

## **Preparing Documents - Guidelines for Using Plain Language and Good Design**

Documents should be written, organized, and designed so that they are easy to read and understand.

### **Visual Appearance**

- a. Use boldface type for captions.
- b. Use a type size that can be read easily, with adequate space between lines and paragraphs. Type should be at least 12 point and preferably 14 point. These guidelines are in 14 point.
- c. Use standard serif or sans-serif fonts. This sentence is in Times New Roman which is a serif font. This sentence is in Arial which is a sans-serif font.
- d. Use margins that make the document easy to read. If the document is a book, or pamphlet, it will be easier to read if the margins are wide and the document can be laid flat.
- e. Use ink that provides a sharp contrast with the paper. Text should be printed with the highest possible contrast. For example, use white print on a dark background or black on white. Printed material, generally, is most readable in black and white.

### **Organization**

- a. Use headings to show the order in which information is presented and to identify the content of each section.
- b. Use a table of contents to identify the sections, if the document is over 2 pages long.

### **Language**

- a. Make your message positive and put it in positive language.
- b. Rephrase legalese into plain language. Use words that state the meanings clearly and directly. Do not use Latin and foreign words. Use short words, sentences, and paragraphs.
- c. Use the active voice in preference to the passive voice. Examples:  
Active: The article discusses the effects of unemployment.  
Passive: The effects of unemployment are discussed in the article.
- d. Use terms with consistency throughout the document.
- e. Define technical terms at the beginning of the document.
- f. Break up multiple conditions or exceptions into simple sentences or lists.
- g. Do not use sentences with double negatives or exceptions to exceptions.