

## Writing Tips for the Public Agency Writer

### Overview

Those whose duties include preparing written materials for decision-makers face a challenging task:

- Often the task is to present complex information on important issues facing the community.
- On controversial items, there may be genuine disagreements about what course of action best serves the community and even underlying facts that bear on decisions.
- The document needs to meet the needs of many audiences. Typically decision-makers are a primary audience; however the public and the media will also often be turning to the document as a source of information and guidance on how an issue affects the community.

Professionalism, transparency and public trust requires that public agency documents be prepared in ways that are objective and understandable.<sup>1</sup> The following strategies can help achieve those goals.

### Provide the Reader Structure

- **Overview.** Include an overview of the points the publication will address. For longer publications, consider a list of topics and then repeat that list at the beginning of each chapter so the reader understands where they are in the list.
- **Headings and Subheadings.** Divide text into sections using headings and subheadings, using declarative headings and subheadings to tell the story. Even if the reader only scans the document, valuable information is conveyed.
- **At-a-Glance Text Boxes.** If the document covers a complex topic, give readers an “at a glance” paragraph or list of key points in a sidebar at the beginning of a chapter or publication that tells readers what they are going to read.
- **Get to the Point.** Think in terms of the first sentence of a paragraph being a topic sentence that lays the foundation for the information that follows.

This resource can be found on the Institute’s website under  
<http://www.ca-ilg.org/local-government-101>

- **Direct the Reader to More Information.** For complex topics, try to distinguish between what readers must know about a topic and what would be nice for them to know. For the latter kinds of information, provide references to attachments, websites or other information for more information if they are interested in delving deeper into a topic.
- **Endings.** A “conclusion” is not always necessary. Some documents identify decision-making choices; others are purely informational.

## Aim for Crispness

- **Sentence Length.** Short sentences are easier to follow. Varying sentence length can also make text more interesting. As part of the editing process after producing an initial draft, break up long sentence into shorter sentences. A good rule of thumb is to limit sentence length to no more than 17 words.
- **Paragraph Length.** Try to limit paragraphs to three or four lines. Longer paragraphs may discourage the busy reader by signaling something is more complex than perhaps it really is.

## Embrace the Active Voice

Action verbs generally show whether their subjects are acting or being acted upon.

- A verb is in the active voice when the subject performs the action.
- A verb is in the passive voice when the subject receives the action or is acted upon.

The active voice is stronger and clearer than the passive because the subject is doing the acting.

Note that these two sentences have the same meaning but say it in two different ways.

**Active:** The voters **have chosen** the delegates to the convention.

**Passive:** The delegates to the convention **have been chosen** by the voters.

In the first sentence, written in the active voice, the voters are the focus; they did the choosing. The second sentence, written in the passive voice, focuses on the delegates. Phrased this way, the sentence places more importance on the delegates than on the voters who chose them.

## Make Efficient and Understandable Word Choices

- Use simple, concrete words whenever possible.
- Avoid acronyms, technical terms and other forms of jargon. They tend to be a convenience for the writer, not the reader or listener. For example, referring to laws by legislative bill numbers tend to be a form of jargon.<sup>2</sup>
  - If one must use technical terminology or acknowledge that a policy area frequently uses such technical terminology, one reader-friendly approach is to start with a *non-technical* reference or explanation and then acknowledge the technical terminology. Parentheses can be useful for this purpose.<sup>3</sup>
  - Another approach is to create a definitions section or a glossary, although keeping an extensive set of definitions in one's mind can be a challenge for all but the most motivated readers.
- Avoid Latin abbreviations since many people do not know precisely what they mean. For example, “that is” is a better choice than “i.e.” and “for example” is a better choice than “e.g.” Another approach is using “such as” as an alternative to “e.g.” and “i.e.”
- In communities where significant numbers of residents may not be proficient in English, consider translating documents to enhance better understanding. Documents that are written in plain language will be easier to translate more accurately.
- Avoid unnecessary words. See the attached for examples.

### Glossaries and Plain Language Explanations Available

The Institute for Local Government offers a number of resources to help explain jargon, acronyms and provide plain language explanations of complex concepts. For example, glossaries are available on pension reform and planning terms.

In addition, the Institute's “basics” series offers straightforward explanations of topics such as municipal finance, public agency decision making and planning.

