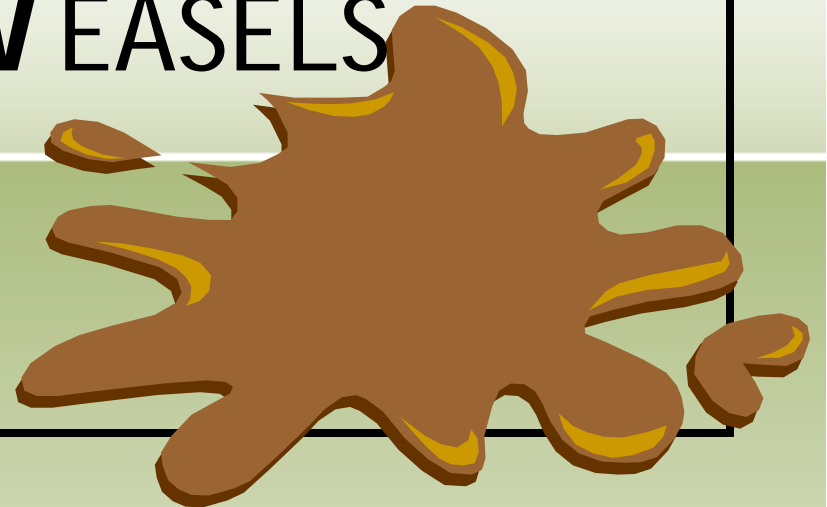


CLEAR AS MUD

and

FULL OF WEASELS

Lynell Buckley, Presenter
LaSSAL / LLA in Baton Rouge, La.
March 13th, 2009



This time at the genesis will be taken in proffering the usual and commonplace salutations and felicitations appropriate in situations such as these when preparing to embark upon an unfamiliar topic.

When to Use “Plain English” Writing

- Policies for Library Users
- Instructional Hand-Outs or Flyers
- Application Forms
- Point-of-Use Instructions
 - Printers/Copiers
 - Computer Software
- Procedure Manuals or Brochures
- Annual Reports
- Fund-Raising Communications

Exhibit A

“Means of Egress: Ways of exit access and the doors to exit to which they lead shall be so designed and arranged as to be clearly recognizable as such. Hangings or draperies shall not be placed over exit doors or otherwise so located as to obscure any exit. Mirrors shall not be placed on exit doors. Mirrors shall not be placed in or adjacent to any exit in such a manner as to confuse the direction of the exit.”

OSHA (Occupational Safety & Health Admin)

Plain English

Clear message :

“Exit Routes: An exit door must be free of signs or decoration that obscure its visibility.”

Clearer message:

“Don't put up anything that makes it harder to see the exit door.”

What is Plain English?

- ✓ *Plain English is Clear English*
- ✓ Simple, Direct, Clear and Concise
- ✓ Written to *Be Understood*
- ✓ No Confusion About Meaning
- ✓ Credible, Authentic Writing Goes Hand in Hand with Clear, Plain Language
- ✓ Readers May Judge Your Trustworthiness Through Plain English and a Credible Writing Style, Rather Than Wondering if Fancy Phrases & Purple Prose Disguise Your Real Purpose

What It Isn't...

- ⊗ It's not Baby-Language or Language that is Abrupt, Rude or Ugly
- ⊗ It isn't "Dumbing Down"
- ⊗ Nor is it Language that Puts Grammatical Perfection Ahead of Clarity
- ⊗ Value of a Document is not in Proportion to its Weight. Your Readers Will Not Respect You More Because You Have Written 100 Pages Instead of 20.

Crystal Mark

Plain English Campaign in England has a “Crystal Mark” guarantee that a document has been written and designed as clearly as possible. Over 17,500 documents carry this mark. A list of the organizations are listed on the Plain English website.

This campaign began in 1979.



Awards by British Plain English Campaign

- ✓ Golden Bull-(worst examples of written tripe)
- ✓ Foot in Mouth-(baffling quotes by public figures)
- ✓ Inside Write-(internal government documents)
- ✓ Media Awards-(radio, television and newspapers)
- ✓ Plain English-(open category)
- ✓ Plain English Web Award-(websites)

Gobbledygook generator



Have you ever wanted to use meaningless, empty phrases that make it look like you know what you are talking about? Simply click on the button below this paragraph and a random piece of business jargon will appear in the box. If you need more than one buzzphrase, just click the button again and again.

