Please stand by for realtime captions.

If you could please, put a green check mark. For a red X so we know. We will reach out to you momentarily. We are at time. I am going to go ahead and turn it over to Jessica.

[ no audio ]

Jessica, if you are talking, we don't hear you.

Hi, this is Jessica.

Yes, I can hear you.

Great. I know Denise will do the introduction. My name is Jess minute, I am - - I have been in Cleveland for about a year in VBA and [Inaudible] I am working at the regional office because of the variety it provides. Although my background is [Inaudible]. Really excited to be doing this training today. And to be talking about writing skills. [Inaudible] some familiar names. [Inaudible] is here., as well as, [Inaudible]. Everybody hear me okay? I am getting a little bit of buzzing.

I can hear you, Jesse.

Okay great.

Sorry I lost the audio. I had to log out and come back in. We should be good to roll out.

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you so much for joining us for the monthly HR community practice. Today's session will cover the importance of your writing skills. As an HR's professional. It will outline the importance of solid written communication. And how critical it is to excellent service and, as well as, your professional success. Today's presenter is Jesse minutes. Jesse has been with the HR specialist with the Cleveland Aro for almost 10 years. And leads the HR team in Cleveland. Prior to joining the VBA, she worked at a VA medical center. And the National Labor Relations Board. She has a labor and employee relations background. Enjoys a variety of HR work. Jesse has a passion for HR training and collaboration at the Aro, ARC and [Inaudible] level. Her presence here today, without further ado, I will turn it over to Jesse for this afternoon presentation.

Okay. I see that I'm having some audio issue. Were you able to hear me clearly?

Okay. Yes, no. Mainly S. Yes.

Yes, thank you. Thanks for joining. I want to thank the attendees for joining to focus on this important topic. I am a bit nerdy about writing, if you could see some of my team members some of my Cleveland listening to this recording, they are probably rolling their eyes and thinking it's an understatement. Although I love writing and analyzing writing and looking at my own, unfortunately, seeing a ton of things to change, I am by no means an expert. Who really is a writing expert ? it's an HR field. I do pay a great deal of attention to writing and actively always learning. I want to say that while I organize the materials today, most of the content comes directly from the [Inaudible] they are really good. If you have an interest in going beyond this training [Inaudible] I will highlight [Inaudible] and it should be helpful to you. The bottom line is [Inaudible] writing skills are critical to HR customer service and professional success. Today we will discuss a number of concepts to help you improve your writing. Maybe you have heard these before. This is one of the topics [Inaudible] at least I do. Let's kick off the discussion with a few questions. Matt, can you start the first pole poll? What is your biggest impediment in writing? I think that in certain instances, [Inaudible] very well. In other instances, I cringe when I look back at the emails I sent.[ no audio ].

10 seconds or so.

All right. [Inaudible]

Jessica let me know when you are back into the lesson.

Thanks, Matt. All right. What are the results? We're seeing them come in. Kind of a similar [Inaudible] are you able to project the results? Thank you. Okay. The vast majority of our group, no surprise. High in demand. Desire to work quickly. The biggest impediment in writing well. We also have those all of above. That is not familiar with writing concepts. Not thinking about the content. Unless you are one of those who did not care and we have nobody that cares which is great. This training will assume that you tend to write as clearly and clearly as you can. We will familiarize everyone - -

So sorry to interrupt. Looks like a number of folks are having a hard time hearing you.

Sorry. I want to make sure that everybody is able to hear you.

Do you think I should dial in question mark

Can I get an informal poll? How many can hear ?

That might not be a bad idea. Looks like many can hear you okay. Okay. If you are unable or having a hard time, set your status and we will reach out to you. If you have any more, Jessica. Looks like you are good now.

Okay. I am also happy to - - let me know. I will keep going. We will familiarize you with the concepts that ultimately could help with [Inaudible] to address the biggest issues. Also give you some [Inaudible] writing, so you are familiar with the concept and learn more about the concept. Let's go back to the slides, if you could, Matt. Actually, sorry, at I have a second poll. Right now. If you can transition back.The second poll is a free response poll. This will help me highlight the different sections today. About what I might spend my time on and direct your focus as well in the content. Thinking about your writing, what area [Inaudible]? As HR professionals, we're always learning. I always say I could be in VA HR for 30 years and still not know everything. Or 100 years. So this is an area of writing which is a constant development. Think about - - that we struggle with. And identify those. Great. We have conservation.

