

EXHIBIT 2: PLAIN LANGUAGE PRINCIPLES

What is plain language? Plain language is communication that your audience or readers can understand the **first time** they hear or read it.

When writing chapters, you should:

- **Organize the information logically.** Think about what information you are providing and organize it so that it makes the most sense to your readers. Depending on the policy, you may organize it chronologically, by subject area or issue, by responsibilities for requirements, or in some other manner. Prepare an outline or use some other method to organize your thoughts before you begin writing.

- **Use active voice.** When you use active voice, the person or organization responsible for taking the action is the subject of the sentence. It is easier for the reader to tell who should do what.

(1) Use active voice: “The Project Leader assigns tasks to the wildlife biologist weekly.”

(2) Avoid passive voice: “The wildlife biologist’s tasks are assigned to him or her weekly.”

- **Use helping verbs that make the requirements clear.**

(1) Use:

(a) **Must** for an obligation (e.g., You **must** publish results on the internet within 10 working days.),

(b) **Should** for a recommendation (e.g., You **should** review your goals twice a year.), and

(c) **May** for a discretionary action (e.g., You **may** send the report to the Regional offices for comment.).

(2) Avoid “shall” and “will” for requirements. They are ambiguous; readers can interpret them in different ways. It is appropriate to use “will” when you intend to write in the future tense.

- **Use short sentences that are easy to understand.** Break up long, complicated, or run-on sentences into multiple sentences.

- **Keep your language simple.** You do not need to use formal or legalistic terms to sound official. Use the simplest words that still get your point across. For example, use:

- “try” instead of “attempt,”
- “send” instead of “submit,”
- “if” instead of “in the event that,”
- “start” instead of “initiate.”

- **Use pronouns.** Use “we” or “our” instead of “the Service” when it makes sense to do so. Talk directly to the reader when possible.
- **Avoid hidden verbs.** Hidden verbs are verbs disguised as nouns. They’re usually longer than they need to be. For example:

Don't use...	Use...
Conduct an analysis	Analyze
Provide assistance	Help
Do an assessment	Assess
Present a report	Report

- **Contractions aren't bad.** Although you must avoid using contractions in official correspondence, you may use contractions when writing Service Manual chapters when it's effective to do so.
- **Avoid jargon.** Avoid technical and legal jargon whenever possible. When you must use technical terms that only certain people will recognize, define them the first time you use them or include them in a “What terms do you need to know to understand this chapter?” section at the beginning of the chapter.
- **Minimize the use of acronyms and abbreviations.** When you must use acronyms or abbreviations, spell them out the first time you use them. If you only use the term a few times, spell it out instead of abbreviating.
- **Use vertical lists to make it easier for the reader to scan the document.** It is much easier to read a vertical list than a large block of text. Assign letters or numbers as shown in the chapter template ([Exhibit 1, 011 FW 2](#)) so that the reader can reference paragraphs.
- **Use examples to illustrate explanations.** Sometimes a short, concrete example helps the reader to understand a complex idea. When appropriate, use examples instead of long blocks of text.
- **Use tables and figures.** Use tables and figures when they make information easier to understand.

For more information on plain language techniques, read [116 FW 1](#), Plain Language in Fish and Wildlife Service Documents.