

Tompkins County



ADMINISTRATIVE MANUAL

PLAIN LANGUAGE GUIDE

Issued December 2009

INTRODUCTION

To assist in maintenance of the County's Administrative Manual and to help County staff draft resolutions, reports and memorandums, we have prepared this brief Administrative Manual Plain Language Guide, which recommends guidelines for clear and effective communication. Using Plain Language principles will enable Tompkins County to communicate its policies and procedures clearly and effectively.

The Plain Language Movement began in the Federal government in the 1970s when the government began to recommend that federal regulations be written in a less bureaucratic manner. Ithaca's own Alfred Kahn, as head of the Civil Aeronautics Board in 1977 and later as President Carter's inflation fighter, insisted that his staff use plain language in all communications. In 1998, President Clinton issued a Presidential Memorandum formalizing that all federal regulations be written in plain language.

Since then, not only federal agencies, but also the private sector and local governments across the country have embraced Plain Language principles to improve the quality of their communications. Countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom have been involved in the plain language movement even longer than the U.S.

WHAT IS PLAIN LANGUAGE?

Plain Language is a writing style that simplifies and organizes use of language to help ensure that written communications are clear and understandable to the reader.

“Clear, straightforward expression, using only as many words as necessary...a language that avoids obscurity, inflated vocabulary, and convoluted sentence construction...Writers of plain English let their audience concentrate on the message, instead of being distracted by complicated language. They make sure that their audience understands the message easily.”

-- Professor Robert Eagleson

Extensive contributor to the first plain English legal document created in 1976

“You achieve plain English when you use the simplest, most straightforward way of expressing an idea. You can still choose interesting words, but you’ll avoid fancy ones that have everyday replacements meaning precisely the same thing.”

-- Bryan Garner

Author of Legal Writing in Plain English

WHY DO WE USE PLAIN LANGUAGE? AND WHY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT IT IN THE CONTEXT OF COUNTY POLICIES?

We use Plain Language so that the reader can quickly and easily understand the content. Using Plain Language makes it easier for the reader to accurately interpret your message.

President Clinton wrote, “By using plain language, we send a clear message about what the government is doing, what it requires, and what service it offers...Plain language documents have logical organization; common, everyday words, except for necessary technical terms; ‘you’ and other pronouns; the active voice; and short sentences.”

County policies and procedures should be as clear and as easily understood as possible. Those who read them should be able to interpret the information correctly, without confusion or the need to contact others (such as the responsible department) for clarification. Clear communication of our policies and procedures is a service to those who need to follow them. Communicating our requirements clearly means they will be more likely to be understood, and, therefore, followed.

PRINCIPLES OF PLAIN LANGUAGE

AS ADAPTED FROM WWW.PLAINLANGUAGE.GOV

IDENTIFY YOUR AUDIENCE

Think about why the reader needs to read the document. Keep in mind the average reader's level of technical expertise. Consider the length of paragraphs and sentences in relation to your audience.

Examples of audiences:

- Community leaders
- Service users
- Legislators
- Young adults
- Local experts

WRITE IN AN ACTIVE VOICE

Both the active voice and passive voice are correct grammatically, but we encourage you to use the active voice because it is often less convoluted and shorter in length.

Voice is the form a verb takes to indicate whether its subject acts or is acted upon. When the subject of a verb does something (acts), the verb is in the **active** voice. When the subject of a verb receives the action (is acted upon), the verb is in the **passive voice**.

Active voice: County Administrator Joe Mareane told the committee that the target calculation is based on the \$2.4 million spending reduction needed to balance the budget.

Passive voice: The committee was told by County Administrator Joe Mareane that the target calculation is based on the \$2.4 million spending reduction needed to balance the budget.

KEEP IT SHORT!

You will communicate more clearly if you keep sentences and sections short. As a guide, aim for an average sentence length of 20 words, with no one sentence running over 40 words. Cover only one subject in each paragraph, and keep paragraphs under ten or 12 lines. (Note: These are guidelines, not strict rules; routinely counting words and lines is not a productive use of time.)