Punctuation. We will get - - on that. Speed. Most of you said speed. Elaborate on that. Proposals. This is not a proposal - - technical class, but some of the information about [Inaudible] to sink in providing clarity will be helpful. Run on sentences. Persuasive writing. [Inaudible] structure. Typing speed. Okay. With respect to typing speed. [Inaudible] I am going to and to and the poll. Have they seen the results ? are they coming on?

Looks like we lost your audio.

You are back now. Okay great.

Keep your response [Inaudible] is we're going through the training. If I don't touch through one of the item, there will be a question in the end. [Inaudible] are not going to be directly in training, but I have comments on them. Make sure to bring it up in the end. If we can go back to the slides, that would be great. Let's get started with the actual presentation. What we're going to talk about today is writing in plain language. Which is a whole movement. Style, style guides. Ensuring quality. And HR [Inaudible] so the goal is to write clearly and [Inaudible] trying to [Inaudible] from transfusion - - [Inaudible]

Plain language, can you give me feedback about if you have heard plain language before, writing and plain language. Please use agree or disagree. Selections. Am I speaking to a crowd that's already heard about this or is there some plain language new lease in the room? Cynthia is typing. A few checks. From Cleveland. Plain language. [ Laughter ] probably heard it from me. We have some green, I see a red. Agree or disagree. That is up on the top with the little guy with the handout. All right. Looks like we have a mix of folks. Sorry, Cynthia. I asked for folks to set their status to agree or disagree whether they have heard plain language were not. You learned it in the Air Force. Cool. It is a concept that's been going on for some time. It is surprising that some folks have not heard it before and it's very, very helpful to all right. We're going to talk about what is plain language, why we should use it, the basics and how to learn more about it plain language is pretty straightforward. It helps readers find what they need, understand the first time they read it, it's a big deal. And use what they find to meet their needs. There's actually a law [Inaudible] the plane writing act of 2010. It requires federal agency to write government communication that the public can understand. It requires federal agencies to have plain language page and a compliance and actually federal agents are rated on their plain language score. So these are focus, public focus. HR is dealing with the public on somewhat limited, we do deal with applicants. At least, half-and-half, if not, more of the communication is internal to employees, leaders, and their own HR teams. All these concepts apply regardless to the audience because they are about clarity in writing [Inaudible]

There is a website, it is actually plain language.gov that provides all these concepts that's very well done. We will be looking at that later. With respect to agencies grades, when this was first rolled out, the VA received an F on the report card. In 2012. Since then, the VA has revamped basically all of its outward facing communication and today, actually in 2019 the last time the score was done, the VA received an A. We transitioned [Inaudible] and thus I said, while all the language language is not apply to external, [Inaudible] the benefit [Inaudible] I want to mention the slides had been loaded into the files section. As we go through the hyperlinks, you should have [Inaudible] this is plain language writing act which is probably not [Inaudible] but you can click if you are interested. Why should we use plain language? It saves time, ultimately. It improves reader compliance. It affects customer satisfaction. I will give you some example in the VA environment that I thought were striking. Before we get into the basic concepts. The first example is [Inaudible] office. They had a plain language letter. A letter that went out to the veterans and they received questions back. They received [Inaudible] per month through the counselor. Each counselor, the letter. The difference [Inaudible] was shocking. How much [Inaudible] the counselors received just because we need transition letter to plain language and understandable. Another example is the VA insurance service. One of the words from the vice president, he called the no gobbledygook award. In 1999, the VA insurance service. The plain language, they could break it down to time-saving and cost-saving. The old letter like a newsletter. They increased, to increase the number of [Inaudible] this is a letter that one out to veterans saying, we need to date your benefits, can you provide [Inaudible] [Inaudible] with the new letter, it took nine minutes and the [Inaudible] the letter be right will [Inaudible] over $8 million.

Jessica, so sorry to interrupt. Seems like we're getting a few more [Inaudible] dialing in might be a good idea. If you have an option.

Hold on tight, everybody. She is getting her audio going here.

We are still here. Jessica is in the process of dialing in. Hang tight, thank you for your patience. Until then, we will have some great audio for the rest of the class.

I went to check in with you, we are still in the process, thanks for your patience. Took a few more minutes than we expected. I am sure you have experienced some really fun tech issues that could happen. We are still learning to live in this virtual world. Thank you for your patience. Much appreciated.

Thank you.

I hear something thank you, Jessica.

