



Plain Language

*Writing for clarity and impact
with your readers in mind*

NOAA Brown Bag
July 2015

PLAIN LANGUAGE

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all sentences short, or avoid all detail and treat subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

— Strunk, W., and E.B. White. 2000. *The elements of style*, 4th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.



WHAT IS PLAIN LANGUAGE?

- Logical organization
- Personal pronouns
- Active voice
- Common, everyday words
- Easy-to-read format



PLAIN LANGUAGE IS NOT



- “Dumbing down”
- Stripping out necessary information
- Editorial polishing



BENEFITS OF PLAIN LANGUAGE



- Demonstrates a clear customer focus
- Enhances transparency and eliminates barriers
- Reduces staff time spent answering questions and correcting misperceptions
- Improves compliance with directives and guidelines

WHAT WE WILL COVER

- Conciseness
- Clarity
- Organizing your ideas
- Choosing words
- Formatting



WHAT WE WON'T COVER

- Spelling and grammar
- Punctuation and capitalization
- Regulation writing





Logical Organization

LOGICAL ORGANIZATION



- State the purpose right away
- Get to the point quickly
If you could write only one sentence, what would it be?
- Anticipate the most important question and answer it immediately



Thank you for your letter on behalf of your constituent, Mr. Jim Smith, regarding the status of his application for a Limited Access General Category Individual Fishing Quota (LAGC IFQ) scallop permit for the fishing vessel *Big Jim*.

The LAGC IFQ permit was established by the New England Fishery Management Council through Amendment 11 to the Atlantic Sea Scallop Fishery Management Plan. In order to qualify for an LAGC IFQ permit, a vessel must meet two criteria: (1) the vessel must have been issued a federal scallop permit between March 1, 2000, and November 1, 2004; and (2) the vessel must have landed at least 1,000 pounds of scallop meats in any one year when the vessel also held a federal scallop permit.

The LAGC IFQ scallop permit regulations recognize a vessel's permit and fishing history, resulting in a vessel's qualification (rather than an individual's). The LAGC IFQ scallop permit program does not allow qualification for, or issuance of, a limited access permit to an individual, even if the individual demonstrated that they participated in a fishery or made landings on a vessel that they did not own.

Mr. Smith applied for an LAGC IFQ scallop permit May 16, 2008, and was denied the permit on June 16, 2008, because the vessel did not meet the qualification criteria.



ANSWER THE QUESTION RIGHT UP FRONT

Thank you for your letter on behalf of your constituent, Mr. Jim Smith, regarding the status of his application for a Limited Access General Category Individual Fishing Quota (LAGC IFQ) scallop permit for the fishing vessel *Big Jim*.

[Answer the question]

Mr. Smith applied for an LAGC IFQ scallop permit May 16, 2008, and was denied the permit on June 16, 2008, because the vessel did not meet the qualification criteria, as described below.

[Then explain why]

The LAGC IFQ permit was established by the New England Fishery Management Council through Amendment 11 to the Atlantic Sea Scallop Fishery Management Plan. In order to qualify for an LAGC IFQ permit, a vessel must meet two criteria: (1) the vessel must have been issued a federal scallop permit between March 1, 2000, ...

LOGICAL ORGANIZATION

Be coherent

- *Limit each paragraph to one thought.*

Weigh the importance of every idea.

- *“Do they really need to know all this?”*

Use separate sentences and paragraphs for emphasis.

- *Isolate to strengthen.*



ISOLATE TO STRENGTHEN

The ocean, our coasts, and the Great Lakes are integral to who we are as a Nation, and are among our greatest assets. They feed us, support millions of jobs, and provide recreation. They are part of our communities and cultures, and enhance our national security by their mere presence. With 53 percent of our population living in coastal counties according to the most recent census, and that percentage expected to grow to 63 percent by 2020, the United States is a coastal nation. Our valuable ocean and coastal resources are vulnerable to misuse, and need to be thoughtfully managed to ensure they remain healthy and productive for current and future generations.

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Using Personal Pronouns

PRONOUNS



- Speak directly to readers and humanize your writing
- Make your writing relevant to readers
- Require less translation
- Eliminate wordiness



PRONOUNS



NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service ~~(NMFS)~~ is the agency responsible for this research. As such, NMFS invites public ~~We~~ **invite your** comments on the identification and definition of immune response between male and female finfish.



AVOID ACRONYMS



The Large Whale Take Reduction Team (~~LWTRT~~) will meet to discuss the Large Whale Take Reduction Plan (~~LWTRP~~). Once the ~~LWTRT~~ Team establishes criteria for the ~~LWTRP~~ Plan, they will report to stakeholders.





Active Voice

WHAT IS PASSIVE VOICE?

- The person doing the action usually follows the verb:

The recommendations were drafted by the Council chair.

- The verb has two parts: Some form of the verb “to be” plus another verb.

The remarks will be presented by the Assistant Administrator for Fisheries.



ACTIVE VOICE

Passive voice is wordy:

The application must be completed by the applicant and received by the financial office at the time designated by that office.

Active voice is concise:

We must receive your completed application by the deadline.

ACTIVE VOICE

Passive voice can disguise who did what:

Your letter was received yesterday.

Active voice makes it clear who did what:

We received your letter yesterday.



ACTIVE VOICE

Passive voice sounds awkward:

Consultation with respondents *was conducted* to determine the estimated burden.