Generate some gobbledygook

Our exploratory research points to
deconstructed management time-phases.



Plain Language Movement in U.S.

- * Consumer Advocacy Groups 1960s
- * Richard Nixon decreed in 1972 that *Federal Register* be in layman's terms
- * President Carter in 1978 issued Executive Order to make government regulations "cost-effective and easy-to-understand by those who were required to comply with them."
- * President Reagan rescinded Carter's Executive Orders. It became an agency-by-agency decision.

Plain Language Movement

- * In 1998, President Clinton revived plain language as a major government initiative
- * Began presenting *No Gobbledygook Award* to government agencies which use plain language in creative ways
- * No formal plan in Bush Administration
- * Current "Plain Language" Movement has focused on training writers of public documents to use precise and straightforward language.

Agencies with Plain Language Programs

- ✓ FAA (Federal Aviation Administration)
- ✓ Federal Register
- ✓ Food & Drug Administration
- ✓ Health & Human Services
- ✓ SEC (Securities & Exchange Comm.)
- ✓ NIH (National Institute of Health)
- ✓ Social Security Administration
- ✓ Veterans' Benefit Administration

Quotable Thoughts

“The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do.” ~Thomas Jefferson

“Don't use words too big for the subject. Don't say 'infinitely' when you mean 'very' ; otherwise you'll have no word left when you want to talk about something really infinite.”

~ C. S. Lewis

More Quotable Thoughts

“Think like a wise man but communicate in the language of the people.”

~ William Butler Yeats

“One should aim not at being possible to understand, but at being impossible to misunderstand.”

~ Quintilian

Why Should Libraries Write in Plain English?

- ? Libraries Are Thought to be the Source of “user-friendly” Information
- ? It’s Important That Our Patrons Understand *WHY* Policies & Rules Are Made
- ? Public Libraries Have to be Concerned with Public Perceptions
- ? Avoid Misunderstandings, Errors, Complaints, and Unnecessary Questions
- ? Avoid Staff Time Lost to Problem-Solving

Basic Elements of Plain Language

- ✓ Logical Organization with Reader in Mind
- ✓ Use of “You” and Other Pronouns
- ✓ Active Voice
- ✓ Short sentences, Varied Sentences
- ✓ Common, Everyday Words
- ✓ Easy-to-Read Design Features

Identify the Reader

- ✓ Is Writing Appropriate & Understandable for the Reader?
- ✓ What Do You Want the Reader to Know?
- ✓ Why Does the Reader Need to Read Your Document?
- ✓ Is It a Document for the Public?
- ✓ What is the Average Expertise of the Reader?

Write for Your Reader

Original draft

"If there exist any points on which you require explanation or further explication, we shall be glad to furnish such additional details as may be required via telephone."

✓ *Now Isn't This Better...*

"If you have any questions, please call us."

Use of Pronouns

- ✓ Aids Comprehension by Clarifying What Applies to *Your Reader* and what applies to *You*
- ✓ Allows You to “Speak” Directly to Your Reader, Creating an Appealing Tone that will Keep Readers Reading
- ✓ Helps You Avoid Abstractions and Use More Concrete, Everyday Language
- ✓ Keeps Your Sentences Short
- ✓ Allows You to Avoid the “he or she” Dilemma. First-and Second-person Pronouns aren’t Gender-specific

YOU’LL BE MORE EASILY UNDERSTOOD

Pronouns

First-Person Pronouns

I, We, Us, Our/Ours

Second

You, Your/Yours

How to Use Pronouns

- ✓ Refer to Your Organization as “We”
- ✓ Refer to the Reader as “You” in the Text and as “I” in Questions
- ✓ Define “We” and “You” in the Definitions Sections or in the Text

Times to Avoid First-Person Pronouns

- ✓ You're Writing a Legal Document or Technical Specification
- ✓ You're Writing Someone More Senior and Wish to Show Respect
- ✓ You Intend to be Formal; for Example, You're Reprimanding Someone

Examples...

