

Improving Document Readability

Regulatory Requirements

- **40 CFR § 1500.1:** “Most important, NEPA documents must concentrate on the issues that are truly significant to the action in question, rather than amassing needless detail. Emphasize the portions of the EIS that are useful to decision makers and the public.”
- **40 CFR § 1502.2:** “Environmental impact statements shall be analytic rather than encyclopedic.”
- **40 CFR § 1502.8:** “Environmental impact statements shall be written in plain language and may use appropriate graphics so that decision makers and the public can readily understand them.”

Case Law

Oregon Environmental Council v. Kunzman, 614 F.Supp. 657 (D. Ore. 1985)

Reiterating that one of NEPA's purposes is to inform the public of possible environmental consequences of federal actions, the court stated that

“An EIS must translate technical data into terms that render it an effective disclosure of the environmental impacts of a proposed project to all of its intended readership.”

Keys to Writing Clearly and Concisely

- Use fewer words and ensure that every word and every sentence is necessary
- Use short sentences – one thought per sentence and no more than 3 lines long (no compound or complex sentences)
- Use the active voice
- Use the subjunctive mood (“would” not “will”) because no decision on the proposed action has been made
- Don’t use double negatives
- Use plain language
 - Eliminate jargon
 - Avoid complex scientific words and phrases, or define them in layperson’s terms if you have to use them
 - Acronyms are distracting, so do not overuse them and make sure to define them
- Use explanatory textboxes and clear graphics for readability
 - Textboxes can be used to explain complex concepts or emphasize important points

- Tables and figures can frequently provide a better explanation in lesser space than a textual explanation
- Make the appearance of your work attractive
 - Break up large paragraphs
 - Use headings and subheadings
- Use glossaries and introductory sections to explain technical terms and concepts once, not in every chapter
- Leave out any bias, justification for the proposed action, and self-serving statements
 - Watch modifiers – don't try to tell the reader how to feel
 - Don't "spin"
 - Be careful of tone – be empathetic
- Present only that information that will be useful to agency decisionmakers and the public
 - Use appendices, technical reports, and incorporation by reference to the fullest extent possible
- Use a technical editor to promote clarity, consistency, and graphics quality
 - Make sure the text is internally consistent
 - Make sure the text is consistent with graphics