Active voice sounds natural:

We consulted with respondents to determine the estimated burden.



AVOID “THERE IS” AND “THERE ARE”

These results are likely even ~~if there is no~~ without an influx of additional funds.

~~There are~~ Several methodologies ~~that~~ can be used to assess stock abundance.

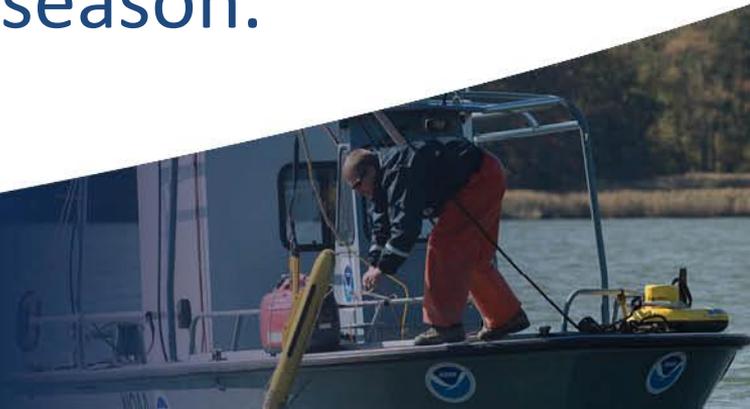




Word Choice

WRITE WITH A WORD, NOT A PHRASE

- We repeated the comparison ~~in order to make sure~~ **to ensure** that the controls did not influence the results.
- Panels might be appropriate for reviewing issues that can be addressed ~~in relatively short periods of time~~ **quickly**.
- Managers may choose to simply ~~reduce the length of~~ **shorten** the fishing season.



AVOID REDUNDANT EXPRESSIONS

- The largest swordfish caught during the tournament weighed ~~a total of~~ 890 pounds.
- The cruise took place in ~~the month of~~ September.
- The recommendations include ~~but are not limited to~~ the following:

AVOID AMBIGUITY

- The dolphin arrived in critical condition. **Because his brain was severely damaged, the veterinary surgeon** decided to operate immediately.
- ✓ The dolphin arrived in critical condition **with severe brain damage. The veterinary surgeon** decided to operate immediately.



AVOID “IMPACT” AND “AFFECT” AS VERBS

- The policy will ~~affect the amount of~~ **increase** paperwork.
- These excess nutrients may ~~impact the~~ **quality of** **damage** coastal wetlands.



DON'T USE 5 WORDS WHEN 1 WILL DO



- In consideration of the fact that
- In view of the fact that
- Given the fact that
- Due to the fact that
- In as much as
- ✓ Because



WORD CHOICE

Instead of these words:	Use these:
With regard to	About
By means of	By
In the event that	If
Until such time	Until
Accordingly	So
At a later date	Later
In close proximity to	Near
Utilize	Use
Subsequent to	After
With a view to	To
It is probable that	Probably
Adequate number of	Enough
Provide an opportunity to	Allow



Easy-to-Read Format

FORMAT

- Use informative headings
- Write short sections
- Include only one issue per paragraph
- Use vertical lists
- Use white space, bold, and italics



LISTS

- Make it easy to identify all individual items or steps in a process.
- Add white space for easy reading.
- Help readers see the structure of the document.



We invite your comments on the identification and definition of immune response between male and female finfish, including responses to exogenous and self-antigens, the innate and adaptive immune response, systemic and mucosal immune response, and regulation of the immune system by hormonal and non-hormonal sex differences.

We invite your comments on the identification and definition of immune response between male and female finfish. Examples include:

- Responses to exogenous and self-antigens.
- The innate and adaptive immune response.
- Systemic and mucosal immune response.
- Regulation of the immune system by hormonal and non-hormonal sex differences.

Management uncertainty takes various names in the scientific literature, among them: implementation error (Rosenberg and Brault 1993, Dichmont 2006a , Essington 2010); implementation uncertainty (Francis and Shotton 1997, Prager et al. 2003, Shertzer et al. 2010, Fulton et al. 2011); partial controllability (Williams 1997); and structural uncertainty (Charles 1998).

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- Implementation error (Rosenberg and Brault 1993, Dichmont 2006a , Essington 2010).
- Implementation uncertainty (Francis and Shotton 1997, Prager et al. 2003, Shertzer et al. 2010, Fulton et al. 2011).
- Partial controllability (Williams 1997).
- Structural uncertainty (Charles 1998).



PLAIN LANGUAGE

One unoriginal but useful tip: Write with a specific person in mind. When writing Berkshire Hathaway’s annual report, I pretend that I’m talking to my sisters. I have no trouble picturing them: Though highly intelligent, they are not experts in accounting or finance. They will understand plain English, but jargon may puzzle them. My goal is simply to give them the information I would wish them to supply me if our positions were reversed. To succeed, I don’t need to be Shakespeare; I must, though, have a sincere desire to inform.

No siblings to write to? Borrow mine: Just begin with “Dear Doris and Bertie.” — *Warren Buffet (1998)*



PLAIN LANGUAGE



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PLAIN LANGUAGE

- The Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN) is a group of federal employees from various agencies and specialties who support the use of clear communication in government writing.
- They meet monthly to discuss plain language issues. These meetings are open to all federal employees.
- Visit www.plainlanguage.gov.

