Foreword. The Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) mission is critical to both the safety and economy of our nation. We accomplish this mission in partnership with all members of the aviation industry as well as our customers, the flying public. That's why it is critical that we communicate clearly, effectively and in plain language that is readily understood by all. Over the years, some of our writing has become dense and needlessly complex. Clarity of communication is a safety issue, and we must strive to communicate clearly and strongly. I understand this will be an evolutionary process. Let us all begin to work together to make clear communication standard practice at FAA.

Marion C. Blakey
Administrator

3/31/03
Date
FAA Writing Standards

Chapter 1  General information

1. **What is the purpose of this order?** To establish writing standards for all FAA documents.

2. **Who must comply with this order?** Anyone who writes or reviews FAA written documents intended for internal or external distribution.

3. **Why is FAA issuing this order?** Since FAA’s mission is so critical to both the safety and economy of our nation, we must strive to communicate clearly with our customers and with each other. Over the years, our writing has become dense and needlessly complex, laden with technical terms and abbreviations that make it time-consuming and difficult for our readers to understand.

4. **Does this order mean I must rewrite existing material?** No. This order is prospective only. You should follow this order when significantly revising existing documents. If you are making a minor change to an existing document, you may find it difficult to follow all the principles in this order. In that case, use your best judgment. Do not mix styles or terms in a way that will confuse your reader.
Chapter 2  Writing principles

1. Use effective writing techniques.

There are several simple techniques to make your writing clear and effective. This section describes the most critical ones. You must follow them when writing an FAA document.

   a. Consider your audience. Who you are writing to? What expertise and knowledge do they have? What do they need from you? If you are responding to questions from your audience make sure you answer all of them. If you believe you have more than one audience, select one as the primary audience and prepare your letter accordingly.

   b. Organize your document. The key to clear writing is to present material in the order that is most useful to the reader. If your document deals with a process, organize it chronologically, first step to last. You can also organize documents by putting the most important points first and the minor ones at the end. Put standard provisions first and exceptions last. Sometimes a combination of these organizational methods is useful. Whichever method you use, keep your reader in mind and be consistent. Ask yourself, “What will help my reader understand and follow my document?”

   c. Use active voice. Voice is the form a verb takes to indicate whether its subject acts or is acted upon. When the subject of a verb does something (acts), the verb is in the active voice. When the subject of a verb receives the action (is acted upon), the verb is in the passive voice. Because the active voice emphasizes the doer of an action, it is usually briefer, clearer, and more emphatic than the passive voice. Whenever possible, use active voice in your writings.

   d. Use short sentences. Your average sentence length should be 20 words or fewer. Use a list instead of running items together in a long sentence, and apply the 20-word rule to each item in the list. You rarely need a sentence over 40 words long.

   e. Write short paragraphs. Each paragraph should cover only one topic. Generally, limit paragraphs to seven lines or fewer.

   f. Limit initials, abbreviations, and acronyms. You can use a short form for the main topic of your document. For example, if the document is about the Coordinated Operational Approval Process, write it out the first time and in parenthesis type the abbreviation "COAP". Use the abbreviation throughout the document. Since that's what your document is about, it's unlikely to confuse your reader. But don't also use abbreviations for several other ideas in the same document. Either write out the full name or use a short form of the name (for example, call an Aviation Rulemaking...
Advisory Committee "the Committee," not ARAC) that will help your reader remember
what you're talking about. If you use a term only a few times, write it out every time.

g. Use pronouns. Pronouns help readers relate better to documents. It's important to
use pronouns when you want people to do something, because pronouns help them
understand they have a responsibility. However, make sure your reader understands to
whom a pronoun refers, especially if you are addressing more than one audience. One
way to do this is to define the pronoun early in the document and then redefine it
occasionally throughout long documents, especially at the beginning of major sections or
chapters.

(1) Refer to the reader as “you.” To define “you”, you might say, "If you are
a certificate holder, you should . . . ."

(2) Since we at FAA write these documents, you may also use "we" to refer to
the agency. In general, write out “FAA” and the name of the person to whom “you”
refers (certificate holder, pilot, and so on) once at the beginning of each paragraph or
major section.

h. Avoid using “shall.” Shall is an ambiguous word. It can mean must, ought, or
will. While shall cannot mean “should” or “may,” writers have used it incorrectly for
those terms and it has been read that way by the courts. Almost all legal writing experts
agree that it’s better to use “must” to impose requirements, including contractual
requirements.

2. Format for readability.

a. Use bold or italics for emphasis. Emphasize only those words, phrases, and
sentences that are important. Avoid underlining, as underlines clutter up the type and
make it harder to read. Never use capital letters to stress a word.

b. Consult the GPO Style Manual for accepted practices for capitalization,
punctuation, and abbreviations. You can find the manual on-line at
http://www.access.gpo.gov/styleman/2000/browse-sm-00.cfm

c. Use quotation marks for direct quotations or to set off ordinary words used to
mean something other than what they normally mean. Do not use quotation marks to
enclose titles of chapters, sections, or paragraphs. Indent long quotes from both margins,
without quotation marks.

d. Use figures such as charts, tables, and other illustrative material as examples to
explain complex material. Mention or introduce every figure in the text before it occurs
and place the figure close to the text that explains it. Try to limit figures to one page. For
figures that extend to more than one page, repeat the name and figure number on each
page. Make sure all figures have informative headings.
e. Place administrative information, such as references to other documents or lists of superceded documents, after the main body of the document. This helps your reader focus on your main message, rather than on administrative details.

