WRITING READER-FRIENDLY DOCUMENTS

1.   Overview

The traditional way of writing government documents has not worked well. Too often, complicated and jargon-filled documents have resulted in frustration, lawsuits, and a lack of trust between citizens and their government. To overcome this legacy, we have a great responsibility to communicate clearly.

Studies show that clearly written regulations improve compliance and decrease litigation. Writing that considers our readers' needs improves the relationship between the government and the public it serves. Clear writing reduces the burden on the public. It also reduces our burden because we don't have to deal with the consequences of unclear communication.

How can we be better writers?

We believe that the most important goals are these--

- Write for your reader
- Write clearly
- Write in a visually appealing style

The next several pages summarize some of the best techniques to achieve these three goals. Following the summary, you'll find detailed suggestions for applying these techniques to your writing.

Write for Your Reader

Writing for your readers sends a message that you have considered who they are and what they need to know. When you communicate a concern for your readers' needs, they are more likely to be receptive to your message.

When your document is plainly written, your readers are more likely to--

- Understand what you want and take appropriate action
- Focus on key information
- Believe that you are concerned with their needs

Identify your audience

Identify your audience early and think about why the reader needs to read the document. Identify people who will be interested, even if they are not directly affected. Write to everyone who is interested, not just to technical or legal experts. Keep in mind the average reader's level of technical expertise.

Organize to meet your reader's needs

People read documents to get answers. They want to know how to do something or what happens if they don't do something. Organize your document to respond to these concerns. Frequently this means describing events as they occur--you fill out an application to get a benefit, you submit the application, the agency reviews the application, the agency makes a decision on the application.

Think through the questions your readers are likely to ask and then organize them in that order. For regulations, you can organize them into a comprehensive table of contents that will be an outline of the document.

Use a question-and-answer format

As much as possible, write section headings as questions. Try to ask the questions your readers would ask. Answer each question immediately. Using the question-and-answer format helps readers to scan the document and find the information they want. It also increases the chances that they will see a question that they didn't have, but need to know the answer to. This format is enormously helpful to readers.

Use "you" and other pronouns to speak directly to readers

"You" reinforces the message that the document is intended for your reader in a way that "he," "she," or "they" cannot. More than any other single technique, using "you" pulls readers into your document and makes it relevant to them. Using "we" to refer to your agency makes your sentences shorter and your document

more accessible readers.

Use the active voice

Active voice makes it clear who is supposed to do what. It eliminates ambiguity about responsibilities. Not: "It must be done." But, "You [or someone else] must do it." Using passive voice, which obscures who is responsible for what, is one of the biggest problems with government documents.

Use the appropriate tone

In regulations, tone is not really an issue. But the tone of other documents, such as letters, affects how well the reader takes in your message. A cold tone can cause the reader to tune out the message. In some cases, it causes him to put down your document rather than attempting to read it at all. Select the tone based on who your reader is and what his or her circumstances are.

Write Clearly

For years, most of us have addressed our documents mainly to technical experts and lawyers, rather than to the many other readers we want to influence. A jargon-laden, legalistic style does not clearly convey important information. You can reduce confusion or misinterpretation for all readers without sacrificing the technical integrity of your writing.

How can you write more clearly?

Government documents such as regulations present special challenges because of the highly technical information they often contain. At the same time, you have multiple audiences, some highly knowledgeable, some less so. In fact, focus-group results show that even technical experts do not always understand technical language easily or quickly. The following techniques will help ensure that you keep your language clear, so that your users can focus on technical information.

Use short sentences

Express only one idea in each sentence. Long, complicated sentences often mean that you aren't clear about what you want to say. Shorter sentences show clear thinking. Shorter sentences are also better for conveying complex information; they break the information up into smaller, easier-to-process units. Vary your sentence structure to avoid choppiness, but don't revert to tangled multi-clause sentences.

Write to one person, not to a group

Use singular nouns, pronouns, and verbs to direct your writing to one individual reader. This prevents confusion about whether a requirement applies to readers acting individually or in groups.

Use the simplest tense you can

Using simple present tense avoids the clutter of compound verbs and clearly conveys what is standard practice.

Use "must" to convey requirements

Use "must" for obligation, "may" for permission, and "should" for preference. Use "must not" to convey prohibitions. Avoid the ambiguous "shall." When was the last time you heard "shall" in everyday conversation?

Place words carefully

There are several ways you can reduce ambiguity--

- Keep subjects and objects close to their verbs.
- Put conditionals such as "only" or "always" and other modifiers next to the words they modify. Write "you are required to provide only the following," not "you are only required to provide the following."
- Put long conditions after the main clause. Write "complete form 9-123 if you own more than 50 acres and cultivate grapes," not "if you own more than 50 acres and cultivate grapes, complete form 9-123."

Use "if-then" tables

If material is particularly complex and many conditional situations are involved, put it in an "if-then" table.

