Orwell had it right....

Government Writing, Public Documents, and the Art of Plain Language

M.H. Dorsett, AICP

Author's note: Before I turned 40 and decided a change of profession was a better idea than a red sports car, I taught writing to college freshmen. This article draws not only on my 15 years of experience in planning, but a decade's worth of experience in the classroom and nearly 35 years of experience as a writer.

In 1946, George Orwell published a short essay, "Politics and the English Language," in which he argued that the English language has become "ugly and inaccurate." Orwell added that "the slovenliness of our language" stems from, primarily, political and economic causes. While most of Orwell's article is not, per se, aimed at government writing, there are three sections that every employee tasked with writing government documents should heed:

1. "Operators or Verbal False Limbs": which takes perfectly good simple verbs and gummies them up with a lot of extra words, typically nouns adverbs, adjectives, and the like. Orwell includes examples on a number of variations on the theme, but they all result in muddied prose. Rather than writing clean, concise, active language, the language is passive. Rather than having the force of direct verbs, the writer buries the verb and shifts responsibility for the action. In some camps, this is called nominalization, which is the act of taking a perfectly wonderful verb and turning it into a perfectly awful noun: *It was the decision of the committee...* versus *the committee decided*.
2. "Pretentious Language": Using five buck words because they sound good and look impressive rather than a nickel word or phrase that is more to the point: cul-de-sac versus dead end street.
3. "Meaningless Words": Words that elicit a "fill in the blank" response from the reader. Meaningless words or. perhaps more precisely, words that are open to interpretation are actually fairly common in planning, especially in "future" or "vision" statements: *we want a vibrant community nestled in area of natural beauty.* Try finding a single definition of "vibrant "or "natural beauty." When citizens read words like "vibrant, they fill in their own definitions, and then are disappointed when the vibrant community they envisioned never comes to pass.

If you have read government resolutions or bills, it is difficult to argue that Orwell was off-base, at least in the United States. For example, compare the following "plain language" definitions:

*Plain Writing Act of 2010: "*The term 'plain writing' means writing that is clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to

the subject or field and intended audience." (US House of Representatives, HR946) Note: the legislation excludes regulations and, by extension, legislation from the plain writing requirements.

*Plain Language & Legislation Booklet. "*Plain language is language which is direct and straightforward. It is designed to deliver its message to its intended readers clearly, effectively and without fuss.*" (Office of Scottish Parliamentary Counsel, 2006).* Note: the Office of Scottish Parliamentary Counsel is responsible for writing bills for the Scottish Executive Branch. As the title indicates, the definition applies to legislative and, by extension, regulatory writing.

George Orwell is credited with providing the impetus for the Plain Writing/Plain Language movement. In the United States, despite the best efforts of multiple generations of freshman English instructors and teachers, the Plain Writing/ Plain English movement remained, until recently, something of a ghost, especially in technical, legal, and academic fields where the knowledge of jargon determines the user's level of professional involvement and proficiency. Jargon functions as a "gate-keeper," a way of determining the writer or speaker's level "expertise" and legitimacy. In short, the use of jargon and $5 buck words is a quick way of determining who is "in the know," excluding those outside of the profession, and narrowing audience participation in the conversation.

The History of the "Plain Writing" (AKA "Plain English" or "Plain Language") Movement

In the United States, the move to tackle incomprehensible and dense government writing started in 1944 with former U.S. Representative Maury Maverick, a Texas lawyer, businessman, and ardent supporter of FDR. Mr. Maverick, then working for

---

The Meaningless Word Conundrum

A few years ago, a jurisdiction approved a conditional use permit for a major home occupation for firearm sales in a townhome development. The applicant was in law enforcement and clearly intended to sell merchandise to other law enforcement agencies. The resolution for a conditional use permit did not include a sunset clause, a point where the right, at that location, to sell arms ended. Nor did it include any provisions in case the applicant chose to move at some point in the future. It did, however, include the following phrase: "that public necessity, convenience, general welfare, and good zoning practices permit the issuance of a CUP...for a major home occupation for firearms sales..."