- The Library will respond to your request within 30 days after receiving your application for a Courtesy Card . This response shall include written notification of the Library's decision.
 - ✓ We will give you a written response to your Courtesy Card request within 30 days.

Is It a Him or Is It a Her? Is it a He/She?

- Whenever a *patron* calls into the branch to conduct a transaction on *his/her* account, *he or she* must provide a library card number *and/or his or her name*.
- A *patron* retains *full library borrowing* privileges as long as *his/her* library record is not blocked.
- Because a *patron's* borrowing privileges are suspended when *his/her* record shows as blocked, *he/she* may not use another *patron's* card.
- A *patron* may allow another person to use *his/her* library card...but the *library card holder* will be held responsible for all items charged to *his/her* card *regardless of who the borrower is*.

Rewrite These Sentences...

- If one uses his or her brain, then he or she can succeed.
- If a user clicks the “Save” button, then he or she saves the file.
- Users of the “MailNow” application have three options for user mail profile.

List of Frequently Asked Questions...

Why Not Use "I"?

- Am / Able to Renew Books Online?
- How Many Books Am / Allowed to Check Out?
- Am / Charged Fines for Week-End Days?

Use Active Rather Than Passive Verbs

Why?

- ✓ Passive Verbs are Longwinded, Ambiguous, Impersonal and Dull.
- ✓ Active Verbs Make Writing Simpler, Less Formal, Clearer and More Precise.

How to Recognize Passive Voice

- ✓ The Person Doing the Action Follows the Verb
- ✓ Look for forms of the verb *to be* in combination with other verbs. These other verbs often end with "*ing*" *but not always*.
- ✓ Everybody knows the forms of the verb *to be*: *is, am, are, was, were, be* and *been*.

Verb-Tense Examples

Passive

He was bitten by the dog.

Active

The dog bit him.



Verb-Tense Examples

Passive

The frog was swallowed by
Fred.

Active

Fred swallowed the frog.



More Examples

Don't: The new rules *were issued* by the Access Services Department on June 1.

Do: Access Services issued the new rules on June 1.

Don't: An I.D. must *be presented* by all students.

Do: All students must present I.D.

Don't: The report *was written* by Jane.

Do: Jane wrote the report.

Don't: He *was thanked* by the president.

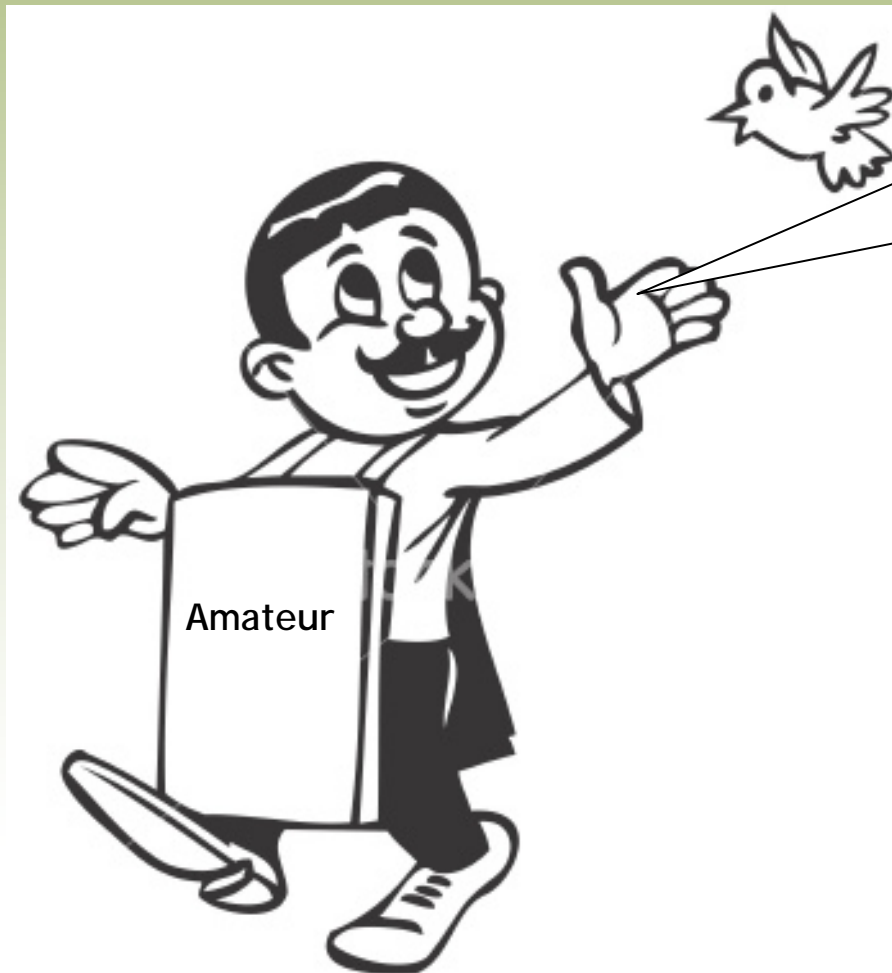
Do: The president thanked him.