Avoid words and constructions that cause confusion

Common sources of confusion include--

- Undefined or overused abbreviations and acronyms
- Two different terms used for the same thing (car, vehicle, auto, conveyance--choose one)
- Giving an obscure technical or legal meaning to a word commonly understood to mean something different (defining "car" to include trucks)
- Legal, technical, and "fashionable," but confusing, jargon
- Strings of nouns forming complex constructions (surface water quality protection procedures)
- Pronouns that don't clearly refer to specific nouns
- Stilted, wordy language

Use contractions when appropriate

Contractions can speed reading, improve accuracy, and sometimes soften the tone of your documents.

Write in a Visually Appealing Style

We want our documents to help readers get information, comply with requirements, and apply for benefits with the minimum possible burden. Visually appealing documents are far easier to understand than more traditional styles.

Traditional government documents are often dense and confusing. Replace blocks of text with headings, tables, and more white space. You will help your reader by making the main points readily apparent and grouping related items together. Use a clear and uncrowded presentation and your readers will be more likely to understand what you want to convey. In turn, your readers will be more likely to do what you want them to do in their dealings with your agency.

How can you make your documents visually appealing?

With visual layout, you draw your readers' attention to information they need to know. Even though various government requirements, such as the *Code of Federal Regulations* (CFR) format, constrain government writers in a number of ways, you can still take significant steps to make your documents visually appealing to the reader.

Use lots of informative headings

Headings attract your readers' attention to important information. They help readers find their way through a document and locate important points.

Pack each heading with lots of information. How often have you seen several different sections entitled "applications" or "appeals" in one set of documents? Applications for what? Appeals of what? If you say "Applications for underground mining permits on public land" the reader knows exactly what you're talking about, and knows the difference between that section and another section entitled "Applications for a temporary use permit to transport cattle across public land."

On the other hand, headings should not be so long that they overwhelm the material in the section itself.

Write short sections

Short sections break up the material into easily understood segments and allow you to introduce a little white space. Short sections look easier to read and understand. Long sections can appear difficult and forbidding, even before someone tries to read them.

Include only one issue in each paragraph

Limiting each paragraph to one issue gives the document a clean appearance and contributes to the impression that it is easy to read and understand. By presenting only one issue in each paragraph, you can use informative headings that reflect the entire issue covered by the paragraph.

Use vertical lists

Vertical lists highlight a series of requirements or other information in a visually clear way. Use vertical lists to help your reader focus on important material. Vertical lists--

- Highlight levels of importance
- Help the reader understand the order in which things happen
- Make it easy for the reader to identify all necessary steps in a process
- Add blank space for easy reading

Use tested emphasis techniques to highlight important points

Emphasis techniques are useful to draw the reader's attention to a line or two. You should use techniques like ***bold and italics*** that have been tested on readers; they draw the reader's attention to the area and are easy to read. You shouldn't use **ALL CAPS**; they're much harder to read.

2. Techniques for Better Writing

This section provides examples of how to use the techniques listed in the overview. The examples are drawn from different agencies across the Federal government. Because we originally wrote this guidance for regulations writers, most of the examples are from regulations. You won't find any of these exact examples in the *Code of Federal Regulations*. We've altered them to provide what we think are better examples of the techniques we recommend.

Identify and write for your audience

Identify who is affected by a document and write to get their attention and answer their questions.

You have to grab your readers' attention if you want to get your ideas across. Let's face it, readers just want to know what applies to them. The best way to grab and hold their attention is to figure out who they are and what they want to know. Put yourself in their shoes. It will give you a new perspective.

Tell your readers why the material is important to them. Say, "If you want a research grant, here's what you have to do." Or, "If you want to mine federal coal, here's what you should know." Or, "If you are planning a trip to Rwanda, read this first."

Identifying your audience should do more than just cause you to make sure the terms you use are clear. It should help you focus on the reader's needs. You should do this by thinking about what your reader knows about the situation now. Then think about how to guide them from their current knowledge to what you need them to know. To help you do this, try answering the following questions--

- Who is the reader?
- Is there a secondary reader we need to give information?
- What does the reader(s) already know about the subject?
- What questions will the reader(s) have?
- What's the best outcome for my agency? What do I need to say to get this outcome?
- What's the best outcome for the reader? What do I need to say to get this outcome?

Guide your readers from Point A to Point B in as straight a line as possible. Anticipate the questions readers have about what to read next.

Many times a document has more than one audience. You may be talking to exporters and importers, or coal miners and surface owners, or airlines and passengers. NEPA documents typically speak to both stakeholders and agency decision makers. Break your documents down into essential elements and determine which elements apply to each part of your audience. Then group the elements according to who is affected. If you are writing about research grants, first tell the professor what he or she must do; then tell the university accounting department what it must do.

Identify clearly whom you are speaking to in each section. Don't make a reader go through material only to find out at the end that the section doesn't apply.

Grant applications must provide the following information:	*(a) When you apply for a grant, you must send us:*
(a) Prior experience in the area covered by the grant;	*(1) A description of your experience in the area covered by the grant; and*
(b) Publications relevant to the area of the grant;	
(c) Other grants held at the time of application;	*(2) Copies of any material that you have published relevant to the area of the grant.*
(d) Name and address of the chief financial officer;	
(e) Nature of in-kind match being provided;	*(b) Your financial office must send us--*
(f) Approved overhead rate; and	*(1) The name and address of the chief financial officer;*
(g) Total proposed budget.	
	(2) A description of the in-kind match you will provide;
	(3) Your approved overhead rate; and
	(4) A proposed budget.

