

## Where can I learn more about WSDOT's Reader-Friendly Environmental Documents?

### WSDOT Environmental Procedures Manual and The Reader-Friendly Toolkit:

The Reader-Friendly Toolkit is a companion document to the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT's) Environmental Procedures Manual. You should use both the Toolkit and the manual when you prepare WSDOT environmental documents. The Environmental Procedures Manual provides you with WSDOT environmental guidance, and the Toolkit gives you specific tools you can use to make your documents easier to understand.

### WSDOT Graphics Website:

The Washington State Department of Transportation Graphics Department has many tools available online for employees with access to the WSDOT Intranet. These tools can be accessed at: [www.wsdot.wa.gov/Communications/Graphics](http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/Communications/Graphics).

### "Plain-Talk Writing" class information:

[www.writewordsusa.com](http://www.writewordsusa.com).

### "Reader-Friendly Writing" class information:

email [readerfriendlytraining@parametrix.com](mailto:readerfriendlytraining@parametrix.com) or call (253) 501-1050.

### Reader-Friendly Toolkit - online:

[www.wsdot.wa.gov/environment/compliance/ReaderFriendly.htm](http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/environment/compliance/ReaderFriendly.htm)

### The Plain Language Action Network website:

[www.plainlanguage.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov)

**Joseph M. Williams' book:** *Style: 10 Lessons in Clarity and Grace*

**Natalie Macris' book:** *Planning in Plain English*

This book is available through the American Planning Association at: [www.planning.org](http://www.planning.org)

### Who needs to know about Reader-friendly concepts?

All Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) staff, consultants, agency reviewers, decision-makers and the public.

### When do we apply Reader-Friendly concepts?

The Reader-Friendly format should be used for all environmental documents, including EISs and EAs. It is not required for supporting documents such as technical memos and discipline reports.

# Reader-Friendly Documents

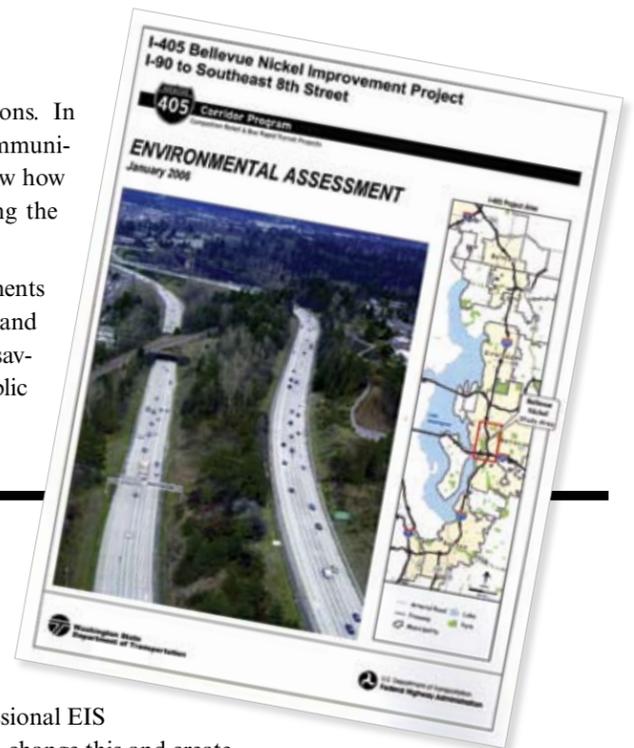
## A new direction for communicating complex environmental issues

Environmental Services Office - June 2006

## A New Direction

WSDOT is working to improve the quality of all documents and publications. In our project-level environmental reviews, we are trying to change how we communicate the results of technical analysis. We need our public documents to show how we propose to meet a transportation need while protecting and enhancing the surrounding land, water, and communities.

Our new, Reader-Friendly environmental assessments and impact statements have helped build public trust and have reduced frustration with over-sized and overly complex documents. It has also benefited the project teams in time savings with faster reviews, and by generating more constructive and concise public comments because the public has a better grasp of our proposals.



