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Plain English Guidance

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What is plain English?

Put simply, writing in plain English is about using a clear and concise message, written with the reader in mind.

Using plain English will save you time in writing and improve understanding. It means you can get your message across more often, more easily and in a friendlier way. It is generally more inviting to your audience and leads to less confusion.

It is **not** about making things over-simple or patronising. It doesn't mean reducing the length or changing the meaning of a message.

Perhaps the best advice on writing plain English is to imagine you are talking to your reader face to face. If your writing sounds like how you would talk to someone, you are on the right track.

Too often we are used to writing in a formal way. In fact many more people will understand us if we make things simpler to read.

The general idea

The general idea is that you need to think clearly about what you want to say. Don't bury the main point under a lot of background information.

Writing in plain language should be logical, well organised, clearly laid out and avoid 'jargon'.

The main points to consider when writing in plain English are outlined below.

1.   Keep sentences short

Most experts agree that clear writing should have an average sentence length of 15 to 20 words. This does not mean making every sentence the same length. Of course you will sometimes need to use more than 20 words, especially when trying to explain a complicated point.

The general idea is to stick to one main idea in a sentence and to be concise.

If you try to have one main idea per sentence, the sentences should be naturally short.

2. Use 'you' and 'we'

Use personal language. Using 'you' and 'we' makes your writing more direct and understandable.

Try to call the reader 'you', even if the reader is only one of many people you are talking about generally. Remember that you wouldn't use words like 'the applicant' if you were speaking to somebody sitting across a desk from you.

Here are some examples:

'Applicants must send us.' becomes **'You must send us.'**

'We always tell customers before we.' becomes **'We will tell you before we.'**

'Advice is available from.' becomes **'You can get advice from.'**

Similarly, always call the organisation 'we'. This makes the message less formal.

3. Use Active Verbs

Active verbs should be used more than passive verbs. They are a lot easier to read and understand and they make writing more personal. Passive verbs can be confusing and long-winded and they make writing less lively.

Here are some examples of passive verbs that can be changed to active ones.

- 'This matter will be considered shortly' (passive) becomes 'We will consider this matter shortly' (active).

- 'Your application will be dealt with' (passive) becomes 'We will deal with your application' (active).

- 'Your complaint has been investigated' (passive) becomes 'We have investigated your complaint' (active).

- 'A report was written by the surveyor regarding the condition of the roof' (passive) becomes 'The surveyor wrote a report on the condition of the roof' (active).

There are of course times when you should use a passive. The example below shows that the passive option is friendlier here:

- 'You have not paid this bill' (active) is less friendly than 'This bill has not been paid' (passive).

In general, aim to make about 80 – 90 % of your verbs active.

4.   Words to avoid

Try to avoid certain words or phrases where simpler, friendlier options can be used. Some examples of words and phrases to avoid are shown below. Alternatives are given in brackets.

- In the event of (if)
- Prior to (before)
- Regarding (about)
- Should you wish (if you wish)
- In excess of (more than)
- Commence (start)
- On receipt of (when we/you get)

There are also many words we use that have simpler, clearer or less formal equivalents e.g. Don't write 'obtain' when you mean 'get'. Many words seem to be used for their dignified appearance, not for their sense.

Use the simplest words to get your meaning across. Don't be put off by people who accuse your writing of being childish or simplistic. Remember that you need to write to a wide audience. You cannot assume that everyone will understand difficult words and phrases. Some examples of ways to make wording simpler are below:

Avoid	Use
Additional	Extra, more
Assistance	Help
Commence	Start
Consequently	So
Obtain	Get

Use the number not the word – If typing a number, use the number digit not the word e.g. use 3 not three.

Cut out useless words:

One of the common problems with writing is that we either use unnecessary words or we use wordy phrases when a shorter phrase will do.

Here are some examples of this. The unnecessary words are shown in bold:

- During **the course of** the investigation

- also, **it should be mentioned** that many people

- Anything over **and above** this

- for **a period of** 14 days

5. Format and layout

Present your information in a logical sequence. Think about what you want to say and say it clearly and concisely.