Organize to meet your readers' needs

Well-organized, detailed tables of contents make it easy for the reader to identify all elements in a document. Part of serving your readers better is organizing your document so that they can understand how a program works and where to find instructions for each step they need to complete. Your table of contents should be a reliable road map that readers can follow to get through a process painlessly. The table of contents below is organized in a logical sequence for a discretionary grant program. The organization follows the order in which events occur and in which the public might ask questions about the program.

Part 791: Javits Gifted and Talented Students

Subpart A: How the Grant Program Works

Subpart B: How to Apply for an Award

Subpart C: How the Secretary Makes an Award

Subpart D: Grantees' Rights and Responsibilities

791.30   *Under what conditions may I use my Javits Grant award?*
791.31   *What are my responsibilities for serving students and teachers in
             private schools?*

The same organization works well for almost any type of regulation. Here's an
example of an administrative regulation--

*Part 725--CLAIMS FOR BENEFITS UNDER THE FEDERAL MINE
SAFETY AND HEALTH ACT*

General

725.1   *What does this program cover?*
725.2   *What special terms do I need to know to understand this part?*

Who is Covered

725.201   *Who is entitled to benefits under this program?*
725.202   *How long can my benefits last?*
725.203   *Are my dependents entitled to benefits?*
725.204   *How long will their benefits last?*
725.205   *Am I still eligible if I am convicted of a felony?*

How to Apply for Benefits

725.301   *How do I file a claim?*
725.302   *Can other people give evidence on my behalf?*
725.303   *Are there any time limits for filing my claim?*
725.304   *Can I modify or withdraw my claim?*

How to Appeal Agency Decisions

725.401   *Can I appeal a decision if I don't agree with it?*
725.402   *How do I file an appeal?*
725.403   *How long do I have to file an appeal?*
725.404   *What types of evidence must I submit?*
725.405   *What happens if I won't get a medical examination?*

Use useful headings 3

There are three types of headings--

Question Heading	A heading in the form of a question	Why Do We Use Headings?

Statement Heading	A heading that uses a noun and a verb	Headings Help Guide a Reader
Topic Heading	A heading that is a word or short phrase	Helpful Headings

Question Headings are the most useful. They ask the questions that readers are asking and guide them to the answers. Statement Headings are the next best choice because they are still very specific. Topic Headings are the most formal so many times management is more comfortable with them. But sometimes they're so vague that they just aren't that helpful. It's best to stay with just one type of heading.

The question-and-answer format is the most efficient way to communicate with your reader. The reader comes to your document with questions that he or she needs answered. It's much more efficient to anticipate the reader's questions and pose them as he or she would. By doing this, you make it easier for the reader to find information.

§ 254.11 Indian Rights. *§ 254.12 Applications.* *§ 254.13 Multi-tribal grants.* *§ 254.14 Administrative* *requirements.* *§ 254.15 Appeals*	*§ 254.11 How do the procedures in this part affect Indian rights?* *§ 254.12 How do I apply for a grant under this part?* *§ 254.13. When must I submit my application?* *§ 254.14 Can a multi-tribal organization submit a single grant request?* *§ 254.15 What special information do I need for an application by a multi-tribal organization?* *§ 254.16 Must each tribe in a multi-tribal organization submit certification forms and budgets?* *§ 254.17 If I receive a grant under this part, what requirements must I follow?* *§ 254.18 What reports must I submit after receiving a grant?* *§ 254.19 How can I appeal administrative actions under this part?*

The original version had short headings that were not helpful to the reader. In the new version, we've identified with the reader and written additional questions that became separate sections.

Use pronouns to represent the reader and to refer to your agency

By using "you," you address your reader personally and add immediacy to your document. When you address the reader as "you," the reader feels that you are addressing him or her directly. Remember that even though your document may affect a thousand or a million people, you are speaking to the one person who is reading it. When your writing reflects this, it is more economical and has a greater impact on the reader. By using "you" to answer the reader's questions, you clarify whom you are addressing.

Copies of tax returns must be provided.	*You must provide copies of your tax returns.*

Writing for an individual reader forces you to analyze carefully what you want the reader to do. By writing to an individual, you will find it easier to--

- Put information in a logical order
- Answer questions and provide the information that your reader wants to know
- Assign responsibilities and requirements clearly

Be sure to define "you" clearly.

Facilities in regional and district offices are available to the public during normal business hours for requesting ...	If you are a member of the public, you can get copies of our records at any regional district office ...

Define "you" by any of the following methods--

- State in the beginning of the document who the audience is--"This regulation tells you, a loan applicant, how to secure a loan."
- Define "you" in the Definitions section--"You" means a loan applicant.
- Where you address different readers in different parts of the document, define "you" in each context-- "How do different types of borrowers apply for a loan? If you are a small business, you must submit . . . If you are an individual, you must submit . . ."

