Plain English Guide

Contents

This guide has been produced to help you make sure your writing is clear and easily understandable, whether you are writing a report, a letter to a resident or information for a website or leaflet.

You can provide a five-star service but if your leaflets and website are packed with jargon and gobbledegook, you risk alienating or confusing people.

Plain English gets to the point straight away and helps the reader to understand quickly and accurately the information being given to them.

The most effective writing seeks to inform rather than to impress. As writers we must produce documents that readers can understand quickly and easily. This guide sets out how you can achieve this.

2. Planning your writing

Before you even start writing, you need to consider the following:

Know your audience
Knowing your audience and understanding them will help you decide what writing style is most effective. For example, is your audience made up of people who have the same level of knowledge on the subject – such as a group of experienced councillors? Or is it a diverse group of people, such as a local community?
You should ask yourself:
- Does the audience have any knowledge of the subject?
- What is the demographic of the audience? For example, what is the age range or do they speak English as a first language?

Know the results you want
You need to decide how you want people to respond to your writing so that your message is focused.
For example, does your writing need to:
- Educate – do you need to explain a complex message to people in a clear way?
- Prompt – do you want people to participate or take action?
- Ask – do you want to encourage people to ask for more information?

Prepare your structure
Do not put anything down on paper until you have prepared properly by:
- listing the main points you wish to make;
- arranging your facts and figures to help you explain each point.

Review your notes, removing anything that is out of place and adding anything you feel is missing. Now read it through again and see if it makes your case clearly.

Remember! Think about who you are writing for and what they will understand.

When you start writing, bear in mind some of the basic rules of plain English:
- Be concise;
- Avoid jargon;
- Avoid long, rambling sentences;
- Write in the active voice;
- Avoid the use of clichés;
- Use correct grammar and punctuation;
- Provide a clear lay out.

Be concise

One of the biggest obstacles to writing plain English is using several words when one will do. Here are some common examples with suggested alternatives:

Too many words	Shorter version
On the part of	By
On account of the fact that	Because
At the present time	Now
Such as the following	For example
The show came to an end	The show ended
In the majority of instances	Mostly

Avoiding words that say the same thing also helps to make your language more understandable. For example:

- **free** gift
- **new** innovation
- **pair of** twins
- **past** history
- **vast** majority
- **brief** moment
- **circle** round
- **join** together
- **repeated** again

- **mutual** co-operation
- **whether** or not
- **a dead** corpse
- **added** bonus
- **revert** back
- **future** prospects
- **early** beginnings
- **unite** together

Avoid jargon

Jargon is technical language that many readers can find difficult to understand. Specialist terms may be appropriate if you are writing for a specialist audience, but they are inappropriate for a general audience.

Local government commonly uses abbreviations or acronyms that the writer assumes the reader will understand. These are forms of jargon. Terms like LSP, LAA, CDRP, Defra and SMART need proper explanation before they are used - the full version of the abbreviation should always be used before it is abbreviated.

For example:

"The Primary Care Trust (PCT) approved plans to build a new health facility in Bracknell. The chief executive of the PCT said she hoped the new building would be available for residents by the end of 2009."

Avoid long rambling sentences

Long sentences are the most common problem when writing plain English. By using shorter sentences, writing becomes easier to understand and more direct. If sentences are too long there's a danger of losing the intended meaning – and losing the interest of your audience.

Extending sentences by using the word 'also' and using needless sub-clauses all create long-winded sentences. Sentences should be kept short and simple and should not contain more than one idea. Aim for a maximum of 20 words for each sentence (15 if writing for the web).

The length of a sentence affects the pace of the writing. So a series of six-word sentences will come across as very fast and too jumpy. But writing that has extremely long sentences will have the opposite effect. It will seem slow and bureaucratic. The best writing varies the pace a little – but does not go from one extreme to the other.

Have a look at this article below. The pace comes from the sentence length:

Councils are getting better with money. All single-tier and county councils in England have met or exceeded the Audit Commission's minimum expectations for financial management.

Three quarters have beaten the commission's requirements, new figures show. The results show a marked improvement on last year.

The chief executive of the Audit Commission said that local councils had improved considerably over recent years. He added that the figures were a sign that this positive trend is set to continue.

But the Commission warned that, if local government finances get tighter and councils face more challenging efficiency targets, "there is still work to be done".

