

Plain Language Style Guide

Writing and editing tips for DPA staff

Department of Personnel Administration
Executive Office - Communications

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Plain Language Style Guide

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Can this guide help me write?

Yes!

This guide begins with three principles you should always follow:

- [Help your readers scan](#)
- [Give useful information](#)
- [Edit](#)

If you stick to those three things, you will write better than practically everyone else.

Beyond that, this guide describes DPA's requirements for:

- [Style](#)
- [Grammar](#)
- [Punctuation, word choice, and format](#)

Pay attention to these basics when you're writing and when you're editing.

Help readers scan

Don't expect readers to read pages from top to bottom. Readers look for the most interesting (and easy) parts and skip the rest. Readers give up when they get bored or distracted.

Put your most important point first

The top of the page is prime real estate. Tell readers what they need to know.

- Imagine you have 30 seconds—or, if you want to be realistic, 10.
- Minimize introductions. Cut them out if you can.
- Put conclusions at the top.
- Summarize at the top, don't explain. Details come later.

Keep it short

Think short. Short documents, short paragraphs, short sentences, short words.

- The less words the better.
- Aim for no more than five sentences per paragraph.
- Sentences: 20 words or less.
- Leave out anything you don't need. Cut once. Then cut again.
- Use short, common words.

Show off your points

Draw the reader's eyes to your critical points.

- Use headings.
- Make your headings meaningful.
- Call attention to points using bullets and lists.
- Use charts, diagrams, and pictures.

Make it look easy to read

Dense blocks of text turn readers off. How can you cure this? Use plenty of blank space.

- Use headings with plenty of space around them.
- Break up text with bullets, charts, diagrams, and pictures.

Give useful information

Readers will follow a clear instruction. But if you give them a mess of instructions, you're asking for trouble. When they get stuck wading through it, they'll call you. Or they'll make a mistake that you'll need to undo.

Save yourself the trouble. Give readers useful information to begin with.

Write clearly

Do you take pains to make your message clear?

- Write in plain language style.
- Short, direct sentences work better than long, meandering ones.
- Readers love examples, stories, and comparisons. Keep them short and simple.
- Use headings to label sections.

Stay relevant

Think of the reader's attention span. If you throw too much at the reader, the reader will tune out.

- Cut introductions, purpose statements, and unlikely exceptions. They should be short – or gone.
- Read your work – and others' work – looking for what's overwritten. Cut that part.

Tell readers what to do

People need to know what to do. Where do I send this form? Who do I call?

- Direct the reader to take an action.
- Put your direction at the beginning.
- If you need the reader to look over instructions before acting, say so upfront.
- Use questions as headings. Answer the questions with directions to take an action.

Edit

Your writing tells readers about you and your department in ways you may not know.

We all know how a spelling or grammar mistake can embarrass us.

Poor style, convoluted instructions, and impenetrable layout tell readers something, too. They tell readers you don't respect the time it's going to take them to wade through it.

Always take care to polish your writing before you send it out. The time you spend revising pays dividends each time someone reads your work.

Revise

You have a deadline you can barely meet. Do you have time to revise? Yes. Make the time.

- Plan to spend at least a third of your time revising.
- Sharpen your writing by cutting out at least a quarter of your words.
- Look for places where you strayed from plain language style. Fix them.
- Watch the flow of your piece. Rearrange parts and change headings. Make your writing flow.
- Add details and examples if you find places where they can help.

Have someone else read it

No matter how good a writer you are, you can improve your writing by having another person read it.

- Listen for suggestions on ways to improve style, flow, and layout.
- Be open. Even suggestions you initially resist may help you improve the document.
- Look for more than grammar and spelling errors when you review someone else's work. For instance, point out unnecessary words or sentences that could be eliminated.
- Review other people's writing. You'll learn to write better this way.

Style

Use simple sentence structure

A simple sentence has a subject, verb, and object. It has one thought. It has a period or question mark at the end. It doesn't have subordinate thoughts, clauses, or phrases.

You can break long, complicated sentences into two or more smaller ones. It's easy.