Words and phrases like " public necessity, convenience, general welfare, and good zoning practices" sound reasonable and are meant to provide a clear connection between the power to make a decision at the local level and the police powers enumerated in the U.S. Constitution that justify planning and zoning actions. Unfortunately, they are often treated like stock language, phrases included in every resolution with little or no consideration of whether the proposal actually fits with the terms. In short, they have become meaningless language, language included to satisfy a legal requirement but with little or no meaning. It is uncertain whether the planning commission in the above example thought about the proposal in terms of good zoning practice or general welfare, convenience or public necessity, Indeed, the proposal suggests that little thought was given beyond the convenience of the applicant.

If terms are used in resolutions or in other documents, ask how they are defined and how they apply to the specific case. The answers may help clarify the proposal or suggest the need for additional restrictions.

the Smaller War Plants Corporation at Roosevelt's request, complained in a memo about the convoluted language in a report created by one of his own employees, calling it gobbledygook. In the memo, Maverick wrote ""Stay off the gobbledygook language. It only fouls people up. For Lord's sake, be short and say what you're talking about … Anyone using the words 'activation' or 'implementation' will be shot" (Memorandum, March 30, 1944). Unfortunately, Representative Maverick's plea for linguistic sanity went unheeded.

In 1955, Stuart Chase, the original proponent of "plain writing," wrote an essay titled "Gobbledygook," which picked up where Maury Maverick left off. In the essay, Mr. Chase defined gobbledygook as "using two, or three, or ten words in the place of one, or using a five-syllable word where a single syllable would suffice." While Mr. Chase gave plenty of examples of federal agencies, including the Federal Security Agency, attempting to reduce incomprehensible writing during the Eisenhower Administration, the abolition of gobbledygook was, on the whole, not successful.

In 1971, President Richard Nixon effectively jump-started the Plain English movement at the federal level. In Executive Order 11583, which established the Office of Consumer Affairs, Nixon detailed the functions, including "encourage and coordinate the development of information of interest to consumers by Federal agencies and the publication and distribution of materials which will inform consumers of matters of interest to them *in language which is readily understandable by the layman*." While his order did not extend beyond the confines of Consumer Affairs and product safety, it did represent a first step towards making government documents clearer and more accessible to the general public.

While President Gerald Ford did not do much to encourage clarity, the Plain English cudgel was picked by Jimmy Carter, albeit late in his administration. In the policy portion of Executive Order #12044 (March 23, 1978), Carter wrote "regulations should be as simple and as clear as possible." As a requirement of the approval process for significant regulations, Carter included that each new "regulation [be] written in plain English and [be] understandable to those who must comply with it." On his way out of office, President Carter signed the "Paperwork Reduction Act (44 U.S.C. 3501), which, among other things was meant to "ensure the greatest possible public benefit from and maximize the utility of information created, collected, maintained, used, shared and disseminated by or for the Federal Government" while simplifying and streamlining data collection. While the act, itself, was not written entirely in plain English and the form did little to minimize paper, it was considered a positive step forward in improving government communications.

In 1981, President Reagan rescinded Executive Order $12044 and effectively put the plain English movement on hold for nearly 17 years. Thirty years later, it still seems rather odd that the President most closely associated with plain English (beyond Truman) would not only rescind the plain English provision, but add, in its place, regulations creating far more complicated and less accessible documents.

The plain English movement remained in mothballs until 1998, when President Bill Clinton issued a "Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies" (June 1, 1998), titled "Plain English in Government Writing," in which he wrote:

> The Federal Government's writing must be in plain language. By using plain language, we send a clear message about what the Government is doing, what it requires, and what services it offers. Plain language saves the Government and the private sector time, effort, and money. Plain language requirements vary from one document to another, depending on the intended audience.

Clinton's Memorandum, which did not carry the same force of law as earlier Executive Orders, provided much the same advice as Carter had given 20 years earlier, including insisting on "logical organization; easy-to-read design features; and use:

- common, everyday words, except for necessary technical terms;
- "you" and other pronouns;
- the active voice; and
- short sentences."

