

I.

Principles of Plain English

To date, there are more than 80 rules that are governed by the four Plain Language Principles for English. Together, when employed consistently, they can guide the writer towards a text that is “successful” (roughly equal to the writing quality of a college-educated native English speaker). A successful text is highly readable and understandable for the average reader. Let us take a moment now and consider each of the four principles separately, as they apply to English.

I.1. The Principle of Cohesiveness

The first Principle to consider is the Principle of Cohesiveness. This principle governs the overall structure of the text, its internal integrity, and the flow from one point to another. There are four basic sub-principles, including (1) Conform to context; (2) Use a logical order; (3) Be consistent; and (4) Avoid distractions. These four sub-principles in turn govern more than thirty specific rules for English. To give just one example here, Rule 6 suggests to “Avoid passive, causative and conditional structures” – a rule governed by the sub-principle, “Use a logical order.” Rule 6 simply suggests that although structures such as passives may be grammatical, they are not necessarily easy to read and understand. Rather, writing in the active voice, (Rule 4), is preferred whenever possible because the order is easier for the human brain to process (i.e. is more readable). In the following two sentences, then, the second sentence is preferred over the first.

- 1.a. The ball was hit by John.
- 1.b. John hit the ball.

I.2. The Principle of Directness

The second Principle of Plain Language for English is the Principle of Directness. This principle deals with problems of clarity (versus ambiguity), and covers both word choice and grammatical issues. Here too, there are four sub-principles: (1) State what things are, not what they seem to be; (2) State the subject clearly; (3) Avoid negatives whenever possible; and (4) State the “bottom line” succinctly. There are seventeen rules governed by the Principle of Directness, including Rule 33, “State what things are, not they seem to be.” This relates to statements we often hear which employ vague references such as “they say”, “it looks like”, “it appears”, “it seems” and so forth. We find these in statements such as “they say this winter will be the coldest one ever.” Of course when talking about unknown future events, such as the weather this winter, some degree of uncertainty is to be expected. However, we often see quite similar statements which should not be so uncertain. See the first of the two sentences below, followed by an improved version.

- 2.a. It looks like a good solution.
- 2.b. It is a good solution.