## Why do we need Reader-Friendly Environmental Documents?

"The environmental documents we've been producing are written for professional EIS readers and attorneys and not for decision makers or the public. We need to change this and create documents that can successfully meet the needs of all the important audiences."

— Excerpt from the Reader-Friendly Toolkit

"User-friendly documents show our respect for people and their time. They are also good customer service. Clearly written documents make it easier for citizens to understand how to access service and the roles of all the parties involved.

Documents written in Plain Talk will include:

- Clear language that is commonly used by the intended audience;
- Only the information needed by the recipient, presented in a logical sequence;
- Sentences, written in active voice, that make it clear who is responsible for what;
- Layout and design that help the reader understand the meaning on the first try. This includes adequate white space, bulleted lists, helpful headings and other proven techniques."

— Governor's Executive Order 05-03: 'Plain Talk'

**For more information:** This folio provides an overview of WSDOT Reader-Friendly principles and efforts.

For more information, please contact:

Environmental Services Office  
Special Projects Manager:

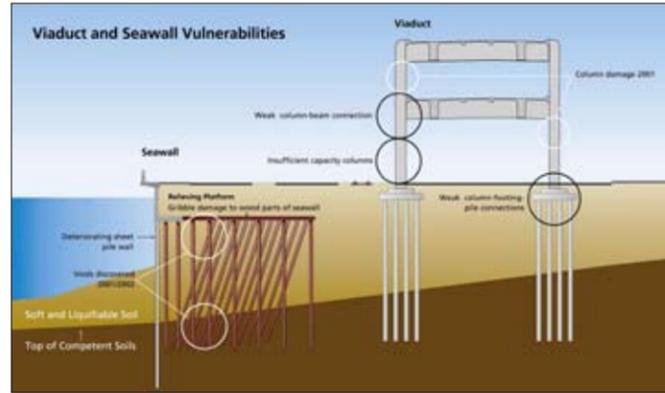
Kathleen McKinney  
(360) 705-7304  
[mckinnk@wsdot.wa.gov](mailto:mckinnk@wsdot.wa.gov)

Environmental Services Office  
Policy Branch Manager:

Carol Lee Roalkvam  
(360) 705-7126  
[roalkvc@wsdot.wa.gov](mailto:roalkvc@wsdot.wa.gov)

# What are the KEY Reader-Friendly concepts?

## 1. Tell a Story



Environmental documents tell stories about proposed projects in the communities where we live, work and play. The graphic above was used to tell a story of why an existing state highway must be fixed. Proper use of graphics and the following tips help us create documents that tell a story:

- Write clearly and use simple language;
- Organize documents to tell a story;
- Explain the problem and why people should care; and
- Describe both the negative and the positive effects associated with the project.

## 3. Make it Brief



**Example:** The draft EIS for the Viaduct project was 168 pages, twenty-five documents totaling 4,000 pages were in the appendix CD.

\* It is essential to tell your readers where they can find the supporting material, for this we have developed cross-referencing tools.

Environmental Impact Statements (EISs) can exceed 1,000 pages, even though NEPA regulations state that in most cases, they should be less than 150 pages long (40 CFR 1502.7). To make it brief, the main document should focus on what is relevant to the decision, providing supporting materials for technical and legal reviewers in the appendices. Environmental documents can also be made shorter by using graphics to convey complex information.

