



Plain Language: Can we talk?

January 9, 2015

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[This plain language writing tip comes to us from Conversational Cat Mary Ryan.]

A new year brings new resolutions to do better. I'm going to try to follow the advice I received through the Federal plain language group ([PLAIN](#)): write in a conversational tone.

Before going any further, I'll note that the tone you choose depends on your audience. As the [NARA Style Guide](#) states on page 1: "The first rule about plain language is *write for your audience*."

For me, and I suspect for many of you, the audience is the public at large and our NARA colleagues. Our purpose is to share information that will help our audience. We want people to read what we've written and understand it after one reading. Thinking about the reader as a partner in a conversation can help the writer create a clearer message.

When talking to someone, I don't use words like "thereunder," "per your request," and "hegemonic discourse." In writing for my usual audience, I won't use them either.

PLAIN's listserv sent a link to a [page of tips](#) for writing in a conversational tone. Some are more useful than others for the majority of what we write at NARA. I won't advocate using slang, but I will get behind using shorter sentences and common words; writing in the active voice; using "you," "I," and "we"; and writing like you're telling a story.

There are times when a formal tone is necessary. A report to Congress or a regulation shouldn't sound chummy. But in these cases, no less than in other writing, clarity and ease of comprehension are essential. That's why tips 13 and 14 are so important: "Write to your target audience" and "Don't go overboard."

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