USE PERSONAL PRONOUNS

When you address the reader as "you," he or she feels directly addressed and is more likely to understand what his or her responsibility is. When your writing reflects this, it is more economical and has a greater impact on the reader.

WRITE IN A VISUALLY APPEALING STYLE

Use lots of informative headings: Make sure each heading has enough information to help your reader understand the content of the paragraph or section. Ensure the subject of the header is clearly associated with information for which it is intended.

Write short sections: Short sections break up the material into easily understood segments. They also look easier to read and understand.

Use vertical lists: Vertical lists highlight a series of items in a visually clear way. Use vertical lists to help your reader focus on important material. If the list becomes too long, use columns of vertical lists to save space. Use bullets to clarify individual entries and concepts. Numbered lists suggest a prioritization or order; only use them if that is what is intended.

DO NOT BE WORDY

Omit needless words. Excess or elaborate words make your writing weaker. Here are some examples of excess words in our writing and plain alternatives:

Original: At the present time, the Tompkins County Council of Governments (TCCOG) fully and completely supports the inter-municipal employee health insurance consortium of Tompkins County municipalities and is encouraging municipalities to participate in this cost-saving effort.

Revised: The Tompkins County Council of Governments (TCCOG) supports the inter-municipal employee health insurance consortium and encourages other municipalities to participate in this cost-saving effort.

Excess words:	Can often be replaced with the plain alternative:
accordingly	so
addressees	you
as a means of	to
as prescribed by	in, under
at a later date	later
at the present time	now, currently
commence	begin, start
constitutes	forms, makes up
for the purpose of	to, for

Excess words:	Can often be replaced with the plain alternative:
heretofore	until, now
in order to	to
in the event that	if
on a monthly basis	monthly
pertaining to	of, about
related to	of
so as to	to
should it appear that	if
with regard to	about

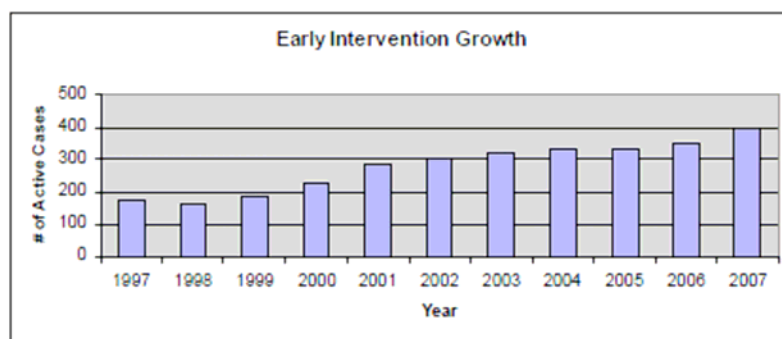
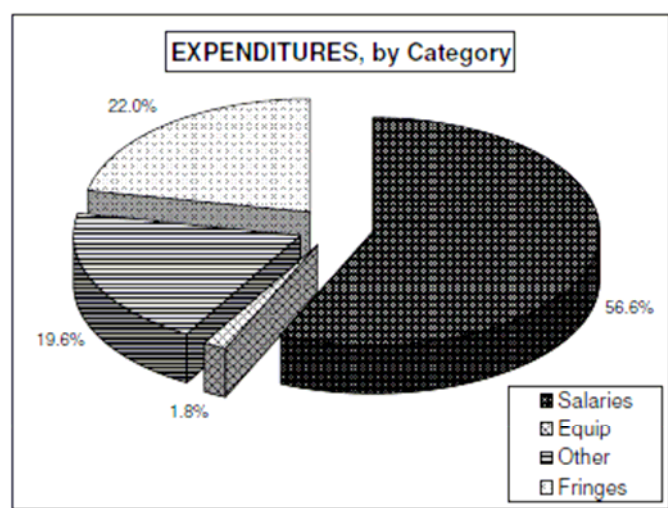
STRUCTURE YOUR WRITING

How you organize the document and what headings you include are extremely important in determining what effect your document will have on its readers. To achieve the highest rate of comprehension from your readers, here are some guidelines on structure:

