

Guideline 3: Use words your customers use

Choose words your customers normally use, not what attorneys or your coworkers use. If you must use a specialized term, define it for your readers.

How do I do this?

- **Select the plain, rather than the “formal” word.** Imagine you are writing to an intelligent friend who knows nothing about your work. This isn’t “dumbing-down” the language. It is showing respect for busy people who aren’t familiar with your specialized terms.
- **Ask your customer service staff.** They explain your agency’s policies and instructions all day long. Listen to the words they use.
- **Listen carefully during [usability tests](#).** This is a great opportunity to listen for words customers tend to use.

Why do this?

- Your customers are more likely to pay attention to your message.
- People read plain, conversational language quickly and more patiently.
- Studies show people are more likely to follow simple instructions than complex ones.
- People have a right to readable language when it involves their legal rights.

Do	Don't
Your completed Employer’s Quarterly Report for Industrial Insurance and payment is now past due.	OUR RECORDS INDICATE YOU HAVE NOT SUBMITTED YOUR EMPLOYERS PREMIUM REPORT OF HOURS AND PAYMENT FOR THE PREMIUM STATED ABOVE. RCW 51.16.155 AUTHORIZES LABOR AND INDUSTRIES TO ESTIMATE AND COLLECT PREMIUM.

Do	Don't
Stop	Cease
Use	Employ
Give	Furnish

Ask	Inquire
Before	Prior to
Stop	Cease
Use	Employ
Ask	Inquire
Get	Procure
Ask	Request
Send/Pay	Remit
Keep	Retain
End	Terminate
Use	Utilize

More Examples

- **Before:** In general, full accreditation is awarded for those parameters for which the two most recent PT results, if applicable, were rated “acceptable.”
- **After:** Ecology will award you full accreditation if your two most recent, applicable PT results were rated “Acceptable.”