It's especially important to define "you" where there are multiple audiences.

Lessees and operators are responsible for restoring the site. You must ensure that ...	*Lessees and operators are responsible for restoring the site. If you are the operator, you must conduct all operations in a way ... If you are the lessee, you must monitor the operator to ensure that ...*

You may want to use "I" to refer to the reader. Since the question-and-answer format assumes that the reader is the one asking the questions, you should use "I" in questions to refer to the reader. Don't use "I" in responses. In responses your agency (represented by "we") addresses the reader. By using "I" to ask questions in headings, you are anticipating questions the reader may have.

Submission of applications.	*How do I apply for a loan?*

By using "we" to respond to questions, you state clearly what your agency requires and what your agency's responsibilities are. You also avoid the passive and use fewer words. Since you will never be asking the questions (only the reader does that), you should not use "we" in section headings. You can define "we" in the definitions sections of your document if that will help the reader.

Loan applications will be reviewed to ensure that procedures have been followed.	*We review your loan application to ensure that you have followed our procedures.*
The Office of Consumer Affairs will process your application within 30 days after receipt.	*We'll process your application within 30 days of receiving it.*

Use active voice

Active voice is the best way to identify who is responsible for what action. In an active sentence, the person or agency taking an action is the subject of the sentence. In a passive sentence, the person or item that is acted upon is the subject of the sentence. Passive sentences often do not identify who is performing the action.

The lake was polluted by the company.	*The company polluted the lake.*
New regulations were proposed.	*We proposed new regulations.*
The following information must be included in the application for it be considered complete.	*You must include the following information in your complete application.*
Bonds will be withheld in cases of non-compliance with all permits and conditions.	*We will withhold your bond if you don't comply with all permit terms and conditions.*

More than any other writing technique, using active voice and specifying who is taking an action will change the character of our writing.

How do you identify passive sentences? Passive sentences have two basic features, although both do not appear in every passive sentence.

- A past participle (generally with "ed" on the end); and
- A form of the verb "to be."

Regulations have been proposed by the Department of Veterans Affairs.	*We have proposed regulations.*
The permit will be approved by the agency's State office.	*Our State office must approve your permit.*

In a very few instances, passive voice may be appropriate. For example, when one action follows another as a matter of law, and there is no actor (besides the law itself) for the second action, a passive sentence may be the best method of expression.

If you do not pay the royalty on your mineral production, you lease will be terminated [by the action of the law].

Write Clearly

Break your material into short sentences

The best way to tell your reader what you want is a short, straightforward sentence. Complex sentences loaded with dependent clauses and exceptions confuse the reader by losing the main point in a forest of words. Resist the temptation to put everything in one sentence; break up your idea into its various parts and make each one the subject of its own sentence.

For good reasons, the Secretary may grant extensions of time in 30-day increments for filing of the lease and all required bonds, provided that additional extension requests are submitted and approved before the expiration of the original 30 days or the previously granted extension.	*We may extend the time you have to file the lease and required bonds. Each extension will be for a 30-day period. To get an extension, you must write to us giving the reasons that you need more time. We must receive your extension request in time to approve it before your current deadline or extension expires.*

Complexity is the greatest enemy of clear communication. You may need to be especially inventive to translate complicated provisions into more manageable language. In the following example, we have made an "if" clause into a separate sentence. By beginning the first sentence with "suppose that" and the second sentence with "in this case," we have preserved the relationship between the two.

If you take less than your entitled share of production for any month, but you pay royalties on the full volume of your entitled share in accordance with the provisions of this section, you will owe no additional royalty for that lease for prior periods when you later take more than your entitled share to balance your account. This also applies when the other participants pay you money to balance your account.	*Suppose that one month you pay royalties on your full share of production but take less than your entitled share. In this case, you may balance your account in one of the following ways without having to pay more royalty. You may either:* *(a) Take more than your entitled share in the future; or* *(b) Accept money from other participants.*

Address One Person, Not a Group

Singular nouns and verbs prevent confusion about whether a requirement applies to individual readers or to groups. In the following example, the reader doesn't

know whether each applicant must file applications at several offices, or whether applicants who are members of a group must file individual requests.

Individuals and organizations wishing to apply must file applications with the appropriate offices in a timely manner.	*You must apply at least 30 days before you need the certification.* *(a) If you are an individual, apply at the State office in the State where you reside.* *(b) If you are an organization, apply at the State office in the State where your headquarters is located.*

In addressing a single person, you can avoid awkwardness by using "you" to address the reader directly, rather than using "his or her" or "he or she."

The applicant must provide his or her mailing address and his or her identification number.	*You must provide your mailing address and identification number.*

Your reader probably will need only a single permit, application, or license. Thus, writing in the singular means that it will apply to the reader as written, eliminating the need to "translate."

Use present tense whenever possible

A document written in the present tense is more immediate and less complicated. Using the present tense makes your document more direct and forceful. The more you use conditional or future tense, the harder your reader has to work to understand your meaning. Writing entirely in the present tense saves your reader work and helps you to make your point clearly.