If somebody can hear me, can you change your status to a green, please. I have echoes. Somebody must be, okay great. Am I loud and clear? Awesome. Okay. Thank you so much for your patience. I came into the office today and for the purpose of avoiding tech issues and turns out there are tech issues. I am happy we are back up and running. I will get to it. And apologize for the nightmare that just occurred with the audio. Let's get going. I don't know how far back you lost me. Let me just say that I was going through the reasons or some VA examples about how using plain language is to our benefit. When the VA made some changes through the right documents and rest letters to veterans in plain language, it resulted in staggering time-saving and cost-saving. There's slides that speaks about the particulars with the VA insurance service, and an example from Jackson regional office, but the case can be made on and on in different agencies and organizations that plain language works as far as reading comprehension and customer being more compliant with the message. Let's talk about the basic. This is the meat of the training. The basics of plain language is writing to your audience. Using format tools. Challenging every word. Those are three things that when you sit down to write an email or recommendation or a memo or a report, keep those in mind. Before you start tapping the keys, think, who is my audience? What format tools will I use to organize the information? What words should I be using? We will be digging into those. Your audience, the first rule of plain language is true right to your audience. A popular myth is that plain language is dumbing down your content so everybody can read it. That is really not true. To write in plain language, we need to be aware of what your audience knows. What they already understand, what do they need to know? What should they do? What questions will they have? We're not dumbing it down like some people say, you need to write to an eighth grader. No you are not writing to an eighth grader. Index can this context, you are writing to an professional. They are a professional who are familiar and they could be a supervisor or maybe they are a new supervisor so you might need to break things down more. I want to focus on what they know. Put yourself in their shoes. It will give you a perspective on how to approach her writing. Think about what your audience knows about the situation or topic you are writing about. Guide them through the information they need to know. You want to be efficient and focused on your goals and professionally engaging. I think about the question they will have. I've had a few examples in the last two weeks when I was pulling the training together. I had a situation with an insurance agent who took an extra three back and forth because she did not answer the obvious questions in her responses. I have also seen lingering back-and-forth emails within our organization where the thought was, you know they are going to want to know that, let's tell them up front the answer, instead of making them ask again. So that is something to think about. Let's talk more about the audio. You may have heard, I think it's percolated now, about how our attention span with social media and other influencing factors have really gone down. We are less patient. We have less of an attention span. How is that going to affect your writing? It affects your audience. It makes it more important to be organized. Readers are asking today, not directly, but in their head and you might be asking this if you are reading something, how will you help me. By the way, how much of my time will you waste before you help me or before I understand the main point of this email? We really want to do bottom line, upfront, or you have probably heard of that. How often are you using it? The question , ask yourself, what is the fundamental purpose of what I am writing? That should be clear. Main message. And then explain what the reader needs to know to take action. This makes me think of emails subject. I see this a lot. I want to recommend you think about tailoring your email subject. Not to be a long line of stuff, but to really be precise and to the point about what the topic is. I have a boss that we joke with because it is common email subject is hey, hello, hey. So we say hey, it's hard for us to figure out what it is going to be about. If it's an important thing we need to open right away or search for it later if you're just saying hey. My guess is most people on the phone are not using hey is that they are email subject, a close to the point of if you're going to do bottom line up front, focus on what that email subject is, or what your memo subject is, so the reader can have the best sense in the subject itself what they are going to be looking at and what it is going to be about. Here are some examples. I have used some of these in the past. Maybe you have utter other examples. If you want to chime in the chat, that would be great. Here's an example of a memo I might write. The first sentence would be, please approve this recommendation and then what my recommendation is for. Already here would be a great start to an email, if we have a task or something to do, or something we need to analyze, and get back to somebody, please conduct an analysis and submit a response by such and such. So really thinking about that bottom line up front. Sometimes it's not appropriate to lead in with the background. It would be appropriate to say, I need this. Or here's what we're looking for. Now let me explain it all. Sometimes, I know we see from time to time, we might be giving a task about something that needs to happen that is rather complicated. Really focus on the main message, what needs to happen and then get into the details and instructions afterwards. We will also talk about tools and providing explicit visible structure that will help the reader by visually organizing the content. One of the resources that I have in the references is from a book called' think like a writer". I love the excerpt from this book that gets at to you your readers and audience respect event how to think about organization from that point of view. Here's what it says. It says the goal is not just to create logic. It is also to create coherence. That is the perception of focus and organization in your readers mind. At each moment they are deciding how much of what they have just read they really need to remember. Figuring out how the next sentence connects with the previous one and forecasting where the analysis is heading. As