

# COASTAL COMMUNICATORS

A newsletter for the nation's coastal management and research reserve programs.

## In This Issue

### COMMUNICATION INSIGHTS

The Plain Writing Act of 2010

### COMMUNICATION PRODUCT OF THE MONTH

Wildlife Center of Virginia

### FROM US TO YOU

Outreach Tool Spotlight—

Lake Level Viewer

Upcoming Social Media Campaigns

Risk Communication:

Understanding Mental Shortcuts

Fast Facts—Marine Debris

TO WRITE  
IS HUMAN,  
TO EDIT IS  
DIVINE.

—Stephen King

March 2026, Issue 79



## COMMUNICATION INSIGHTS

### THE PLAIN WRITING ACT OF 2010

If you've been reading our newsletter for a while, you're probably familiar with our stance on plain language (big fans). We've woven our plain-language advocacy into numerous articles and even devoted an [entire article](#) to it. But what you may not know is that writing plain is actually the law—at least if you're writing for a federal agency.

The Plain Writing Act of 2010 was signed into law to make sure federal agencies communicate clearly with the public. The idea is simple: Government documents should be easy to understand and easy to use. Not simplified to the point of losing meaning, just written in a way that makes sense.

For those of us who write, edit, review, post, or “just take a quick look” at documents before they go out the door, this law matters. A lot.

Let's break it down.

#### What It Is

The law requires federal agencies to use clear, straightforward language in documents meant for the public—especially those explaining how to apply for a benefit, follow a rule, or understand a policy.

Agencies were asked to train staff, name someone responsible for overseeing plain writing, and create a way for the public to give feedback. The Office of Management and Budget provided guidance on how to put the law into practice, and resources are available at [plainlanguage.gov](http://plainlanguage.gov) for anyone who wants practical tips and examples.

What plain writing is not:

- “Talking down” to people.
- Removing important details.
- Oversimplifying complex topics.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

---

## What it is:

- Organizing information logically.
- Putting the main point up front.
- Choosing familiar words over technical ones when possible.
- Writing for the reader instead of writing to impress other writers.

In other words, it's clarity with respect for the reader.

## Why It Matters

At its core, this law is about access. People should be able to understand information that affects their lives. They shouldn't need to reread a sentence three times just to figure out what action they're supposed to take. But even outside of legal requirements, plain writing just makes our jobs easier.

## Clear writing

- Reduces follow-up questions.
- Saves time (yours and everyone else's).
- Builds credibility.
- Helps land your key message.

If you've ever cut a paragraph in half and realized it became stronger, you already understand the spirit of this law. If you've ever moved the main point from page three to page one and watched confusion disappear, same thing.

Plain writing isn't about fewer words. It's about better ones.

## How to Apply It

So how do you apply plain writing principles in real life, especially when the subject matter is technical or policy-heavy? Start small. Lead with the point. If an action is required, state it early.

Break up long blocks of text. Use headings and short paragraphs to help people scan and find what they need.

Use active voice when it makes sense. "Submit the form by Friday" is clearer than "The form should be submitted no later than Friday."

Cut extra words. You probably don't need "in order to." "To" will do just fine.

Ask someone outside your field to read it. If they can explain it back to you correctly, you're in good shape.

None of this requires special software or a communications degree; it simply requires thinking about the person on the other end.

## A Note for Communicators

If you work in communications, you already know this work. You're the one splitting 40-word sentences into two. You're the one asking, "What are we actually trying to say here?"

The Plain Writing Act gives weight to that instinct. It reinforces that clarity isn't optional; it's responsible.

Even if you don't work for a federal agency, the principles still apply. Nonprofits, universities, state agencies, private companies—everyone benefits when people understand what they're reading the first time.

## Final Thoughts

The Plain Writing Act of 2010 supports an essential concept: effective communication.

At the end of the day, our job isn't just to produce content; it's to ensure people can use it. If that means cutting a few favorite phrases, rearranging a section, or replacing "utilize" with "use" (I'll never stop championing the word "use" over "utilize"!), that's a small price to pay.

Clarity is a service. And it's one worth providing.