These sections describe types of information that would satisfy the application requirements of Circular A-110 as it would apply to this grant program.	*These sections tell you how to meet the requirements of Circular A-110 for this grant program.*

Even if you are covering an event that occurred in the past, you can clarify the material for your reader by writing as much as possible in the present tense.

Applicants who were Federal employees at the time that the injury was sustained should have filed a compensation request at that time. Failure to do so could have an effect on the degree to which the applicant can be covered under this part.	*You may not be covered under this part if:* *(a) You were a Federal employee at the time of the injury; and* *(b) You did not file a report with us at that time.*

You help your reader understand and relate to your document if you eliminate the need for him or her to "translate" the text from the past or conditional tense into the present. Remember, the less work your reader has to do to understand, the better he or she can follow your instructions.

Occasionally, of course, you may need to use other tenses. For example, NEPA documents frequently refer to what may happen in the future if certain events occur. But use tenses other than the present only when necessary for accuracy.

Use "must" to indicate requirements

The word "must" is the clearest way to convey to your readers that they have to do something. "Shall" is one of those officious and obsolete words that has encumbered legal style writing for many years. The message that "shall" sends to the reader is, "this is deadly material." "Shall" is also obsolete; when was the last time you heard it used in everyday speech?

Besides being outdated, "shall" is imprecise. It can indicate either an obligation or a prediction. Dropping "shall" is a major step in making your document more reader friendly. Don't be intimidated by the argument that using "must" will lead to a lawsuit. Many agencies already use the word "must" to convey obligations with no adverse legal effects.

You can avoid "shall" by substituting "must" to indicate an obligation or "will" to indicate that an action will occur in the future. Be careful to consider which meaning you intend to communicate to your readers.

Section 5511.1 Free Use of Timber on Oil and Gas Leases	***Section 5511.1 Can I use the timber on my oil or gas lease for fuel?***
(a) Any oil or gas lessee who wishes to use timber for fuel in drilling operations shall file an application therefor with the officer who issued the lease.	*You must file an application to use the timber on your oil or gas lease for fuel. File the application with our office where you got your lease.*
(b) The applicant shall be notified by registered mail in all cases where the permit applied for is not granted, and shall be given 30 days within which to appeal such decision.	***Section 5511.12 Will you notify me if you reject my application?***

Our agency will notify you by registered mail if we reject your application. You must file an appeal of that decision within 30 days. |
| *(c) Where the land is occupied by a settler, the applicant shall serve notice on the settler by registered mail showing the amount and kind of timber he has applied for.* | ***Section 5511.13 Must I notify anyone that I have applied for use of the timber?***

You must notify any settler, by registered mail, that you have applied to use timber from your lease. Include in your notice:

(a) The amount of timber you applied for; and

(b) The kind of timber you applied for. |

Place words carefully

Avoid ambiguous phrasing that can mislead your reader. How you place words in relation to each other can greatly affect your document. Using short sentences will often make this problem disappear.

In the example below, it's difficult for the reader of the provision on the left to figure out which words relate to the forest products, which relate to the tribe, and which relate to the payments.

Upon the request of an Indian tribe, the Secretary may provide that the purchaser of the forest products of such tribe, which are harvested under a timber sale contract, permit, or other harvest sale document, make advance deposits, or direct payments of the gross proceeds of such forest products, less any amounts segregated as forest management deductions pursuant to section 163.25, into accounts designated by such Indian tribe.	*If you ask us, we will require purchasers of your forest products to deposit their payment into an account that you designate.* *(a) You can instruct us to deposit advance payments as well as direct payments into the account.* *(b) We will withhold from the deposit any forest management deductions under section 163.25.*

You will eliminate many potential sources of ambiguity by writing shorter sentences. The less complex the sentence, the clearer the meaning and the smaller the chance of ambiguity creeping in. Still, you must watch how you place words even in short sentences. In the example below, the reader may have to read the original statement several times to realize that we don't mean, "If you really want to have a disability . . ."

If you are determined to have a disability, we will pay you the following:	*If we determine that you have a disability, we will pay you the following:*

As you write, place your words with care to avoid possible misinterpretations or muddied meanings. A carefully written document is clear, concise, and unambiguous.

Use tables to make complex material easier to understand

If-then tables are an ideal way to make complex provisions readily understandable. If a picture is worth 1,000 words, a table is worth at least 750. By laying out the material visually, tables help your reader see relationships in a way that dense text never can. No reader would dispute that the rewritten regulation below is far clearer that the dense text it replaces.

§ 163.25 Forest management deductions.

(a) Pursuant to the provisions of 25 U.S.C. 413 and 25 U.S.C. 3105, a forest management deduction shall be withheld from the gross proceeds of sales of Indian forest land as described in this section.

(b) Gross proceeds shall mean the value in money or money's worth of consideration furnished by the purchaser of forest products purchased under a contract, permit, or other document for the sale of forest products.

(c) Forest management deductions shall not be withheld where the total consideration furnished under a document for the sale of forest products is less than $5,001.