And More...

Don't: The Library will be issuing new circulation policies on July 1.

Do: The Library will issue new circulation policies on July 1.

Remember: Writing in the passive is like wearing a sandwich board that says,



I'm An Amateur!

Writing Sentences

- ✓ Sentence Length is Crucial to Good Writing.
- ✓ Sentences by Good Writers Average 15 to 20 Words
- ✓ Keep Average Sentence Length Well Below 20 Words
- ✓ Vary Length and Rhythm of Sentences
- ✓ Try to Limit Most Sentences to One Idea
- ✓ Break Long Sentences With More Than One Idea Into Two or More Sentences

THE OWL AT PURDUE

FREE WRITING HELP AND TEACHING RESOURCES. OPEN 24/7.



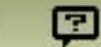
[OWL Family of Sites](#) > [The OWL at Purdue](#) > [Sentence Variety](#)

OWL MATERIALS

Sentence Variety

This resource was written by **Purdue OWL**.
Last full revision by **Ryan Weber**.
Last edited by Allen Brizee on March 27th 2008 at 1:15PM

Summary: This resource presents methods for adding sentence variety and complexity to writing that may sound repetitive or boring. Sections are divided into general tips for varying structure, a discussion of sentence types, and specific parts of speech which can aid in sentence variety.



HELP USING
RESOURCES



FULL RESOURCE
FOR PRINTING



NEED COPIES?
PLEASE ASK



LINKING?
TELL US!



REPORT
AN ERROR



GENERAL
FEEDBACK

NAVIGATION

- [+ The Writing Process](#)
- [+ Professional, Technical, and Job Search Writing](#)
- [+ General Academic Writing](#)
- [+ Research and Citation](#)
- [+ Grammar and Mechanics](#)
- [+ English as a Second Language \(ESL\)](#)
- [+ Internet Literacy](#)
- [+ Writing in the Social Sciences](#)
- [+ Writing in Engineering](#)
- [+ Literary Analysis and Criticism](#)

[Jump to listing of all of this resource's sections](#)

Sentence Variety Practice

All Sections in *Sentence Variety*:

1. Strategies for Variation
2. Sentence Types
3. For Short, Choppy Sentences
4. For Repeated Subjects or Topics
5. For Similar Sentence Patterns or Rhythms

Sentence Examples

Run-On Sentence

We all agreed that we ought to eat at the new Greek restaurant in town, then see a movie, and, before going home, we should stop at the grocery store to buy milk for breakfast, because we ran out of milk earlier in the day.

Corrected Sentence

We all agreed that we ought to eat at the new Greek restaurant in town, then see a movie. Before going home, we should stop at the grocery store to buy milk for breakfast because we ran out of milk earlier in the day.

More...

- This policy does not seem to be well understood by line management in the region, even though this group has primary responsibility for implementing the policy.
 - ✓ The regional managers who are most responsible for carrying out this policy do not seem to understand it well.

Verb Tense Example/ Shorter Sentences

- ✓ **Passive** - "A mistake was made that resulted in an overcharge to your account that has now been corrected and will be shown on your next statement."
- ✓ **Active** - "We made a mistake and overcharged your account. We have corrected the entry and your next statement will show the correction."