Pamela Jacobs  
Senior Communications Specialist  
Lynker for NOAA Office  
for Coastal Management

[Pamela.Jacobs@noaa.gov](mailto:Pamela.Jacobs@noaa.gov)

# COMMUNICATION PRODUCT OF THE MONTH

**Featured product:** Wildlife Center of Virginia

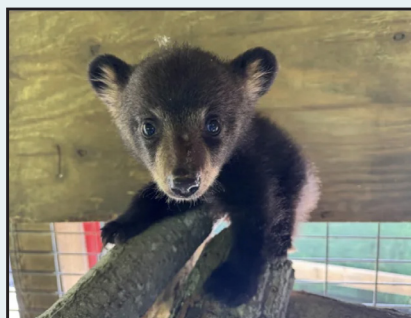
**Source:** [wildlifecenter.org](http://wildlifecenter.org); @wildlifecenter\_va on Instagram and Wildlife Center of Virginia on Facebook

**Submitted by:** Pamela Jacobs, Lynker for NOAA's Office for Coastal Management

**What it is:** The Wildlife Center of Virginia is a world-renowned teaching and research hospital for native wildlife. Since 1982, they've treated everything from black bears to silver-haired bats. Through their digital outreach, including their website and social media, they connect the work they do to the people on the other side of the screen in several ways, especially through their "Patient of the Week" series. Every week, they focus on a single case—from a fledgling barn owl who was successfully reunited with his family to an injured bobcat kitten whose progress I've been following since September—and walk their audience through the patient's entire journey from admission to (hopefully) release.

**Why I like it:** This is a perfect example of how to make a large organization feel personal. By focusing on a single animal, they bypass the "big-picture" fatigue people can feel with nonprofits and tap straight into an individual animal's story. It works because it turns clinical data into a high-stakes drama where the reader is emotionally invested throughout the animal's entire journey and ultimate outcome. They aren't just "saving animals"; they are helping a specific hawk fly again and a pair of bear cubs grow bigger and stronger. By reading their ongoing stories—and watching them on the "critter cam"—it's impossible not to care about their work (and there's nothing better than seeing an animal you've grown attached to make a full recovery). It's a great reminder for anyone working in communications: If you want to move an audience, you have to begin and end with connection.

*(Please note: This is not an endorsement of the designers, websites, or any proprietary tools but simply this writer's opinion on a good communication product.)*



FEBRUARY 6, 2026 UPDATE

## Black Bear Cubs of 2025

Both Black Bear yearlings continue to do well and have settled into their winter routines in the Bear Complex.



493 6 2 29

wildlifecenter\_va Bobcat #25-3628 has been adapting well to her new enclosure and looks more like an adult Bobcat now! She is especially fond of the new climbing structures in her enclosure, and spends most of her time perched on the top or exploring.

The Bobcat has officially entered what we call "pre-school" for hunting. We're not providing live prey yet, but our team has been hiding her meals in difficult-to-find spots in her enclosure, leaving scent trails she has to follow. We've been watching her on cam and see that she is successfully following the trails!

Starting within the next couple of weeks, our team will transition to the next phase of her rehabilitation and start to offer live fish and mice. We know it can be hard for some to hear, but hunting is an important skill she'll need to fully develop before we can safely release her into the wild.

## FROM US TO YOU

### OUTREACH TOOL SPOTLIGHT— LAKE LEVEL VIEWER

Communicating the potential effects of lake level rise can be extremely tricky—many community members and leaders don't even realize how wide-ranging the issue is. This tool creates visuals that not only capture lake level changes but demonstrate potential shoreline impacts, the correlating socioeconomic effects, and the overall effect of a rising lake level on a Great Lakes community. [Learn more about the Lake Level Viewer.](#)

### UPCOMING SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

Follow us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, and tag along with these themes:

- March 2 to 6: Great Lakes Week

### RISK COMMUNICATION: UNDERSTANDING MENTAL SHORTCUTS

You've probably noticed that when communicating an important issue to people, they tend to react based on their own past experiences, or focus on only one aspect of the conversation. It's because people often use mental shortcuts when talking about risk, which can be a major roadblock for the person leading the conversation. This short tutorial helps you recognize when and why people use mental shortcuts, and offers tips for handling them effectively. [Find the self-guided training here.](#)

---

### FAST FACTS—MARINE DEBRIS

This is one of the many graphics and facts available for your use in presentations and handouts. Grab this one at [coast.noaa.gov/states/fast-facts/marine-debris.html](http://coast.noaa.gov/states/fast-facts/marine-debris.html). If you have an idea for a new group of fast facts or illustrations, please let us know.



*Coastal Communicators* is published by NOAA's Office for Coastal Management.

To subscribe to this newsletter, visit [coast.noaa.gov/contactform](http://coast.noaa.gov/contactform).

Send questions or suggestions to [coastal.info@noaa.gov](mailto:coastal.info@noaa.gov).

View past issues at [coast.noaa.gov/gallery/newsletter.html](http://coast.noaa.gov/gallery/newsletter.html).

Editor: *Pamela Jacobs* | Graphic Designer: *Frank Ruopoli*

[coast.noaa.gov](http://coast.noaa.gov) | [facebook.com/NOAADigitalCoast](https://facebook.com/NOAADigitalCoast) | [x.com/NOAADigCoast](https://x.com/NOAADigCoast) | [instagram.com/NOAADigitalCoast](https://instagram.com/NOAADigitalCoast)