

Policy writing webinar for non-native English speakers

Alexandra Dans
ICANN

26 May 2020



Agenda

- ⦿ Introduction
- ⦿ How to improve your writing skills (for public comment submissions or any other content!)
- ⦿ Useful tips for non-native English speakers
- ⦿ Challenges when English is your second language
- ⦿ Understanding the basics about International Communications

Agenda item #1

How to improve your writing skills
(for public comment submissions or any other
content!)

Writing is hard.

You don't start out writing good stuff. You start out writing crap and thinking it's good stuff, and then gradually you get better at it.

That's why I say one of the most valuable traits is persistence.

Octavia E. Butler



Why Is Good Writing Important?

- ⦿ Clear writing = deeper engagement
- ⦿ Doesn't scare readers away
- ⦿ Helps readers find information or solve a problem
- ⦿ Puts the audience first
- ⦿ Reaches readers from around the world
- ⦿ Improves translations

Clarify Your Goals

You don't write because you want to say something,
you write because you have something to say.

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Set Your Goals and Understand Your Audience

- ⦿ Before you start to write, answer these questions:
 1. Who is my audience?
 2. What is the purpose of my content? Why is it important to my audience?
 3. What do I want my audience to do?

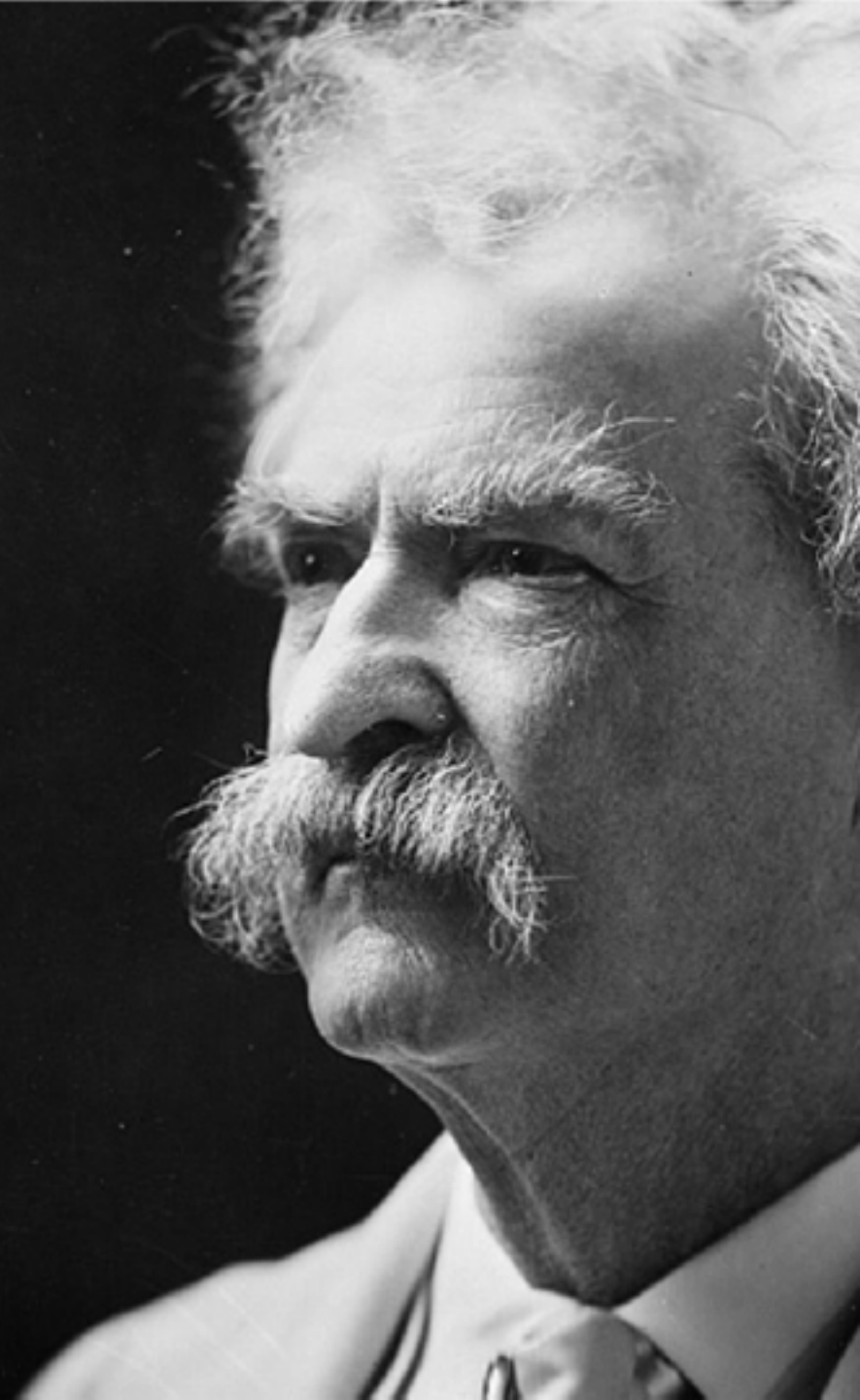
- ⦿ Write your goals down.