The chair of the Local Government Improvement Board said the report showed that councils were " getting their houses in order".

Sometimes it might be appropriate to use bullet points to break up sentences. For example:

"Writing in plain English can have a real effect on how people view local government and can be achieved by following a few simple rules such as avoiding jargon and clichés, writing in the active voice, using accurate punctuation and grammar and also keeping sentences short."

. . . could be written more effectively like this:

"Writing in plain English can have a real effect on how people view local government. It can be achieved by:
• avoiding jargon and clichés;
• writing in the active voice;
• using accurate punctuation and grammar;
• keeping sentences short."

Write in the active voice

A sentence is written in the **passive** voice when the subject of the sentence has an action done to it by someone or something else. This contrasts to sentences in the **active** voice – when the subject of the sentence performs the action. For example:

Passive: Your enquiry has been dealt with.
Active: We have dealt with your enquiry.

Passive: It will be investigated by the manager.
Active: The manager will investigate it.

Passive: Activities have been organised by us.
Active: We have organised activities.

Using too many passive sentences can make your writing bureaucratic, impersonal and uninteresting.

Avoid the use of clichés

A cliché is a phrase, expression, or idea that has been overused to the point of losing its intended force or novelty. Avoid clichés when writing plain English.
For people who don't speak English as a first language, they can be confusing and nonsensical. For those who do speak English, clichés often seem meaningless and irritating.

Examples include:
- At the end of the day
- Think outside the box
- Put two and two together
- We don't want to reinvent the wheel
- To be honest with you
- When all's said and done

Use correct grammar and punctuation

In speech, a listener is helped by:

- pauses;
- the rise and fall of the voice;
- changes in emphasis.

In writing, punctuation performs some of these functions. Here are some examples of common elements of punctuation and how they should be used:

Punctuation	Most commonly used...	Example
Comma	when there would be a short, natural pause if you were speaking.	'You may not think this is a good idea, but it has worked well in other authorities.'
	when an extra, non-essential phrase has been put into a sentence.	'The people can, if necessary, speak to their local MP.'
	to divide a string of adjectives.	The meeting was useful, interesting, and proved more valuable than I originally thought.'
Semicolons	instead of full stops when you have two short, closely related sentences.	'We have considered the appeal for several days; more consideration is necessary.'
	to divide a list (but not on the web), especially when the list items are phrases	The mistakes were: too many people; poor planning; lack of enthusiasm.

Punctuation	Most commonly used...	Example
Capital letters	at the start of sentences	
	for the first letter of a title or subtitle	'Hitchhiker's guide to the galaxy'
	for proper nouns	Great Britain Jessica Monday February Bracknell Forest Borough Council Communities and Local Government
Apostrophe	to show a word or phrase has been shortened and letters are missing	Don't Can't It's
	to denote possession or belonging	The Council's social services department Tim's hat
	Plurals – don't need the extra 's' if they end in 's'	Councillors' agreement Children's services Lawyers' convention
	Exceptions	"Its" does not have an apostrophe when used as a possessive.

When you write, make sure you don't use capital letters just because you think something is important. Think very carefully about whether you are using a specific name or a generic name.

Provide a clear layout

As well as clear writing, the layout of your page can affect how the reader receives the content. Here are some key areas to consider and an explanation of why they are important:

Bold, capital letters and italics – can be used to emphasise text but use sparingly. If overused they can be difficult to read and can look like you are shouting at your reader. Bold can also be used to distinguish headings from normal text.

Line length - line length is important for speed and accuracy of reading. If your lines are very long, people get lost reading them. If you lines are too short, it can make your writing very jerky to read.

Use of space - limit your ideas to one per paragraph. If a series of points is being made, separate them out so that each piece of information can be seen and understood in isolation.

Headings - use headings to divide up information to make it more accessible and easier on the eye. Be aware that sub-headings can be used at different levels of a document.

Text alignment - keep the text alignment consistent throughout the document. In general left-alignment is easier for the reader. Try not to split words over more than one line, or sentences and paragraphs over more than one page. This can be confusing for the reader.

Bullet points - bullet points can be used to break up text and make lists more clear. Bullet points should always be used for lists when writing for the web.

Remember!

