American lawmakers and political leaders have long pushed for clear, understandable writing in government documents. As far back as 1788, future president James Madison warned, “It will be of little avail to the people … if the laws be so voluminous that they cannot be read, or so incoherent that they cannot be understood.”

It’s easy to see what prompted Madison’s warning. Governments are infamous for writing laws and important communications in complicated “bureaucratese.” Consider this 50-word sentence, which used to be part of a dense, page-long federal regulation.

A permit to construct and operate an individual production well facility of not more than 10-megawatt net capacity or heat energy equivalent, including all related on-lease facilities, must be obtained from the authorized officer prior to commencing surface disturbing activities related to the construction and operation of each such facility.

It was rewritten in clear, everyday English, to read like this.

If you want to use federal land to produce geothermal power, you have to get a site license and construction permit before you even start preparing the site.

This rewrite is just one example of a widespread shift toward “plain language,” defined by the federal Plain Language Action and Information Network as “communication your audience can understand the first time they read or hear it.”

Replacing jargon and acronyms with simple, direct language makes it more likely that citizens will understand what government is doing for them, and what it expects of them. As a result, public agencies can save time, effort and money. For example, by rewriting just one letter, Washington’s Department of Revenue tripled the number of businesses that paid a state use tax, collecting $2 million additional revenue in just the first year.

The plain language movement has gained momentum at all levels of government. According to the nonprofit Center for Plain Language, as of 2013, 32 states had a plain language program in at least one state agency.

Washington state launched a full-scale initiative in 2005, when the governor’s office ordered all state agencies to adopt the “plain talk” principles that four departments had already developed on their own.

At the federal level, the Plain Writing Act of 2010 now requires federal agencies to write documents about benefits, services, taxes and requirements in “clear, concise, well-organized” language that the “public can understand and use.” In 2013, a bill was introduced, but not enacted, that would have extended the plain writing mandate to federal regulations.

“In government, our mission is really to serve the public,” says Representative Mary Ann Dunwell (D), who introduced a plain language bill in Montana this session. “One of the best ways to serve the public is to communicate with your constituency clearly and for understanding, so the public can engage in their government—which is their right.”

Although there are no hard-and-fast rules for how to write in plain language, here are some guidelines that can help.
Put yourself in your readers’ shoes.

Before you even start writing, the first step is to get to know your audience. Who are you writing for? What are their needs, and what do they already know about the topic? What questions will they have? Does your audience include people with low literacy or people who speak other languages? If you think more than one audience will need to read what you’re writing—say, worried parents as well as departments of education—address them separately whenever you can.

Organize your material.

People read government documents to get answers. Think about the questions your audience is likely to ask, and put your material in the order that will best respond to those questions. Do your readers want to know how to go through a process, step-by-step? Or do they want the most important information right away? Using plenty of clear headings will also help people quickly find what they need.

Limit jargon.

Some experts, including lawyers, may worry that they’ll lose precision if they use everyday English instead of technical terms. And if there’s really no other good way to say it, specific terms can help. But writing everything else in clear language, using common words your audience is familiar with, will actually reduce the chances that your message will be misunderstood.

Readers can especially do without archaic legalisms like “pursuant to,” “subsequent to,” and “notwithstanding.” Try “under,” “after,” and “although” instead. Avoid acronyms, too.

Keep it short.

“Wordy, dense construction,” according to the Federal Plain Language Guidelines, “is one of the biggest problems in government writing.” Statutes and regulations can be especially full of long, hard-to-follow sentences with lots of commas and clauses. Instead, write short, direct sentences that use only the words you need. A good rule is to aim for sentences that are 25 words or less. The same idea applies to paragraphs, sections, and whole documents: Keep them concise and to the point.

Make sure it works.

The federal Plain Language Action and Information Network notes that plain language is defined by results, rather than techniques. No matter how you get there, plain language should be easy to read, understand and use. What is the best way to find out whether you’ve achieved these goals for your target audience? Ask them. See if real-life readers can describe who and what the document is for, explain key concepts in their own words, and easily do what they need to do. Your writing works when users can find what they need, and understand and act on what they find.

Looking for more plain language tips, tricks and examples? A wealth of information is available through the federal Plain Language Action and Information Network and other websites.

Go to ncsl.org/magazine for more information.