

# Plain language writing tips

## 1 Use short sentences

- 15 to 20 words per sentence
- one topic per sentence

## 2 Use short paragraphs

- average five sentences and one topic per paragraph
- use a logical order: first to last, most to least important

## 3 Make people the subjects

- make it clear who is doing what to whom
- use 'you' and 'we'

## 4 Use active verbs

- a doer (subject) does something (verb) to a receiver of the action (object)
- Passive:** An evaluation of the procedures needs to be done.  
**Active:** We need to evaluate the procedures.

## 5 Give clear instructions

- be upfront about who you are, who you write to, and why
- show your readers what they can do with the information

## 6 Use positive language

- sound friendly, helpful, direct
  - tell your readers what you want them to do, not what you don't want them to do
- Negative:** If you don't exercise you will probably have health problems.  
**Positive:** Exercise helps to keep you healthy.

## 7 Highlight important information

- use lists, simple illustrations, contrast
- use fonts
  - use one or two fonts in one document (not more)
  - use at least 12 point font (**this is 10 point, this is 12 point, this is 14 point**)
  - use a serif font (**like this, Times New Roman**) for the main part of the document
- use headlines
  - sans serif fonts work well for headlines (**this is sans serif Arial**)
  - headlines should be larger, darker, and set apart from the rest of the text

## 8 Use ordinary words

- explain technical words with familiar examples
- surround new, difficult words with lots of everyday language
- avoid jargon, idioms and sarcasm