- *Don't use clichés.*
- *Don't use unnecessary repetition.*
- *Do use lists to break up complex information.*
- *Don't use jargon.*
- *Do use short sentences.*
- *Do use the active voice.*
- *Do use accurate punctuation.*

4. Traps to avoid

Here are some other traps to avoid if you want to make your language easier to understand:

- Legalistic or pompous sounding words;
- Capital letters for whole words/sentences – it's harder to read for people with visual impairments;
- Underlining - use bold instead;
- Brackets - use commas or dashes instead;
- Dotted lines on forms - solid lines are easier to write on;
- Roman numerals - use numbers or bullet points;
- 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th - put January 1, February 2 for dates or use first, second, third in words;
- Putting all the extra noughts in times for example 9.00 am to 5.00 pm. Simply use 9am to 5pm;
- Dashes after a colon in a list - just use the colon - no dash;
- Insincerity such as 'apologies for the inconvenience caused'.

Remember! The overuse of capital letters, bold and italics can make text more difficult to read, especially for those with visual impairments

We need to be consistent about our use of commonly used words. Inconsistent use of the same word, particularly in the same document gives a poor impression of the Council's communications. Here are some examples:

- **Council** with a capital C when you're using it in place of Bracknell Forest Borough Council which is a proper noun. For example, the Council now offers many services online.

- **council/s** with a lower case c when using it as a generic term or a common collective noun meaning other councils. For example, a campaign has been launched to publicise council websites across the country.

- Use 'council' rather than 'authority'.

- **The Council** and all departments are singular and need a singular, not plural, verb. For example the Council **is** going to do this, not are. Social Services and Housing **reports** that **it** will be organising **its** own conference – not Social Services and Housing report that they will be organising their own conference.

- **email** should be one word and does not need to be capitalised unless it starts a sentence.

- **internet** does not need to be capitalised unless it starts a sentence.

- **website** is one word – it doesn't need a hyphen.

6. A quick plain English dictionary

Words to avoid or use less of	Some alternatives
A	
absence of	no, none
accede to	grant, allow, agree
accommodate	try to help, reflect, fit
accommodation	where you live, home
accompanying	with
accomplish	do
in accordance with	agrees, follows
accordingly	so, therefore
according to our records	our records show
acquaint yourself	find out
acknowledge	thank you
additional	extra, more
adjustments	changes
admissible	allowed
advantageous	useful, helpful
affected	changed
a large number of	many, most
albeit	even if
alleviate	ease, reduce, lessen
allocate	give, divide, share
alternative	choice, other
alternatively	or
anticipate	expect
apparent	clear, plain, obvious
applicant	you
appreciable	large, great
apprise	inform, tell
appropriate	proper, right, suitable
appropriate to	which applies to

approximate	about, roughly, say
ascertain	find out
assist, assistance	help
at an early date	soon
attempt	try
attend	come to, go to
authorise	allow, let
authority	may, right, power

B

belated	late

C

calculate	work out, decide
cease	finish, stop, end
Christian name	first name
commence	start, begin
commensurate	equal to
compared with	than
complete	fill in
component	part
compulsory	must
conceal	hide
concerning	about, on
conclusion	end
condition	rule
in connection with	about
as a consequence of	because
consequently	so
consider	think, believe
constitute	make up, form
consult	contact, talk to, meet, ask
creditor	lender
cumulative	add up, added up
customary	usual, normal

D

deduct	take off
deem	treat as
defer	put off, delay
deficiency	lack of
delete	cross out
denote	show
despatch	send
desire	wish
determination	decision
diminish	drop, lessen, reduce
disseminate	spread
disburse	pay
disclose	tell, show
discontinue, terminate	stop, end, cancel
discrete	separate
document	papers
dominant	main
due to the fact that	because, as
duration	time
dwelling, domicile	home

E

eligible	allowed, qualify
enable	allow, let
enclosed	inside, with, here is
endeavour	try
enquire	ask
enquiry	question
ensure	make sure
entitlement	right
equivalent	equal, the same
erroneous	wrong
establish	show, find out

evaluate	test, check
evince	show, display
exceptionally	only when, in this case
excessive	too many, too much
exclude	leave out
excluding	apart from, other than
exclusively	only
exempt from	free from
expedite	hurry
expeditiously	as soon as possible, quickly
expenditure	spending
extant	current, in force

F

fabricate	make up
facilitate	help
factor	reason
failure to	if you do not
following	after
for the duration of	during, while
for the purpose of	to
forward	send
forthwith	now, at once
frequently	often
furnish	give
furthermore	then, also