(d) Except as provided in § 163.25(e) of this part, the amount of the forest deduction shall not exceed the lesser amount of ten percent (10%) of the gross proceeds or, the actual percentage in effect on November 28, 1990.

(e) The Secretary may increase the forest management deduction percentage for Indian forest land upon receipt of a written request from a tribe supported by a written resolution executed by the authorized tribal representatives. At the request of the authorized tribal representatives and at the discretion of the Secretary the forest management deduction percentage may be decreased to not less than one percent (1%) or the requirement for collection may be waived.

§ 163.25 What forest management deductions will BIA withhold?

We will withhold a forest management deduction if the contract for the sale of forest products has a value of over $5,000. The deduction will be a percentage of the gross proceeds (i.e., the price we get from the buyer). We will determine the amount of the deduction in accordance with the following table.

If ...	*then the percentage of the deduction is ...*
a tribe requests an increase in the deduction through a tribal resolution and written request to us	*the percentage requested by the tribe.*
an authorized tribal representative requests and we approve a decrease in the deduction	*the percentage requested, with a one percent minimum.*
an authorized tribal representative requests and we approve a waiver of the deduction	*waived.*
none of the above conditions apply	*the percentage in effect on November 28, 1990, or 10 percent, whichever is less.*

You can also use variations on the if-then table to clarify other types of complicated provisions. Which of the following would you rather read?

§ 163.17 Deposit with bid.

(a) A deposit shall be made with each proposal for the purchase of Indian forest products. Such deposits shall be at least:

(1) Ten (10) percent if the appraised stumpage value is less than $100,000 in any event not less than $1,000 or full value whichever is less.

(2) Five (5) percent if the appraised stumpage value is $100,000 to $250,000 but in any event not less than $10,000; and

(b) Three (3) percent if the appraised stumpage value exceeds $250,000 but it any event not less than $12,500.

> ### *§ 163.17 What deposit must I make with my bid?*
>
> *You must include with your proposal to buy Indian forest products a deposit that meets the conditions in the following table.*

If the appraised stumpage value is ...	*you must deposit ...*	*and the minimum amount of the deposit*
less than $100,000	*ten percent of the stumpage value*	*$1,000*
between $100,000 and $250,000	*five percent of the stumpage value*	*$10,000*
over $250,000	*three percent of the stumpage value*	*$12,500*

If-then tables are powerful tools for simplifying complicated material. By laying out complex provisions visually, you help the reader to see relationships in a way that dense text never could. Tables almost always use many fewer words that a straight textual explanation would use.

Avoid words and constructions that cause confusion

Your document will be clearer if you avoid words and phrases that your readers might not understand. Define each abbreviation or acronym the first time you use it. In general, use abbreviations only to refer to terms that are central to the document. For example, if a regulation is about the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, you can refer to it as CERCLA. But don't abbreviate terms that you use only one or a few times. Write them out each time. And whatever you do, don't overwhelm your reader with strings of acronyms and abbreviations.

Use the same term consistently to identify a specific thought or object

For example, if you use the term "senior citizens" to refer to a group, continue to use this term throughout your document. Don't substitute another term, such as "the elderly," which may cause the reader to wonder if you are referring to the same group.

Define words in a way that does not conflict with ordinary or accepted usage

If possible, use a word in a way that is consistent with its everyday meaning rather than creating a new meaning for your document. A change in meaning may confuse the reader, and you create ambiguity if you use the word elsewhere in your document in its ordinary sense. For example, don't redefine "automobile" to refer to vehicles such as motorcycles or large trucks.

Avoid "noun sandwiches"

Too much government writing uses too many noun clusters--groups of nouns "sandwiched" together. Avoid these confusing constructions by using more prepositions and articles to clarify the relationships among the words.

Underground mine worker safety protection procedures development.	Developing procedures to protect the safety of workers in underground mines.

Use pronouns that clearly refer to a specific noun. If a pronoun could refer to more than one person or object in a sentence, repeat the name of the person or object or rewrite the sentence.

After the Administrator appoints an Assistant Administrator, he or she must ...	*After the Administrator appoints an Assistant Administrator, the Assistant Administrator must ...*

Avoid confusing legal and technical jargon

Readers can do without archaic jargon such as "hereafter," "heretofore," and "therewith." You may sometimes need to use a technical term to communicate accurately and convey a precise meaning. Don't be cowed into overusing technical terms. The argument that technical terms are "necessary" is overused. Try to substitute everyday language for jargon as often as possible.

Use technical terms only when truly necessary and only when your document will be read only by technical readers. If your document is intended for both technical and non-technical readers, write for the non-technical reader.

Avoid stilted, wordy language

Wordy, dense construction is one of the biggest problems in government writing. Nothing is more confusing to the reader than long, complex sentences containing multiple phrases and clauses.

If the State Secretary finds that an individual has received a payment to which the individual was not entitled, whether or not the payment was due to the individual's fault or misrepresentation, the individual shall be liable to repay to State the total sum of the payment to which the individual was not entitled.	*If the State agency finds that you received a payment that you weren't entitled to, you must pay the entire sum back.*

Use contractions to make your writing more accessible

Contractions improve clarity and help your reader. Yes, Virginia, contractions are acceptable in government writing. They're especially appropriate in letters. But you must use them with discretion. Just as you shouldn't bullet everything on a page, you shouldn't make a contraction out of every possible word.