Not to be left out, the American Bar Association jumped on the "plain language" bandwagon. At the 1999 ABA Annual Meeting, the ABA House of Delegates approved a "Resolution and Report on Plain Language, sponsored by the Section of Administrative Law and Regulatory Practice. Although the recommendation was limited to the "use of plain language in writing regulations," the ABA's specific list of techniques for writing regulations reflected those proposed by Bill Clinton the year before:

- Organize [regulations] for the convenience of their readers;
- Use direct and easily understood language;
- Write in short sentences, in the active voice; and
- Use helpful stylistic devices, such as question-and-answer formats, vertical lists, spacing that facilitates clarity, and tables.

Sadly, the American Bar Association's position on plain language did not extend to other forms of legal writing, including judicial decisions, legal reviews, white papers, laws, and their own study of plain language. In a section addressing potential problems with a plain language approach to regulations, the authors wrote:

"...agencies should not make the language of regulations plain by the expedient of referring to bureaucratic discretion issues that more complex language could deal with. Doing so would leave an agency with no standards to cabin its discretion."

Despite the language, the concern is worth noting. As with previous changes in administration, the shift in 2000 placed the plain language movement back on the shelf.

Codifying the Plain English Movement

As they say (with "they" being undefined), government agencies and Congress move at all deliberate speed. Until 2010, the eradication of gobbledy gook, at least in terms of government departments and agencies, depended on the whims of leadership. Some administrations declared war on garbled language, others embraced it as a way to cover unpopular positions. By 2010, it was clear that Executive Orders and memorandums were not only not enough, they were too easy to undo.

Congress passed and President Obama signed the "Plain Writing Act of 2010," effectively changing how government communicates with citizens, at least for the time being. The act, sends government writers back to freshman composition to relearn what they should have learned at eighteen.

The Act defines "plain writing" as "writing that is clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field and intended audience." In short, the "Plain Writing Act" requires that writers consider point (what do you want your readers to understand or know when they finish reading), purpose

(why do you want them to know it), and audience (who are you writing to). According to the sponsors, the purpose of the "Plain Writing Act" is to improve the effectiveness and accountability of Federal agencies to the public by promoting clear Government communication that the public can understand and use."

While the Act covers a fair number of forms of government communication, it excludes regulation and does nothing to improve the quality of legislation. Excluding regulation and legislation means that the Act accomplishes far less that the earlier executive orders. On the upside, as a signed piece of legislation, it will be far harder to rescind. The Act and the legislative intention is laudable, the implementation is less so.

Rules of the Road: Writing in Plain English

I. Audience, Point, & Purpose: the Core of Writing

Point, purpose, and audience are at the heart of writing:

- *Audience:* Who are you writing for or to?
- *Point: W*hat do you want your readers to know when they finish reading?
- *Purpose:* why to you want them to know it and what to you want to accomplish when all is said and done?

Audience:

Your choice of audience will dictate your approach, the level of detail, and the words you choose. Most local government documents are written with the general public in mind, including elected and appoint officials. One of the oddities of government writing is that we assume that elected officials have some magical understanding of a subject or speak a special language, so we write in precise, formal, often legal terms. For the most part, the only real difference between elected officials and the general public they represent is that someone cast a vote for them. Their knowledge of government, of specific subjects, may be no broader than the teacher living down the street or the checkout person at the local Home Depot.

Before you start writing, think about your audience's level of knowledge about a subject. Writing about complex issues to a general audience does not mean either dummying down the language or the subject; it does mean you need to spend more time educating your audience and defining your terms. Never assume that your audience are idiots; they're not. Some of the worst examples of government prose, aside from federal legislation and local ordinances, are the "help" guides written by a subject specialist for the general public. Condescension is never a good idea. Be detailed and respectful.

Point:

In Freshman Comp, point is equivalent to your thesis: the one thing you want your reader to understand or know when they finish reading the document. You point may be narrow (the grading standards for a lot) or it may be broad (the future direction of the county). Every piece of writing, long or short, must have a point.

An old friend, long since dead, wrote combat strategy guides for the military.