There are ways to make your written material look easier to understand. Try to use larger print (at least 12 point). When you are writing to many people, it's better to do this because there will always be people who find it hard to read small print.

Don't break up words with a hyphen at the end of the line. Start a new line if a whole word doesn't fit.

6. Jargon

Don't complicate writing with the use of jargon or words you don't normally use when speaking. The aim is to write as you speak.

Don't assume the reader will understand terms you are familiar with. It is best to avoid using unnecessary legal and technical words. If you have to use them, it's often worth explaining what they mean, even if it takes an extra sentence or two. If you don't do this within the text, you can always use a glossary of terms at the end.

7. Capital Letters

Remember not to use too many capital letters. This can make a page off-putting and more difficult to read. Don't use them just because you feel the concept is important and you want to emphasise it. To emphasise something, it's better to use **bold**.

Remember that using long strings of capitals can seem more unfriendly (AS IF YOU ARE SHOUTING). As capital letters are all the same height they are much more difficult to read. This is especially the case for people with visual impairments, who look for the shapes of words to be able to read them more easily.

Also avoid using *italics* or <u>underlining</u>. They make text harder to read. Bold is always the best way to make something **stand out**.

<u>EXAMPLES</u> of plain English are shown on the next few pages

Example Letter 1

Consider the letter below:

Dear Mr. Jones,

A contractor recently called at the above property to carry out carpentry repairs but found no one at home. A card was left requesting you to make alternative arrangements for his return.

Should you fail to notify the Association within two weeks, of a convenient time when he can come, it will be assumed that the repair no longer requires attention and will therefore be cancelled.

Yours sincerely,

If the letter was written in plain English, it would read:

Dear Mr. Jones,

You were not at home when one of our contractors called to carry out repairs.

We left a card for you to arrange another visit for the repairs to be carried out. Please return the card with details of when you want the work done.

If you do not send the card back by the end of the month, the repair order will be cancelled.

Yours sincerely,

Example Letter 2

A paragraph in a letter may read:

I would appreciate it if you could make an appointment to see Mr Smith at the above address regarding your rent arrears. Your arrears are currently a cause for concern and we hope to be able to assist you with resolving this matter by enabling you to speak to a member of staff.

When it could say:

We need to speak to you about your rent arrears. Please contact Mr Smith at the above address to make an appointment. Your arrears are quite high at the moment so we want you to speak to someone so that we can help you sort this out.

Example Letter 3

Another paragraph may read:

We are currently attempting to increase the membership of our resident involvement groups. These groups enable residents to discuss some of the issues that may affect them from time to time. It means that they can be involved in the decision-making processes of the Association. We would ask that you consider joining a local resident group to further enable us to engage with the local community.

When it could say:

We would like to have more people in our resident involvement groups. These groups mean that residents can talk about issues that affect them. It means you can be involved in the decisions we make. We would like you to think about joining a resident group so that we can understand more about what our residents need.

Conclusion

If we use plain English when we communicate with others, we are more likely to get our message across. We are more likely to reach a wider audience and to make ourselves understood.

Try not to make your writing too complicated. We are usually used to writing in a formal way so Plain English can be difficult at first. But when you get used to doing it, you will find it's easier for you and the reader.

Consider the checklist below whenever you've finished writing something:

Checklist

1. Have you referred to the reader as 'you' and the Association as 'we'?

2. Have you avoided using long sentences? (Try to keep to one main idea per sentence so you use less than 20 words.)

3. Have you avoided using passive verbs and used active verbs instead? (e.g. 'Your application will be considered' should be 'We will consider you application')

4. Have you taken out all unnecessary words?

5. Have you explained any difficult words/jargon or considered replacing them with a different word?

6. Have you made sure that none of the words are broken with a hyphen at the end of a line?

7. Have you made sure that no block capital text, underlining or italics have been used for emphasis? (Bold is the better option).

8. Would you be able to say this information to someone face to face? (Remember to write as if you are speaking to someone).

This is a basic summary of plain English. To find out more about it go to www.plainenglish.co.uk