



PBOT WRITING GUIDE

Tip Sheet #3

Writing clearly about complex work.



Take a deep breath. Before you draft your PBOT story, distill what you want to communicate into the shortest, simplest sentence you can. Let that sentence be your guide to writing the rest. These simple steps can help you once you have your first draft.

SIMPLE STEPS TO CLEAR COPY

1. BREAK UP SENTENCES Split long sentences and remove passive voice to make your copy easy to read, understand, and translate. Aim for a reading level of Grade 8 or lower. Test your work with the online tool Hemingway: hemingwayapp.com.

2. USE SIMPLER WORDS Simple nouns and active verbs will suffice. Longer descriptions are also better than using standalone buzzwords like *livability*, *sustainability*, *walkability*, etc.

3. CLEAN UP ACRONYMS Write out acronyms on first usage, especially for the Portland Bureau of Transportation (PBOT). Don't use an acronym for something mentioned once. Avoid acronyms only used internally by PBOT.

4. REDUCE JARGON Many terms we use internally that are common in planning, transportation, or business settings mean less to a public audience. Use plain language first and foremost and provide as much context as possible. Unless you can argue a term you're using is in common usage outside the world of transportation, cut it out. If jargon is still vital for the story you're telling, describe the work in simple language first, then introduce the jargon second.

Avoid:

- amenities
- arterial
- bike facilities
- collector
- complaint-driven
- conveyance system
- crosswalk architecture
- demand management
- infilling
- micromobility
- mode, modal, multimodal
- multiuse
- non-local
- pedestrian environment
- road diet
- road user
- signalized

The public doesn't know the technical definition of terms like these. Find ways to avoid technical jargon when simple adjectives and nouns evoke the same feeling.

Beware prefix- and suffix-creep. Terms like *micromobility*, *multiuse*, or *non-drive-alone trips*, are often too wonky to be understood (or translated) easily without more content.

Not everyone understands this industry jargon to describe the different ways people get from point A to B. Mode on its own is preferable than *transportation option* or *choice* (not everyone has a choice), but beware jargon language-creep to *modal*, *multimodal*, etc.

5. REMOVE REDUNDANT

PHRASES Be sure to drop the italicized (and unnecessary) words in phrases like:

- advance **planning/warning**
- close **proximity**
- demographic **populations**
- depreciated *in value*
- end **product**
- end **result**
- few** *in number*
- final **outcome**
- general **consensus**
- lift *up*
- merge *together*
- might **possibly**
- mutual **cooperation**
- plan *ahead*
- surrounded** *on all sides*
- twelve **midnight/noon**

6. UPDATE YOUR TERMS Language is constantly evolving. We do our best to follow the public conversation and reflect the language the community is using to describe itself. This means retiring outdated or offensive terms wherever possible. It also means paying careful attention to the context of the language you're using, and your intended audience. Examples of people-first language and terms we've adopted include:

WRITING:

- collision, crash
- driver crashed into...
- pedestrian
- people biking/driving
- people taking transit
- people with disabilities
- protected bike lane

INSTEAD OF:

- accident
- a car crashed into...
- walkers, people walking
- cyclists
- transit riders
- disabled
- cycletrack

We heard from the disability community that they feel more included in terms like *pedestrian* vs. *walker*, *people walking*

Staff with the Office of Community & Civic Life has written a great article "Demystifying Disability Language" with helpful tips see: portlandoregon.gov/civic/article/713447

7. FINAL PASS After you've simplified your copy, do a final check. Be sure all streets names, dates, and figures, match our guidelines in Tip Sheets #1 and #2. Replace symbols &, / or + with *and*. Watch for the over-capitalization of words like *bureau*, *city*, *program*, *service*, etc. Reduce double or triple spaces after your sentences to one space. Feel free to run by Comms when you're done!

PBOT writing style questions on something not covered here? Ask **Stacy Brewster** with PBOT Communications.

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