

# Plain Writing Clinic

Business

Business

Business

in accordance with

**PUBLIC LAW 111-274**

**PLAIN WRITING ACT  
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# Plain Writing Clinic

## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter 1 – Planning</b>	<b>1.</b>
<b>Chapter 2 – Organizing</b>	<b>5.</b>
<b>Chapter 3 – Drafting</b>	<b>7.</b>
<b>Chapter 4 – Editing</b>	<b>9.</b>
<b>Chapter 5 – E-Mailing and Texting</b>	<b>33.</b>

**Appendix**



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*Plain Language is not just easier  
to read – it improves clarity.*

# CHAPTER 1

## PLANNING

Most business writers don't plan their writing – they just start typing. But there is a process that makes any writing task easier. This manual outlines the steps in that process. First and foremost, good business writing requires both good language skills and a sound knowledge of the subject matter – not necessarily a high IQ. Anyone can learn the basics of business writing. With a good solid foundation and some practice, anyone can be a superior business writer.

### The Plain Writing Advantage



Plain Writing is not a matter of “dumbing down” a document; it’s not just about short words and sentences. It’s about communicating clearly and concisely so that readers understand what you are saying and, most importantly, what they need to know or do. Readers look immediately for whether the information is of use to them and what’s required of them.

They are usually only interested in what applies to them. So, you should tell readers only what’s important and why they should care. Your task is to provide readers that vital information and ensure they understand it.

Readers understand plain language better and prefer it far more than the dense, impersonal prose of most public documents. And because they understand it better, they’ll have fewer questions, make fewer mistakes and be more responsive. Ultimately, this saves readers, writers, and their organizations time, resources, and aggravation while improving efficiency, productivity and relationships. Plain writing is particularly valuable to senior executives whose time is precious and decisions are important and to non-government people whose desire and tolerance for government “bureaucratese” is low.

When was the last time you read a business document straight through ONLY ONCE and understood it completely? Think about it:

- ✓ No ambiguities or misunderstandings
- ✓ No asking colleagues for their take on it
- ✓ No asking the writer for clarification
- ✓ No re-reading sentences, paragraphs, or sections
- ✓ No looking up words or referring to other documents
- ✓ No reason to skip the document in favor of an easier one

If you're able to read a document a single time and fully understand it, then congratulations to the writer – this is an exception versus the norm. More likely than not, the writer used plain writing.

Plain writing will save time for you and for your readers. Simplify what you are saying so that your readers grasp the intent and content on the first read through. No one says, "This is too easy to understand." Writing clearly the first time saves you (or your boss!) from having to answer questions, in writing or verbally, later. Everyone wins – you, your readers and your manager.

When writing business correspondence, choose to be simple instead of complex, strong rather than weak, short versus lengthy and specific as opposed to vague. Be simple, direct, clear and concise.

### **Why Are You Writing?**

What is the purpose of the correspondence? Are you only providing information or seeking action? Get your purpose clearly in mind before you start. All your material should support your purpose statement. Again, what do you want the reader to know or do?

*Readers ask:  
How does this affect me?  
What am I supposed to do?*

### **Who Are Your Readers?**

Is your reader a supervisor, subordinate, client, contractor, applicant, or someone else? It is vital for you to know your intended audience. Do as much research as it takes to get to know and understand them. Ask yourself these questions:

- ✓ Who are my readers?
- ✓ What do they already know about the topic?
- ✓ Am I tasking them or just providing information?
- ✓ How will they react to my information?
- ✓ What questions or concerns might they have?



Plain writing is reader focused. Consider what is most important to the reader and organize your material in descending order of importance. You are writing for your reader not yourself. So that means putting yourself in the reader's shoes. What would you want to know first, second, third, etc., and how would you like it presented?

It's normally easier to write if you imagine that you are writing to a single person versus to a group (even though that may be the case). Even though your letter may be distributed to tens, hundreds, or thousands of people, ultimately, individuals will be reading it, separately, one at a time. For multiple or highly diverse audiences, create multiple versions tailored to the specific needs of each group. If you don't, some of your readers may become confused by reading material oriented for others.