- **Complicated:** When an employee is on an unpaid leave of absence the deductions for benefits cease, and at that time the option to direct pay to continue the monthly premiums is offered, not COBRA.
- **Simple:** Benefits deductions cease when an employee takes an unpaid leave of absence. The employee has the option to pay the monthly premiums directly, but can't use COBRA.

Use active voice

Active voice means using strong verbs, with subject and object where the reader expects them. Passive voice hides the subject.

Beware of the verb "to be" (is, are, am; was, were; being, been, be). Use it sparingly.

- **Passive:** Nominations are submitted by departments and agencies to DPA and recipients are honored annually in a public ceremony.
- **Active:** Departments and agencies submit nominations to DPA. The Governor honors recipients in a public ceremony each year.

Use real verbs, not "is"

Avoid the verb "to be" (is, are, am; was, were; being, been, be) when possible. Find the verb that fits and make it do its job.

- **With "is":** Check if your department is participating in the program.
- **Without "is":** Check if your department participates in the program.

Use the verb form of words

Look out for verbs that have shrunk into nouns. Certain word endings may signal that the writer reduced a mighty verb to a puny noun: -al, -ment, -ant, -ence, -ion, -ancy, -ency, -ance, -ity, -en, -ize.

- **Noun form:** At the discretion of the appointing power, CEAs may receive an adjustment to their bonuses.
- **Verb form:** The appointing power may adjust CEA bonuses.

Write with a personal tone

Write like you would talk. Do you speak in a stiff, formal tone? Probably not.

- Use personal pronouns: I, me, mine, we, us, ours, you, your, yours
- Use the full range of punctuation. Try using a colon or dash every now and then.
- Use contractions: you're, won't, can't, you'll, and so on.
- Ask your reader questions. Why not give it a try?
- Use common words with common meanings. For example, instead of "reflected" use "shown."

Example:

- **Impersonal tone:** This code, which is reflected on the employee's monthly statement of earnings, is used to identify deduction premium and enrollment information for each dental carrier.
- **Personal:** The State Controller uses the code shown on your paystub to identify your dental carrier and deduct the correct premium.

Cut out jargon

When you create new terms or use overly precise terms, you create jargon. Jargon makes the reader struggle to figure out what you're saying.

Sometimes we use jargon because we need to use very specific terms as we do our jobs. But, most often, our readers don't need that kind of precision. It only slows them down or confuses them.

- **With jargon:** Plan members can use a Reduced Fee Network Attorney (RFNA) at a reduced rate of at least 25% for legal advice and representation for non-excluded services.
- **Without jargon:** For legal advice and representation covered by insurance, you can hire an attorney for at least 25% less than you'd pay otherwise.

Don't create acronyms

Readers won't tolerate unfamiliar acronyms. We already expect readers to know quite a few acronyms. Don't add new ones. By the same token, feel free to use commonly accepted acronyms.

Do your readers – or you – know what all of these acronyms stand for?

- DCRA
- ARRA
- AEI

- RMD
- QEL
- MCL
- GLSIP
- QRD
- MLA
- RHCEP
- ESP
- MAA

Grammar

Match nouns and pronouns

When you use a noun, refer to it with a pronoun. Make sure the two parts agree in number. In other words, for a singular form of a noun, use the singular pronoun; for a plural noun, use a plural pronoun.

In this example, “the department” is the noun.

- **Instead of:** The department gave their employees the day off.
- **Write:** The department gave its employees the day off.

In this example, “a worker” is the noun.

- **Instead of:** If an injured worker can’t perform their duties
- **Write:** If an injured worker can’t perform his or her duties

In this example, look at the pronoun “their,” which is plural. Do you use “a participant” or “participants”?

- **Instead of:** A participant may transfer assets back to their core account.
- **Write:** Participants may transfer assets back to their core accounts.

Match nouns and verbs

Use the correct form of the verb based on the subject.

A problem occurs when you get confused about the subject of your sentence.

In this example, the subject is “the choice” (not “plans”).

- **Instead of:** The choice of health plans are up to the employee.
- **Write:** The choice of health plans is up to the employee.

The first sentence above highlights a common mistake that happens when you put a prepositional phrase or indirect object in between the subject and the verb.