- put the main message first
- divide your material into short sections
- group related ideas together
- put material in an order that makes the best sense to the reader
- use lots of headings

USE GRAPHICS AND TABLES

Use figures such as charts, tables, and other illustrative material as examples to explain complex material. Try to limit graphs and illustrations to one page. Make sure all graphs and illustrations have informative headers, row/column/axis labels, units of measurement, citations of data sources, relevant dates associated with data, and any other assumptions of which readers should be aware. Here are two effective illustrative examples:



Graphs taken from the Tompkins County Health Department 2007 Annual Report

AVOID USING AND/OR

This is a formula that indicates items joined by it can be taken either together or as alternatives. Using the device “and/or” often makes the meaning of a document unclear. Why use two words where one would do? Most of the time you mean either “or” or “and” but not both. So, before writing your document, decide what you want to say and whether “and” or “or” will fit your meaning.

Occasionally you do need both:

“The facility has a strict security policy. The more identification you have the better. I advise you to bring your license or your birth certificate, or both.”

SHALL / WILL / MUST / OUGHT TO

“Shall” is an ambiguous word. It can mean “must,” “ought,” or “will.” While “shall” cannot mean “should” or “may,” writers have used it incorrectly for those terms and it has been read that way by courts. Using the word “must” is the clearest way to convey to your readers that they have to do something.

DO NOT USE UNNECESSARY QUALIFIERS

They add no additional meaning to a sentence. The classic example from everyday language is “very dead.” Here are some examples:

- Their claim was totally unrealistic
- We are completely convinced
- It is definitely worth experiencing
- Work in partnership with
- Maintain successful bilateral agreements

DO NOT USE MULTIPLE NEGATIVES

Using more than one negative muddles the meaning of a document. Accentuate the positive when you can.

Original: The Department doesn't know nothing about no free-lunch policy.

Revised: The Department doesn't know anything about a free-lunch policy.

When you can put a negative statement as a positive one without changing the meaning, do it.

Original: No changes will be made to the Administrative Manual unless the Legislature reviews them and concludes that they are appropriate updates.

Revised: Changes will be made to the Administrative Manual only if the Legislature reviews them and concludes they are appropriate updates.

AVOID REDUNDANCIES

Using different words that mean the same thing can actually make your document harder to understand. To avoid repetition, if you are thinking of describing something with two words that have the same meaning, use the word that sounds more powerful.

Original: Because you are a Tompkins County employee, you should help aid the new incoming employees with procedures.

Revised: Because you are a Tompkins County employee, you should help the incoming employees with procedures.

DEFINE ACRONYMS AND TECHNICAL TERMS

Do not assume the reader knows what the term or acronym means. When you use an acronym, write out the full meaning the first time, with the acronym in parentheses.

Example: The Tompkins County Council of Governments (TCCOG) is an association of local governments that provides a forum to address and act on more efficient delivery of government services. TCCOG supports the intermunicipal employee health insurance consortium.

When you need to use a technical term, define it clearly.

Example: H1N1, an influenza-like-illness sometimes called Swine Flu, is present in Tompkins County as of May 28, 2009.

ORGANIZATION AND READABILITY

Make the document logically organized and easy to follow. Use bullets, white space, one-inch margins, and short paragraphs. Design the document so the reader can quickly ascertain the most important pieces.

COMMON GRAMMAR MISTAKES

IT'S FOR ITS

“It’s” stands for “it is,” while “its” is the possessive form of it.

Original: Download the software, along with it's readme file.

Revised: Download the software, along with its readme file.

Original: The laptop is overheating and its making that funny noise again.

Revised: The laptop is overheating and it's making that funny noise again.

THEY'RE FOR THEIR, OR FOR THERE

“They’re” stands for “they are”; “their” is the possessive form of “they”; and “there” is an adverb indicating location or existence.

Original: The managers are in they're weekly planning meeting over their in that office.

Revised: The managers are in their weekly planning meeting over there in that office.

Original: The employees have to check there cell phones at the door, and their not happy about it.

Revised: The employees have to check their cell phones at the door, and they're not happy about it.

Original: Their will be unhappy people in the office if you stop there insurance.