On a large sheet of paper, he wrote his audience definition, his central point, and a short purpose statement (the same purpose statement every time). He taped the sheet of paper on the wall above his typewriter. The example I remember best was:

> *Audience:* 18 to 25 year old kids without the sense god gave a turnip.
> *Point:* How to play "king on the mountain" with M-16s.
> *Purpose:* Keep them alive.

He resisted the temptation of junking up his prose with three-word phrases that seemed to be in vogue at the time.

While you do not need to write your point on a large sheet of paper and tape it to the wall, it is worth your time to clearly define you central point before you sit down to write. It will keep you on track and help you clearly define essential versus non-essential information.

Purpose

Every piece of writing, whether a newsletter article, a report, or project summary, exists for a reason.--whether it is to keep a bunch of hapless teenagers alive or to teach citizens how to build a deck or help planning commissioners make a decision. Your purpose statement not only defines why you are creating a specific piece of writing, it also defines the mode of writing (the type of document you are going to be creating and the approach you are likely to take).

Modes of Writing Resources

II. Modes of Writing and Organization

There are no hard and fast rules for organization, in part because the organization of a writing project depends on the mode of writing you choose (descriptive versus process), as well as your point, purpose, and audience. There are seven primary modes or types of writing: narration, exposition, definition, classification, description, process analysis (how-to), and persuasion. The mode or modes you choose depend, in large part, on what you are trying to accomplish.

Narrative:

Perhaps one of the most maligned forms of writing because many of us associate narratives with the grim "what I did during my summer vacation" essays we were forced to write as kids and as college freshmen. Narrative writing recounts events over time, and answers the basic question of how we got from point A to point B. Planning reports often have narrative elements, especially reports of zoning violations. Any time you are having to recount some sort of story, you are using the narrative mode. The history section in your comprehensive plan is an example of narrative writing.

Organization. Narratives are based on time sequences, with clearly defined starting and ending points. Unless you are trying for dramatic effect, unlikely as that may be in a government or business report, narratives use a linear organization.

Exposition:

Perhaps it would be better to refer to this as explanatory writing. Expository

writing answers the questions "why did '*x*' happen" and "how does 'x' work." Articles that discuss "cause and effect" fall under this heading (*"a"* and *"b"* events led to *"c"* outcome. Most newsletter articles, news articles, and general information handouts are examples of expository writing. For example, a report on the recent flooding in an area not prone to flooding (effect) and the events or actions that led to the flooding (cause). Other examples include technical data sheets explaining impervious surface, setbacks, cash proffer systems, and so on.

Organization: While the organization of an expository or explanatory writing depends on the project, the most common approach resembles an inverted triangle. Start with the broad or general points, and then narrow to the component elements and add detail. The general discussion provides a framework for the details. One of the simplest ways of generating materials for an expository project involves answering the "J" questions: who, what, when, where, why, and how.

Definition.

The definition mode answers "what is the nature of 'x'?" As with the expository mode, definition mode is used primarily in newsletters, subject specific brochures and other forms of public outreach materials, and background reports for elected and appointed officials. Examples of definitional writing include: a brochure explaining the characteristics of floodplains, a newsletter article defining monopole telecommunications towers, or a handout to planning commissioners explaining green infrastructure.

Organization: Definition projects follow a similar organization pattern.

Classification:

The classification mode answers "what are the characteristics of and the difference between 'x,' 'y,' and 'z'?" The classification mode requires separating things (objects, places, types of landscapes) into different classes, detailing the characteristics and requirements for each class, and comparing the similarities and differences between classes. Classification is at the heart of land use ordinances, whether you are writing about different land use categories (agricultural versus suburban versus urban) , specific differences in sign requirements for each of the land use categories, or different parking requirements for different types of commercial uses.

Organization: Organization is based on one or more "controlling" characteristics. For example, if you are asked to write a report on existing land uses in your jurisdiction, controlling characteristics may be identified as either rural, suburban, and urban land uses; by general use categories like agricultural, residential, commercial, and industrial; or by intensity of use. The approach you take depends on the point, purpose, and audience for the report.