the information flows past, they want the structure and sequence to match the logical order of issues or events described. Readers don't like it if you recite facts chronologically and the key issues have nothing to do with who did what and when. They are irrational, sorry, they are irritated if the section is divided into five suck subsections that look equally important when the last one is simple subordinate to the. They are annoyed if the sentence structure implies that three details are equally important when the fourth is logically subordinate to the third. I don't know about you, but I related to that. It's thinking about how the reader will digest the information. I know when we are providing information to say a customer, whether an employee, a coworker or supervisor, that information is usually organized pretty well in our head where in the subject, take a step back and think that there perspective and with respect to what they know and how to take it down the clear path to a they need to know and learn. The second thing with respect to your audience is the tone. We know in writing, tone can be misinterpreted. What we want to do is talk person-to-person with our customers. Use language that puts the person first. You will be taking an interest in the person you are speaking with or the group you are speaking with if you are writing in plain language. Think about your greeting, relate ability and word choices. Thinking through this topic, earlier, I can reflect on my own writing. I sent an email this week or last week, it started with a person's first name in and the comma. It is [Inaudible] Wendy,, blah blah blah. I looked back at the email and thought, all right, she doesn't know I am sitting here and what my thoughts are. What my emotional tone is when I am writing that. If she got an email and she did, it said Wendy, it probably did not come up the way I wanted it to. Think about greeting and how you are approaching people. Think about your ending. We're not talking about being fake. We're talking about having a consideration for how you are writing will be received. We also don't want a false formality. We want genuine empathy. A survey was done with veterans. The veterans said, I don't care if you call me sir. If you can't help me. I want you to be relatable to me and help me. That was basically the conclusion. That is what we're going for with tone. We want to be helpful. We don't want to be bureaucratic. Because you want to be relatable to our customers. Some of the word choices that we're going to discuss momentarily will help with that and will help with tone and not feeling so stiff and stuffy. Also consider your greetings and your endings, not talking about adding a lot of flowery colorful language here. Tone is definitely something that needs to be reviewed and thought about Thorley. We spoke about organization generally. No we will consider tools to help that. Aside from considering the reader's perspective, logical order and transition, when organizing content, the following tools will help to make sure the structure is visually clear and the content is easier to absorbed. Here's some great formatting tools. We will talk a bit about some of these and give you some examples. Headings, fonts or typography. This would be like folding things and making things larger. Bulleted list. Illustrations. Tables. Having short sections or chunks that relate to each other. And then using blank spaces appropriately.The federal plain guidelines is a great resource. It digs into topic headings. And how you can organize your topic headings. There's a few different ways to do headings. You can have your heading is a question. Here's an example of why we use headings. Or a short statement. Or just a word. Those are some options that are out there for you to consider. I want to give you some examples. The VA settings and elsewhere. Matt, are you able to click on the screen share for me so I can transition to my screen? Great. Thank you. Can I get a thumbs up in the chat from somebody once you can see it, please. I see Alex typing. Maybe you are good. Great, thank you. Alex and Marcella. On the slide, there are some VA examples that you can click through. Here's one of them. This is a great example of relatable headers and plain language. This is a change in enrollment status letter from the VA. What the record show and what we did and what we mean. Here's one from pension service. This is VA requesting information clearly they thought this part was important they get right to the privacy part because they are asking for medical information. Just yesterday, I was talking with the HR assistant about maximum contribution to TSP. I noticed right away that TSP must have changed their page recently and they did it to be in plain language. It was kind of exciting. I am throwing it in. It's plain language. We went to the website. Within a few clicks, because they changed it, we could find the exact information. So manager plan. We're looking for the maximum. Manager plan. Making contributions. There's a short relatable easy headers. And then contribution limits. And then they even have what it means, what to know and what to do. I am not saying that headings are necessarily an appropriate tool for all our communications. They can certainly be helpful, especially if we are meeting this in the lengthier email. And then we want to talk about - - catch up contributions. This is really designed to be user-friendly and in plain language. What it means and what to know and what to do. I would encourage you to think about when putting together memos or emails, especially if they have different sections to consider those tools. And how you would incorporate the format tool approach in your writing. Another format tool is using table. I think we have it on the plain language. This is the guide. This could be something it if you have read through it. For preparing this training. This takes you through plain language principles, including organizing. Using headings etc. Page 59 gives an example of a table. And how that could be helpful. Giving instructions, whether it would be a memo, an email, a fact, fax sheet. This table, it has six cells. It is much easier for the reader to get a quick, you don't have to read half of it, if you want to submitted electronically. You don't have to care about the other parts. That is a great example of the use of a table. I will show you another one. This is on the plain language website as well. This is if, and and then and then if and then. This is a great use of a table to demonstrate