Revised: There will be unhappy people in the office if you stop their insurance.

i.e. for e.g.

The term “i.e.” means “that is” or “in other words” and is used when there is only one example possible, or one explanation is intended; “e.g.” means “for example,” and is used when more than one example is possible. A comma follows both of them.

Original: Use one of the many anti-spyware programs available (i.e., Ad-Aware).

Revised: Use one of the many anti-spyware programs available (e.g., Ad-Aware).

Original: Leave the computer asleep when you go home (e.g., do not shut the power off completely).

Revised: Leave the computer asleep when you go home (i.e., do not shut the power off completely).

Note: If you use “e.g.,” do not end the list of examples that follow with “etc.” because “etc.” is redundant; if you want to use “etc.,” omit the “e.g.”

EFFECT FOR AFFECT

“Affect” and “effect,” each word both noun and verb, both share the sense of “influence.” Because of their similarity in pronunciation, these words are sometimes confused in writing.

As a verb, “affect” means “to act on” or “to move” (His words affected the crowd so deeply that many wept); or “to pretend” or “to assume” (New students sometimes affect a nonchalance they don’t feel).

The verb “effect” means “to bring about or accomplish”: Her administration effected radical changes.

The noun “affect,” pronounced with the stress on the first syllable, is a technical term in psychology and psychiatry.

The noun “effect” means “result, consequence”: There are serious effects of an oil spill.

Example: The outage shouldn't affect any users during work hours.

Example: The outage shouldn't have an effect on any users.

Example: We will effect several changes during the downtime.

Note: Impact is a noun, not a verb. Purists, at least, beg you to use “affect” instead:

Original: The outage shouldn't impact any users during work hours.

Revised: The outage shouldn't affect any users during work hours.

Revised: The outage should have no impact on users during work hours.

YOU'RE FOR YOUR

“You’re” stands for “you are,” while “your” is the possessive of “you.”

Original: Remember to defrag you're machine on a regular basis.

Revised: Remember to defrag your machine on a regular basis.

Original: Your right about the changes.

Revised: You're right about the changes.

DIFFERENT THAN FOR DIFFERENT FROM

Use “different from” for simple comparisons, as in comparing two persons or things.

Original: This setup is different than the one at the main office.

Revised: This setup is different from the one at the main office.

Revised: This setup is better than the one at the main office.

LAY FOR LIE

“Lay” is most commonly a transitive verb and takes an object. Its forms are regular: “lay,” “laid,” “have lain.” If “place” or “put” can be substituted in a sentence, a form of “lay” is called for: Lay the folders on the desk. The mason is laying brick. She laid the baby in the crib.

Lay also has many intransitive senses, among them “to lay eggs” (The hens have stopped laying), and it forms many phrasal verbs, such as “lay off” (“to dismiss from employment” or “to stop annoying or teasing”) and “lay over” (“to make a stop”).

“Lie,” with the overall senses “to be in a horizontal position, recline” and “to rest, remain, be situated, etc.,” is intransitive and takes no object. Its forms are irregular: “lie,” “lay,” “have lain.” Its past tense form is identical with the present tense or infinitive form of lay: Lie down, children. Abandoned cars were lying along the road. The dog lay in the shade and watched the kittens play. The folders have lain on the desk since yesterday.

Example: I got dizzy and had to lie down.

Example: Just lay those books over there.

Example: I lay down because I was tired.

THEN FOR THAN

“Then” implies a point in time, while “than” is comparative.

Original: The accounting department had more problems then we did.

Revised: The accounting department had more problems than we did.

Note: When a sentence construction begins with “if,” you don't always need a “then.” “Then” is implicit, so it's often superfluous and wordy. However, in longer sentences with several modifying phrases, its use can help clarify the sentence.

Original: If you can't get Windows to boot, then you'll need to call Ted.

Revised: If you can't get Windows to boot, you'll need to call Ted.

COULD OF, WOULD OF FOR COULD HAVE, WOULD HAVE

“Of” is not a verb. In spoken English, people often shorten or slur “have” so that it sounds like “of.”

Original: I could of installed that application by mistake.