Mistakes also happen when you construct the sentence poorly, perhaps by choosing the wrong verb.

In this example, the verb doesn’t work right as first written. Can you revise the sentence to make it stronger?

- **Instead of:** The increased contribution limits changes the plan greatly.
- **Write:** The increase in contribution limits change the plan greatly.

Punctuation, word choice, and format

For consistency, everyone writing for DPA should use these rules. You may find other writers use different rules. That doesn't make them (or us) wrong. We aim for internal consistency.

above-listed

Eliminate this phrase.

- **Instead of:** Please call the program manager at the above-listed number.
- **Write:** Please call the program manager at the number listed above.

above-mentioned

Change to "mentioned above" or "listed above."

- **Instead of:** I am responsible for the above-mentioned child.
- **Write:** I'm responsible for the child mentioned above.

acronyms

Ask yourself why you're using an acronym. Plain language tries to eliminate overuse of acronyms. It's all about the reader. If an acronym helps the reader, use it. You don't help readers, though, by teaching them new acronyms.

acronyms, DPA

Most of the time you don't need to spell out DPA. We can expect readers of a web page or letter on letterhead to know what DPA means.

acronyms, plural

Don't use an apostrophe to make an acronym plural. Just add an "s" at the end.

- **Singular:** CEA
- **Plural:** CEAs

acronyms, possessive

Treat the acronym just like it was any other word.

- **Acronym:** MOU
- **Possessive:** MOU's
- **Plural Possessive:** MOUs'

acronyms, spelling out

You don't need to spell out an acronym. If your readers know what it means, you don't gain anything by spelling it out. If your readers don't know what it means, you shouldn't be using it.

aforementioned

Eliminate this word. Use more natural wording, such as "listed above."

- **Instead of:** The incumbent must be employed by the State Personnel Board in one of the aforementioned classifications.
- **Write:** The incumbent must be employed by the State Personnel Board in one of the classifications listed above.

aligning text

Alignment refers to how you anchor text on a page. Documents should be left aligned, meaning text starts flush to the left margin and continues right. Paragraphs can be indented or not, depending on the document.

Justification refers to spacing or kerning the font so text has a smooth border on both sides. We don't justify documents except flyers or short announcements. We never justify text on web pages.

all of

Usually you can omit "of."

- **Instead of:** Appellant supervised all of the part-time and intermittent help.
- **Write:** Appellant supervised all the part-time and intermittent help.

But you can use "all of" in these cases:

- **When the next word is a pronoun:** All of us are confronted by a variety of temptations in our jobs.
- **When the next word is a possessive noun:** We met all of Dave's goals.

and/or

Try to avoid "and/or." Choose one.

- **Instead of:** The State will make reasonable accommodations to adjust the application process, job, and/or work environment.
- **Write:** The State will make reasonable accommodations to adjust the application process, job, and work environment.

You can also use the construction "A, B, or both."

- Enroll in a FlexElect Medical Account, a Dependent Care Account, or both.

The word "or" usually includes the sense of "and."

- **Instead of:** If you're doing workforce and/or succession planning ...
- **Write:** If you're doing workforce or succession planning ...

Apostrophes

Use an apostrophe only to show possession.

Where you place the apostrophe depends on whether the word it refers to is singular or plural.

- Unit (singular)
- **Possessive:** Unit's
- Units (plural)
- **Possessive:** Units'

For words that end in "s" add apostrophe "s" if the word is singular.

- Process (singular)
- **Possessive:** Process's

bold

Use bold font to call attention to a word or text. Don't use bold as a substitute for a heading – use heading styles instead.

Don't overdo bold. If you put too much bold font on a page, it loses its impact and distracts the reader.

bullets

Use one style of bullets throughout your document. Don't use subordinate bullets. Use headings and subheadings instead.

cannot, can't

Cannot is one word. You can also use the contraction can't.

capitalization, all caps

Don't use all caps, even in a headline or subject line. Always use mixed case words.

- **Instead of:** GOVERNOR ISSUES OPEN LETTER
- **Write:** Governor Issues Open Letter

See also [lists](#).

capitalization, headings and titles

Capitalize the title or primary heading of a document. Don't capitalize subordinate headings, except for the first letter and any proper nouns.

