive Voice

Introduction
This map explains how to convert the passive voice into the active. It also explains when it’s appropriate to use the passive voice.

Active versus passive
Writing sentences in the active voice is the single best way to improve writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active voice</th>
<th>Passive voice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>– uses fewer words</td>
<td>– uses 20 percent more words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– takes less time to read</td>
<td>– takes more time to read</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– identifies the agent.</td>
<td>– may omit the agent.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before and after
Passive voice: *It was recommended that an ethics committee be created, so citizens would be afforded a means of reporting fraud, waste, or abuse.*

Active voice: *City Council recommended the mayor create an ethics committee to enable citizens to report fraud, waste, or abuse.*

Conversion steps
To convert a passive sentence into an active one, take these steps:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Identify the agent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Move the agent to the subject position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Remove the helping verb, <em>to be.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Remove the past participle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Replace the helping verb and participle with an action verb.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examples of conversion

Original: The report has been completed.
Revised: Jack completed the report.

Original: A decision will be made.
Revised: Jill will decide.

When to use passive
Though overused, passive voice still has legitimate purposes in our language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use the passive voice when the</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>receiver is the focus of the action</td>
<td>John was awarded a prize.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>agent is unknown</td>
<td>The store was robbed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>agent is irrelevant, or</td>
<td>The paragraphs will be numbered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>situation calls for discretion.</td>
<td>No decision has been made. (Your boss is sitting on the action.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Smothered Verbs**

**Introduction**
This map explains how to shorten sentences by eliminating smothered verbs.

**Action verb**
An action verb is one that expresses meaning without helping verbs or other modifiers. **Example:** We agree with the decision.

**Smothered verb**
A smothered verb is a verb converted to a noun, so it needs a helping verb and prepositions or articles to express action. This lengthens a sentence and saps its vitality. It also encourages use of the passive voice.

“We are in agreement with the decision.” In this sentence, the writer has smothered the main verb (agree) with a noun (agreement). The noun now requires a helping verb (are) and a preposition (in) to show action.

**Distinct endings**
Most smothered verbs have distinct endings:
- ance
- any
- ant
- ant
- ance
- ity
- ant
- ment
- ness
- sion
- tion.

**Weak helping verbs**
Smothered verbs rely on weak helping verbs to show action. If one of them appears, you know a smothered verb is nearby. **Examples:**
- be
- can
- conduct
- do
- effect
- get
- give
- have
- hold
- make
- provide
- put

**Converting smothered verbs**
To give your sentences more punch, find the smothered verb and convert it into an action verb (or substitute it with a harder hitting verb). This eliminates the need for a helping verb and other modifiers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of saying</th>
<th>Try</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We held a meeting</td>
<td>We met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I made a choice</td>
<td>I chose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They conducted an investigation</td>
<td>They investigated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consideration was given to</td>
<td>We considered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are in support of the plan</td>
<td>We support the plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He made an attempt to escape</td>
<td>He attempted to escape.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sentence Clarity

Introduction
This map explains how to write clear, emphatic sentences.

Length
So far, you’ve seen how using the active voice and eliminating wordy expressions enhances clarity. However, this may not be enough. If sentences are all long or all short, paragraphs may still be hard to read.

Variety
While sentences should average about 15 words, they need not all be the same length, nor is this desirable. If written clearly, an occasional long sentence is fine. However, after writing a long sentence, keep the next one short.

Caution: Should you write all long or all short sentences, you’ll present too few or too many points of emphasis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Don’t make all sentences</th>
<th>because it makes them</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the same length</td>
<td>monotonous.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>long</td>
<td>dense and hard to read.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>short</td>
<td>choppy, telegraphic, and juvenile.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Too long
Example:
I learned I was selected for the job, so I called Jeanne immediately, and I told her the good news, and that evening we celebrated by going out to dinner.

Analysis:
This sentence of 31 words with four stringy thoughts is much too long. And we’re not sure which point the writer is emphasizing. This sentence must be divided into shorter ones, but they must not be too short.

Too short and choppy
Revision of original sentence:
I learned I was selected for the job. I called Jeanne immediately. I told her the good news. That evening we celebrated by going out to dinner.

Analysis:
Here, we deleted the conjunctions (and, so) and created four short sentences. They’re easier to read, but when read in order they send a choppy message. They also raise four points of emphasis for the reader to ponder. We can make these sentences more effective by combining them.
Example (four short sentences):
I learned I was selected for the job. I called Jeanne immediately. I told her the good news. That evening we celebrated by going out to dinner.

Final revision:
Upon hearing I was selected for the job, I called Jeanne and told her the good news. That evening we celebrated by going out to dinner.

Analysis:
Using a subordinate and an independent clause, combined first three sentences.

Emphasis
Emphasis correctly placed adds clarity and force to expression.

Beginning of sentence
Place introductory, preliminary, previously known, or less important points at the beginning. This tells the reader these preceding words have lesser emphasis than what is to follow.

End of sentence
Place the point you wish to emphasize at the end of the sentence. You want to stress the newest or most important point there.

Bad example
I called Jeanne and told her the good news, upon learning I was selected for the job.
Analysis: In this example, the emphasis is misplaced. Old information (job selection) should appear in the front and introduce the new information.

Good example
Upon learning I was selected for the job, I called Jeanne and told her the good news.
Analysis: In this example, old information precedes the new.

Recap
To add clarity to sentences,
- use the active voice
- delete extraneous words
- reduce clauses to phrases or words
- replace long words with short ones
- control sentence length, and
- emphasize the main point at the end.

Note: This has been a cursory treatment of sentence clarity. For a comprehensive presentation, consult this source: Joseph M. Williams, Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace, 2nd ed. (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1985).