You switch back, you stop sharing before so I will went back to the lesson. I am back to the lesson now so you can restart.

Okay. I don't know how. It says stop sharing. On my screen.

Maybe you need to give it another shot

I wonder if we can put something in the chat. It did not go in.

Yes. You may need to close out and come back in. Looks like you are screen sharing.

Great.

Okay. I don't know if the group was able to see this. This is the example of the if, then table. If and then. The point is if you have a lot of complicated information to share, and different topics. Basically, this consolidates information and helps the reader pull out what they need instead of reading lengthy paragraphs that can get confusing with a lot of comments. Consider if and then, if and then, and here's another example, you are organizing we can go to the slideshow now.

Think about how and when to incorporate. The use of format tools in writing for the benefit of the readers. So heading, and also bulleted list. Here's an example of a bulleted list and before and after and how the use of bullet clear things up and makes it easier to digest. We're going to talk about word tools. To write in plain language, you will be choosing our words carefully. Being precise and concise. Getting straight to the point and writing clearly. To do that, we would be using simple words, freeing our verbs, using pronouns and act to voices. He will have a section on each of these. As you can tell I like cartoons. I like this one. I don't know what a premium is, but it sounds fancy. And the other person saying, weird, I just had this lousy old payment. Just thinking about being simple. This is not to dumb it down, it is to clear up what we are meaning. So time for another poll. We will do a free response on this one. And the question is, what word choices really bother you as a reader? You have those pet peeves, as in HR specialist, you are reading and writing documents all day. If you could share your pet peeve, if we can spare ourselves from using them in the future an introduction.

Irregardless, that's a great one. You need to. You will. The folks with you need to and you will, if you could expand on that, that would be helpful. We do like to use Pro nine. Pronouns.

Pacific, not specific, that's a great one. Excessive use of that. Yes, I did not have this in the presentation. When I was at the VA Medical Center, my director hated the word fat. - - That. We got into the routine of using an every time we use the word that, it was shocking how many times we could eliminate it because it did not add any value. So that was a great comment. Using the word that, when it doesn't add value. Double negatives, that is great. Regardless, irregardless. Assurance, instead of in sure. And sure. The comment about as dated. Reminds me of the tone issue. I read emails in the past. I hope I haven't done it. Maybe. Maybe I do. It's one of my pet peeves, I don't think I do it. As I previously mentioned. That drives me crazy because it is not a helpful tone. I have seen it from both sides.The RO side, the customer site, the leader site, as I previously mentioned or explained. My take away from that was like, probably was not explained very well. Or there is something blocking the audience. That is something to watch out for. Pen and ink instead of 10. I see. Okay. Word choices. Okay. Great. Let's and that Paul. Most of these, will fall into categories that we will discuss. We can go back to the slides. Inks for the participation. I like to see everybody chiming in. I don't think we have another response poll.

Okay now we're going to talk about short simple words. So this is, sometimes these phrases and words are used because the writer is trying to some professional or smart. But they actually heard understanding. Making sentences longer, obligated and stuffy. Plain language principles are talking about using simple words. So we're going to pick a familiar or commonly used words over the unusual or obscure words. So I would love to hear your comments. I have the animation. We can discuss it without the answer in our case. Let's take Benny's complicated phrases and transform them into plain language. Here are some great ones, due to the fact, in the event of, subsequent to. So what would the plain language alternative be to do to the fact? You want to type it out for me? Because. Yes. So sometimes, that is what I gather. Due to the fact sounds official, let's say because. We're not trying, we don't want to be bureaucratic and official in most cases of our writing. What about in the event of? What are your thoughts of " in the event of?" It could be one. It could be if. So in the event of such and such, this will happen. If is a good alternative. Trying to identify the simple words that we can use. Here are some plain language alternatives. We have [Inaudible] I think somebody has unmuted.

I am hearing some feedback.

Here are some alternatives to cumbersome and stuffy words. Another plain language concept is to eliminate unnecessary words. Some of the examples we saw in the last I had unnecessary words. Let's talk through some more. I was actually thinking some of these would come up as your pet peeve.

[ Event has exceeded scheduled time. Captioner must proceed to captioner next scheduled event. Disconnecting at 2:00 pm EDT. ] [ event concluded ] This message is intended only for the use of the Addressee and may contain information that is PRIVILEGED and CONFIDENTIAL. If you are not the intended recipient, you are hereby notified that any dissemination of this communication is strictly prohibited. If you have received this communication in error, please erase all copies of the message and its attachments and notify us immediately.