- ⦿ Understand and respect your audience:
 - Be clear and concise.
 - Use familiar vocabulary.
 - Be sensitive to newcomers.

- ⦿ When you're done, check to see if you've met your goals.

I was going to write you a short letter, but I didn't have time, so I wrote you a long one.

Mark Twain



Cut Content That Adds No Value

- ⦿ Background information that is irrelevant
- ⦿ Explanations of concepts your audience already knows
- ⦿ Content that belongs elsewhere
 - Example: background information in the middle of a paragraph that explains the latest developments
- ⦿ Related information that you can easily link to instead

Don't Obscure the Message

Before

With respect to the review of existing regulations and the promulgation of new regulations, section 3(a) of Executive Order 12988, “Civil Justice Reform,” 61 FR 4729 (February 7, 1996), imposes on Executive agencies the general duty to adhere to the following requirements: (1) Eliminate drafting errors and ambiguity; (2) write regulations to minimize litigation; and (3) provide a clear legal standard for affected conduct rather than a general standard and promote simplification and burden reduction. With regard to the review required by section 3(a), section 3(b) of Executive Order 12988 specifically requires that Executive agencies make every reasonable effort to ensure that the regulation: (1) Clearly specifies the preemptive effect, if any; (2) clearly specifies any effect on existing Federal law or regulation; (3) provides a clear legal standard for affected conduct while promoting simplification and burden reduction; (4) specifies the retroactive effect, if any; (5) adequately defines key terms; and (6) addresses other important issues affecting clarity and general draftsmanship under any guidelines issued by the Attorney General. Section 3(c) of Executive Order 12988 requires Executive agencies to review regulations in light of applicable standards in section 3(a) and section 3(b) to determine whether they are met or it is unreasonable to meet one or more of them. DHS has completed the required review and determined that, to the extent permitted by law, this final rule meets the relevant standards of Executive Order 12988.

After

This rule meets the applicable standards in sections 3(a) and 3(b)(2) of Executive Order 12988.

Keep It Short

The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do.

Thomas Jefferson

Write Short Sentences and Paragraphs

- ⦿ Short paragraphs
 - One idea per paragraph
- ⦿ Short sentences
 - One idea per sentence
 - 26 word maximum, aim for keeping all sentences under 18 words
 - 15–20 words average (uk.gov advocates 14!)
- ⦿ Break up long sentences.
- ⦿ If a long sentence contains an embedded list, consider formatting it as a bulleted or numbered list.
- ⦿ If you can't keep a sentence short, make sure the sentence has a good, strong, parallel structure.

Omit Extra Words

- ⦿ Make every word count. Every word needs to be in a sentence for a reason.
- ⦿ Here are some examples taken directly from Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*:

Instead of ...

he is a man who

in a timely manner/fashion

this is a subject that

the reason why is that

until such time as

in spite of the fact that

call your attention to the fact that

I was unaware of the fact that

Use ...

he

timely

this subject

because

until

though (although)

remind you (notify you)

I did not know

Omit Extra Words, continued

Instead of...

as well as

in order to

a large number of

in the near future

in the event that

has the opportunity to

at this point in time

has the ability

it would appear that

with regard to

during the time that

in spite of the fact that

Use ...

and

to

many

soon

if

can

now

can

apparently

regarding

while

despite

Cut Unnecessary Prepositions

Instead of...

fill up

off of

inside of

out of

check up on

meet up with

Use ...

fill

off

inside

out

check on

meet with



Use Plain Language

Use the smallest word that does the job.
E.B. White

Use Plain Language

- ⦿ Don't use a pretentious word when a simple one will do:

Instead of...

endeavor
erroneous
attempt
commence
demonstrate
terminate
utilize
functionality
cognizant
inception

Use ...

try
wrong
try
begin, start
show, prove
end, stop, cancel
use
feature, function
aware
start

Hidden

Please make an application for a personal loan.
You don't have to make a decision now.