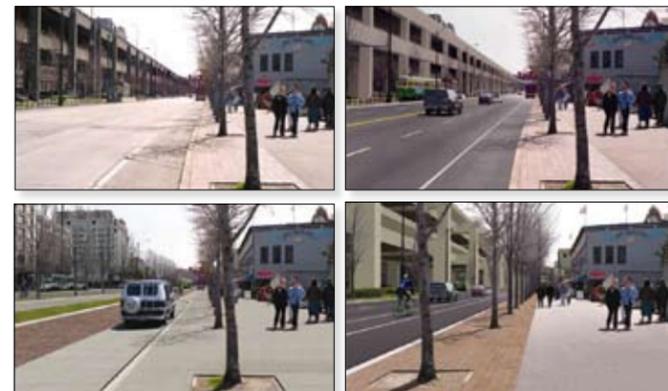
## 2. Engage the Reader

<b>Traditional Headings:</b>	<b>Reader-Friendly Headings:</b>
Purpose and Need	Why do we need this project?
Project Termini and why they are logical	Where is the project located?
Social and Community Impacts	How would the project affect local neighborhoods and the people who live there?

Can an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) be engaging? Yes! We can create an EIS that connects with people if we make the reader a character in the story, use question and answer headings, and avoid jargon.

Question and answer headings draw readers in and direct them to the information they are most interested in. These headings also give writers an opportunity to make NEPA-required topics more inviting to readers, as shown in the example traditional vs. Reader-Friendly headings above.

## 4. Make it Visual



Graphics are much more interesting to readers and can be more useful than plain tables or text. When using graphics and photographs in Reader-Friendly layouts, be sure that they are clearly labeled for reference.

One way that WSDOT uses graphics, is to highlight the differences between a set of alternatives - such as the streetscape design visualization shown above.

# What are some of the challenges in making a document Reader-Friendly?

## Write clearly and use simple language

Writing in a Reader-Friendly style takes practice. Your writing needs to be clear and your thoughts complete - using simple, and relevant language. Technically correct environmental documents are crucial. But they must be technically correct *and* well written.

Writing clearly and using simple language doesn't mean "dumbing information down." For years we have written environmental documents that are impersonal and vague because we thought that was how they were supposed to be. In many cases, environmental writers present a lot of information, analysis, and data, but they don't draw conclusions. Now we need to train ourselves to communicate more directly.

Writing clearly is a skill, and it takes work to do it well. You must think clearly before you can write clearly. Sometimes the reason environmental documents are difficult to understand isn't just because the writing is poor - sometimes the thinking is incomplete. If the author doesn't know what the analysis or data demonstrate, writing clearly is impossible.

Keep verbs active and make the doers of action the subject of your sentences. Keep your subject and verb close to each other

in sentences. Your paragraphs and sections should be short. Keep technical concepts and terms relevant to the reader. In addition, it helps to have a clear direction to start from. That's where a well-thought-out outline will benefit writers, especially if it's written in a question-and-answer format.

## Write your question headers with care

Creating appropriate questions for your headings is critical since they become the drivers for the content of the document. Once you create a question, make sure the first paragraph provides the question's answer. The questions help the writer get to the point and present the information that the reader needs to know instead of providing unnecessary information that can distract the reader.

## Focus on layout

Use plenty of white space to make it easy for people to read your document. Refer to the Reader-Friendly Toolkit for proper fonts and formatting. The suggested fonts for the Reader-Friendly format were carefully selected to make the document easy to read. Your layout should be consistent, with sidebars always placed in the right margin. Text and graphics should be grouped together.

## What would YOU rather read?

### Traditional Writing

"Intersections that are projected to operate with especially long delays or overcapacity during the PM peak hour are identified as "congested intersections". These intersections are those that operate under LOS F conditions (average vehicle delay of greater than 80 seconds) or ICU greater than 100 percent. Congested intersections are further identified as "highly congested" if they exceed 110 seconds of average vehicle delay and have an ICU of great than 110 percent."

*Notice how this paragraph talks about LOS, PM Peak, and ICU - meaningless terms to most readers.*

### Reader-Friendly Writing

"What are congested and highly congested intersections?"

Congested intersections are intersections that cause drivers considerable delay. A driver might wait between one and two minutes to get through a traffic signal at a congested intersection. At a highly congested intersection, a driver might wait two minutes or more to get through the traffic signal."

*This paragraph explains the same information as the traditional EIS paragraph only the reader can clearly understand the language and how they will be affected by the issue.*