

Excerpted Medical Plain-Language Guidelines

Adapted from the Federal Plain Language Guidelines

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I. Words

- Choose your words carefully – be precise and concise.

1. Verbs

i. Use active voice

In an active sentence, the person or agency that's acting is the subject of the sentence. In a passive sentence, the person or item that is acted upon is the subject of the sentence. Passive sentences often do not identify who is performing the action.

- Avoid passive voice.
- Don't confuse passive voice with past tense.
- To identify passive voice look for its 2 basic features:
- A form of the verb "to be" (for example: are, was, were, could be) and
- A past participle (generally with "ed" on the end).

Examples of Passive and Active Voice:

Passive voice	Active voice
The lake was polluted by the company.	The company polluted the lake.
New regulations were proposed.	We proposed new regulations.
The following information must be included in the application for it to be considered complete.	You must include the following information in your application.
Bonds will be withheld in cases of non-compliance with all permits and conditions.	We will withhold your bond if you don't comply with all permit terms and conditions.

ii. Use the simplest form of a verb

- Write in **Present Tense**- the simplest and strongest form of a verb

Don't say	Say
These sections describe types of information that would satisfy the application requirements of Circular A-110 as it would apply to this grant program.	These sections tell you how to meet the requirements of Circular A-110 for this grant program.

- Even if you are covering an event that occurred in the past, you can clarify the material for your user by writing as much as possible in the present tense.

Don't say	Say
Applicants who were Federal employees at the time that the injury was sustained should have filed a compensation request at that time. Failure to do so could have an effect on the degree to which the applicant can be covered under this part.	<p>You may not be covered under this part if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. You were a Federal employee at the time of the injury; and b. You did not file a claim at that time.

- Use tenses other than the present only when necessary for accuracy.
- Use tenses other than the present only when necessary for accuracy:
- Example: National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documents frequently refer to what may happen in the future if certain events occur.

iii. Avoid hidden verbs

A hidden verb is a verb converted into a noun. It often needs an extra verb to make sense.

Hidden verbs come in two forms. Some have endings such as *-ment*, *-tion*, *-sion*, and *-ance* or link with verbs such as *achieve*, *effect*, *give*, *have*, *make*, *reach*, and *take*. Often, you will find a hidden verb between the words “the” and “of.”

Examples of Hidden Verb:

Hidden Verb	Uncovered
To trace the missing payment, we need to carry out a review of the Agency's accounts so we can gain an understanding of the reason the error occurred.	To trace the missing payment, we need to review the Agency's accounts so we understand the reason the error occurred.
If you cannot make the payment of the \$100 fee, you must make an application in writing before you file your tax return.	If you cannot pay the \$100 fee, you must apply in writing before you file your tax return.

iv. Use “must” to indicate requirements

The word “must” is the clearest way to convey to your audience that they have to do something. “Shall” is one of those officious and obsolete words that has encumbered legal style writing for many years. The message that “shall” sends to the audience is, “this is deadly material.” However, “Shall” is imprecise. It can indicate either an obligation or a prediction.

- Do NOT use “shall”, use:
- “must” for an obligation,
- “must not” for a prohibition,
- “may” for a discretionary action, and
- “should” for a recommendation.

The following example demonstrates how much clearer language can be if you follow these suggestions.

Don't say	Say
<p>Section 5511.1 Free Use of Timber on Oil and Gas Leases</p> <p>a. Any oil or gas lessee who wishes to use timber for fuel in drilling operations shall file an application therefore with the officer who issued the lease.</p>	<p>Section 5511.1 Free Use of Timber on Oil and Gas Leases</p> <p>a. You must file an application to use the timber on your oil or gas lease for fuel. File the application with our office where you got your lease.</p> <p>b. We will notify you by registered</p>

Don't say	Say
<p>b. The applicant shall be notified by registered mail in all cases where the permit applied for is not granted, and shall be given 30 days within which to appeal such decision.</p> <p>c. Where the land is occupied by a settler, the applicant shall serve notice on the settler by registered mail showing the amount and kind of timber he has applied for.</p>	<p>mail if we reject your application. You must file an appeal of that decision within 30 days.</p> <p>c. You must notify any settler, by registered mail, that you have applied to use timber from your lease. Include in your notice the amount and the kind of timber you intend to use as fuel.</p>

v. Use contractions when appropriate

“Write as you talk” is a common rule of writing readably, and the best way to do that is to use contractions. People are accustomed to hearing contractions in spoken English, and using them in your writing helps people relate to your document.

- Use contractions with discretion wherever they sound natural.
- Do NOT make a contraction out of every possible word.