When capitalizing a heading or title, capitalize all words except articles, prepositions, conjunctions, and forms of to be.

- Impact of Budget Delay on Paychecks
- 2009 Employer Contribution for Health, Dental, and Vision Benefits

capitalization, Social Security number

Capitalize "Social Security" but not "number."

- To change your dental plan, enter your name and Social Security number.

capitalization, State, state

Capitalize "State" when referring to State of California government. "State" is like the name of a company.

- What do you need to do when you return to State service?
- Read the State's last, best, and final offer.
- If your spouse is a State employee, your spouse may be eligible for leave while you're on active duty.

Use lower-case "state" when referring to California as an area. Also use lower-case "state" when you mean any state.

- You may be able to relocate anywhere in the state.
- The public thinks state workers across the country get great benefits.

commas, dates

Use commas before and after the year if the date includes the day of the month.

- On November 20, 2008, DPA announced an increase for pre-tax parking deductions.

Don't use commas if you omit the day of the month.

- These changes take effect in January 2009.

See also [dates, format](#).

commas, serial

Place commas after every item in a series of three or more.

- Today DPA presented the State’s last, best, and final offer.
- DPA’s responsible for all issues related to salaries, benefits, job classifications, and training.

computer terms

The convention for using computer terms changes quickly. We’ve seen formal principles relax as these terms come into general use. Words get pushed together, we drop hyphens, and we rarely capitalize. Here are DPA’s current conventions for spelling some common terms.

- database
- email
- home page
- the Internet
- internet (as an adjective)
- intranet
- online
- the Web
- web (as an adjective)
- web page
- website

contractions

Use contractions. When trying to decide whether to use the spelled-out version or a contraction of a word or words, read the sentence aloud. If it *sounds* natural to use the contraction, write it that way.

The rules of some writing styles urge you to avoid contractions, typically for formal academic writing. DPA uses a plain language style, so if you would use a contraction when speaking you should use the contraction when you write.

cover pages

Make the title the focal point. The title needs to tell the reader what to expect. If you have a subtitle, use a subordinate heading style for it. The subtitle belongs under the main title.

dashes

Use dashes to set off phrases. Dashes work like parenthesis, but imply a more direct relationship with the main thought.

- When you type two hyphens together, Word—on default AutoFormat settings—changes them to a dash.
- At the hastily arranged press conference—don't get me started on why we agreed to it—the first question out of the reporters' mouths was ...

See also [hyphens](#) and [parentheses](#).

date, day

Date means a specific calendar day.

- For cases with a date of injury after January 1, 1994, you may get an additional payment.
- We haven't chosen the date for the conference.

Day means a day that could occur any time.

- The benefit begins on the first day of your disability.
- We know the conference will last three days.

dates, format

In text, write out full dates whenever possible, like this:

- November 24, 2008

If you need to use a smaller date format, use the full year, dashes, and leading zeroes, like this:

- **November 24, 2008 becomes:** 11-24-2008
- **January 2, 2009 becomes:** 01-02-2009

Always use the four-digit year.

dollar amounts

Leave off the cents if it's zero.

- **Instead of:** \$20.00
- **Write:** \$20

Don't begin a sentence with dollar amounts. Change the sentence around.

For amounts of \$1 million or more, use a one- or two- decimal format.

- **Instead of:** \$1,293,450
- **Write:** \$1.3 million

Ignore this rule in charts or examples where you need to use the exact figure.

See also [numbers and numerals](#).

due to the fact that

Use "because."

- **Instead of:** An employee may not be eligible due to the fact that the employee received equal pay.
- **Write this:** An employee may not be eligible because he or she received equal pay.

e.g.

From *exempli gratia*. Latin for "for example." You can use e.g. if you mean "for example."

- **Using Latin:** Enter the name of the dental plan (e.g., Delta Premier-Basic).
- **In English:** Enter the name of the dental plan (for example, Delta Premier-Basic).

enclosed please find

Don't use "enclosed please find." Instead, write "I (or we) have enclosed" or "Enclosed is."