KISS Excess Words Goodbye

Keep It Simple Stupid is a really good phrase to keep in mind when writing

Use simple words rather than complex, such as:

In the preceding example

->

In the previous section

Additional printer options

->

Extra printer equipment

Edit Wordy Phrases

at a later date . . .	later . . .
at this point in time . . .	now . . .
for the purpose of . . .	for . . .
have no alternative but . . .	must . . .
in addition to . . .	besides, as well, as also . . .
in order to . . .	to . . .
In relation to . . .	about, in, with, to, towards . . .
on a regular basis . . .	regularly . . .

Alternatives to Wordy Phrases

at such time as	when
due to the fact that	as, because, since
has the ability to	can
if conditions are such	if
in a timely manner	promptly
in close proximity to	near, close, about
in light of the fact that	because, since
in many cases	often, usually
in the event that	if

Plain English Overkill...

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**“Class, I’ve got a lot of material to cover,
so to save time I won’t be using vowels today.
Nw lts bgn, pls trn t pg 122.”**

Use Everyday Words with Clear Meanings

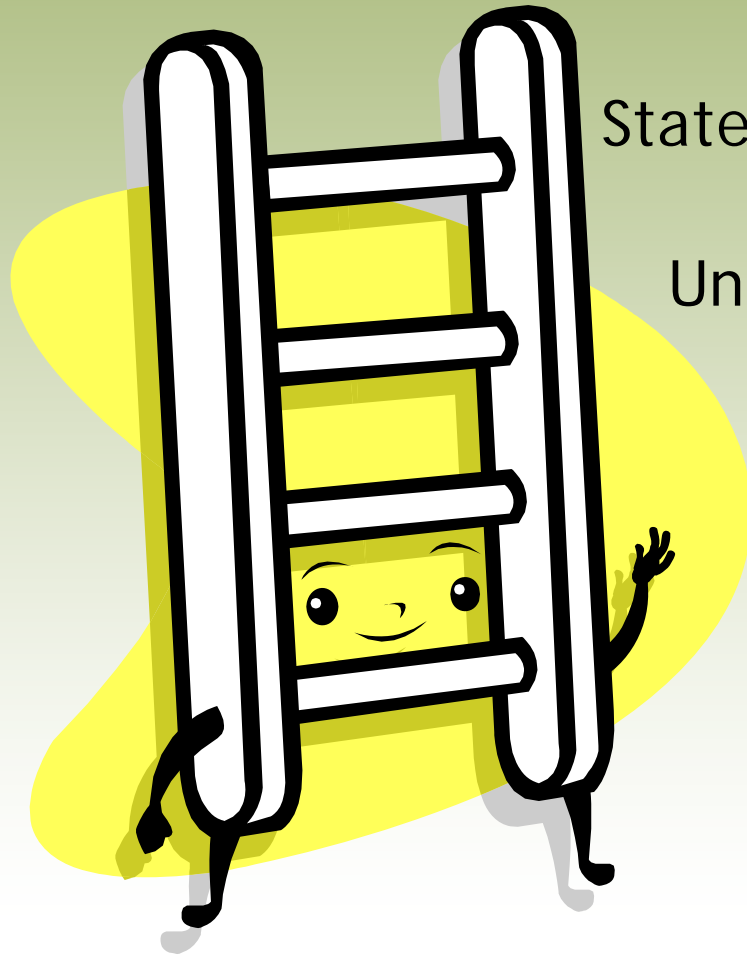
Instead of...

