Plain Language

Department of Community and Senior Services Uses StyleWriter

Otto Solorzano, Chief Deputy Director

> "I used StyleWriter and didn't let anyone know that I had the program. I was editing my staff's work, and most of them knew they were good writers. It was when I kept changing their sentences to active instead of passive voice and trimming excess words that they knew some things were going to be changing."
>
> Otto Solórzano, Chief Deputy Director

> "StyleWriter will significantly change the way in which we communicate with all CSS community partners. The software teaches you to write in plain English, but not in a simplistic or patronizing way."
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> Jay Glassman,
> CSS Quality and Productivity Manager

Last year, the Quality and Productivity Commission distributed the plain language software, StyleWriter, to the Network Managers as part of a pilot project. The software guides the writer to use active verbs, short sentences and plain, simple language. Plain language is language that everyone in your audience can easily understand. It means writing in a way that is easy-to-read, looks good, is organized logically, and is understandable the first time you read it. It improves the effectiveness of communications.

Jay Glassman and I both tested the software and were impressed. Jay, a member of the Productivity Network, is responsible for our Strategic Planning efforts. He used the software to rewrite letters, memos and goals for the Strategic Plan. I used StyleWriter to edit letters, program memos and emails sent to me by staff. Although we felt the original documents were well written, the final documents were even better. One manager saw me editing one of her documents said, "…and I thought all along that you were a good writer, now I know your secret." StyleWriter helped me clarify, simplify, and cut excess words. The software taught me to change my own writing habits.

Our employees write documents for commissions, advisory councils, committees and the public. For this reason, our Director, Cynthia D. Banks, asked the Quality and Productivity Commission if we could pilot StyleWriter department-wide. The Commission approved the request. Within the next few months, our managers, as well as staff who write extensively, will be using this software. We expect noticeable changes in the quality of our documents.

On March 6, 2007, the Board of Supervisors approved a $208,706 grant from the Information Technology Fund to the Quality and Productivity Commission. This grant will be used to purchase and distribute StyleWriter software to County departments to support the use of plain language in written documents.

We applaud the Quality and Productivity Commission for their leadership and continuing support for the use of plain language throughout all County departments and services.

> "The software forces you to use plain language and removes old writing habits so common in organizational writing."
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> Cynthia D. Banks, Director