20 rules for those who write consent forms

Adapted by Pierre Deschamps from

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Plain-English-Writing-Rules
Rule # 1: Know Who Your Reader Is

“Everyone who writes strives for the same thing. To say it swiftly, clearly, to say the hard thing that way, using few words. Not to gum up the paragraph. To know when to quit when you're done. And not to have hangovers of other ideas sifting in unnoticed. Good writing is precisely like good dressing.”

*William Carlos Williams*
Before we write, we must organize our thoughts. Answer these questions:

1) What am I writing?
2) What is my purpose for writing it?
3) Who is my audience? My primary reader?
4) What important facts do I need to make?
5) What is the overall message that I want the reader to understand?
6) How is the reader most likely to react to my message?
7) What action, if any, do I want the reader to make at the end?
8) Do my readers have any special handicaps, such as cultural differences, language barriers, or a below average education level?
Rule # 2: Have Something Important to Say

"Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style."

*Matthew Arnold*
Have something to say—and think it through. Writing flows more effortlessly if you have something to say. The common challenge in writing is to convey an idea. To accomplish this—and to communicate clearly—you must:

1) have something to say; 2) you must have readers to express it to; 3) you must arrange and plan what you want to say; 4) you must map out the order in which to say it; and 5) you must write it and rewrite it. To have something to say is—without a doubt—the life-support of all good writing.
Rule # 3:
Use Familiar Words

“I love words, but I don't like strange ones. You don't understand them, and they don't understand you. Old words are like old friends. You know 'em the minute you see 'em.”

Will Rogers
Plain English demands that we use comfortable, common (everyday) words. They are the vehicles of communication. Words must sound proper to us and to our readers. *In fact*, they must sound more useful to us than big words do.

All good writing demands us not to disrupt what we are striving to communicate. When we refer to "everyday words," we mean common, conversational words.

Everyday words are the common words that we all comprehend without struggle because they're the words that we use in our own thought-process.
Rule # 4: Use the Right Word!

“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.”

*Mark Twain*
We have many troublesome words in the English language. Using the right words, particularly in business writing, reveals the skill-set of the writer. You must choose the right words in the right situations, allowing for every plausible way that your readers might interpret them.

You must know—very clearly—what you need to achieve in your writing before you breathe life into the very first word. An unfocused mind produces unfocused writing.
Rule # 5:
Avoid Complexity

“For certainly it is excellent discipline for an author to feel that he must say all he has to say in the fewest possible words, or his reader is sure to skip them; and in the plainest possible words, or his reader will certainly misunderstand them.”

*John Ruskin
Avoid Complexity

- **Complexity** is one of the primary smog factors that plagues poor writing. Complexity is predominantly, but not solely, a mechanical mess. It arises from not maintaining the relationship and logical flow between words, phrases, and clauses. It usually arises when we cram excessive facts and ideas into one sentence; when we string together too many related ideas and descriptive words. Remember to keep your writing simple.
Rule # 6:
Write with Purpose

“The words in prose ought to express the intended meaning, and nothing more.”

*Samuel Taylor Coleridge
• Write to convey your message, not to impress your readers. Do not write flowery prose or technical jargon unless you are specifically writing for that audience. Adapt your writing style based on your audience and their reading/education level.

• Legalese and government gobbledygook often confuse average readers, and even some experts. Favor common, clear, everyday words to convey your message.
Rule # 7: Use as Few Words as Possible!

“Brevity is the soul of wit,” and “Men of few words are the best men.”

*William Shakespeare*
Use lively words (strong verbs!) to enrich your writing. Readers benefit from simple, direct, lively language. Writing sentences in active voice is more succinct and forceful than sentences in passive voice.

Strong, direct verbs help the reader know who is performing the action and what is being acted upon. You can find "weak verbs" in your writing by identifying passive voice and hidden verbs. Weak verbs always add excessive length and confusion to a sentence.
Rule # 8: Avoid Verbosity!

“This report by its very length, defends itself against the risk of being read.”

*Sir Winston Churchill*
Avoid Verbosity

- **Reduce compound prepositions.** A compound preposition is two or more words. The words "next to," "in between" and "because of" are prepositions comprised of two words; "in spite of," "in front of," "on behalf of" are prepositions comprised up of three words.

- Keep your message simple by using its plain English counterpart. For example, rather than using the word "disseminate," you could use a simpler equivalent, such as "spread."
Rule # 9: Avoid Legalese and Jargon

“Lawyers would be better off if they stopped thinking of the language of the law as a different language and realized that the art of writing for legal purposes is in no way distinguishable from the art of writing for any other purpose.”

*Archibald MacLeish*
Avoid these "deadwood" words that weigh down good writing: henceforth, hereby, hereinafter, herewith, heretofore, therein, wherein, and dozens of other outdated words that plague and sicken legalese and government writing.

- Also omit permanently the word "shall" from your vocabulary because it forces the reader to interpret one of its five meanings.
Rule # 10:  
Pick Simple Words that Match Your Ideas

“To condense the diffused light of a page of thought into the luminous flash of a single sentence, is worthy to rank as a prize composition just by itself.”

*Mark Twain

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Pick Simple Words that Match Your Ideas

- Good writing demands that we choose practical, useful words. The words we pick either reveal or hide our meaning. When your writing style is engaging and lively, the reader feels as if you are writing directly to him as a person.

- When we write simply and succinctly, we avoid distractions and intrusions—only our ideas are noticeable, and they are crystal clear to the reader on his first reading. Attaining such a style starts when you pick direct, uncomplicated words.