Process Analysis:

Process analysis is better known as "how-to." and answers the question "how do I do 'x'?" Process analysis or "how-to" writing is meant to teach someone

how to do a specific task. On the face of it, "how-to" writing should be the easiest of the modes; in reality, it is the hardest and requires far more attention to detail than some of the other modes. Instruction sheets for how to apply for a rezoning, how to file a complaint, how to get a new address, how to find the planning department, are all examples of process analysis.

Organization: Process analysis always uses sequential organization: this is how you start; these are the steps you need to take, in this order; this is how you finish.

Persuasion.

Persuasive writing is one of the more common modes of writing in planning, although it is arguably the least acknowledged. Persuasive writing is designed to answer the question "why should we or you do 'x' or take 'y' position ?" Persuasive writing is designed to build a case for or against a specific approach or project. Staff reports, especially those which recommend for or against a proposed project, responses to Requests for Bids (RFPs), project proposals, and grant applications are perhaps the best examples of persuasive writing.

Organization: The organization of a persuasive writing project depends not only on a clear definition of point, purpose, and audience, but also may be dictated by circumstances. This is especially true for grant and project proposals which may require following a rigid format. In general projects, persuasive writing starts with facts and then a discussion of the facts based on the point you are trying to make. One important thing to remember in organizing a persuasive piece is that English preferences the second half of the construction. Translation: the last thing you mention is going to be what sticks in people's minds. As a rule of thumb, the formula for a persuasive writing project is 1) present the facts; 2) present the opposition; and 3) present the case for the proposal or project.

The modes of writing are tools. No writing project utilizes a single mode. While there may be a controlling mode, the chances are you will have sections that use the other modes. For example, a technical data sheet on floodplains may be primarily explanatory (expository), but will also incorporate classification (characteristics of the different parts of the floodplain), definition (what is a floodplain or a levy), persuasion (why citizens should have flood insurance or engineered foundations under single-wides), and so on.

III. The Flow of Language and Choice of Words

Most of the guidelines start with "write short sentences." The problem with the advice is that an entire paragraph of short sentences is as difficult to read as a paragraph-length sentence that continues long past its expiration date. Short sentences sound simplistic, choppy, and, at worst, patronizing. If you are writing a government report, the last thing you want to do is sound like a recitation of "Mary had a Little Lamb."

There is a flow to language. While we typically don't think of writing as an oral form, writers listen to their words and their sentences as they add them to the page. Your ear is your best editor. Most people know, intuitively, what "sounds

right." Trust your ear. As you are writing, periodically stop and read aloud what you have written. If you need to take a further step back, ask a friend, a neighbor, or a co-worker to read aloud what you have written to you. If the words and sentences sound convoluted or choppy, they probably are and you need to go back to the drawing board.

There is an added benefit to this approach. You will hear errors before you see them. When we write, it is not uncommon to leave out "little" words or leave fragments behind when we cut and paste text. Our minds fill in the blank, so small errors are not as visible as you might think. Quietly skimming through your article won't guarantee that you will find the mistakes, especially if you are working on a document that has gone through multiple revisions.

Each sentence should stand on its own and should make sense without being connected to the sentences before or after. One trick you can use in the final editing stage is to read your report or article backwards. Start at the end of your manuscript, and read the manuscript, sentence by sentence, in reverse order. We often miss writing errors because of our familiarity with the text and what we assume is there. By reading backwards, you remove the sentence from its overall context and make it easier to catch errors. While you may not catch spelling errors, you will catch most sentence construction errors and errors created by "cut and paste."

Use Direct Language.

This would probably better labeled as "the use of verbs." Using direct language means that your ideas are not obscured, either intentionally or unintentionally, by your language. Active language is direct, to the point, and assigns specific actions (verbs) to specific actors (nouns, pronouns). As readers, we are trained to look for the subject of a sentence and look for the action the subject is or has taken.