All are available at:  
[www.ca-ilg.org/post/ilg-resource-list](http://www.ca-ilg.org/post/ilg-resource-list).

## Use Bullets to Increase Readability/Scan-ability

A way to help readers grasp content faster is to lay out information in bulleted lists.

Look for opportunities to have bulleted (or numbered) lists.

- One technique is to list out the subjects or issues a piece will cover and then have those bullets match the piece's headings.
- Another is when a topic can be divided into a certain number of parts (“Proponents make three arguments on why the county should adopt the policy”). Using a numbered list to underscore the parts of a topic helps imprint those parts in the reader's mind.

- To avoid diluting the benefits of bullets, limiting the number of bullets in a list can be a good practice.
- Another technique is to have the first few words in a bullet capture the key concept. This helps readers who are skimming the text pick up on those key concepts and locate information of most interest. Using bold type can also help.
- Avoid making bullet points so long that they look like paragraphs. Three or four lines are a good goal.
- Consider inserting line spacing between bulleted items to help the reader manage absorbing the information. Even readers interested in a subject may get lost or tune out when faced with a page of bulleted points that visually run together.

This resource is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) whose mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial, and easy-to-use resources for California communities.

ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties

The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

- *Email: [jspeers@ca-ilg.org](mailto:jspeers@ca-ilg.org), Subject: *Writing Tips for the Public Agency Writer**

## Attachment: Phrases to Avoid

| <b>Examples of Redundancy: (the first word is already implied by the second word)</b>              |   |
|--|---|
| Local resident   | Past history                                    |
| Old adage  | Young teenager                                  |
| Mutual cooperation   | End result                                      |
| Close proximity  | Advance planning                                |
| True facts   | Successful achievements                         |
| Usual customs  | Self-confessed                                  |
| <b>Examples of Useless Introductory Phrases</b>  |   |
| With reference to your questions,...   | It goes without saying that....                 |
| At that point in time,.....  | By way of response,.....                        |
| It seems unnecessary to point out that.....  |   |
| <b>More Efficient Ways to Say the Same Thing<br/>(Alternatives are suggested after the = sign)</b> |   |
| Utilize = use  | Shall = must                                    |
| Is/are required to = must  | It is/there are                                 |
| Is capable of = can  | Makes use of = uses                             |
| In view of the fact = since  | For the purpose of = to                         |
| At an early date = soon  | At this point in time = now                     |
| Draw attention to = point out  | During the same time that = while               |
| Give rise to = cause   | In advance of = before                          |
| In the event that = if   | In this day and age = today                     |
| Made a statement saying = stated or said   | Owing to the fact that = because                |
| This is a topic that = this topic  | Was of the opinion that = thought               |
| Was witness to = saw   | Am in possession = have                         |
| Ahead of schedule = early  | In addition to = also                           |
| Passive verbs  | Unnecessary use of <b>that</b> and <b>which</b> |

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## References and Resources for Further Information

The Institute for Local Government's website has sections with more information for local officials and others on:

- <http://www.ca-ilg.org/post/virtues-plain-language>

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, tenants four and five of the International County-City Management Association Code of Ethics:

4. Recognize that the chief function of local government at all times is to serve the best interests of all of the people.
5. Submit policy proposals to elected officials; provide them with facts and advice on matters of policy as a basis for making decisions and setting community goals; and uphold and implement local government policies adopted by elected officials.

See also Guideline to tenant three (commitment to highest honor and integrity): "Public Confidence. Members should conduct themselves so as to maintain public confidence in their profession, their local government, and in their performance of the public trust." The ICMA Code is available at

[http://icma.org/en/icma/knowledge\\_network/documents/kn/Document/3959/ICMA\\_Code\\_of\\_Ethics](http://icma.org/en/icma/knowledge_network/documents/kn/Document/3959/ICMA_Code_of_Ethics).

<sup>2</sup> Referring to laws by bill numbers can be inherently ambiguous, since the same number refers to different bills or laws in different years.

<sup>3</sup> For example, when referring to state law, one approach is to refer to the law generally and then acknowledge the technical terminology. For example, "State recycling law (sometimes referred to by the bill number that created it—AB 939), requires x, y and z...." and then use an endnote to provide the legal reference. Providing information on where one can find the law offers an extra measure of user friendliness and transparency. (Information about for California statutes can be found online at [www.leginfo.ca.gov/calaw.html](http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/calaw.html).)