- Always write based on your audience's perspective and their level of reading comprehension (which, for the general public, is between a 7th and 9th grade reading level).
Rule # 11: Use Concrete, Specific Words

“It is words as with sunbeams—the more condensed, the deeper they burn.”

*Robert Southey

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Use Concrete, Specific Words

- Use both **specific words** and **concrete words** instead of abstract words. Readers can grasp specific words faster and easier because they are well-defined. Concrete words label real things and real people, and also appeal to a reader's five senses: his eyes, ears, taste, touch, and smell.

- These concrete words are the bowels of all good writing; they are as common to a reader's mind as wet is to rainwater, air to lungs, heat to fire, light to candle, and odor to sewage.
Rule # 12: Develop an Uncluttered Writing Style

“It wasn’t by accident that the Gettysburg Address was so short. The laws of prose writing are as immutable as those of flight, of mathematics, of physics.”

*Ernest Hemingway
Ernest Hemingway's writing style is one of the most familiar and dominant literary styles of the 20th century. Many reviewers consider his style as being more "conversational" than ornate—a skill he honed from working as a newspaper reporter where tight deadlines forced him to write short sentences and lively English. Hemingway's style is straightforward, with basic grammar encased in simple language that everyone knows.
Rule # 13: Omit Abstract Words

“There is but one art - to omit! O if I only knew how to omit, I would ask no other knowledge.”

*Robert Louis Stevenson*
When you edit your writing, highlight all abstract words and replace them with specific or concrete words. Abstract words, similar to basic words, are so wide-ranging, so vast, and so full of various meanings that an unskilled writer can make them mean almost anything.

Also, similar to general words, abstract words have different levels of abstraction—and the greater the level, the more difficult it is for the reader to uncover the true meaning.
Rule # 14:
Think Clearly to Write Simply

“If you can’t explain something simply, you don’t understand it well.”

*Albert Einstein
Think Clearly to Write Simply

- Maintain a balance of not writing "down" or "up" to your readers; instead, visualize how your readers will interpret your words. Read your final piece of writing as if you are a stranger to it, rewriting anything awkward, refining and sharpening every sentence, and trimming waste. Ideally, ask a colleague or a co-worker to peruse your final draft before publishing it. Be certain your message is straightforward yet that you are sincere to its complexity.
Rule # 15: Avoid Redundancy

“Beauty of style and harmony and grace and good rhythm depend on simplicity.”

*Plato*
We can avoid redundancy by analyzing a phrase and extracting what it truly means. If we were to write "We are planning the party in the month of July," we can omit "the month of." If we were to write, "We are planning in advance to call our friends," we can omit "in advance." Omitting these words still retain the exact meaning of the sentences.

Writers, by nature and habit, use many wordy phrases, thinking they sound "more educated." Rather, they use too many redundant expressions that disrupt the flow of their writing and makes it more difficult for readers to understand.
Rule # 16: Use Words that Your Readers Know

“Any word you have to hunt for in a thesaurus is the wrong word. There are no exceptions to this rule.”

*Stephen King*
Use Words that Your Readers Know

- When you write for a general audience, you must strive for clearness; as a result, you regularly repeat particular words and concepts. You cover your information meticulously, developing the reader's information gradually.
Rule # 17:
Explain Your Point Crisply and Clearly

“The chief virtue that language can have is clarity, and nothing detracts from it so much as the use of unfamiliar words.”

*Hippocrates*
When you must explain something, explain it crisply and briefly. Make it pointed and poignant. Long explanations overwork and upset readers.

Delete every word that is not needed. You will minimize space and enrich your writing. As soon as you have validated your point, stop giving extra arguments. To say anything more will perplex rather than persuade.
Rule # 18: Write One Thought Per Sentence

“Too many slippery ifs and buts and however, too much hereinbefore provided whereas, too many doors to go in and out of.”

*Carl Sandburg
Plain English writing requires us to obey "unity" in our sentences and paragraphs. This means we should discuss one—and only one—idea, thought or concept per paragraph.

Using one paragraph to discuss two or three points is too confusing for most readers. Of course, if you need 15 sentences to develop one idea, you are not restricted to encapsulate all 15 complete sentences into one huge paragraph. Instead, break apart long paragraphs with transitional terms, sub-headings, bullet-points, etc. Your aim is to create smaller, unified paragraphs that support the main paragraph.
Rule # 19:
Write Short, Strong Sentences

“Whatever you want to say, there is only one word to express it, only one verb to give it movement, only one adjective to qualify it. You must search for that word, that verb, that adjective, and never be content with an approximation, never resort to tricks, even clever ones, and never have recourse to verbal sleight-of-hand to avoid a difficulty.”

*Guy de Maupassant
Write short, strong sentences. The long sentence is sensible, pleasing and appealing in lots of ways, but wordy sentences nearly always disorient readers.

Make your writing stylish and sharp with meaning. Then you can feel confident that you are writing clearly. When you sense that a sentence or idea might trigger confusion—that your reader might skip your point—then repeat it.
Rule # 20:
Make Rewriting Count!

“It is not the writing but the rewriting that counts.”

*Willa Cather*
After you've written your first draft, you can now refine and develop it. Read it. And reread it. Identify "problem areas" that you can improve or omit. Yes, you are correcting grammar, spelling and punctuation—but you are also condensing sentences, shortening paragraphs, and re-arranging thoughts so your ideas flow coherently. The most successful book authors usually re-write their manuscripts multiple times.