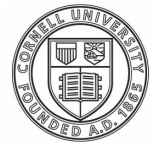
Cornell University
ILR School

Cornell University ILR School
DigitalCommons@ILR

International Publications | Key Workplace Documents

10-2008

Using Plain English

Olivier Serrat
Asian Development Bank

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/intl
Thank you for downloading an article from DigitalCommons@ILR.
Support this valuable resource today!

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Key Workplace Documents at DigitalCommons@ILR. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@ILR. For more information, please contact hlmdigital@cornell.edu.

Using Plain English

Abstract
{Excerpt} Many people write too much, bureaucratically, and obscurely. Using plain English will save time in writing, make writing far easier, and improve understanding.

Reports are a visible part of work. They remain and are used long after it is done. Work is advanced by readable reports that give the target audience a good chance of understanding the document at first reading, and in the sense that the writers meant them to be.

Keywords
Asian Development Bank, ADB, poverty, economic growth, sustainability, development

Comments
Suggested Citation

Serrat, O. (2010). *Using plain english.* Washington, DC: Asian Development Bank.

Required Publisher's Statement

This article was first published by the Asian Development Bank (www.adb.org)

This article is available at DigitalCommons@ILR: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/intl/187

Using Plain English

by Olivier Serrat

Many people write too much, bureaucratically, and obscurely. Using plain English will save time in writing, make writing far easier, and improve understanding.

Purpose

Reports are a visible part of work. They remain and are used long after it is done. Work is advanced by readable[1] reports that give the target audience a good chance of understanding the document at first reading, and in the sense that the writers meant them to be.

What is Plain English?

Plain English—or plain language—is a message written for the reader in a style that is clear and concise. It is quicker to write, faster to read, and puts messages across more often, more easily, and in friendlier ways. Using plain English, writers should

- Select simple words.
- Make lists.
- Keep sentences short.
- Refrain from giving unnecessary details.
- Cut down on jargon and use defined terms sparingly.
- Discard superfluous words.
- Reduce nominalizations.[2]
- Avoid weak verbs.
- Use the active voice with strong verbs.
- Be specific rather than general.
- Write personally, as if you were talking to the reader.

Knowing the Audience

Knowing the target audience is the most important step in assuring that a document is understandable. One can create a profile of individual target audiences based on the following questions:

- What are the demographics of the audience, e.g., age, education, and work experience?
- How familiar is the audience with technical terminology?
- What concepts can one safely assume the audience understands?
- How will the audience read the document for the first time? Will they read it straight through or will they skip to sections of particular interest? What data and information will they look for, and is it easy to find?
- How will the audience use the document?

[1] Merriam-Webster's defines "readable" as pleasing, interesting, or offering no great difficulty to the reader.

[2] A nominalization is a noun derived from a verb. It usually ends in -tion. To make writing more vigorous and less abstract, writers should find the noun and try to make it the main verb of the sentence. For example, "We made an application" becomes "We applied."

Knowing the Information to Disclose

The following steps can be taken to ascertain that a document written in plain English is readable:

- Read and outline the current document.
  - Read the table of contents to see if there is an obvious logical flow to the argument.
  - Read the entire document without taking notes to gain a general understanding of the information presented.
  - Read the entire document a second time, taking notes on what information is covered and what questions the target audience might have. The notes will show if the information flows through the document in logical order.
  - As you read, consider the following: Will the audience understand the language? Does the document emphasize information of importance to the audience? Is any important information missing? Does the document include information that is not required and will not help the audience make informed decisions?
- Eliminate redundant information.
  - Question the need for repeating any information. Reading similar material more than once bores—perhaps even troubles—readers.
  - Readers skip over paragraphs they think they have read before.
- Discuss the executive summary.
  - An executive summary is an inviting entryway to a document. It should orient the reader, highlighting the most important points that are presented in detail in the document.
  - Many executive summaries seem as long as the document itself and all-too-often consist of paragraphs copied from the main text.

