

WHY USE “PLAIN LANGUAGE”? TALKING POINTS FOR FEDERAL AGENCY STAFF

Why should Federal agencies consider writing program guidances or requests for proposals (RFPs) using “plain language” techniques? Initial information from agencies that have completed application cycles using these techniques suggests many benefits for agencies and the community. Here are some reasons identified by staff of agencies that are applying “plain language” approaches:

1. **Use of plain language helps your agency meet the intent of PL 106-107, the Federal Financial Assistance Management Improvement Act of 1999**, the “federal grant streamlining program.” One of its purposes is to simplify and streamline Federal financial assistance application and reporting requirements. In public agencies as in the private sector, there is a growing trend towards the use of simpler, more straightforward language and formats that contribute to quick understanding of the information presented.
2. **It reduces the number of submissions from ineligible applicants.** If the eligibility criteria are stated in plain English, ineligible entities are less likely to apply. This avoids wasting your time – and theirs.
3. **It encourages applications from smaller organizations, especially community-based nonprofit groups.** Sometimes small nonprofit organizations are appropriate providers of the services sought in your guidance. If so, using plain language helps get them to apply. Small agencies usually do not have proposal writers on staff, and may not be able to afford grantwriting consultants. Long, complicated application guidances discourage them from competing. Plain English guidances with clear formats send a message that you want applications from smaller organizations like them.
4. **It leads to better, more responsive grant applications.** Most applicants – especially community-based organizations but also State and local agencies, universities, and for-profit entities – find “plain language” application guidances or RFPs easier to understand than traditional guidances. They understand what you want. This enables them to better meet application requirements and to prepare proposals that directly address funding agency priorities and needs.
5. **It reduces the burden on staff involved in the application process.** Some agencies do report an increase in the number of total applicants; others do not. However, there is agreement that because the RFP is clearer, there are often fewer pre-submission questions, and less need for clarifying amendments or explanations. Once received, applications responding to plain English RFPs tend to be clearer and easier to review. Because the applicant understands what is wanted, it is more likely to meet RFP requirements. Applications are more likely to be from eligible applicants, meet page limitations, and include required content and attachments.

6. **It makes the job of external reviewers easier and more pleasant.** Because applications tend to be clearer and better organized, reviewers find them easier to read and rate. Eligibility criteria tend to be clearer and better linked to the narrative, so applicants are more likely to include information in the correct section. Applications are more likely to directly address specified criteria and to reflect the language of the guidance. Reviewers themselves find the application guidance easier to understand, and do a better job of focusing on agency intent and priorities when assessing applications.
7. **Applicants appreciate the use of plain language and consider the entire application process to be fairer.** Smaller organizations and those without professional grantwriters often feel at a significant disadvantage in applying for federal funds. This is true of small state and local agencies (e.g., health departments in the less populated states) and institutions of higher education as well as small community-based organizations. Use of plain language creates a “more level playing field.” Applicants feel more confident that they have a fair chance to compete and feel good about the process.
8. **It benefits the public through funding to the right organizations for the right programs.** By removing barriers, plain language RFPs help encourage applications from a wide pool of applicants and help them prepare sound project proposals. Such RFPs also facilitate fair and effective external reviews. The result is that your agency is more likely to find and fund the most appropriate and qualified applicants – which increases public benefits from Federal programs and funding.
9. **The first plain language guidance provides a model that can be used repeatedly.** This saves time in the preparation of future guidances and RFPs. This means that the initial investment in making the change to plain English application guidances pays off quickly.

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