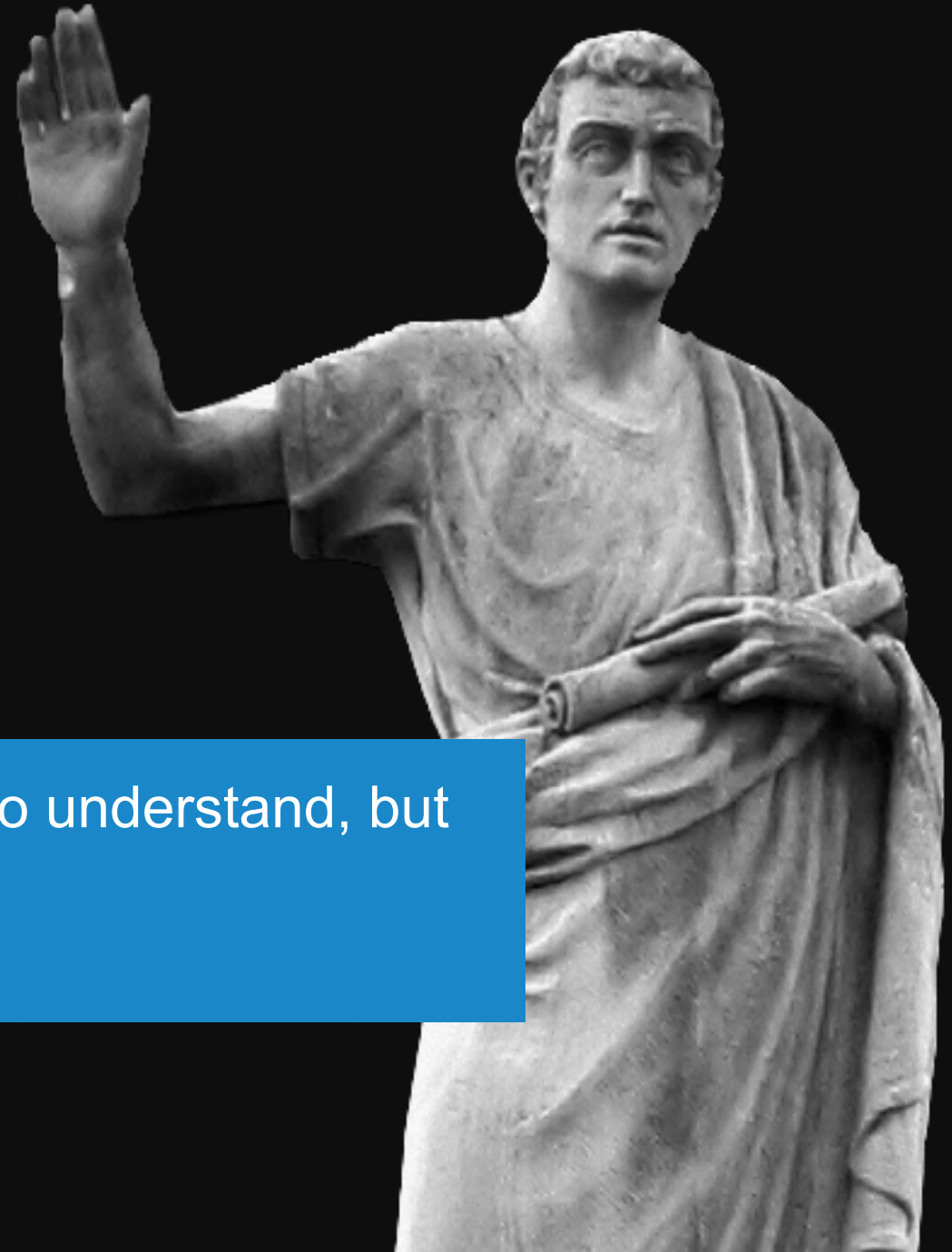
Exposed

Please apply for a personal loan.
You don't have to decide now.

Be Clear and Direct

One should aim not at being possible to understand, but at being impossible to misunderstand.

Quintilian



Use Concrete Language

- ⦿ Avoid vague, weak words like good, poor, interesting and very.
- ⦿ Use language that evokes an image:

Vague

A period of unfavorable weather set in.

Concrete

It rained every day for a week.

Vague

The book was interesting.

Concrete

The book presented newly discovered information about the Roman Empire.

Be Positive

- ⦿ *No* and *not* make a sentence longer and hard to understand.

Negative

He was not very often on time.

Positive

He was usually late.

Negative

Do not use this procedure except when you want to start the system.

Positive

Use this procedure only when you want to start the system.

Beware of False Subjects

- ⦿ These expressions add words and hide the true subject:

False subject

It is possible that the taxpayer may not qualify for the earned income tax credit.

Real subject

The taxpayer may not qualify for the earned income tax credit.

Watch Your Modifiers

⦿ When a modifier is in the wrong place, you can't tell what it's modifying.