- ✓ Cease, use.....Stop
- ✓ Procure.....Get
- ✓ Terminate.....End
- ✓ Utilize.....Use
- ✓ Facilitate.....Help
- ✓ Necessitates....Needs
- ✓ Parameters.....Limits
- ✓ Methodology....Method
- ✓ Promulgate.....Issue, Declare

Avoid Abstract Words and Phrases

- Activities
- Devices
- Inputs
- Sectors
- Amenities
- Elements
- Operations
- Structures
- Facilities
- Outputs
- Systems
- Aspects
- Factors
- Processes
- Variables
- Concepts
- Functions
- Resources

Abstraction Ladder



State Asset

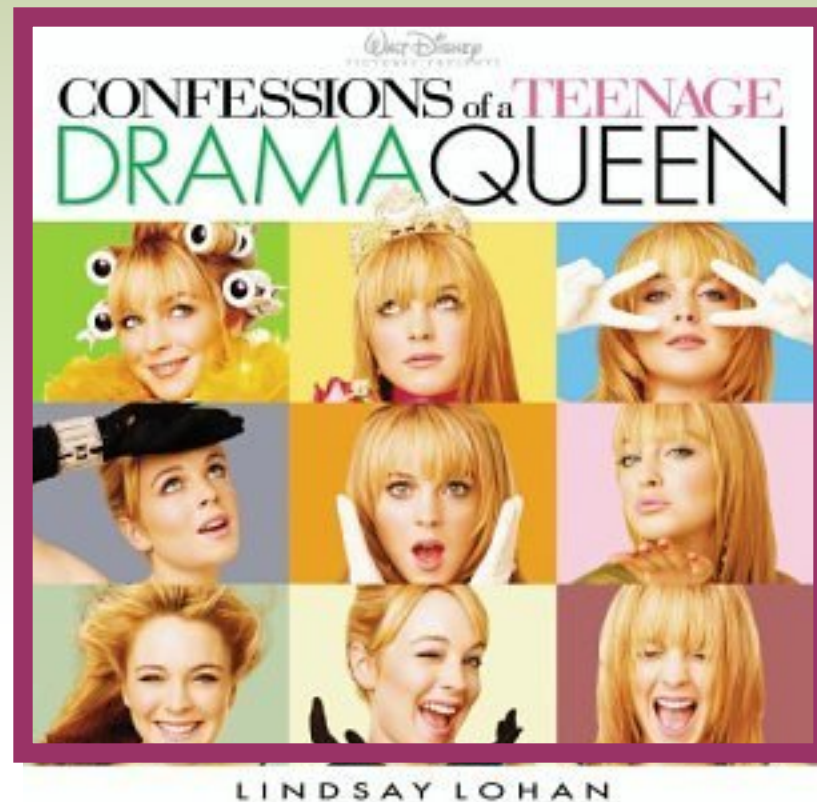
University Property

School Furniture

Desk

From Abstract to Concrete

Society → Most People → Spoiled Child
→ My Sister, Susie



Avoid Starting Sentences with...

- It is...
- It was...
- It has been...
- There is
- There was...
- There are...
- There were...
- There has been...
- There have been...

These combinations add needless complexity to a sentence, and detract from the meaning you want to express.

Example:

“There have been numerous cases demonstrating the danger of eating something bigger than your head.”



“Numerous cases demonstrate the danger of eating something bigger than your head.”

Avoid Jargon and Technical Terms

- ✓ Don't Overestimate Readers' Understanding of Terms
- ✓ If You Must Use a Technical Term, Define it
- ✓ It Doesn't Insult the Intelligence of Readers to Explain Terms Clearly
- ✓ Use Abbreviations, Acronyms and Other Jargon Sparingly, if at All

Buzz Words

A buzzword is a word or phrase that usually sounds important or technical and is use primarily to impress laypersons.

24/7	best practice
benchmark	empower
core competencies	fast track
game plan	think outside the box
out of the loop	touch base
proactive	paradigms
synergy	paradigm shift
win-win	At the end of the day

Examples of Jargon

- **Economists:** cost-push inflation, marginal-cost pricing, j-curve
- **Computing:** IRQ, NTFS, RAID, EPROM
- **Insurance:** annuitants, debentures, gilts, sum assured
- **Photography:** ASA rating, f-stop, teleconverter, TTL metering
- **Investment Broker:** Basis point, Collateralized debt obligation squared (CDO-squared), Dollar-cost averaging, bagel-land

Jargon to Hide Behind...