Don't Say	Say
<p>No pilot in command of a civil aircraft may allow any object to be dropped from that aircraft in flight that creates a hazard to persons or property.</p>	<p>If you are a pilot in command of a civil aircraft, don't allow any object that creates a hazard to persons or property to be dropped from that aircraft during flight.</p>

2. Nouns and pronouns

- Nouns add substance and direction. Pronouns engage your audience.
- Don't complicate things by using words patients won't understand or abbreviations that confuse them.

i. Don't turn verbs into nouns

Readability suffers when three words that are ordinarily separate nouns follow in succession. Once you get past three, the string becomes unbearable. Technically, clustering nouns turns all but the last noun into adjectives. However, many users will think they've found the noun when they're still reading adjectives, and will become confused.

- Eliminating descriptive words that aren't essential.
- Use more prepositions and articles to clarify the relationships among the words.
- Avoid too many noun strings (groups of nouns "sandwiched" together).

Avoid nouns strings like these	Instead, say
Underground mine worker safety protection procedures development	Developing procedures to protect the safety of workers in underground mines
Draft laboratory animal rights protection regulations	Draft regulations to protect the rights of laboratory animals
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's automobile seat belt interlock rule	The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's interlock rule applies to automotive seat belts

ii. Use pronouns to speak directly to readers

- Make sure you use pronouns that clearly refer to a specific noun.
- If a pronoun could refer to more than one person or object in a sentence, repeat the name of the person or object or rewrite the sentence.

Don't say	Say
After the Administrator appoints an Assistant Administrator, he or she must ...	After the Administrator appoints an Assistant Administrator, the Assistant Administrator must ...

3. Other word issues

- Be concise – leave out unnecessary words.
- Don't use jargon or technical terms when everyday words have the same meaning.
- Use words and terms consistently throughout your documents.

i. Use short, simple words

- Prefer the familiar word to the far-fetched.
- Prefer the concrete word to the abstraction.
- Prefer the single word to the circumlocution.
- Prefer the short word to the long.
- Prefer the Saxon word to the Romance word.
- Pick the familiar or frequently used word over the unusual or obscure. There are many lists of complex words and suggested substitutes, for example www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/wordsuggestions/simplewords.cfm

Example:

Avoid this long version:

There is no escaping the fact that it is considered very important to note that a number of various available applicable studies ipso facto have generally identified the fact that additional appropriate nocturnal employment could usually keep juvenile adolescents off thoroughfares during the night hours, including but not limited to the time prior to midnight on weeknights and/or 2 a.m. on weekends.

Use these stronger, simpler words:

More night jobs would keep youths off the streets.

ii. Omit unnecessary words

- Avoid long, complex sentences containing multiple phrases and clauses.

- Omit information that the audience doesn't need to know.
- watch out for "of," "to," "on," and other *prepositions*. They often mark phrases you can reduce to one or two words.

Don't say	Say
a number of a sufficient number of at this point in time is able to on a monthly basis on the ground that an amount of X be responsible for in order to	several, a few, many enough now can monthly because X must to

- Often, you can omit *redundant words*.

Don't say	Say
The X Department and the Y Department worked together on a joint project to improve ...	The X and Y Departments worked on a project to improve ... ("Joint" and "together" are both redundant.)

- Avoid **excess modifiers** such as absolutely, actually, completely, really, quite, totally, and very.

Don't say	Say
Their claim was totally unrealistic.	Their claim was absurd.
It is particularly difficult to reconcile the somewhat differing views expressed by the management team.	It is difficult to reconcile the differing views expressed by the management team.
Total disclosure of all facts is very important to make sure we draw up a total and completely accurate picture of the Agency's financial position.	Disclosing all facts is important to creating an accurate picture of the Agency's financial position.

- Avoid doublets and triplets.

Don't say	Say
due and payable	due
cease and desist	stop
knowledge and information	(either one)
begin and commence	start

Here's an example that uses several of the techniques discussed above to cut a 54 word sentence down to 22 words, with no loss of meaning.

Don't say	Say
If the State Secretary finds that an individual has received a payment to which the individual was not entitled, whether or not the payment was due to the individual's fault or misrepresentation, the individual shall be liable to repay to State the total sum of the payment to which the individual was not entitled.	If the State Secretary finds that you received a payment that you weren't entitled to, you must pay the entire sum back.

iii. Dealing with definitions

We have ONE rule for dealing with definitions: *use them rarely.*

Give common words their common meanings and don't define them.

- Never define a word to mean something other than its commonly accepted meaning.

Commonly understood words with uncommon meanings	How uncommon meanings might confuse readers
<i>Pages</i> means paper copies of standard office size or the dollar value equivalent in other media	Ten pages into the document, how do you think the average user would respond if asked to define "page"?

<i>Coal deposits</i> mean all Federally owned coal deposits, except those held in trust for a Native American tribe.	So if coal is held in trust for a Native American tribe, it isn't coal?
<i>Dead livestock.</i> The body (cadaver) of livestock which has died otherwise than by slaughter.	So if you slaughter it, it isn't really dead?