⦿ Place the modifier right before the word to be modified.

almost, even, exactly, hardly, just, merely, nearly, only, scarcely

○ The man just smiled at her as he entered the theater.
He did nothing but smile.

○ The man smiled just at her as he entered the theater.
He smiled only at her.

○ The man smiled at her just as he entered the theater.
He smiled at her the moment he entered the theater.

Agenda item #2

Helpful tips for non-native English speakers

Basic tips for non-native English speakers

- ⦿ Read the content out loud. This will help you spot problems:
 - Errors
 - Awkward sentences
 - Wordy sentences
- ⦿ Keep a list of words you have spelled incorrectly in the past
- ⦿ NO! to google translate – try to express yourself in English
- ⦿ Make an English-native speaker review your text. Compare your original text with the edited one.
- ⦿ Don't be afraid to ask for clarification at any time

Before the next agenda item...

Some basic rules for your emails

5 Rules for Emails

- ◉ Who needs to read it?
- ◉ Everything you need to know about attachments
- ◉ Short vs Long
- ◉ Always re-read before hitting send

And...

- ◉ **DON'T OVERCAPITALIZE**

Phrases for starting and ending your emails

INFORMAL

Starting:

Dear (diminutive of first name),
Good morning (ibid.)

Ending:

Regards,
With best wishes,
With many thanks and best wishes,

FORMAL

Starting:

Dear Mr. (full name),
Dear Sir or Madam,

Ending:

Yours sincerely,
Yours faithfully,
Yours truly,

VS

The Basics of Capitalization

- ◉ Lowercase all letters in common nouns.
- ◉ Capitalize the first letters of nouns and adjectives in proper nouns.
 - ◉ What is a proper noun? It's the specific name of a person, place, thing.
- ◉ People tend to over-capitalize because:
 - Distinguishing between common and proper nouns can be difficult.
 - We think that our own jargon is special.
 - We mistakenly believe that a spelled-out acronym must match the acronym in case.
 - And some people just seem to like random capitalization.

Examples

Common nouns

policy development
process

monthly report

working group

committee

meeting

program

forum

conference

registry, registrar

Proper nouns

GNSO Policy Development
Process

ICANN Annual Report

GAC Public Safety Working
Group

Executive Committee

ICANN Public Meeting

New gTLD Program

Eastern European DNS
Forum

World Internet Conference

ICANN Style

multistakeholder	(no hyphen)
ICANN58, ICANN59	(no space)
ICANN Public Meeting	(initial caps)
WHOIS	(all caps)
19 July 2017	(ICANN's date format)
ICANN community	(lowercase "c")
ICANN organization	(not staff)
ICANN Board of Directors	(initial caps)
Internet	(initial cap I)
generic top-level domain	(lowercase)

Agenda item #3

Challenges when English is your second language

Some well-known challenges

- ⊙ Words with similar sounds (but different spelling)
 - ⊖ ~~*Their~~ not *hear yet. > They're not here yet.
 - ⊖ ~~*Wear~~ do you want to *meat? > Where do you want to meet?

- ⊙ Short words
 - a lot *fə mistakes > of
 - Thank you *frə your letter > for
 - at *hte meeting > the

- ⊙ Silent words
 - know write wrong forward thought right interesting Wednesday Bye

Some well-known challenges

- ⊙ -s in the 3rd person singular
 - The training ~~*start~~ at 9 a.m. > starts
 - My plane ~~*leave~~ at 4.35. > leaves
 - How long ~~*do~~ it take? > does
 - How many times ~~*have~~ he been here? > has
- ⊙ Punctuation
- ⊙ Foreign terms
- ⊙ Exclamation points

Homework:

Commonly Confused or Misused Words

advice, advise	complementary, complimentary	like, as
a lot, allot	compose, comprise, constitute	loose, lose
among, between	continually, continuously	that, which
anybody, anyone, any body, any one	farther, further	to, too, two
beside, besides	its, it's	where, were
can, may, might	who's, whose	you're, your

Agenda item #4

Understanding the basics about International Communications

English is the language of international communication

80% of non-native speakers of English are using English to communicate with other non-native speakers of English, using English as the lingua franca of international communication.

[Barbara Seidlhofer: Understanding English as a Lingua Franca: A Complete Introduction to the Theoretical Nature and Practical Implications of English used as a Lingua Franca]

BUT! → This does not mean that the cultures of native English speakers should be the reference point for all users of the language.

Every aspect of communication is influenced by each person's culture:

“Just like each person's English has an accent from their first language, they have influences from their first culture”

[Read [“5 Principles for Better Communication in the Global Workplace”](#)]

Thank you! Questions?