G

generate	produce, give
guidance	help

H

henceforth	from now on, from today
hereby	now, or leave out altogether
herewith	now, or leave out altogether
heretofore	until now
hitherto	until now

I

immediately	at once
implement	carry out, do
in accordance with	as, under
in addition to	also
in case of	if
in connection with	for, about
in conjunction with	and, with
in consequence	because, as
indicate	show
in excess of	more than, over
inform	tell
initiate	begin, start
in lieu of	instead of
in order to	to
in receipt of	get, getting, have, receive, receiving
in relation to	about
in respect of	about, for
issue	give, send
in the case of	in, for
in the course of	in, while, during
in the event of	if
irrespective of	whether or not, even if

J

jeopardise	risk

L

locality	place
locate	find

M

magnitude	size
manufacture	make
mandatory	must

material	relevant
marginal	small, slight
modification	change

N

necessitate	have to, need
notify	tell, let us know
notwithstanding	even if, despite, still, yet
nevertheless	but, however
none the less	even

O

obtain	get, receive
objective	aim, goal
occasioned by	caused by
offeror	seller
offeree	customer
officer	employee
on behalf of	for
on the grounds that	because
operate	work, run
opportunity	chance
option	choice
ordinarily	normally, usually
otherwise	or
outstanding	unpaid
owing to the fact that	because

P

partially	partly
participate	take part in
particulars	details, facts
per	a, each
permissible	allowed
performed	did
permit	let, allow

persons	people, anyone
peruse	read, look at
pursuant to	under
possess	have, own
practically	almost, nearly
predominant	main
prescribed	set, fixed
preserve	keep
principal	main
prior to	before
procure	get, obtain
promptly	quickly, at once
promulgate	make known
proportion	part, share
provided that	if, as long as
provisions	rules, terms
proximity	near
purchase	buy
purport	claim
pursuant	under

R

received	get
reconsider	think again
reduce	cut
regarding	about
regulation	rule
reimburse	repay, pay back
render	send, make, give
remain	stay
remainder	the rest
remittance	payment
remuneration	pay, wages, salary
report	tell

represents	shows, stands for, is
request	ask, question
require	need
have a responsibility to	must, should
reside	live
residence	home
restriction	limit
retain	keep
reverse	back
revised	new, changed

S

said	the – for example 'the document' instead of 'the said' document
same	that
select	choose
signage	sign
solely	only
state	say, tell us, write down
statutory	legal, by law
submit	send, give
subsequently	later
subsequent to	after
substantial	large, great, a lot of
sufficient	enough
supplementary	extra, more
surname	family name

T

terminate	stop, end, finish
thereafter	then, after
therefore	for this reason or because of this
therewith	with that
transmit	send
to date	so far
to the extent that	if, when

U

ultimately	in the end
unavailability	lack of, absence
uniform	same
utilise, utilisation, usage	use
undertake	agree

V

variation	change
vendor	seller
vicinity - in the	near
virtually	almost
visualise	see, predict

W

whensoever	when
whereas	but
with reference to	about
with regard to	about, for
with respect to	about, for

7. Plain English checklist

1. Have you planned your writing, thinking about your readers and the action you want them to take?   √

2. Have you followed the basic rules of plain English and:

3.   • Avoided jargon and abbreviations;   √

4.   • Used short and simple sentences;   √

5.   • Written positively and in the active voice;   √

6.   • Avoided clichés and needless words;   √

7.   • Used correct grammar and punctuation;   √

8.   • Used a clear layout?   √

9. Have you avoided traps such as the overuse of capital letters, abbreviations and using 1st January instead of January 1?   √

10. Have you been consistent with commonly used words such as "council", "website" and "email"?   √

Further Information

Web links:

www.plainenglish.co.uk - the Plain English Campaign website
www.askoxford.com - online dictionary and tips on better writing
www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/words/grammar - tips and exercises on spelling and writing.

Reference books:

- The Plain English Guide, Martin Cutts, Oxford University Press

- Usborne Book of Better English, Robyn Gee and Carol Watson, Usborne

- Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford University Press

- Dictionary of Troublesome Words, Bill Bryson, Penguin

- Rediscover Grammar, David Crystal, Longman

- Who Cares about English Usage, David Crystal, Penguin

- The Complete Plain Words, Sir Ernest Gowers, Penguin

- Good Word Guide, Martin Manser, Bloomsbury