Contractions help the reader. Readers are used to hearing words in the contracted form. So, when readers see "would not," they turn it into "wouldn't." That means that using contractions speeds reading. Another benefit is that many readers miss the second word and take the exact opposite meaning. They read "would not" as "would." That doesn't happen when you use "wouldn't."

Most people will agree that contractions are less formal than writing out both words. As in any other type of writing, it's important to focus on your reader. If you would speak more formally to someone, then you should probably write to them the same way, without contractions.

In a few cases, there is a difference in tone between the contracted form and the two word form--"can't" and "cannot" or "don't" and "do not."

More Emphatic Message	Softer Message
You *cannot* come in now.	You *can't* come in now.
Do not enter this building.	*Don't* enter this building.
Do not enter this building without permission.	*Don't* enter this building without permission.

Use lots of informative headings

Headings help readers find their way through a document and locate information they care about. A document with lots of informative headings is easy to follow. Using more headings helps you break up the document into logical, understandable pieces. Informative headings are more specific and thus more helpful to the reader than are short headings that cover several pieces of information. Questions make excellent headings.

Purpose and policy. Scope.	*What does this subpart do?*
Information and records available to the public and exempt from disclosure.	*How can I get records from SBA?* *How long will it take for SBA to respond to my request for records?*

Public access to information and records.	*If SBA grants my request, which records will you send me?*
Business information.	*How will SBA respond to business requests for information?*

It's often useful to start writing your document by developing the headings, structuring them to your readers' concerns. This approach can also reveal major groupings of information that you might want to identify with centered headings.

Qualifications of permittees and lessees

Who may hold leases and permits?
Can foreign citizens hold permits or leases?

How do I file evidence of my qualifications?

Can I amend my qualifications statement?

Bonding requirements

Must I file a bond with my permit or lease?

Where do I file my bond?

What types of bonds are acceptable?

How does BLM establish bond amounts?

When does BLM terminate my liability under a bond?

On the other hand, headings should not be so long that they overwhelm the material in the section itself. Avoid headings with one word answers.

Do I have to file a newspaper notice of my activities before I begin operations?	*Are there any public notice requirements?*
Yes.	*You must publish a notice of your operations in a local newspaper before you begin.*

Break your material into short, understandable sections

Short sections break up material into easily understood segments that are visually appealing to the reader. Short sections are easier to organize and understand. Long sections are confusing and visually unappealing.

§ 2653.30 Native group selections.	**§ 2653.31 What are the selection criteria for Native group selections and what lands are available?**
(a) Selections must not exceed the amount recommended by the regional corporation or 320 acres for each Native member of a group, or 7,680 acres for each Native group, whichever is less. Native groups must identify any acreage over that as alternate selections and rank their selections. Beyond the reservations in sections 2650.32 and 2650.46 of this Part, conveyances of lands in a National Wildlife Refuge are subject to the provisions of section 22(g) of ANCSA and section 2651.41 of this chapter as though they were conveyances to a village corporation.	*You may select only the amount recommended by the regional corporation or 320 acres for each Native member of a group, or 7,680 acres for each Native group, whichever is less. You must identify any acreage over 7,680 as alternate selections and rank their selection.*
	§ 2653.32 What are the restrictions in conveyances to Native groups?
(b) Selections must be contiguous and the total area selected must be compact except where separated by lands that are unavailable for selection. BLM will not consider the selection compact if it excludes lands available for selection within its exterior boundaries; or an isolated tract of public land of less than 640 acres remains after selection. The lands selected must be in quarter sections where they are available unless exhaustion of the group's entitlement does not allow the selection of a quarter section. The selection must include all available lands in less than quarter sections. Lands selected must conform as nearly as practicable to the United States lands survey system.	*Beyond the reservations described in this part conveyances of lands in a National Wildlife Refuge are subject to section 22(g) of ANSCA as though they were conveyances to a village.*
	§ 2653.33 Do Native group selections have to be contiguous?
	Yes, selections must be contiguous. The total area you select must be compact except where separated by lands that are unavailable for selection. BLM will not consider your selection if:
	(a) It excludes lands available for selection within its exterior boundaries; or
	(b) An isolated tract of public land of less than 640 acres remains after selection.
	§ 2653.34 How small a parcel can I select?
	Select lands in quarter sections where they are available unless there is not enough left in your group's entitlement to allow this. Your election must include all available lands in areas that are smaller than quarter sections. Conform your selection as much as possible to the United States land survey system.

Short sections also give you more opportunity to insert informative headings in your material. Remember that boldface section headings give your reader the best roadmap to your document.. Long sections are impossible to summarize meaningfully in a heading. When you write short sections, each heading can give the reader information about the entire contents of the section.