- **Human Resources:** Redundancy elimination, Negative employee retention, dehiring, downsizing
- **Military:** Render non-viable, Arbitrarily deprive of life; Terrain alteration, Servicing the target; Incontinent ordnance, Accidental delivery of ordnance
- **Politician:** Period of economic adjustment, Meaningful statistical downturn
- **Other:** The involuntarily undomiciled, Economically marginalized, Vehicle appearance operative

Avoid Abbreviations

The Most Common and Most Irritating Form of Jargon is Overuse of Abbreviations

How Many of These Do You Know?

CRA

PMS

DPI

SC

DTP

UGD

“Shall” We?

- ✓ Using *Shall* is Another Example of Outdated, Shoddy Legal Writing Creeping into the Real World.
- ✓ Shall is an Ambiguous word; It can Mean *Must*, *Ought* or *Will*. *Must* is the Clearest Way to Indicate that Something *Has* to be Done
- ✓ *Must not* for prohibitions
- ✓ *Shall* is archaic...
 - ✓ “*The Purpose of the Policy Shall Be...*”
 - ✓ “*The Purpose of the Policy IS...*”

Latin is Dead

- ✓ Avoid using “*Re*” where *concerning*, *regarding*, or *about* will do the trick
 - “*Re* your memo of January 13...”
 - Makes your writing seem stilted or “jargony.”
- ✓ Other Latin words or phrases to avoid in “Plain English” writing
 - *Ergo*,
 - *i.e.*
 - *Et al.*
 - *e.g.*

Design Document for Easy Reading

- ✓ Use Easy to Read Type
- ✓ Use a Layout that Spaces Paragraphs and Sections of the Documents From Each Other
- ✓ Write Short Paragraphs
- ✓ Charts, Graphs, Tables
- ✓ Bold Headings or Bullets Make Documents More Readable and Highlight Important Points
- ✓ Shorter Units of Text are More Manageable, Less Intimidating
- ✓ White Space and Headings are Clues to What's Important

Weasel Words

- ✓ Informal Term for Words that are Ambiguous and Cannot be Substantiated by facts.
- ✓ Typically used to Create an Illusion of Clear, Direct Communication
- ✓ Usually Expressed with Deliberate Imprecision

What does this mean?

1. A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT APPROACHES ARE BEING TRIED

We are still clueless.

2. EXTENSIVE REPORT IS BEING PREPARED ON A FRESH APPROACH TO PROBLEM

We just hired three kids fresh out of college.

3. CLOSE PROJECT COORDINATION

We know who to blame.

4. MAJOR TECHNOLOGICAL BREAKTHROUGH

It works only so so, but looks very hi-tech.

5. CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IS DELIVERY ASSURED

We are so far behind schedule the customer is happy just to get it delivered.

Really, what does this mean?

6. PRELIMINARY OPERATIONAL TESTS WERE INCONCLUSIVE

The darn thing blew up when we threw the switch.

7. TEST RESULTS WERE EXTREMELY GRATIFYING

We are so surprised that the stupid thing works.

8. THE ENTIRE CONCEPT WILL HAVE TO BE ABANDONED

The only person who understood the thing quit.

9. IT IS IN THE PROCESS

It is so wrapped up in red tape that the situation is about hopeless.

10. WE WILL LOOK INTO IT

Forget it! We have enough problems for now.

Full of weasels . . .

11. PLEASE NOTE AND INITIAL—

Let's spread the responsibility for the mistake.

12. GIVE US THE BENEFIT OF YOUR THINKING—

We'll listen to what you have to say as long as it doesn't interfere with what we've already done.

13. GIVE US YOUR INTERPRETATION—

I can't wait to hear this nonsense!

14. SEE ME OR LET'S DISCUSS—

Come into my office, I'm lonely.

15. ALL NEW—

Parts not interchangeable with the previous design.

Let's Rewrite...

Before

High-quality learning environments are a necessary precondition for facilitation and enhancement of the ongoing learning process in children.

After

Children need good schools if they are to learn properly.

Again...

Before

Your inquiry about the use of the entrance area at the library for the purpose of displaying posters and leaflets, gives rise to the question of the origin and authoritativeness of the material to be displayed. Some posters and leaflets from authoritative bodies are usually displayed in libraries, but items of a disputatious or polemic nature, while not necessarily excluded, are considered individually.