- **Instead of:** Enclosed please find the State's modifications to its offer.
- **Write:** We've enclosed the State's modifications to its offer.

etc.

From *et cetera*. Latin for "and so on." Instead of using etc., try to spell out the alternatives. If it's appropriate, you can use etc. when you mean "and so on."

- **Using Latin:** Courses, seminars, etc. are not scheduled at convenient times.
- **In English:** Courses, seminars, and so on are not scheduled at convenient times.

federal

Don't capitalize "federal" unless it begins a sentence.

font style

With the current version of Word, use the built-in styles. Use Normal style for text.

See also [headings, font style](#).

gender neutral

When you refer to a person who may be male or female, use gender neutral terms. You have three ways to do this, in this order of preference:

- **Address the person directly:** When you're referred to a physician, your supervisor will give you a Medical Provider Network brochure.
- **Use a gender-neutral term first, then use "he or she" and "him or her":** When an employee is referred to a physician, the supervisor gives him or her the Medical Provider Network brochure.
- **Use a gender-neutral term throughout:** When an employee is referred to a physician, the supervisor gives the employee the Medical Provider Network brochure.

See also [personal pronouns](#).

he/she, he or she

See [gender neutral](#) and [personal pronouns](#).

headings, font style

With the current version of Word, use Title style for your title. Use Heading 1 for major section titles, Heading 2 for subtitles within sections, and so on.

Don't skip levels of headings. In other words, if the last heading style you used was Heading 1, the next heading style under it should be Heading 2, not Heading 3 or something else.

headings and titles, capitalization

See [capitalization, headings and titles](#).

headlines

Headlines express a message. They don't state topics. Use verbs in your headlines.

- DPA Encourages Flexible Approaches to State Work During I-5 Fix
- DPA Releases Revised State Restrictions of Appointments Manual

Headlines need to be the right size: not so short they say nothing, but not so long the reader won't catch the meaning from a quick glance.

See also [capitalization, headings and titles](#).

highlight

To highlight text, make it bold and use italics. Don't underline or capitalize it.

- **Instead of:** THESE PERMITTING EVENTS ONLY APPLY TO THE FLEXELECT PROGRAM.
- **Write:** *These permitting events only apply to the FlexElect Program.*

Don't overdo highlighting. Highlighting works best if done sparingly. Too much and the reader can't distinguish the highlighted text from the other parts.

however

Don't use "however" to connect sentences. Use two sentences.

- **Instead of:** An age 60 employee with ten years of service would qualify under this pattern; however, an age 45 employee with 20 years of service would not qualify.
- **Write:** An age 60 employee with ten years of service would qualify under this pattern. However, an age 45 employee with 20 years of service would not qualify.

hyperlinks

Use hyperlinks to give readers access to web pages, websites, email addresses, and bookmarks in the same document. Hyperlinks have two parts: an address and some text.

In electronic documents, readers can click hyperlinks. For documents that readers will see online or receive through email, don't spell out the hyperlink address. Instead, write text that lets the reader know what to expect and make it all one hyperlink.

- **Instead of:** An electronic copy of the "Notice of Mailed Ballot Election" will be posted on the PERB website (at www.perb.ca.gov).
- **Write:** An electronic copy of the "Notice of Mailed Ballot Election" will be posted on [the PERB website](#).

The longer the hyperlink's address, the less likely a reader will try to type it. If you need to send a printed document with a hyperlink address, try to arrange for a short link that's easy to type.

When you spell out a hyperlink's address, don't include "http://." Web browsers add this automatically.

hyphens

Use hyphens to connect words. Don't use them in place of dashes.

When you have two adjectives in a row, hyphenate them.

- The report will also specify any follow-up testing.
- It may be impractical to obtain long-term lodging.
- We'll accomplish short-term goals in the next 6 to 18 months.
- You produced a well-written report.

Don't hyphenate word pairs when the words follow the object they describe or are used as a verb.

- She was told to follow up with Kaiser.
- The investment probably won't return much in the short term.

- But the investment will probably have bigger returns in the long term.
- The report was well written but not to the point.

Don't hyphenate adverbs ending in -ly.