3. Write informative headings.

Most documents benefit from headings. However, it’s important that you use useful headings. After good organization and active voice, informative headings are the most helpful way to guide readers through your document. Your reader should be able to decide, based on the heading, if they need to read a paragraph. Don't waste a reader’s time by using headings that are not informative, such as "general" or "transfer" or "training." Instead, headings should give the reader a synopsis of what information follows, such as "General Information about Markings" and "Transferring Responsibility for Maintaining an Aircraft." Since most readers come to our documents with questions in mind, headings in the form of questions are often the most effective way to direct the reader to information he or she wants to find, such as "How many hours of training must I have?"

4. Introduce each paragraph with a topic sentence.

A topic sentence ensures that each paragraph is cohesive. It should capture the essence of what’s in the entire paragraph. The rest of the paragraph supports and expands on the topic sentence. A reader should be able to follow the basic points of your document by skimming the topic sentences.

In letters, the first paragraph should contain a topic sentence that covers what’s in the rest of the letter. List the issues in the same order you follow in the body of the letter.

5. Other helpful writing principles.

In general, follow these principles when writing FAA documents.

a. Don’t be wordy. Excess or elaborate words make your writing weaker. Government writing is often too wordy. Look at FAA's Plain Language Manual for more guidance. You can reach this manual at https://employees.faa.gov/tools_resources/branding_writing/media/Writing_User_Friendlier_Documents.pdf. Here are some examples of excess words in our writing and plain alternatives:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excess words</th>
<th>Plain Alternatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>accordingly</td>
<td>so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>addressees</td>
<td>you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a means of</td>
<td>to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as prescribed by</td>
<td>in, under</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assist, assistance</td>
<td>aid, help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at a later date</td>
<td>later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at the present time</td>
<td>now</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
engage, begin, start
constitutes forms, makes up
facilitate help
for the purpose of to, for
heretofore until now
implement start, carry out
in accordance with under
in order to to
in the event that if
initiate begin, start
obtain get, gain
on a monthly basis monthly
pertaining to of, about
provide give
related to of
so as to to
such that so
should it appear that if
with regard to about

You can find many more common substitutes at the Plain Language site referenced above, in the menu item called “Reference Library” under “Simpler Words and Phrases.”

(1) Hidden verbs are verbs used as nouns. They add length and weaken sentences. The simple present tense is the strongest way to write. Here are some examples of hidden verbs and how to make sentences clearer and stronger:

The inspector will carry out a review of the company's programs.
The inspector will review the company's programs.

This plan assists in the management of . . .
This plan manages . . .

To determine part life, make a calculation of the . . .
To determine part life, calculate . . .

(2) Unnecessary qualifiers add no additional meaning to a sentence. The classic example from everyday language is "very dead." Here's some examples we see in FAA writing:

Their claim was totally unrealistic
We are completely convinced
It is definitely worth explaining
Work in partnership with
Additional requirements needed to provide a level of safety
Maintain successful bilateral agreements
b. It's easy for readers to get lost in run-on sentences. Vertical lists are quicker and easier for readers to follow and are an ideal way to explain a series of facts. Consider this example:

Along with your letter of application, submit a statement of conformance certifying that you have met the requirements of Subpart O of part 21 and that the article meets the TSO in effect on the date of your application; one copy of the data the TSO requires; and a description of your quality control system.

Or, presented as a list:

With your letter of application, send us the following:

1. A statement of conformance certifying that you have met the requirements of Subpart O of Part 21 and that the article meets the TSO in effect on the date of your application;
2. One copy of the data the TSO requires; and
3. A description of your quality control system.

c. Avoid noun clusters – three or more nouns “sandwiched” together. Noun sandwiches confuse and bore readers. Use prepositions and articles to clarify the relationship among the words. Here’s a typical FAA example: “drug testing and alcohol misuse prevention regulations.” It would be better to say “regulations about drug testing and preventing alcohol misuse.”

d. Dense text and complex instructions are clearer in “if-then” tables. Tables help your reader find what’s important to them, and see relationships in a way they can’t grasp from dense text. The FAA often publishes material that we could cover more clearly in if-then tables. Compare the text and table versions of the following material:

**Text:**
We must receive your completed application form on or before the 15th day of the second month following the month you are reporting if you do not submit your application electronically or the 25th day of the second month following the month you are reporting if you submit your application electronically.

**Table:**
We must receive your completed application form on or before the following dates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If you submit your form...</th>
<th>[then] We must receive it no later than...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Electronically</td>
<td>the 25th day of the second month following the month you are reporting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other than electronically</td>
<td>the 15th day of the second month following the month you are reporting.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 3 Administrative matters

1. How does this order affect other FAA directives? This order takes precedence over any other writing instructions in any other FAA directive or instructional material.