Cover only one topic in each paragraph

Limit each paragraph or section to one topic to help the reader follow the document. Separating different topics into paragraphs is another way to help your reader understand your document. By making sure that each topic is in a separate paragraph, you give the reader a better idea of the underlying organization.

Good paragraphing is similar to using tables because it shows your reader the important issues and their relationship to subordinate topics. This is especially true because the new paragraphs that you identify often become subparagraphs.

(a) Notice of a bid advertisement shall be published in at least one local newspaper and in one trade publication at least 30 days in advance of sale. If applicable, the notice must identify the reservation within which the tracts to be leased are found. Specific descriptions of the tracts shall be available at the office of the superintendent. The complete text of the advertisement shall be mailed to each person listed on the appropriate agency mailing list.	*(a) We will publish an advertisement to solicit bids 30 days before the sale.* *(1) We will publish the notice in at least one local newspaper and in one trade publication.* *(2) The notice will identify any reservation within which the tracts to be leased are found.* *(3) We will mail the complete text of the advertisement to each person listed on the appropriate agency mailing list.* *(b) Specific descriptions of the tracts will be available at the superintendent's office.*

As the example above shows, indentations and "white space" greatly improve readability. When you use separate paragraphs for each idea, you show your reader how the material is organized and which ideas are more important.

Use lots of lists

Vertical lists highlight important topics and make it easy for the reader to identify all elements in a series. Vertical lists are much more appealing visually and easier to read than running text. They make your documents appear less dense and make it easier to spot main ideas. They are also an ideal way to present items, conditions, and exceptions.

Each completed well drilling application must contain a detailed statement including the following information: the depth of the well, the casing and cementing program, the circulation media (mud, air, foam, etc.), the expected depth and thickness of fresh water zones, and well site layout and design.	*With your application for a drilling permit, provide the following information:* *(a) Depth of the well;* *(b) Casing and cementing program;* *(c) Circulation media (mud, aid, form, etc.);* *(d) Expected depth and thickness of fresh water zones; and* *(e) Well site layout and design.*

Vertical lists are also helpful in clarifying the chronological order of steps in a process.

When a foreign student presents a completed Form I-20: *(a) Enter the student's admission number from Form 94;* *(b) Endorse all copies of the form;* *(c) Return a copy to the student; and* *(d) Send a copy to the Immigration and Naturalization Service.*

However, you can over-use vertical lists. Remember to use them to highlight important information, not to over-emphasize trivial matters.

If you use bullets, use solid round or square ones. Bullets are not the place to be overly creative. Large creative bullets with strange shapes tend to distract the reader. However, in some circumstances numbers are a helpful option. You can best use numbers when you are highlighting the order of steps in a process, or when you are making a point that there are a certain number of items in the list. See the examples below--

Using numbers in a list	
Chronological order	**Number of items**

There are several steps to apply-- *1. Complete the application.* *2. Sign the application.* *3. Have your supervisor review and sign the application.* *4. Keep the bottom copy.* *5. Return the rest of the application to Human Resources.*	*We need to know your opinion about the location of our annual meeting. We narrowed it down to three choices--* *1. Our own office complex* *2. White House Conference Center* *3. Cameron Hotel*
Numbering the list above emphasizes that the student should keep a copy signed by the supervisor.	**Numbering the list above reinforces the three choices mentioned in the introductory sentence.**

Your lists will be easier to read if you:

- Always use a lead-in sentence to explain your lists;
- Indent your from the lead-in sentence margin; and
- Use left justification only – never center justification.

Classroom supplies
XA tablet
XA pen or pencil
XThe paperwork you sent us when you
first applied for class
	Classroom Supplies
	
	When you come to class, you should bring the following--
	
	    • *A tablet*
	    • *A pen or pencil*
	    • *The paperwork you sent us*
	      when you first applied for
	      class.

Without a lead-in sentence, it is not clear who is to bring the supplies to class. Centering the bullets may make a nice pattern, but it makes it very difficult to see where statements begin and end.	*In this sample the lead-in sentence makes it clear who is to bring the supplies to class. Indenting makes it easier to see how the information is chunked.*

Use emphasis to highlight important concepts

Use **bold and italics** to make important concepts stand out. While it is difficult to use these techniques in regulations, emphasis techniques, like a combination of **bold and italics**, help bring out important points in your letters and other documents. The most important rule to remember is to limit emphasis to important information. Putting everything in bold, for instance, is like shouting all the time. It makes it impossible for the reader to know what is really important.

Using vertical lists is also another way of emphasizing information. Here too, you don't want to overuse the technique. So, even if you can make a vertical list out of everything on the page, don't do it. Choose things that need the most emphasis. For instance, you may want to emphasize a list of what you want students to bring to class, rather than a list of what the teacher will supply.

PUTTING EVERYTHING IN CAPITAL LETTERS IS NOT A GOOD EMPHASIS TECHNIQUE. ALTHOUGH IT MAY DRAW THE READER'S ATTENTION TO THE SECTION, IT MAKES IT HARDER TO READ. <u>Similarly, underlining will draw the reader's attention to the section, but it makes it hard on the eyes</u>. ***In both of these cases, it is better to use bold and italics for only the important issues.***