Nominalization. Nominalization is the act of taking a perfectly wonderful verb and turning it into a perfectly awful noun. Nominalized (or "nouned") verbs remove direct responsibility for an action from those who have taken the action (also known as indirect agency, which turns a direct actor into an indirect actor). For example:

- Nominalized: Therefore let it be know that it is (verb) the resolution (nominalized verb) of the Town Council (noun) to....
  Direct: The Town Council (noun) resolved (verb)...
- Nominalized: It was (verb) the decision (nominalized verb) of the Board of Supervisors (noun) to raise taxes (object).
  Direct: The Board of Supervisors (noun) decided (verb) to raise taxes.
              or
  The Board of Supervisors raised taxes.

The use of direct language, especially in ordinances, has some key benefits: 1) decreased confusion, 2) increased compliance, and 3) reduced paper and print costs.

Jargon and Specialty Terms.

Common wisdom strongly suggests that you should avoid any and all

Coded Language: Understanding Auxiliary or Conditional Verbs

Let's face it, lawyers and lawmakers love auxiliary (conditional) verbs: should, shall, may, must. It is impossible to find statutes, codes, and ordinances that are not littered with the words. In English, auxiliary verbs emphasize, direct, demand, and generally control the verb in the sentence, your subsequent actions, and your right to question authority.

Do It! Verbs.   Some auxiliary verbs really don't give you a choice in terms of action, which is the reason they are most prevalent in codes and ordinances:

> *Shall.* If an ordinance or code uses shall, or the negative shall not, before a verb (shall write, shall adopt, shall not build), then the action is mandatory and arguing is futile, unless you are willing to go through the legislative process in order to remove the word. If a legislature really wants a town, a committee, a board, or citizens to do something, they use shall in the lead up to the requirement. It is generally best to think of shall as unconditional and non-negotiable.

> *Must.* While the word *must* is similar to *shall*, it doesn't carry the same force, is not nearly as common in statutes and codes, and is more likely to be followed by the word but. In general, codes that use *must* are providing a general rather than a specific rule and provide a variety of methods for getting from point A to point B. For example, "counties must provide a variety of recreational facilities, but the choice of facilities should be based on the needs of the community. Must is unconditional, but negotiable.

> *Should.* *Should* is, at least in law, the equivalent to a verbal guilt-trip, meant to make you feel guilty if you leave out any of the suggested items in a list. For example, your comprehensive plan should use a minimum of a 10 year horizon. As with *must,* the provisions which follow the *should* are not mandatory (if they were, the authors of the statute would have used *shall)*, although there is some indication that ignoring the advice is probably not a good idea.

> As an aside, *must* and *should* are also considered compromise words. The chances are, the provisions which follow originally were preceded by *shall*, but to gain support for the provisions, the shall was removed and replaced by must or should.

> *May.* *May* means you have, at least, the illusion of latitude and indicates you have options.

> While you can probably safely ignore the provisions that follow *may* and do not apply to your jurisdiction, it is not a good idea to ignore the provisions following *should* and *must*. Although these provisions are not mandatory, it can be argued that there inclusion suggests an adherence to the "spirit of the law."

variations of jargon. The problem is that not all subject-specific words are jargon. Words and phrases like "setback," "impervious surface," and "externality" are necessary land use terms. While they may not be in the vocabulary of most citizens, their failure to make the list of commonly used terms is not a good reason to avoid their use. It is, however, an excellent reason to add them to a glossary. If you are using terms that are common to a field, but not common in general conversation, include a plain language definition in your document.

Beware of assuming information. Planners are notorious for assuming that the terms or phrases they use are common knowledge. When you are writing, use the "reasonable person" standard. In a nutshell, a "reasonable person" is a the average reader (or citizen) within your defined audience. If you are writing a technical article for geologists, then the "reasonable person" is the average professional geologist. If you are writing an instruction sheet for rezoning a parcel of land, then the "reasonable person" would be your average citizen or average landowner.

As a local employee, you probably have a pretty good idea what your citizens do and do not understand. If you are working on a brochure, a technical data sheet, a plan, or an ordinance, think about what terms your citizens are likely to know. Rather than avoiding planning terminology or phrases that may be unfamiliar, take the educational opportunity and define them.

