

Commentary: Unclear communication is costly, time-consuming

By ANNETTA L. CHEEK

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Today's world is so complex that we must rely on others, especially the government, for information to keep us safe, secure and healthy. Taxpayers pay for the government, and they deserve to understand what it's doing and what it's telling them to do. Unfortunately, the government often serves up information in overwritten, wordy, highly technical language like the following:

"The amount of expenses reimbursed to a claimant shall be reduced by any amount that the claimant receives from a collateral source. In cases in which a claimant receives reimbursement under this provision for expenses that also will or may be reimbursed from another source, the claimant shall subrogate the United States to the claim for payment from the collateral source up to the amount for which the claimant was reimbursed under this provision."

And what does all this mean? Simply that:

— If you get a payment from another source, the government will reduce its payment to you by the amount you get from that source.

— If you already got payments from the government and from another source for the same expenses, you must pay back what the government paid you.

Difficult, obscure writing like this is expensive, time-consuming and annoying. It puts citizens at risk and makes it difficult for federal agencies to fulfill their missions effectively and efficiently. It discourages people from complying with requirements or applying for benefits. The owner of a small business in Tulsa, Okla., asked 13 clients about their responses to difficult government communications. Of the 13, 10 said they might never respond.

When government communications are unclear, agencies have to write second documents to explain the original unclear document. They have to answer calls asking for explanations. They have to chase after people who fail to respond. They may even lose court cases because their communications violate rights to due process.

The other side of the story is equally compelling. Plain language — language the intended reader can understand and use on one reading — can save the government and the public time and money and help the government fulfill its mission better.

A Veterans Benefits Administration office rewrote one benefits letter in plain language. Calls to the office about that letter fell 90 percent. But even better, more veterans applied for benefits because they understood whether they were eligible and what they needed to do. In the end, more veterans got the help they needed because VBA rewrote this one letter.

Arizona's Department of Revenue started a plain language effort that spread to other state offices. Here are just two of the results:

— The Department of Revenue saved \$51,014 in a year from avoided phone calls after clarifying requirements.

— The Department of Weights and Measures collected an extra \$144,000 a year after clarifying payment instructions.

Given such evidence, why does the government continue to use difficult language? It's easier. Writing clearly takes hard work. And it requires clear thinking. It's faster to pull out an old model and update it than to redo your document.

And, often, government writers don't think much about the most important aspect of communication — the audience.

Fixing this problem will take focus and determination. Government writers will need new skills and will need to change the way they think about communication with the public. They need to recognize the huge costs imposed by poor communication and accept that it's their job to be clear, not the job of the reader to figure out what they're saying. Perhaps then government communication will serve citizens the way our democracy intends.

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Annetta L. Cheek is chairwoman of the Center for Plain Language. She testified last month before the House Small Business subcommittee on contracting and technology on HR 3548, the Plain Language in Government Communications Act.