- **Instead of:** hastily-arranged press conference
- **Write:** hastily arranged press conference

See also [dashes](#).

I

See [personal pronouns](#).

i.e.

From *id est*. Latin for "that is." You can use i.e. when you mean "that is." Many times you can delete this phrase altogether.

- **Using Latin:** The benefits package provided to the State's excluded employees (i.e., employees designated managerial, supervisory, confidential, excluded, and exempt)
- **In English:** The benefits package provided to the State's excluded employees (managerial, supervisory, confidential, excluded, and exempt)

if, should

Don't use "should" when you mean "if."

- **Instead of:** Should you have any questions ...
- **Write:** If you have any questions ...

impact

Don't use "impact" as a verb when you mean "affect."

- **Instead of:** The Environmental scan involves looking at how change could impact the workforce.
- **Write:** The Environmental scan involves looking at how change could affect the workforce.

italics

Use italic font style to indicate a special case. Italics don't call as much attention to text as bold font.

Don't overuse italics. Italicized text's impact comes from its contrast to normal font styles. If you use too much of it, it becomes meaningless.

its, it's

"Its" means "belonging to it."

- DPA reviewed its policies.

"It's" means "it is."

- It's not required to conform.

justification

See [aligning text](#).

lines and borders

Web pages don't use borders. We can use a horizontal line of set size to separate sections.

For print documents, limit your use of lines and borders. Don't use different colored lines, different line weights, or different line styles.

In other words, if you use 1.5 point solid single black lines in one place, use the same settings everywhere you have a line.

lists

You can organize information attractively using lists. This guide uses many lists.

Use bullets to create unordered lists. Most lists are unordered.

Use numbering to create ordered lists. Only use numbered lists if the reader needs to follow the steps in a particular order.

Use headings and subheadings to create lists of sections. This gives your document structure. When done properly, you can automatically create a table of contents from your document.

See also [bullets](#).

margins

In general, for printed documents use one of these two settings:

- 1" margins all around (Word 2007 default)
- 1.25" right and left margins with 1" top and bottom margins (Word 2003 default)

If you're preparing a document with special formatting requirements, such as a letter from the Director, follow the specific guidelines for what you're writing.

See also [aligning text](#).

nationwide

Nationwide is one word.

numbers and numerals

Spell out zero through ten. Use numerals for numbers greater than ten.

- The two-day event attracted 30 people.

However, if you use numbers above and below ten to compare quantities of something, use numerals.

- Of the 30 people enrolled, 7 registered at the door.

Spell out numbers when they begin a sentence.

- Twenty units started bargaining this year.
- One unit has agreed to a new contract.

See also [dollar amounts](#), [numerals in parentheses](#), and [percentages](#).

numerals in parentheses

If you spell out a number, don't follow it with the numeral in parentheses.

- **Instead of:** An additional nine (9) permanent positions were established.
- **Write:** An additional nine permanent positions were established.

The tradition of putting numerals in parentheses came about to counter confusion caused by sloppy handwriting and misspelling. In today's type-written, spell-checked world, the practice is outdated and adds a certain stuffiness to documents it's used in.

ongoing

Ongoing is one word.

parentheses

Parentheses set off an interrupting or peripheral thought. If you use them, you must use an opening and closing parenthesis. Omitting the closing parenthesis is a common typographical error.

Too many parentheses can annoy the reader. Consider using dashes instead. Or give the parenthetical statement its own sentence.

See also [dashes](#), [parentheses](#), [period placement](#).

parenthesis, period placement

If the material in parentheses is a complete sentence, the period goes inside the parentheses.

- Workforce planning depends on sound strategic planning. (Create your strategic plan as the first step in workforce planning.)

If the parenthetical phrase isn't a complete sentence, the period goes outside the parentheses.

- Focus on defining the necessary competencies (skills, knowledge, abilities, and personal attributes).

See also [parentheses](#).

percentages

For percentages, use a number or numeral followed by the word "percent." Save the percent symbol (%) for when you're comparing a series of numbers (for example, in a table).

- Nine percent is a good return rate.

See also [numbers and numerals](#).

personal pronouns

Use personal pronouns: I, we, you. These words help engage the reader. Addressing the reader as "you" also helps you avoid clumsy constructions with "he or she."