If you are writing about a specific issue, think about local examples you can use to provide your readers with a reference point. For example, your local planning district commission has started a sustainability initiative and you have been tasked with writing an information brochure for the residents in your county. You can write a definition of sustainability, but it may not resonate with your residents. Local reference points and examples, the recycling campaign at the county high school, the garden club's tree planting and beautification program, the rails-to-trails project connecting your two primary towns, will help bridge the gap between concept and local reality.
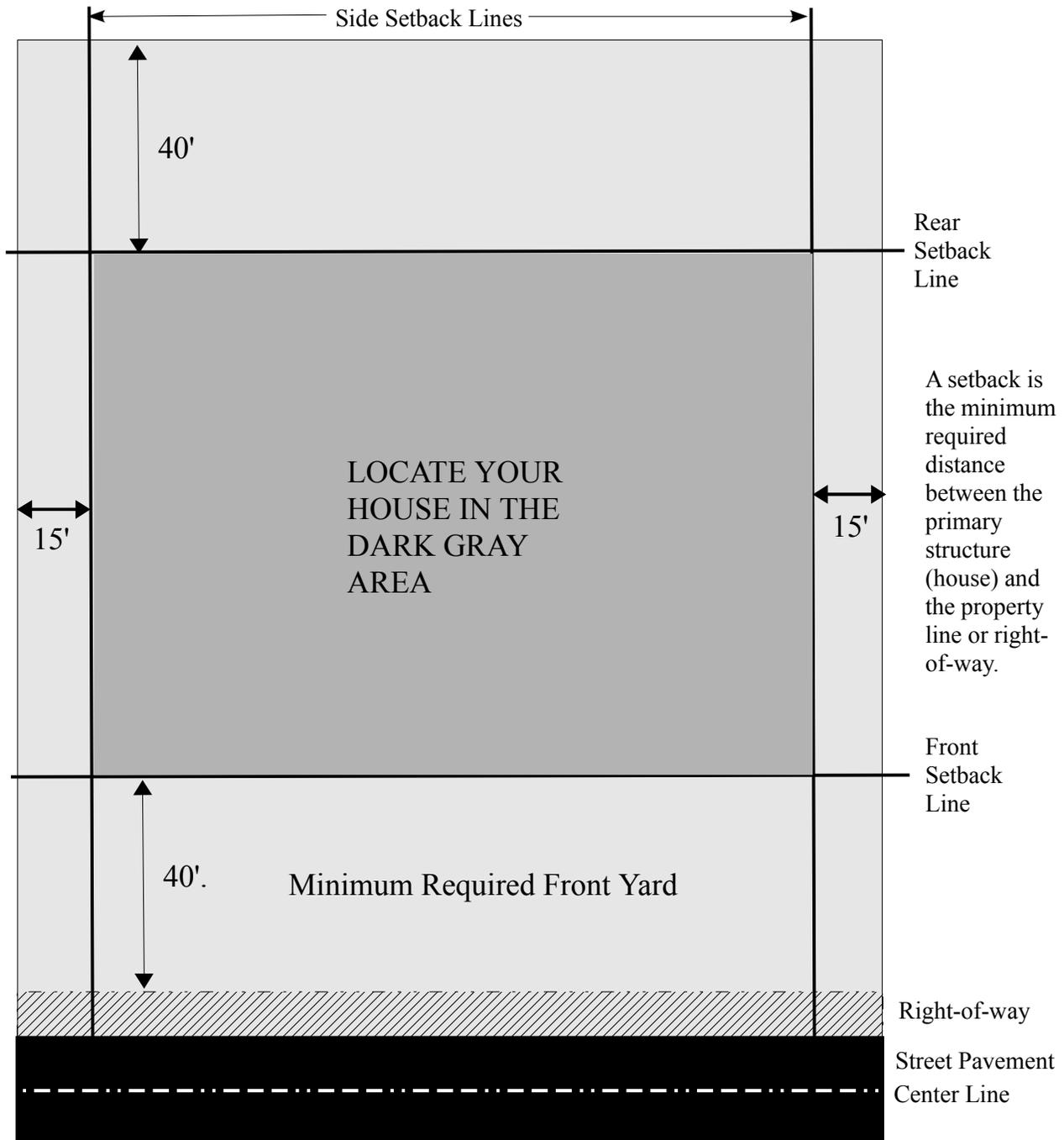
One trick that is useful is to have an informal editorial committee... two or three volunteers who are willing to slog through planning documents and mark the information, specifically words and phrases, that they are unfamiliar with or find confusing. Choose people with whom you are comfortable and from whom you feel you could accept suggestions.

