2022 Plain Language Report Card

U.S. National Science Foundation's NSF.gov

What is plain language?

Federal agencies have been required to use plain language in their public communications since the **_"Plain Writing Act of 2010."_** At its essence, writing plainly means keeping readers' knowledge and needs at the forefront. A plainly written item makes it easy for readers to:

- Find what they need.
- Understand what they find.
- Use what they find to meet their needs.

Why a report card?

NSF modeled this report after the Center for Plain Language's **_Federal Plain Language Report Card_**, which grades a subset of federal websites on the quality of their writing and their compliance with the "Plain Writing Act" each year.

With this report card, NSF's Office of Legislative and Public Affairs, or OLPA, offers a snapshot of NSF.gov's plain language performance in 2022. It celebrates NSF's successes, highlights areas for improvement, and serves as a baseline to assess the agency's future plain language performance.

Why now?

The NSF website's migration to the redesigned **_beta.nsf.gov_** presents an opportunity to rework its content to better meet audiences' needs — especially audiences less familiar with NSF, such as early-career researchers, industry, and institutions of higher education that have received little funding from the agency.

What does a plainly written webpage look like?

Users don't *read* webpages; they *scan* them, quickly skimming until they find relevant information.

As outlined in the **_Federal Plain Language Guidelines_**, a well-designed webpage:

- ✔ Is concise, putting essential information front and center.
- ✔ Uses descriptive headings.
- ✔ Uses more headings than on paper, with less content under each heading.
- ✔ Creates ample white space by using short paragraphs.
- ✔ Uses frequent short lists and bullets to organize information.
- ✔ Uses graphics to reinforce key information.

What we did

A team* of plain language experts in OLPA, the Directorate for Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences and the Department of Energy prepared this report. Using a rubric adapted from the Center for Plain Language, the team graded three popular destinations on NSF.gov:

- **_About NSF_**
- **_Transformative Research_**
- **_Merit Review_**

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How pages were evaluated

Audience: Is it clear what readers should learn or do using this page? Is the presentation appropriate for the intended audience(s)?

Content: Does the page tell a story or help readers complete a task? Are there headings to guide the reader? Does the page convey key content while avoiding unnecessary details?

Style: Does the page avoid *jargon*, *noun-strings* and *hidden verbs*? Does it use *active voice* and direct language (like "you") when appropriate?

Design: Does the layout make the page easy to scan? Can you tell by glancing where the important information or action is? Do any graphics support the content?

What we found

Each webpage featured plain language successes. But each also had content and design issues in need of improvement. Generally, the pages were:

1. Longer than necessary, with duplicative writing or unnecessary details.

2. Difficult to skim, lacking a clear page hierarchy and elements to help draw the reader's eye to key information. These elements can include:

   - Visually distinguishable headings.
   - *Accordions*.
   - Bulleted and numbered lists.
   - Illustrative graphics.

Credit: National Science Foundation

Page: *About NSF*

Why we graded it: Highly visited; represents how NSF describes itself to the public.

Grade: NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

Successes:

- Uses headings to help "chunk" information.
- Writing is generally simple and free of jargon.

Opportunities for improvement:

- Streamline duplicative content, such as the "NSF at a glance" and "What we do" sections.
- Clarify abstract phrasing, like "high-risk, high pay-off ideas" and "ever-moving horizons of inquiry," with examples.
- Use more descriptive headings and subheadings, like "Budget" and "Leadership."

Page: *Transformative Research*

Why we graded it: Highly visited; explains a concept relevant to many NSF programs.

Grade: NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

Successes:

- Uses a FAQ page to answer common audience questions.

Opportunities for improvement:

- Condense content to a single webpage, streamlining duplicative or extraneous information in the "Introduction," "Definition" and "Characteristics" sections.
- Use headings, bulleted lists and accordions to reduce clutter and emphasize actions and key information.

Page: *Merit Review*

Why we graded it: Highly visited; explains a critical NSF process.

Grade: SATISFACTORY

Successes:

- Clearly states the page's goal at outset.
- Uses organized, logical sections.
- Uses a graphic to reinforce key information.

Opportunities for improvement:

- Use headings, bulleted lists and accordions to reduce clutter and emphasize actions and key information.

Recommendations and resources for reworking and constructing webpages

Improve page design

Migrating content to beta.nsf.gov will greatly improve authors' ability to design reader-friendly webpages. The beta.nsf.gov site features numerous design options that nsf.gov lacks, including:

- Different heading types.
- Accordions.
- Visually distinct components for showcasing featured content.

Rework content

OLPA is assisting directorates and offices to ensure that NSF.gov is plain-language compliant. The office offers these services:

1. **Technical writing and editing support,** including:
   - Advice on content organization.
   - Rewriting to align with plain language guidelines.
   - Copy editing before content is published to beta.NSF.gov.

2. **Plain language training on InsideNSF (coming soon)** for all NSF.gov authors and reviewers.

Questions about this report or about plain language?

Contact OLPA at: *copyedit@nsf.gov*
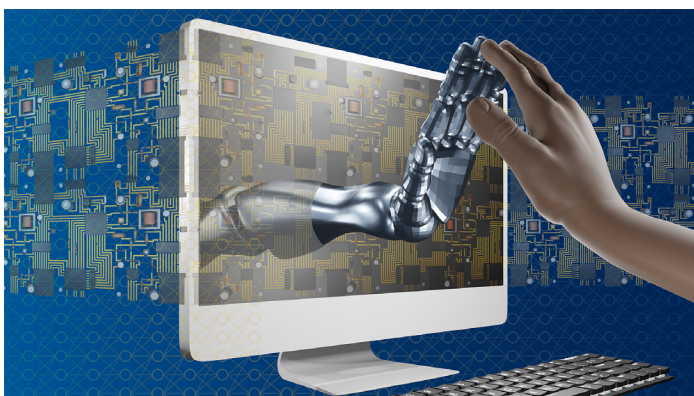
Credit: National Science Foundation/Alice Kitterman

Plain language checklist for web authors and reviewers

Audience

Intended audience is clear

Information serves the audience's needs

Content

Tells a story or helps readers complete a task

Headings guide the reader

Introductory text concisely describes page content

Most important information appears first

Sentences are generally short (~20 words)

Paragraphs are generally short (~3 sentences)

Uses keywords that are important to the audience

Style

Uses "I" and "you" when appropriate

Uses active voice

Avoids unnecessary acronyms or abbreviations

Avoids ambiguous or confusing phrasing

Avoids noun strings
- **Instead of:** *"Advanced manufacturing protocol security protection procedures"*
- **Try:** *"Procedures that protect the security of advanced manufacturing protocols"*

Avoids jargon
- **Instead of:** *"Riverine avifauna"*
- **Try:** *"River birds"*

Uses hidden verbs sparingly
- **Instead of:** *"Prepare an application"*
- **Try:** *"Apply"*

Links tell users where they're going
- **Instead of:** *"Click here"*
- **Try:** *"View the 2021 webinar"*

Design

Page is concise and easy to scan

Bulleted or numbered lists help "chunk" information

Tables, figures and images convey key information or aid navigation

Images are accompanied by captions and *alt text*