



Plain Language: Do your readers need a decoder ring?

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[This writing tip comes to us from Decoding Diva Mary Ryan.]

Four years ago, the Archivist's Task Force on Agency Transformation began asking staff for their ideas on all sorts of topics. Several staffers commented that we should promote the use of "real words" instead of codes when we communicate with each other.

We still have office codes because they're useful for databases, charts, and other business practices where space is a constrained, but we don't have to use them when we talk to each other.

The goal for any writer is to write so that your reader easily understands your message. Being a "writer" doesn't necessarily mean you're creating something destined for publication with a vast audience. Every email, tweet, Facebook post, and text message is a written communication.

And whether you write a report about an agency program or send a text to a friend, you think about who your audience is and how well the reader will understand what you wrote.

What may be shorter for you to write may take longer for the reader to decipher. Yes, it's quicker to write "RDT10" than "Archives I Research Rooms Section," but it's much easier for a reader to comprehend the latter. Putting aside the document to find an organization chart to decipher the code wastes time and distracts the reader from your main message.

Being careful with codes is especially important when you are writing for people outside of the agency. They don't even have the organization chart, so they're pretty much lost unless you spell out the terms for them.

The organization codes have specific and useful purposes. They're useful shorthand in our business practices, but they weren't meant to be substitutes for names in everyday use.

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