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FAA WRITING STANDARDS



**DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION**

Foreword. The Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) mission is critical to both the safety and economy of our nation. We accomplish this mission in partnership with all members of the aviation industry as well as our customers, the flying public. That's why it is critical that we communicate clearly, effectively and in plain language that is readily understood by all. Over the years, some of our writing has become dense and needlessly complex. Clarity of communication is a safety issue, and we must strive to communicate clearly and strongly. I understand this will be an evolutionary process. Let us all begin to work together to make clear communication standard practice at FAA.

Marion C. Blakey

Administrator

3/31/03

Date

What is the purpose of this forward? Should the author just include this in the document text?

FAA Writing Standards

Chapter 1 General information

Who is the FAA? Is this clear in the text?

- 1. What is the purpose of this order?** To establish writing standards for all FAA documents.
- 2. Who must comply with this order?** Anyone who writes or reviews FAA written documents intended for internal or external distribution.
- 3. Why is FAA issuing this order?** Since FAA's mission is so critical to both the safety and economy of our nation, we must strive to communicate clearly with our customers and with each other. Over the years, our writing has become dense and needlessly complex, laden with technical terms and abbreviations that make it time-consuming and difficult for our readers to understand.

What exactly is an "order" and who must follow it?

- 4. Does this order mean I must rewrite existing material?** No. This order is prospective only. You should follow this order when significantly revising existing documents. If you are making a minor change to an existing document, you may find it difficult to follow all the principles in this order. In that case, use your best judgment. Do not mix styles or terms in a way that will confuse your reader.

Chapter 2 Writing principles

The Federal Aviation Administration offers several excellent writing guidelines. Can you add a few to the list?

1. Use effective writing techniques.

There are several simple techniques to make your writing clear and effective. This section describes the most critical ones. You must follow them when writing an FAA document.

a. Consider your audience. Who you are writing to? What expertise and knowledge do they have? What do they need from you? If you are responding to questions from your audience make sure you answer all of them. If you believe you have more than one audience, select one as the primary audience and prepare your letter accordingly.

b. Organize your document. The key to clear writing is to present material in the order that is most useful to the reader. If your document deals with a process, organize it chronologically, first step to last. You can also organize documents by putting the most important points first and the minor ones at the end. Put standard provisions first and exceptions last. Sometimes a combination of these organizational methods is useful. Whichever method you use, keep your reader in mind and be consistent. Ask yourself, “What will help my reader understand and follow my document?”

c. Use active voice. 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: Tom Clancy wrote *The Hunt for Red October*.

Passive voice: *The Hunt for Red October* was written by Tom Clancy.

Because the active voice emphasizes the doer of an action, it is usually briefer, clearer, and more emphatic than the passive voice. Whenever possible, use active voice in your writings.

d. Use short sentences. Your average sentence length should be 20 words or fewer. Use a list instead of running items together in a long sentence, and apply the 20-word rule to each item in the list. You rarely need a sentence over 40 words long.

e. Write short paragraphs. Each paragraph should cover only one topic. Generally, limit paragraphs to seven lines or fewer.

f. Limit initials, abbreviations, and acronyms. You can use a short form for the main topic of your document. For example, if the document is about the Coordinated Operational Approval Process, write it out the first time and in parenthesis type the abbreviation "COAP". Use the abbreviation throughout the document. Since that's what your document is about, it's unlikely to confuse your reader. But don't also use abbreviations for several other ideas in the same document. Either write out the full name or use a short form of the name (for example, call an Aviation Rulemaking

Did the FAA break this rule?

Advisory Committee "the Committee," not ARAC) that will help your reader remember what you're talking about. If you use a term only a few times, write it out every time.

g. Use pronouns. Pronouns help readers relate better to documents. It's important to use pronouns when you want people to do something, because pronouns help them understand they have a responsibility. However, make sure your reader understands to whom a pronoun refers, especially if you are addressing more than one audience. One way to do this is to define the pronoun early in the document and then redefine it occasionally throughout long documents, especially at the beginning of major sections or chapters.

(1) Refer to the reader as "you." To define "you", you might say, "If you are a certificate holder, you should . . ."

(2) Since we at FAA write these documents, you may also use "we" to refer to the agency. In general, write out "FAA" and the name of the person to whom "you" refers (certificate holder, pilot, and so on) once at the beginning of each paragraph or major section.

h. Avoid using "shall." 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 the courts. Almost all legal writing experts agree that it's better to use "must" to impose requirements, including contractual requirements.

Does this section suggest that FAA documents are legal and contractual? How does this change the tone of the document?

2. Format for readability.

a. Use bold or italics for emphasis. Emphasize only those words, phrases, and sentences that are important. Avoid underlining, as underlines clutter up the type and make it harder to read. Never use capital letters to stress a word.

b. Consult the GPO Style Manual for accepted practices for capitalization, punctuation, and abbreviations. You can find the manual on-line at <http://www.access.gpo.gov/styleman/2000/browse-sm-00.cfm>

The authors should follow the given guidelines and spell out GPO.

c. Use quotation marks for direct quotations or to set off ordinary words used to mean something other than what they normally mean. Do not use quotation marks to enclose titles of chapters, sections, or paragraphs. Indent long quotes from both margins, without quotation marks.

An example would be very useful here. What exactly is a word used to mean something other than what it normally means? What was the author trying to say?

d. Use figures such as charts, tables, and other illustrative material as examples to explain complex material. Mention or introduce every figure in the text before it occurs and place the figure close to the text that explains it. Try to limit figures to one page. For figures that extend to more than one page, repeat the name and figure number on each page. Make sure all figures have informative headings.

e. Place administrative information, such as references to other documents or lists of superceded documents, after the main body of the document. This helps your reader focus on your main message, rather than on administrative details.