## What Do You Want to Say?



You must know your subject matter well. It's hard to be precise when you don't know the material in depth. If you don't know the topic well, then spend ample time educating yourself on the subject. Once you've done that, your document will almost write itself. You'll have proper knowledge and focus, and you'll be able to convey the most important points to your readers.

What do you know about your reader? Since most of us are in a hurry, ask yourself what do you normally do when you receive a document? Probably, you read the first paragraph to find out what you need to do, if anything. Then you might scan from there. So put your most important information up front - then support, expand or illustrate that point thereafter. By putting the most important point first, your reader now has context or framework within which to put upcoming details.

{ *Keep your writing simple.  
You'll look smarter!* }

# CHAPTER 2 ORGANIZING

Once you've established your purpose statement, then it's time to decide what information you are going to include. Then gather that information and arrange it in an order that will be clear for your reader.

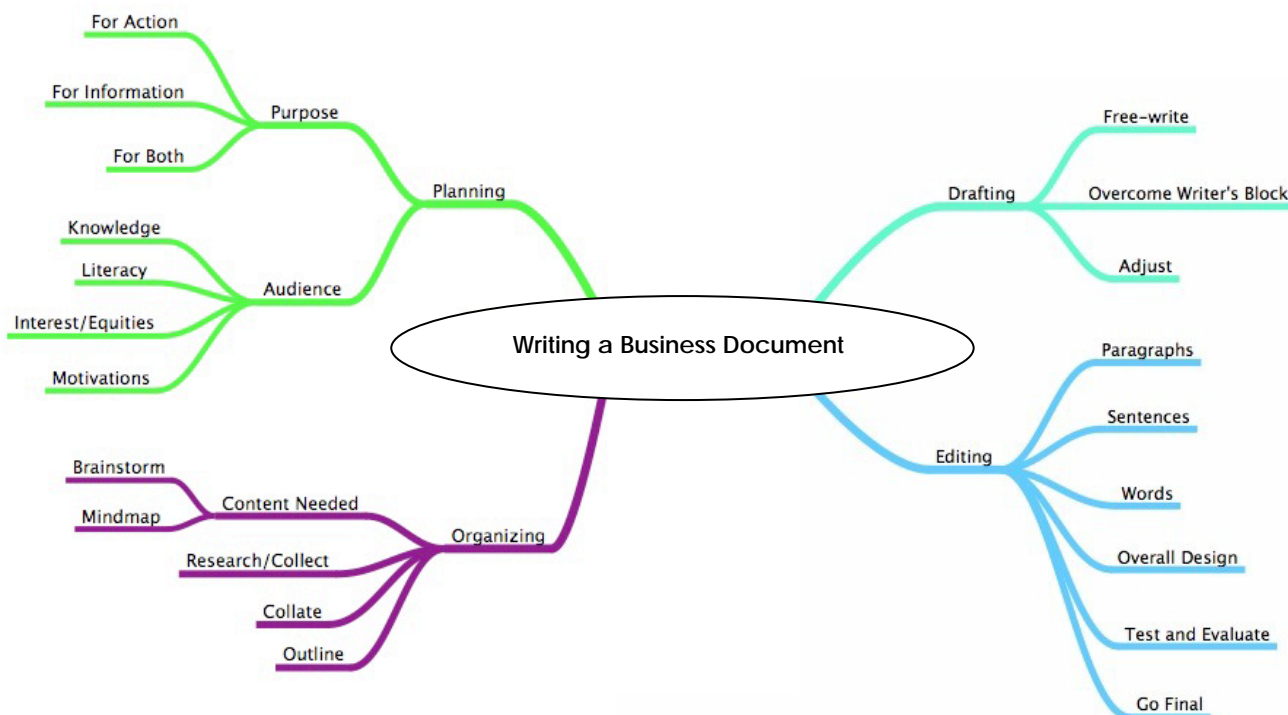


## Brainstorming and Mind Mapping

Brainstorm ideas of what you would like to include in your document. Remember, it's centered on the needs of your reader. With the reader's perspective in mind, determine what material is needed to support your purpose.