After

Thank you for your letter asking permission to put up posters in the entrance area of the library. Before we can give you an answer we will need to see a copy of the posters to make sure they won't offend anyone.

A Look at Current Policies...

- The Hortonville Public Library is a facility to be used by the public free of charge according to the terms of this policy statement.
 - ✓ The Hortonville Public Library is open to the public free of charge...
- Denial of library privileges may be given for due cases including but not limited to: theft or non-return of materials, failure to pay fines, destruction of library property, or disturbance of other library users.
 - ✓ Library privileges may be denied for the following reasons:...

More...

- Anyone living within the geographic boundaries of the community or within areas served by the library systems with which this library has a cooperative agreement may borrow from the Hortonville Public Library.
 - ✓ You may borrow from the Hortonville Public Library if you live within the city limits or within other areas served by cooperating systems.

More...

- All materials checked out to a **borrower** are the responsibility of the borrower. It is the borrower's responsibility to handle the library's materials with care and to report all damages to the **library staff**. **It is also a responsibility of the borrower** to return materials to the library and to pay all fines.
 - ✓ You are responsible for all materials checked out...
 - ✓ You are also responsible for returning materials and paying any fines charged to you...

And Still More...

- A registration card will be given to any person who requests a borrower's card. Each applicant must present positive proof of residence (driver's license, Wisconsin State identification card, current utility or telephone bill, checkbook with name and address imprinted, or an expired OWLSnet library card.)

Rewrite...

A registration card will be given to any applicant who can present proof of residence with any of the following:

Any applicant will receive a registration card after providing any of the following proof of residence:

- Driver's License
- Wisconsin State Identification Card
- Current Utility or Telephone Bill
- Check With Name & Address Imprinted
- Expired OWLSnet Library Card

More...

- In order to prevent an unreasonable invasion of personal privacy, the contents of registration and circulation records shall not be made available to anyone except under the written order of the Library Director, such order having been issued pursuant to a proper legal process, order, or subpoena under the law.

Try this...

- ✓ Without the written order of the Library Director, registration and circulation records *will* not be given to anyone in order to prevent an invasion of privacy.
- ✓ In order to prevent an invasion of privacy, registration and circulation records **WILL** not be given to anyone (even the patron?) unless...

Not Done Yet...

- Immediately upon receipt of the library ecard account number, you will have access...
 - ✓ As soon as you receive your ecard account number...
- To renew a library card, customers may visit any library location. Online renewal is not possible, as valid identification with current address must be brought to the library when renewing the card.
 - ✓ YOU may visit any library location to renew a library card. Because valid identification and current address are needed, you cannot renew cards online.

Jacksonville Public Library,
Jacksonville, FL

And Even More...

- All Madison Public Library circulation and other records which indicate the identity of library users, especially as they connect library users with material or services used, are confidential.
 - ✓ All Library records which identify library users are confidential.
- Library staff treats all requests, and the customers who make them, with respect.
 - ✓ All customers and their requests are treated with respect.
 - ✓ We treat all customers...


Madison Public Library
Madison, Wisconsin

Still More...

- In the event that a library card is lost, it will be replaced free of charge.
 - ✓ If a library card is lost, we will replace it free of charge.
- Any LaCrosse city resident that due to temporary or permanent disability finds it difficult or impossible to visit the library in person is eligible for Home Delivery service for the duration of the disability.
 - ✓ If you are unable to visit the library in person because of temporary or permanent disability, you are eligible for Home Delivery service as long as the disability lasts.

LaCrosse Public Library
LaCrosse, Wisconsin

Various Policy Statements...

- **It is greatly preferred that** cardholders present their library cards when checking out materials but another form of identification will be accepted if the information it contains matches that in the library's patron file.
- **SHALL** used repeatedly...
- Three locations to better serve you there's a library within minutes of your home. 
- Document/article delivery is a costly service provided by the John Smith Memorial Library to enhance research by making available articles in journals to which the library does not subscribe.

And Finally...

“Do not accustom yourself to use big words for little matters. A man who uses a great many words to express his meaning is like a bad marksman who instead of aiming a single stone at an object takes up a handful and throws at it in hopes he may hit.”

~ Samuel Johnson