Revised: I could have installed that application by mistake.

Revised: I could’ve installed that application by mistake.

Original: I would of sent you a meeting notice, but you were out of town.

Revised: I would have sent you a meeting notice, but you were out of town.

ASSURE, ENSURE, AND INSURE

“Assure,” “Ensure,” and “Insure” all mean to make secure or certain. Only “assure” is used with reference to a person in the sense of “to set the mind at rest.” Although “ensure” and “insure” are generally interchangeable, only “insure” is widely used in the commercial sense of “to guarantee financially against risk.”

Example: The new member assured the leader of his loyalty.

Example: The department head wanted to ensure that staff followed proper policies and procedures.

Example: The company insured the property to protect its financial interests.

RULES FOR COMMA USAGE

(1) Use a comma to separate elements in a series. Do not forget the serial comma, which **always** precedes the “and” element.

Example: He hit the ball, dropped the bat, and ran to first base.

(2) Use a comma plus a little conjunction (and, but, for, nor, yet, or, so) to connect two **independent clauses**. An independent clause is defined as having its own verb and subject, and can stand alone.

Example: He hit the ball well, but he ran toward third base.

(3) Use a comma to set off an introductory clause in a sentence.

Example: Running toward third base, he suddenly realized how stupid he looked.

(4) Use a comma to set off parenthetical elements of a sentence. A parenthetical element is a part of a sentence that can be removed without changing the essential meaning of that sentence. It is important to remember that, in this case, commas **always come in twos**.

Example: The batter, whose goal in life was to play for the Yankees, turned from third base and ran toward the pitcher’s mound.

(5) Use a comma to set off phrases that express contrast.

Example: It was the money, not the game or passion, that first attracted him to professional baseball.

(6) Use commas to make the year parenthetical when the date of the month is included. Without the date itself, however, the comma disappears. No commas are needed when using the international or military format.

Example: April 1, 1994, was the date he played the worst game of his life.

Example: April 1994 was the worst month of his life.

Example: The worse game of his life took place on 1 April 1994.

(7) **A pause in reading is not always a reliable reason to use a comma.** Try not to use a comma unless you can apply a specific rule to do so.

WHO FOR THAT FOR WHICH

(1) “Who” refers to people. “That” and “which” refer to groups or things.

Example: Anya is the one who rescued the bird.

Example: Jack is on the team that lost in April.

Example: Kim belongs to the department that specializes in environmental health.

(2) “That” introduces essential clauses; “which” introduces non-essential clauses and is preceded by a comma.

Example: I do not trust products that use “all natural ingredients” because this phrase can mean almost anything.

Example: The product claiming “all natural ingredients,” which appeared in the Sunday newspaper, is on sale.

(3) If “this,” “that,” “these,” or “those” has already introduced an essential clause, you may use “which” to introduce the next clause, whether the clause is essential or not.

Example: That is a decision which you must live with for the rest of your life.

Note: Often, you can streamline your sentence by removing “which.”

Example: That is a decision you must live with for the rest of your life.

Note: Notice in the following example that the clause beginning with “which” is offset by commas because it is non-essential.

Example: Those ideas, which we've discussed thoroughly enough, do not need to be addressed again.

WORDS THAT ARE NOT WORDS

Irregardless: This word is redundant. The term "regardless" implies the same meaning as the incorrect version "irregardless."

Conversate: This word is an attempt to make the noun "conversation" into an improper verb. The correct term is "converse."

Misunderestimate: Apparently coined by George W. Bush, the proper term is "underestimate."

Preventative: This word has crept into common usage, although "preventive" is the proper, correct word.

DATA VS. DATUM

"Data" is the plural version of the singular "datum." In a sentence, "data" is always treated as a plural noun.

Example: The data are not sufficient to support the conclusion.

SINGULAR PRONOUNS

The pronouns "each," "everyone," "everybody," "anyone," "anybody," "someone," and "somebody" are singular and require singular verbs.

Example: Each of the girls sings well.

Example: Everyone should know what his/her social security number is.

For more information on the principles and use of plain language, see the Federal Government's website on plain language: <http://www.plainlanguage.gov>.