If you don't have input of others when deciding what to put in your document, you can still brainstorm – but by yourself. That's called mind mapping. A mind map is a diagram that you create to capture and arrange your most important points. You place your purpose at the center of a page and then place your various supporting points, information and ideas surrounding it – in no particular order. You can choose different colors, shapes, etc. to highlight, prioritize, organize, or code each element.

Your brainstormed thoughts can evolve into a mind map like this:





## Researching

When you have finished your

mind map, it's time to research any topics that you are unsure about. If you are comfortable with the material, you can proceed to the outlining step. But if you do have some knowledge gaps, it's time to research. If you are thinking about the research required in school – don't. This type of research could be

as simple as asking a subject-matter expert to fill in what you don't know. Other research can come from the Internet, on-site or outside libraries, read files, colleagues, or even studies or surveys previously conducted. Do your "homework" and get smart on the topic, so that you may write with ease. You can't write convincingly if you don't know the subject yourself.

## Outlining

From your rough mind map, decide on the best grouping of points and a logical order of topics. By arranging and prioritizing your mind map ideas, you've just created your outline, and it provides structure. Your outline doesn't have to be formal (for example, I. A and B, II. A and B, etc.). That works, but it can be informal – just dot, dot, dot. Think about it as a document's table of contents. So don't be concerned about a school format – use what works for you.

An outline will save you time by helping you eliminate redundancies. Your reader will more likely be able to understand the material as it flows from point to point logically. So, here's a sample outline from the earlier mind map.

### **WRITING A BUSINESS DOCUMENT**

- *Planning*
  - *Why are you writing*
    - *What do you want the reader to do*
    - *What do you want the reader to know*
  - *To whom are you writing*
  - *What do you want to say*
- *Organizing*
  - *Decide what to include*
    - *Brainstorming*
    - *Mind Mapping*
  - *Gather the information*
  - *Outline the material*
- *Drafting*
  - *Free-write*
  - *Overcome writer's block*
- *Editing*
  - *Paragraphs*
  - *Sentences*
  - *Words*
  - *Design*
  - *Testing*

*The less you know about a topic, the more authoritative the source sounds.*  
-Tongue and Quill Law of Research

# CHAPTER 3

## DRAFTING

Once you have finished the planning stage of writing, it's now time for your first draft. You know what you want your reader to know or do, you have a good understanding of the material yourself, and you have an outline to use so that the material will flow logically for your reader. Some folks think that the first draft is the hardest part of the writing process. And it could be if you don't follow some simple steps. They have to do with free-writing and overcoming writer's block.

*Free-writing  
is writing quickly without  
correcting or editing your work.*

### **Free-writing**

Using your outline as a guide, write whatever comes to your mind related to your subject. This technique is called free-writing. Writing as much as you can as fast as you can without thinking. That's right, without thinking. Allow the creative right side of your brain to dominate. Turn off your brain's left side, which is the logical and analytic side, for the time being. Let the information flow – there's no right or wrong in free-writing. Just get the narrative down quickly without editing. In five minutes, you may be able to write an entire page or more. Grammar, punctuation and mistakes are common during the free-writing process. They simply don't matter at this point. Get your thoughts on paper first before thinking about how to say it better.

Later, during the editing phase, your left brain or the internal critic can manifest to identify and correct errors. Allow enough time to thoroughly edit or revise your document because if you were truly free-writing there's plenty to correct during your revision.

### **Writer's Block**

Writer's block may inhibit you from getting started or from making progress. If you write quickly with no regard for grammar or style, it's a lot easier to put your "rough" thoughts on paper. Imagine that you are talking with a friend. How would you carry on the conversation; what would you say? That's how to capture your main thoughts. Spoken English is a lot easier to understand than most written English, so write as you speak (provided you have a command of proper grammar). But since it's still the first draft, make all the mistakes that you want. But do allow sufficient time to fine tune your material during the editing phase (Chapter 4).