When possible, define a word where you use it

- Avoid long sections of definitions at the beginning or end of your document.

If you must have a definition section, put it at the beginning or the end

- In definition sections, don't number the definitions, but list them alphabetically.

Never include regulatory or other substantive material in definitions

Consider this "definition" in Title 43 Part 3480 — Coal Exploration and Mining Operations:

Maximum economic recovery (MER) means that, based on standard industry operating practices, all profitable portions of a leased Federal coal deposit must be mined. At the times of MER determinations, consideration will be given to: existing proven technology; commercially available and economically feasible equipment; coal quality, quantity, and marketability; safety, exploration, operating, processing, and transportation costs; and compliance with applicable laws and regulations. The requirement of MER does not restrict the authority of the authorized officer to ensure the conservation of the recoverable coal reserves and other resources and to prevent the wasting of coal.

Hiding in this long passage is the definition, "Maximum economic recovery (MER) means the mining of all profitable portions of a leased Federal coal deposit, based on standard industry operating practices." All the rest of the material belongs in the substantive parts of the regulation.

Do Not define words you don't use.

vi. Don't use slashes

- Use either "X", or "Y", or both instead of "X/Y"
- Use a hyphen to join equal or like terms, as in "faculty-student ratio" instead of slashes

II. Sentences

Choose your words carefully. Start with your main idea – don't start with an exception. Word order does matter, so place your words carefully. Keep it short; it's not a crime to use lots of periods.

1. Write short sentences

- Break up your idea into its parts
- Express only one idea in each sentence.

Don't say	Say
Once the candidate's goals are established, one or more potential employers are identified. A preliminary proposal for presentation to the employer is developed. The proposal is presented to an employer who agrees to negotiate an individualized job that meets the employment needs of the applicant and real business needs of the employer.	Once we establish your goals, we identify one or more potential employers. We prepare a preliminary proposal to present to an employer who agrees to negotiate a job that meets both his and your employment needs.

In the following example, we have made an "if" clause into a separate sentence. By beginning the first sentence with "suppose" (that is, "if") and the second sentence with "in this case" (that is, "then") we have preserved the relationship between the two.

Don't say	Say
<p>If you take less than your entitled share of production for any month, but you pay royalties on the full volume of your entitled share in accordance with the provisions of this section, you will owe no additional royalty for that lease for prior periods when you later take more than your entitled share to balance your account. This also applies when the other participants pay you money to balance your account.</p>	<p>Suppose that one month you pay royalties on your full share of production but take less than your entitled share. In this case, you may balance your account in one of the following ways without having to pay more royalty. You may either:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Take more than your entitled share in the future; or b. Accept payment from other participants.

2. Keep subject, verb, and object close together

- Use subject-verb-object word order- it's the best.
- Resist putting modifiers, phrases, or clauses between two or all three of these essential parts.

Example:

“If any member of the board retires, the company, at the discretion of the board, and after notice from the chairman of the board to all the members of the board at least 30 days before executing this option, may buy, and the retiring member must sell, the member’s interest in the company.”

In essence, the sentence says:

“The company may buy a retiring member’s interest.”

All the rest of the material modifies the basic idea, and should be moved to another sentence or at least to the end of the sentence.

- For sentences in regulations include “if-then” provisions:

- Start your sentence with the “if” provision, and then list the “then” provisions.
- If the provision is complex, and especially if there are several different “if” provisions, use a different sentence for every “if,” or consider using an if-then table.

3. Avoid double negatives and exceptions to exceptions

When you write a sentence containing two negatives, they cancel each other out. Your sentence sounds negative, but is actually positive.

Don't say	Say
No approval of any noise compatibility program, or any portion of a program, may be implied in the absence of the agency's express approval.	You must get the agency's express approval for any noise compatibility program or any portion of a program.

Here are some expressions that signal double negatives.

Change the double negative	To a positive
no fewer than ...	at least
has not yet attained	is under
may not ... until	may only ... when
is not ... unless	is ... only if

Many ordinary words have a negative meaning, such as *unless*, *fail to*, *notwithstanding*, *except*, *other than*, *unlawful* (*un-* words), *disallowed* (*dis-* words), *terminate*, *void*, *insufficient*, and so on. Watch out for them when they appear after **not**. Find a positive word to express your meaning.

Don't say	Say
An application for a grant does not become void unless the applicant's failure to provide requested information is unreasonable under the circumstances.	An application for a grant remains active if the applicant provides the information we request within a reasonable time.

Exceptions to exceptions

An exception that contains an exception is just another form of a double negative.

Don't say	Say
Applicants may be granted a permit to prospect for geothermal resources on any federal lands except lands in the National Park System, unless the applicant holds valid existing rights to the geothermal resources on the National Park System lands listed in the application.	You may be granted a permit to prospect for geothermal resources on any federal lands. This includes lands in the National Park System only if you hold valid existing rights to the park lands listed in your application.