Do not try to write to the outliers. It is sometimes useful to think of your citizens on a continuum. You will have some at each end that either think you are being too simple or too complex. You are never going to write a planning document that is 100% understandable to all citizens, but you can make it accessible to 90% of your citizens by providing adequate definitions and, when needed, illustrations.

Words and Phrases to Avoid.

If you want to write in plain language, avoid legal and archaic words and phrases that are there because of tradition but add little to the conversation. It is common practice to throw in "whereas" and the "heretofore" in resolutions and toss out latin phrases like candy at Mardi Gras, but for the sake of your readers, resist the temptation. The same goes for using slang. If a word or

Technical Data Sheet Handout: Setbacks & Required Yards

Side Setback Lines

40'

Rear Setback Line

LOCATE YOUR HOUSE IN THE DARK GRAY AREA

A setback is the minimum required distance between the primary structure (house) and the property line or right-of-way.

15'

15'

Front Setback Line

40'. Minimum Required Front Yard

Right-of-way

Street Pavement Center Line

Street Rights-of-way: Streets (the paved area) are built on an easement (an area reserved for use as a street, for utilities, for sidewalks, and for other public uses). All residential street rights of way in Xville are 40 feet. Before starting construction, call the Xville Street Department and ask them to mark the right-of-way easement on your property. Your front setback is measured from the edge of the right-of-way, not the edge of your property line. Side and rear setbacks are measured from your property line.

phrase adds little of nothing to your reader's knowledge of the subject, leave it out or substitute a more accessible and more easily understood term or phrase.

Acronyms

While acronyms take less time to type, do not use them unless you have defined them. Never assume that everyone knows their meaning or that the letter combination has only one meaning. For example:

SUP = Special Use Permit;
SUP = Stand-Up Paddle Surfing;
SUP = Stanford University Press;
SUP = Simple Update Protocol;
SUP = Sailor's Union of the Pacific;
SUP = Selective Ultraviolet Phototherapy; and
SUP = Scottish Unionist Party.

While you can argue that the acronym is clear in context, don't assume that you and your reader are on the same page or have the same understanding.

Gremlins in the Mix

Most writers use spellcheck and then call the proofreading quits. It will find the clear misspellings, but it skips over words it recognizes as words. Most of the gremlins are the small words: *he* and *the*, *an* and *and*, etc. There is, however, one gremlin that periodically pops up in public documents at generally the worst possible time. Before you close a document and call it finished, run a search and replace for the word *pubic*. You would be amazed how many writers leave out the "*l*" in *public*.

When in Doubt, Draw a Picture

Like most staff planners, I spent a few hours every week as the "on call" planner, tasked with answering citizen questions on everything from setback to "what can I do with my property." It turned out to be easier to draw a picture to explain setbacks than to try and explain setbacks without the visual aids. If you find yourself drawing a picture to explain a concept, consider including the illustration when you revise your ordinance.

On occasion, the best approach to explaining a concept is providing an illustration, either as a stand-alone image with labels or as supplemental image to a written explanation. This is especially true if you are developing land use ordinances, technical data sheets, information brochures, and plans.

Meghan Dorsett is the editor and publisher of The Community Planner. Before taking over her parents' publishing company, she worked as the comprehensive planner for Montgomery County, Virginia. A member of the American Institute of Certified Planners, Meghan has a masters in Environmental Resource Planning from Missouri State University, and a Masters in English from Virginia Tech. In addition to working as a planner and a planning consultant (Cambria Planning Group), Meghan taught English at Missouri State (aka Southwest Missouri State) and worked as a writer, editor, graphic designer, printer, and occasional bartender.