Applying the Rule of 15

A rule of thumb for preparing plain English reports is to use the "rule of 15":

- Not more than 15% of sentences should be longer than 15 words.
- Not more than 15% of sentences should be written in the passive voice.
- Not more than 15% of words should be longer than three syllables.

Editing the Document

When it is time to edit the document, it is best to work in the following order:

- Edit for overall structure.
- Edit for sequencing and logical flow within subsections.
- Edit for plain English.
- Edit for style conventions.
- Edit for typographical errors and punctuation.

Checking Microsoft Word's Readability Statistics

Microsoft Word allows users to check how difficult text is to read.[33] Aim for

- Flesch Reading Ease score >50 (higher scores are easier to read).
- Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score <12 (lower scores are easier to read).

[3] On the **Tools** menu, click **Options**, and then click the **Spelling & Grammar** tab. Select the **Check grammar** with **spelling** check box. Select the **Show readability statistics** check box, and then click **OK**. On the **Standard** toolbar, click **Spelling and Grammar**.

Using Readability Formulas and Style Checkers

Readability formulas establish how difficult a document is to read. Several websites offer free readability services online. They include

- **Gunning Fog Index**. Available: http://simbon.madpage.com/fog/
- **Online Utility**. Available: www.online-utility.org/english/readability_test_and_improve.jsp
- **Juicy Studio**. Availability: http://juicystudio.com/services/readability.php

Box: "Brevity"—Memo to the War Cabinet, from Winston Churchill, 9 August 1940

To do our work, we all have to read a mass of papers. Nearly all of them are far too long. This wastes time, while energy has to be spent in looking for the essential points.

I ask my colleagues and their staff to see to it that their reports are shorter. The aim should be reports which set out the main points in a series of short, crisp paragraphs.

If a report relies on detailed analysis of some complicated factors, or on statistics, these should be set out in an appendix.

Often the occasion is best met by submitting not a full-dress report, but an aide-memoire consisting of headings only, which can be expanded orally if needed.

Let us have an end of such phrases as these:

"It is also of importance to bear in mind the following considerations," or "consideration should be given to the possibility of carrying into effect." Most of these woolly phrases are mere padding, which can be left out altogether, or replaced by a single word. Let us not shrink from using the short expressive phrase, even if it is conversational.

Reports drawn up on the lines I propose may first seem rough as compared with the flat surface of "officialese" jargon. But the saving in time will be great, while the discipline of setting out the real points concisely will prove an aid to clearer thinking.

Further Reading

ADB. 2009. *Handbook of Style and Usage.* Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/handbooks/style_usage/hsu-2009-edition.pdf

_____. 2002. *Handbook on Correspondence and Writing*. Manila

For further information

Contact Olivier Serrat, Head of the Knowledge Management Center, Regional and Sustainable Development Department, Asian Development Bank (oserrat@adb.org).

Knowledge Solutions

Asian Development Bank

ADB, based in Manila, is dedicated to reducing poverty in the Asia and Pacific region through inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration. Established in 1966, it is owned by 67 members—48 from the region. In 2007, it approved $10.1 billion of loans, $673 million of grant projects, and technical assistance amounting to $243 million.

Knowledge Solutions are handy, quick reference guides to tools, methods, and approaches that propel development forward and enhance its effects. They are offered as resources to ADB staff. They may also appeal to the development community and people having interest in knowledge and learning.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) or its Board of Governors or the governments they represent. ADB encourages printing or copying information exclusively for personal and noncommercial use with proper acknowledgment of ADB. Users are restricted from reselling, redistributing, or creating derivative works for commercial purposes without the express, written consent of ADB.

Asian Development Bank
6 ADB Avenue, Mandaluyong City
1550 Metro Manila, Philippines
Tel +63 2 632 4444
Fax +63 2 636 2444
knowledge@adb.org
www.adb.org/knowledgesolutions