4. Place the main idea before exceptions and conditions

- Start with the main idea and then cover exceptions and conditions.

Don't say	Say
Except as described in paragraph (b), the Division Manager will not begin the statutory 180-day review period for the program until after the preliminary review determines that your submission is administratively complete.	The Division Manager will not begin the statutory 180-day review period for the program until the preliminary review determines that your submission is administratively complete. However, see paragraph (b) for an exception.

- Use the word *if* for conditions. Use *when* (not *where*), if you need *if* to introduce another clause or if the condition occurs regularly.
- If an exception or condition is just *a few words*, and seeing it first will avoid misleading users, put it at the beginning instead of the end.

Don't say	Say
With your grant application you must submit a resume containing your undergraduate, graduate, and any other professional education, your	<i>Unless you have already submitted an up-to-date resume</i> , you must submit a resume containing your undergraduate, graduate, and any other professional education,

Don't say	Say
work experience in the field of health care, and the name, and phone number of current and previous employers in the health care field, <i>unless you have already submitted this information.</i>	your work experience in the field of health care, and the name, address and phone number of current and previous employers in the health care field.

- If an exception or condition is *long* and the main clause is *short*, put the main clause first and then state the exception or condition.

Don't say	Say
<i>Except when you submitted an identical application for an education grant in the previous year and you received full or partial grant for that year's program,</i> we will schedule a hearing on your application.	We will schedule a hearing on your application, <i>except when you submitted an identical application for an education grant in the previous year and you received full or partial grant for that year's program.</i>

- If a condition and the main clause are *both long*, foreshadow the condition and put it at the end of the sentence. If there are several conditions, lead with “*if*” or a phrase such as “*in the following circumstances.*”

Don't say	Say
If you, or an interested party, requests that the hearing be held at the educational institution where you plan to instruct program participants, and the hearing room is both handicapped-accessible and large enough for at least 100 people, we may, at our discretion, hold the hearing at that location, after adequate public notice.	We may hold a hearing at the educational institution where you plan to instruct program participants <i>if</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. You, or an interested party, request the location; b. The hearing room is large enough for at least 100 people and handicapped-accessible; and c. We can give adequate public notice.

- Use a list (like the example above) if your sentence contains multiple conditions or exceptions.

Don't say	Say
With your grant application you must submit a resume containing your undergraduate, graduate, and any other professional education, your work experience in the field of health care, and the name, and phone number of current and previous employers in the health care field, <i>unless you have already submitted this information.</i>	<p><i>Unless you have already submitted an up-to-date resume,</i> you must submit a resume containing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your undergraduate, graduate, and any other professional education; • Your work experience in the field of health care; and • The name, address and phone number of current and previous employers in the health care field.

- Make implied conditions explicit by using **if**.

Don't say	Say
A party must make advance arrangements with the hearing officer for the transportation and receipt of <i>exhibits of unusual bulk.</i>	<i>If your exhibits are unusually bulky,</i> you must make advance arrangements for transporting them with the hearing.

- Avoid using an exception, if you can, by stating a rule or category directly rather than describing that rule or category by stating its exceptions.

Don't say	Say
All persons except those 18 years or older must...	Each person under 18 years of age must...

- But use an exception if it avoids a long and cumbersome list or elaborate description.

Don't say	Say
Alabama, Alaska,... and Wyoming (a list of 47 states) must	Each state except Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona must...

5. Place words carefully

Sloppy word placement can cause ambiguity. To reduce ambiguity:

- Keep subjects and objects close to their verbs.
- Put conditionals such as “only” or “always” and other modifiers next to the words they modify. Write “you are required to provide only the following,” not “you are only required to provide the following.”
- Put long conditions after the main clause. Write “complete form 9-123 if you own more than 50 acres and cultivate grapes,” not “if you own more than 50 acres and cultivate grapes, complete form 9-123.”

Confusing word placement	Clearer construction
<p>Upon the request of an Indian tribe, the Secretary may provide that the purchaser of the forest products of such tribe, which are harvested under a timber sale contract, permit, or other harvest sale document, make advance deposits, or direct payments of the gross proceeds of such forest products, less any amounts segregated as forest management deductions pursuant to section 163.25, into accounts designated by such Indian tribe.</p>	<p>If a tribe (you) asks us, we will require purchasers of your forest products to deposit their payment into an account that you designate.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. You can instruct us to deposit advance payments as well as direct payments into the account. b. We will withhold from the deposit any forest management deductions under section 163.25.

Ambiguous construction	Clearer construction
<p>If you are determined to have a disability, we will pay you the following:</p>	<p>If we determine that you have a disability, we will pay you the following:</p>