3. Write informative headings.

Most documents benefit from headings. However, it's important that you use useful headings. After good organization and active voice, informative headings are the most helpful way to guide readers through your document. Your reader should be able to decide, based on the heading, if they need to read a paragraph. Don't waste a reader's time by using headings that are not informative, such as "general" or "transfer" or "training." Instead, headings should give the reader a synopsis of what information follows, such as "General Information about Markings" and "Transferring Responsibility for Maintaining an Aircraft." Since most readers come to our documents with questions in mind, headings in the form of questions are often the most effective way to direct the reader to information he or she wants to find, such as "How many hours of training must I have?"

4. Introduce each paragraph with a topic sentence.

A topic sentence ensures that each paragraph is cohesive. It should capture the essence of what's in the entire paragraph. The rest of the paragraph supports and expands on the topic sentence. A reader should be able to follow the basic points of your document by skimming the topic sentences.

In letters, the first paragraph should contain a topic sentence that covers what's in the rest of the letter. List the issues in the same order you follow in the body of the letter.

5. Other helpful writing principles.

In general, follow these principles when writing FAA documents.

a. Don't be wordy. Excess or elaborate words make your writing weaker. Government writing is often too wordy. Look at FAA's Plain Language Manual for more guidance. You can reach this manual at https://employees.faa.gov/tools_resources/branding_writing/media/Writing_User_Friendlier_Documents.pdf. Here are some examples of excess words in our writing and plain alternatives:

Excess words	Plain Alternatives
accordingly	so
addressees	you
as a means of	to
as prescribed by	in, under
assist, assistance	aid, help
at a later date	later
at the present time	now

Does this document explain the difference between the FAA Plain Language Manual, and the document you are reading here? Is this helpful information, or confusing?

commence	begin, start
constitutes	forms, makes up
facilitate	help
for the purpose of	to, for
heretofore	until now
implement	start, carry out
in accordance with	under
in order to	to
in the event that	if
initiate	begin, start
obtain	get, gain
on a monthly basis	monthly
pertaining to	of, about
provide	give
related to	of
so as to	to
such that	so
should it appear that	if
with regard to	about

You can find many more common substitutes at the Plain Language site referenced above, in the menu item called "Reference Library" under "Simpler Words and Phrases."

(1) Hidden verbs are verbs used as nouns. They add length and weaken sentences. The simple present tense is the strongest way to write. Here are some examples of hidden verbs and how to make sentences clearer and stronger:

The inspector will carry out a review of the company's programs.
The inspector will review the company's programs.

This plan assists in the management of . . .
This plan manages . . .

To determine part life, make a calculation of the . . .
To determine part life, calculate . . .

(2) Unnecessary qualifiers add no additional meaning to a sentence. The classic example from everyday language is "very dead." Here's some examples we see in FAA writing:

Their claim was *totally* unrealistic
We are *completely* convinced
It is *definitely* worth explaining
Work *in partnership* with
Additional requirements *needed* to provide a level of safety
Maintain *successful* bilateral agreements

b. It's easy for readers to get lost in run-on sentences. Vertical lists are quicker and easier for readers to follow and are an ideal way to explain a series of facts. Consider this example:

Along with your letter of application, submit a statement of conformance certifying that you have met the requirements of Subpart O of part 21 and that the article meets the TSO in effect on the date of your application; one copy of the data the TSO requires; and a description of your quality control system.

Or, presented as a list:

With your letter of application, send us the following:

- (1) A statement of conformance certifying that you have met the requirements of Subpart O of Part 21 and that the article meets the TSO in effect on the date of your application;
- (2) One copy of the data the TSO requires; and
- (3) A description of your quality control system.

c. Avoid noun clusters – three or more nouns “sandwiched” together. Noun sandwiches confuse and bore readers. Use prepositions and articles to clarify the relationship among the words. Here’s a typical FAA example: “drug testing and alcohol misuse prevention regulations.” It would be better to say “regulations about drug testing_ and preventing alcohol misuse.”

d. Dense text and complex instructions are clearer in “if-then” tables. Tables help your reader find what’s important to them, and see relationships in a way they can’t grasp from dense text. The FAA often publishes material that we could cover more clearly in if-then tables. Compare the text and table versions of the following material:

Text:

We must receive your completed application form on or before the 15th day of the second month following the month you are reporting if you do not submit your application electronically or the 25th day of the second month following the month you are reporting if you submit your application electronically.

Table:

We must receive your completed application form on or before the following dates:

If you submit your form...	[then] We must receive it no later than...
Electronically	the 25th day of the second month following the month you are reporting.

other than electronically	the 15th day of the second month following the month you are reporting.
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Why is this information buried on the last page of the document? This order is to take precedent over any other writing instructions. Where should this information be given?

Chapter 3 Administrative matters

1. How does this order affect other FAA directives? This order takes precedence over any other writing instructions in any other FAA directive or instructional material.

2. Where can I get more information about writing clearly? See the FAA's Plain Language Manual, available at https://employees.faa.gov/tools_resources/branding_writing/media/Writing_User_Friendlier_Documents.pdf. There are also many useful references at <http://www.plainlanguage.gov>. See especially the entry for [Elements of Style](#) by William Strunk, Jr. *The Chicago Manual of Style* is another excellent reference for writers.