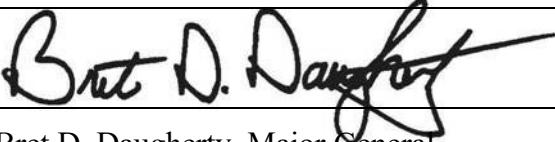




Department Policy No. COMM-903-24

Title:	Plain language writing and design in WMD communications
Former Number:	New policy
Authorizing Source:	Executive Order (EO) 23-02 – Plain Language
Information Contact:	The Adjutant General Building #1 (253) 512-8001
Effective Date	March 14, 2024
Mandatory Review Date:	March 14, 2028
Revised:	N/A
Approved By:	 Bret D. Daugherty, Major General The Adjutant General Washington Military Department Director

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to help Washington Military Department (WMD) employees prepare written content that is clear, concise, inclusive, and easy to understand for the intended audience.

Executive cabinet agencies are expected to produce clear communications that improve a person’s ability to understand how to access services, comply with requirements, and participate in state government (Governor’s Executive Order 23-02).

Background

Plain language writing and design strategies are proven techniques for improving communication and reducing misunderstandings and frustration. Benefits of plain language include:

- Achieving better services and results for customers.
- Improving customers’ ability to understand and comply with requirements or action items.
- Making WMD’s operations more efficient and cost-effective.
- Improving WMD’s ability to meet accessibility standards and provide culturally sensitive translations.

- Advancing equity.
- Supporting transparency.

Plain language supports Washington State's Pro-Equity Anti-Racism (PEAR) efforts. It demonstrates WMD's commitment to ensuring all people in Washington have equitable access to public information and opportunities to participate in State government.

Scope

This policy applies to written and online content that includes information or action items that need to be understood regardless of the audience's level of familiarity with the subject matter, cultural background, socioeconomic status, and other factors. This includes but is not limited to: procurement and contracting opportunities, employment opportunities, rule-making or public comment opportunities, and grants or benefits programs.

At WMD, these communications include the following:

- Letters and correspondences
- WMD-developed contract language
- Forms, instructions, and applications
- Talking points, FAQs, telephone and other audio scripts, and Q&A documents
- Reports
- Publications
 - Brochures
 - Fliers
 - Fact sheets
 - Booklets
 - Posters
 - Announcements
 - News releases
 - Advertisements
 - Newsletters
- Webpages
- Blog and social media posts
- Presentations and meeting materials

This policy excludes Washington Administrative Code (WAC) and Revised Code of Washington (RCW) language that follows requirements of the Office of the Code Reviser. However, WMD should provide WAC or RCW explanations in plain language when WMD refers to these laws in publications, forms, letters, and other communications.

Definitions

Audience: The intended recipients of a specific communication.

Culturally sensitive: Being aware of people's lived experiences and recognizing that words have different meanings for everyone. Approaching the language we use with care, humility, intention, and inclusiveness.

Customers: Individuals and organizations WMD serve and works with.

Plain language: The result of a process that creates or revises written content to reflect plain language writing and design principles.

User testing: The process of making content easier for the audience to understand by testing it with members of the audience and incorporating their feedback.

Policy

1. WMD staff are expected to use plain language principles in written communications with internal and external customers, other individuals, and organizations we communicate with about WMD programs, activities, and decisions. User-testing, while not required, is encouraged where feasible, cost-effective, and sensible.

To use plain language principles, you should:

- a. Write for your audience, not for yourself. Organize information based on what your audience needs to know and the questions they are most likely to ask.
 - b. Use common words, short sentences, and short paragraphs.
 - c. Avoid jargon, undefined acronyms, and legal or technical language.
 - d. Use unambiguous language that is culturally sensitive for the intended audience.
 - e. Use active voice writing to make it clear who is responsible for what. Some cultures prefer passive voice, so it is important to understand the audience's preference. However, research shows active voice helps the reader more than passive voice.
 - f. Layout and design that help the reader understand important information on the first try. This includes adequate white space, bulleted lists, helpful headings, and other proven techniques.
2. WMD employees whose position description includes preparing written material for external and/or internal audiences are required to complete the plain language training provided by the Department of Enterprise Services. At a minimum, this includes:
 - a. Executive Management Team members
 - b. Division or command leadership personnel
 - c. Legal professionals
 - d. Contracting office members
 - e. Human resource office members
 - f. Designated website contributors
 - g. Program managers

3. Supervisors and managers should consider making plain language training part of the performance development plan for any employee who helps with writing, designing, or editing the kinds of documents and content subject to this policy.
4. WMD will designate an employee to serve as the agency's plain language lead. This employee will have the following responsibilities:
 - a. Develop a plan to take an inventory of existing documents and content that are subject to this policy, with a priority on forms or public information that directly affect a person's ability to access services or programs. The inventory will identify the 10 documents or forms most viewed online or used in interactions with the public, and the 10 most-viewed agency website pages. The plain language lead will develop a plan to update that content and publish plain language versions within one year of adopting this policy.
 - b. Develop a process or procedure for reviewing or auditing content on a biannual basis to ensure required documents and content follow plain language writing and design principles.
 - c. Develop a process that ensures all public-facing documents subject to this policy go through a plain language review before being finalized.