Here's an excerpt from The Center for Plain Language at <http://centerforplainlanguage.org/5-steps-to-plain-language/>

I've added comments, in blue type, that relate the Center's guidelines to the writing we'll do in this course. The document below is the basic "text" for this course. We will use its advice in each week of the course!

**Write better**

Use our 5-step checklist… [revised for conciseness for ENGL 315,Writing in the Workplace]

Plain language writers communicate effectively because they understand who will (and will not) use the document or website they are writing. They create products that

* speak clearly and directly to the target group
* anticipate what readers already know and what they need to learn
* present information logically
* include content only if it is needed
* help the reader move through the content efficiently and act on it confidently
* create trust in the company or agency

A document, web site or other information is in plain language if the target audience can read it, understand what they read, and confidently act on it.

**5 steps**

**Step 1. Identify and describe the target audience.**

List what people need or need to know to complete the task
List characteristics of the groups that should influence design (for example, age, computer experience…)

[In this course, your readers are the other members of this class, in majors from Health Care to Accounting to Computer Investigations.]

The audience definition works when you know who you are and are not designing for, what they want to do, and what they know and need to learn.

**Step 2: Structure the content to guide the reader through it**

Organize the content so that it flows logically

[Follow your introduction with a blueprint/map/outline to guide your readers.]

Break content into short sections that reflect natural stopping points

[Begin a new paragraph to reveal a slight shift in topic, to reveal each step in a process, or to correspond with the passage of time.]

Write headings that help readers predict what is coming up

[For visual clarity, use exactly the same wording and capitalization scheme in your headings that you used in your blueprint/map/outline.]

The structure works when readers can quickly and confidently find the information they are looking for.

**Step 3: Write the content in plain language**

**Keep it short and to the point**
Write short but logical sentences

[Strive for an average of around 17 words per sentence.]

Present important information first in each section, subsection, and paragraph
Include the details that help the reader complete the task

[Support each main point with examples, concrete detail, stories/anecdotes, or comparisons to which your particular readers can relate.]

Leave out details that don’t help or may distract readers, even if they are interesting
Use transitions to connect ideas, sentences, paragraphs, or sections

**Set a helpful tone**
Use a conversational, rather than legal or bureaucratic tone

[Prefer *active voice* to *passive voice*; strive to keep your percentage of passive voice verbs to 10% or lower.]

**Pick the right words**
Use strong verbs in the active voice

[Keep your percentage of passive voice verbs to 10% or lower.]

Use words the audience knows

[When you must use the technical terms of your field, follow them with brief explanations in Plain English and offer concrete examples.]

Make titles or list elements parallel (for example, start each with a verb)

[Make your blueprint (list of main section headings) parallel.]

For websites: Match the link wording to landing page names

The language works when readers understand the words and grasp the intended message quickly and confidently.

**Step 4: Use information design to help readers see and understand**

Use headings and sub-headings to organize the information

[Exactly match the wording of headings to your opening blueprint/map/outline.]

Use typography (font size, color, bold, etc.) to guide the reader’s attention

[Use bold for titles; use italics for titles of books and web sites and for terms you’re about to explain. Use italics for words borrowed from other languages, as well.]

Use white space to organize the information

[Leave a little more white space above main section headings than below them.]

Use images to make content easier to understand

[Explicitly introduce an illustration (or a quote) before you use it—mention its source and the reason you’re using it at this point in your document. Follow up on your illustration (or quote) by relating it explicitly to the point you’re making in this section of your document.]

The design works when users notice and use the signposts to move through the information efficiently.

**Step 5: Work with the target user groups to test the design and content**

**Test the design at multiple points**
Were audience needs, such as top tasks, prioritized based on user research?

[You can ask members of your small group of revision and editing partners how they might use the information you plan to share with them. You’ll have two opportunities—you can ask about your introduction and blueprint in Week 2 and your full draft in Week 3.]

**Check that the final product is useful and usable**Note where they stumble or misunderstand and rethink those parts of the site or document

[Pay attention to where your revision and editing partners have questions or appear to misunderstand you. Revise and try the new version out on them.]

The document or site works when target users can find what they need, understand what they find, and act on it confidently.