- **Instead of:** The manager reviews the immediate supervisor's remarks and indicates in the space provided whether he or she concurs with the report and comments.
- **Write:** Manager--review the immediate supervisor's remarks and indicate in the space provided whether you concur with the report and comments.

Write questions from the perspective of the reader, as if "I" am asking them.

- **Instead of:** What are the consequences to an employee if he or she participates in a strike?
- **Write:** What are the consequences if I participate in a strike?

The rules of some writing styles urge you to avoid personal pronouns, typically for formal academic writing. DPA uses a plain language style in all its communications, so you can always use personal pronouns.

See also [gender neutral](#), [question and answer sections](#).

question and answer sections

Question and answer sections help readers find answers quickly. But they aren't a substitute for creating and refining informative sections or pages.

When you create a question and answer section, you create an obligation on your part to update it frequently. You also must be honest with the reader. If you call it "frequently asked" questions, you need to ensure it really addresses the questions that are asked most often.

See also [personal pronouns](#).

quotation marks

Put periods and commas inside quotation marks.

- The "Excluded Employees Bill of Rights Act," passed in 1990, requires DPA to meet and confer with organizations.
- See "Catastrophic Leave."

Don't put colons or semicolons inside the quotation marks.

A question mark goes inside the quotes if it's part of the quoted material. If you're asking a question about the quote, put the question mark outside.

- See the section "Is your spouse a State employee?"
- Are you an "exempt employee"?

rationale

Don't use "rationale" when you mean "reason."

- **Instead of:** The rationale is loss of consciousness may indicate more serious injuries.
- **Write:** The reason is loss of consciousness may indicate more serious injuries.

should, if

See [if, should](#).

slash

Don't use the slash character when you mean "and," "or," or both. Instead, use the appropriate conjunction.

- **Instead of:** Dental/Vision
- **Write:** Dental and Vision

Social Security number

See [capitalization, Social Security number](#).

State, state

See [capitalization, State, state](#).

statewide

Statewide is one word.

that, which

"That" introduces a clause that's essential to the sentence. It's not set off by a comma or commas.

- Do State employees currently have the right to strike or engage in other types of job actions that interfere with the work of the State?

"Which" introduces a non-essential clause. The sentence would still be complete, though perhaps not as informative, without the "which" clause. It's set off by a comma or commas, depending on whether it comes in the middle of a sentence or at the end.

- Each CEA position must be checked against the DPA CEA Database, which identifies approved CEA positions.
- The State contributes \$788 per month toward employee health premiums (for family coverage), which equals 80 percent of the total premium for most State employees.

See also [that, who](#).

that, who

Use "who" when referring to people and "that" when referring to anything else

- **Instead of:** The number of people that attend your meeting...
- **Write:** The number of people who attend your meeting...

Other examples:

- Any employee who opts to enroll must wait 90 days.
- Any employee in unit 12, 13, 14, 16, or 19 who is a member of PERS or STRS can receive the benefit.
- Employees in classes that include certain duties and require specialized experience or training can get this pay differential. (In this sentence, "that" refers to classes.)

See also [that, which](#).

timeframe

Timeframe is one word.

timely

Avoid using this word except as an adjective before the word it modifies. Instead, use "in time," "on time," or a similar expression.

- Instead of: She had not contacted respondent timely.
- Write: She had not contacted the respondent in time.

underline

Don't underline text to highlight it. Make it bold and use italics instead.

Underlining indicates a hyperlink.

we

See [personal pronouns](#).

which, that

See [that, which](#).

workforce

Workforce is one word.

you

See [personal pronouns](#).

Plain language on the Web

- [PlainLanguage.gov - the Federal Government's plain language website](#)
- [Uselt.com - writing for the Web](#)
- [Easy-to-Read NYC - New York City's guidelines for clear and effective communication - PDF](#)
- [Silva Rhetoricae - an online guide to the art of rhetoric](#)

Books

- Bailey, Jr., Edward P. *The Plain English Approach to Business Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Krug, Steve. *Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability, Second Edition*. Berkeley: New Riders, 2006.