



Plain Language: Make a list, then check it twice

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[This week's writing tip comes to us from Santa Jim Worsham, who always checks lists twice.]

One of the devices we use frequently in writing at NARA is the list.

It might be a list of staff, or of offices within NARA, or records management requirements, or—well, it could be anything.

Lists help us get information across to readers in a clear way that is easy for them to understand. Lists also are good tools to use to meet “plain writing” goals, especially in communicating information about multi-faceted subjects.

Lists are used to tell readers about:

- Tools or materials needed to do something
- Subjects to be discussed at a meeting
- Criteria by which you will be evaluated
- Parts of an object
- Recommendations or conclusions
- Actions that can or will be taken
- Steps to be taken, in order, in a process of some sort

One of the most important things in writing a list is to be consistent. Always start each item in a list with the same part of speech—a noun, a verb, or an “ing” word.

It's not as hard as you think. Let me walk you through it.

Here's an example of an inconsistent, and sort of confusing, list:

The President said he would ask Congress for legislation to do the following:

- All student loans would be forgiven
- There would be lower income tax rates
- Tax credits for buying an American-made automobile
- Drop penalties for overdue tax payments
- Ask Congress to approve a bill to raise sales taxes on tobacco products, liquor, and gasoline.
- A blue-ribbon commission will study the fiscal problem and issue a report in a year. Its members will be named by him and congressional leaders.